EdData II

Education Data for Decision Making

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Assessing Early Grade Reading Skills in Africa

While primary school enrollments have increased significantly in Africa throughout the past decade, results from regional and international assessments of academic achievement indicate that a significant percentage of pupils have not mastered content knowledge. The Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) provides further insight into these results, telling us whether children are able to read and comprehend—and therefore whether they have the skills necessary to learn.

Assessing Early Grade Reading Skills: The EGRA Instrument

The ability to read with understanding is one of the most fundamental skills a child can learn. Research evidence indicates that learning to read both early and at a sufficient rate are essential for learning to read well. Acquiring literacy skills becomes more difficult as children grow older. Students who do not learn to read in the first few grades are more likely to repeat and eventually drop out, and the gap between readers and nonreaders increases over time. Recognizing the importance of the early acquisition of fundamental reading skills, EGRA is designed to easily and accurately assess how well children in the early grades of primary school are acquiring key reading skills, and if not, what areas of instruction need to be improved.

EGRA Applications in Africa

EGRA in Africa has served two main purposes: (1) to provide key decision makers and stakeholders with an overview of students' reading skills at the national or regional level (e.g., Ethiopia, The Gambia, Ghana, and Kenya); and (2) to inform the development of reading interventions and to assess their impact (e.g., Girls' Improved Learning Outcomes (GILO) in Egypt, Early Grade Reading Intervention in the Gambia, EGRA Plus in Liberia, Read-Learn-Lead in Mali, Systematic Method for Reading Success (SMRS) in South Africa, and Breakthrough to Literacy in Zambia). To date, EGRA has been implemented in 36 different languages in 19 countries in the continent. (For a complete list of countries and the years and languages in which EGRA was conducted, visit http://www.eddataglobal.org.)

Administering EGRA in Hausa as part of the USAID Nigeria Northern Education Initiative. Photo: RTI staff.

Key Findings

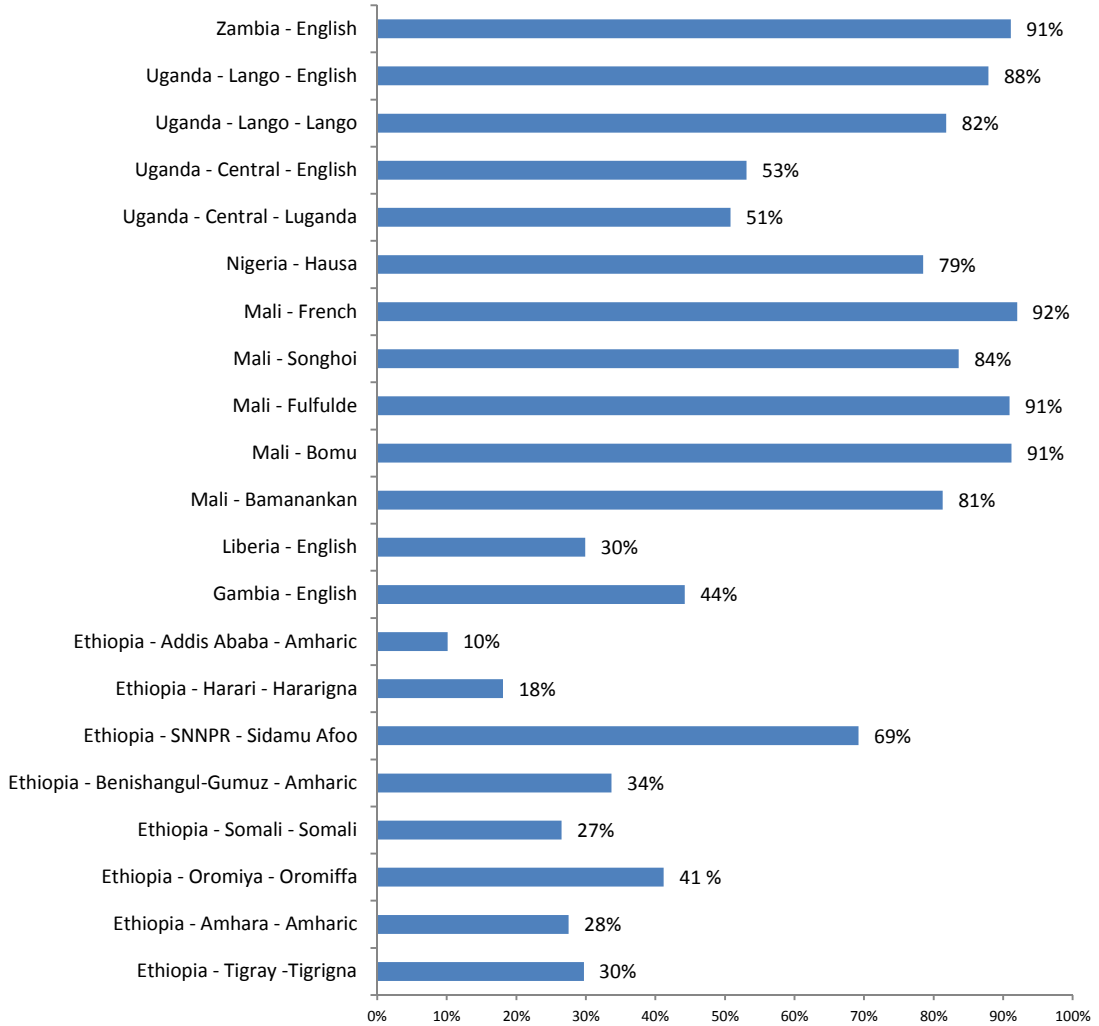
EGRA results in Africa provide information on whether students have mastered key reading skills necessary for fluent reading and comprehension. Overall, EGRA results from Africa show that most students have not yet acquired a basic level of reading proficiency by the end of grade 2 (or beginning of grade 3) to allow them to transition from learning to read to reading to learn in later grades. In several countries, not only have most students not acquired a basic level of proficiency, but a large proportion is unable to read at all—a worrisome finding.

