Instructional Reading Practices in the Classrooms

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NORC included classroom observations in USAID-funded evaluations of the Read Liberia Activity and the Literacy Achievement and Retention Activity (LARA) in Uganda. In this report, we summarize the most common practices found in classroom reading instruction among trained teachers. Our goal was to identify aspects of the instructional approaches that were well implemented and understood by teachers and those that seemed to present a persistent challenge requiring attention.

Methods

When measuring classroom practices at scale, it is common to use closed-ended instruments that require relatively low inference judgements on a range of features of classroom instruction. In this type of instrument what is often included is what can easily be measured. One of the problems with studying pedagogy in this way is that it produces atomistic descriptions that tell us little about the actual pedagogic processes in classrooms, and hence about quality. While certain inputs are measured, the approach says nothing about when they are used and how they are combined to generate potential learning. In the recent literature from developed and developing countries, there is agreement that high quality classroom talk and reciprocal interactions involving clear feedback between teachers and learners is what makes the difference in pedagogy and student learning outcomes (Westbrook et al., 2013; Snilstveit et al., 2016) These are the pedagogical process variables often missed in large-scale studies of classrooms (Alexander, 2014).

NORC classroom observation studies use a novel methodology that collects both process and input data. Our tool includes both closed-ended items and open-ended narrative descriptions of classroom activity. Two fieldworkers each produce a detailed description of the same lesson. The two descriptions are read together at the point of analysis. In addition, the closed-ended part of the tool is completed after the lesson by both fieldworkers. In this way judgments required in the closed-ended items are subjected to a form of inter-rater reliability at the point of data collection.

An alternative approach that emerged due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, was to take video lessons. The collection of video data allows for even greater in-depth analyses of classroom processes and discourse. The camera was positioned at the back of the classroom to capture a
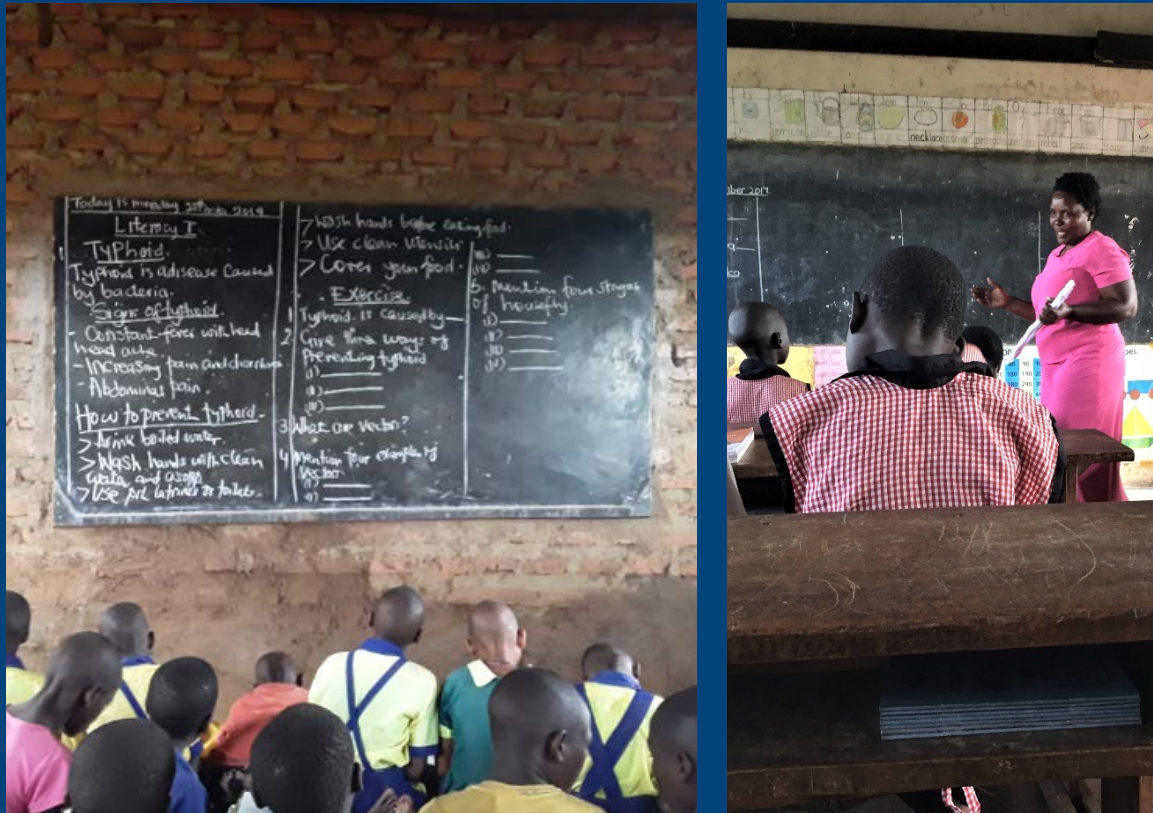
broad view of the classroom, blackboard, and teacher. The camera focuses on the teacher but also captures the activity of learners at their desks. Audio records are simultaneously collected, with the microphone positioned near the teacher to assist with accurate recording of teacher talk. Still photographs of all text that was used in the lesson, including any text written by the learners, are taken as well.