Nonreaders. Exhibit 1 shows the percentage of students tested at the end of second grade (or the beginning of third grade) who were unable to read a single word in the reading fluency component of the assessment, which requires students to read a short text in the language in which they are being taught to read. Most EGRA applications in Africa reveal that a high percentage of students are unable to read at all. For example, in Mali (French, Songhoi, Fulfunde, Bomu, and Bamanankan), between 81% and 92% of students tested were unable to read a single word. In addition, significant differences in reading outcomes exist by region within countries. Such is the case in Uganda, where about half of students in Central Province are unable to read compared to more than 80% in Lango

Province; in Ethiopia, there is a much lower percentage of nonreaders in Addis Ababa Region (Amharic, 10%) than in all the other regions in the country, where between 18% and 69% of students are unable to read a single word.

Reading comprehension. The reading comprehension section of EGRA measures how well children are able to read and comprehend a short narrative text passage, targeted for the second grade level. EGRA surveys in Africa show that a very small percentage of students in the early grades in the region is able to sufficiently comprehend what they read. The percentage of students that reads with at least 80% comprehension was less than 4% in Liberia, Mali, and Uganda. In Ethiopia, between 0.5% and 13% of students could read with comprehension, depending on the language and region of the country. In The Gambia, the percentage of students who could read with comprehension at the end of two years of schooling—23%—was higher than in other regions and countries surveyed in Africa but still very low.

Exhibit 1. Percentage of nonreaders, end of grade 2 or beginning of grade 3



Using EGRA Results to Improve Reading Instruction in Africa

The results of EGRA in Africa show that the vast majority of students tested cannot read with sufficient comprehension to learn and most are simply unable to read at all. Improving the teaching and learning of early grade reading skills should therefore be an urgent priority to enhance learning outcomes generally. Results from several successful interventions in Africa indicate that reading and learning outcomes can be improved if (1) teachers are trained to teach key foundational reading skills and have the necessary materials to do so (e.g., comprehensive, scripted lessons); (2) children have appropriate texts to practice reading; (3) time is devoted each day to reading instruction and practice; and (4) teachers continually assess students' reading skills. Providing students with an opportunity to gain reading skills in their mother tongue, or a familiar language, is also key. Programs with these characteristics include the SMRS program in South Africa, Read-Learn-Lead in Mali, and Breakthrough to Literacy in Zambia, which all have significantly improved students' early grade reading skills in Africa.

More Information

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EdData II is implemented by RTI International, EHC-E-00-04-00004-00, September 2004–November 2013.