Quantitative data complement the classroom observations. A conceptual framework distinguishing between instructional content and instructional method, grounded in the interventions' underpinning principles and approaches, informed quantitative data collection. We also included questions about teacher training, availability of teaching and learning materials, information about the classroom conditions and printed materials displayed on the walls. In addition, where relevant, we counted the number of pages completed in student workbooks. The data was analyzed using a convergent mixed methods parallel strategy (Cresswell, 2011), considering the open-ended data in relation to patterns in the quantitative data.

Data

NORC drew on classroom observation data in our evaluations of the Read Liberia Activity under USAID's Reading & Access Evaluations contract and the the USAID/Uganda LARA Activity. These were experimental evaluations where schools were randomly assigned to receive the treatment or to act as controls.

In Liberia, we conducted grade 2 classrooms observations in 41 treatment schools and in 17 control schools at midline (2019) and 25 treatment schools and 13 control schools at endline (2021-22), for a total of 96 observations.

We completed 92 classroom observations in Uganda. In 2017 we observed 24 lessons in treatment schools and seven in control schools. In 2018 we returned to the same 24 treatment schools and

seven control schools visited the previous year. All the observations were conducted in grade 1 (P1). Finally in 2019, we observed 23 lessons in treatment schools and seven in control schools in grade 3 classrooms (P3).

Thus, in total we had the opportunity to observe teachers' instructional practices during 188 reading lessons.

Context[1]
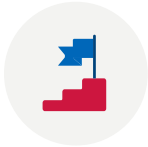
The Read Liberia and LARA activities aimed to improve reading abilities of children in the first years of primary school through the implementation of an early grade reading program that comprised training and coaching for teachers and high quality, teaching and learning materials, among other components.

Read Liberia and LARA, both implemented by RTI, provided teachers instructional guides (TIG) with a structured literacy program for five days of every school week. The TIG provides teachers with weekly overviews of the reading skills to be covered and daily scripted lesson plans detailing the content to cover and how to teach it. The scripting details precisely what the teacher should say and do.

Both programs include a well-established conception of successful literacy instruction based on the explicit and systematic teaching of different components of reading, including phonemic awareness; phonics; vocabulary; and comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000; Snow, 2017). They incorporate a focus on fluency, spelling, sight words, and shared writing as well, and recognize writing and oral language fluency as key to the development of reading. Some instructional principles used in both programs and included in the scripts are the 'I do, we do, you do' methodology (or gradual release model, Fisher and Frey, 2008), the use of familiar language, assessments and feedback to the students, use of appropriate pacing, inclusion, positive discipline, and homework.

Findings
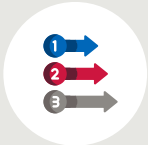
There is a large difference in the teachers' adherence to the program between the two countries. In Uganda, teachers showed higher levels of implementation fidelity than in Liberia, where the program take up was low. In general, teachers trained by LARA tried to follow the lesson plan steps, although less than half of the teachers completed more than 50 percent of the lesson. In Liberia, very few teachers completed all the steps fully. Some teachers did not follow the lesson plans at all, and most teachers only covered some lessons' steps and only partially. In Uganda, adherence to the macro pacing of the program was quite good. Most teachers were at or within one or two weeks of the stipulated program week. In contrast in Liberia, most teachers were working on lessons well behind the expected week in the program. This slow pacing was confirmed by inspecting the students' activity books used in Liberia. At the time of the observation, learners should have covered around 75 percent of the activity book if they had followed the program. We found that none of the classes had completed more than 40 percent of the book, and most had completed less than 20 percent.

[1] More details about the programs, their implementation, and impact evaluation results can be found in Menendez et al., 2020 and Menendez, Hoadley and Soloyeva, 2021.

Despite this difference in program uptake, we found regularities in the instructional practices of teachers in both cases which we summarize below.

Steps of the daily lessons are left out. The most difficult elements of the lessons tend to be omitted. Teachers mostly teach constrained skills and lesson components amenable to repetition, leaving out the more complex, challenging, and open-ended parts of the instructional plans. For example, inferential comprehension questions were always omitted. Teachers do not encourage learner participation, talk, oral language development or engagement with meaning of text. In Liberia, instruction at the sound, letter and word level was particularly weak.

There is excessive repetition. The reading of words, sentences or passages in the classrooms tends to be very repetitive. No time is devoted to engaging learners in the contextual meaning of the text they read and its relation to learners' prior and new knowledge. In one P3 LARA classroom in Uganda, the class read a single passage 23 times. It is likely that those who were unable to read it at the start memorized the words rather than developed the ability to read it. Highly repetitive chorused readings of short text are very common across classrooms.

Flawed interpretation of the "I do, we do, you do" methodology. Both programs use this approach. The teacher models a content in the "I do" step and the idea behind 'we do' and 'you do' is to assess whether learners are able to produce the given content and identify where support is required. However, the implementation of this method differs from the intended approach. In the classrooms the approach was transformed into a very repetitive practicing (of sounds, words, sentences, or passages) by teachers and learners. The methodology becomes repetitive rather than progressive in the learning process and is stripped of its evaluative component. The method seems to be grafted onto the existing classroom discourse, which is repetitive and involves extensive oral chorusing. Teachers do not seem to understand the difference between the gradual release methodology and simple repetition.

Classroom talk is very restricted. The nature of the classroom discourse consists of simple chained sequences of teacher initiation and learner chorused response. Lessons entailed a very low level of cognitive demand. Teachers ask low level closed comprehension questions that require a single word response from learners. Learners do not ask questions and have very limited opportunities to talk. There is very little discussion of text, themes, or ideas. This is a highly ritualized form of instruction, with the two-move exchange structure precluding feedback. There was no conceptual or linguistic building through the exchange, and no explicit indication when a student's production was partial or incorrect. Teachers tend to lack strategies to assist students when they fail. "Word attack skills" such as decoding, syllabification or using contextual clues were absent.

There is lack of opportunity to read extended text in the lessons, particularly to read silently, and independently.

No evidence of assessment. No informal or formal assessment of reading was seen in the classrooms. It is difficult for teachers to identify learners reading skills given that most reading and oral activity occurs through whole class chorusing and teacher may not even know that some learners do not read at all. When teachers circulate among learners the purpose is monitorial rather than instructional. There is also very little or no evidence of writing, homework, or differentiation.

Conclusions

Across lessons, the most common form of reading is 'echo reading' which consists of teachers reading portions of text aloud to the class and students repeating after. The classroom discourse is dominated by teacher talk and chained sequences of teacher initiation and learner chorused responses. Teachers mostly ask closed questions that discouraged discussion. In general, there is no conceptual or linguistic building through the exchange. Student responses to questions are generally restricted and, in most lessons, teachers do not probe students' answers, elaborate on them, nor provide correction when necessary. Thus, we observed in many of the classrooms repetitive reading of text in a call-and-response pattern reminiscent of the ritualized chorus exchange found across many similar classroom contexts (Hoadley 2018; Kewaza and Welch 2013; and Ssentanda 2014).

Future teacher training (pre-service and in-service) should consider these findings to better guide teachers and equip them with skills aimed at enhancing the quality of reading instruction.

Teachers need further development in understanding the principles underpinning the programs and the purpose behind each of the lesson steps. Efforts should be made to move away from excessive chorus repetition and towards a real understanding of the "I do", "we do", "you do" technique. To this end, training needs to include modeling and practice of the technique given that in general teachers are not understanding and implementing the approach correctly.

Teachers need training in conducting theme discussions, encouraging more learner talk, vocabulary development, and engagement with meaning of text. Low levels of oral language ability and poor overall language skills have consistently been linked to reading comprehension difficulties (Snow, 2017) which are commonly found in early grade reading assessments, even in contexts where programs succeed in improving reading skills.

Finally, the teachers need to be confident in the technical aspects of teaching reading to be able to contextualize the program to their classrooms and work productively with the plan in relation to their learners and their context. Developing their own background knowledge could foster greater confidence in allowing more open discussion in the classroom.

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