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The Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) in Tajikistan: Time for a New Approach?

While EGRA is effective for classroom-based assessment, a more robust assessment of reading comprehension can better inform national education policy.

Introduction

Over the last decade, USAID has been supporting the Government of Tajikistan (GOT) to improve learning outcomes in primary education. The GOT has not previously used a national objective assessment to measure those learning outcomes. USAID introduced the Early Grade Reading Assessment to measure the impact of its investments. An EGRA has been implemented about every two years since 2013.

What is the Early Grade Reading Assessment?

The EGRA is an oral reading and pre-reading skills assessment that evaluates learners' understanding of five components critical for the mastery of reading: phonics (the connection between sounds and print); phonemic awareness (the ability to understand that sounds make words); vocabulary; reading with fluency and accuracy; and reading comprehension. The EGRA is designed as a one-to-one oral-response assessment to measure accuracy in reading. As such, the cost of administering a national sample can be substantial, as high as [REDACTED]. EGRAs have been funded by different development agencies in over 40 countries to provide data on learning outcomes to gauge the level of performance of education systems or of specific reading program interventions in low- and middle-income countries worldwide.

How have EGRAs been used in Tajikistan?

In Tajikistan, USAID has administered EGRAs in both Tajik and Russian language schools to learners in grades 2 and 4. At least five EGRAs have been carried out periodically between 2014 and 2022. Analysis of the publicly available results show that Tajik learners have strong pre-reading skills, as demonstrated in high scores on letter name and letter sound recognition. The percentage of learners who could not read a single word is low (less than 3% of grade 2 students). Grade 2 learners in Tajik language of instruction schools read Tajik at a similar level of fluency to their peers in Uzbekistan or Kyrgyzstan and there has been improvement in reading fluency over the past eight years, more so in grade 4 than grade 2. Reported reading comprehension scores are less reliable owing to the limitation in how EGRA measures comprehension.¹

EGRA results in Tajikistan have been shared at the national and subnational levels. The results have been used by international agencies to report on progress toward Sustainable Development Goals, and they have been reported in GOT-sector strategic documents. The sample-based nature of data precludes specific use below the regional level. In general, EGRA has not been used to inform resource allocation or policy decisions by the government.

¹ Three EGRAs that are publicly available can be found at the following links:
https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00KRNO.pdf; https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00ZVKZ.pdf;
https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00Z5ST.pdf

What are some of the limitations of EGRA?

EGRA was designed to identify learners in need of additional support and is appropriate to identify pre-literacy and basic reading competency from preschool up to grade 2. In other contexts, EGRA was administered at higher grades to demonstrate that poor performance on national written tests may be attributed to students' limited reading ability rather than their lack of understanding of subject area content. This may not be appropriate in the Tajikistan context. EGRA is a good instrument to measure reading skills, but is less effective at measuring higher-order cognitive skills. For example, the comprehension subtask is based on a single text and contains only five questions related to that text, most of which require only factual recall. And while reading fluently is correlated with comprehension, reading with prosody (stress and intonation) may be slower, but also demonstrate understanding of what is being read.

What approach to assessing learning outcomes aligns with Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) goals?

EGRA, if administered by teachers with their students, may be useful for identifying areas of specific weakness of individual learners. Teachers can then use that information to provide differentiated support. Programs in other countries use software applications that run independent of the internet on a tablet or mobile phone to track the progress of individual learners as they work to master each step to reading. Orienting schools and teachers to use EGRA might encourage teachers to use existing supplementary materials more efficiently based on the progress of individual learners.

Grade 4 Tajik learners, as evidenced by EGRA results, have sufficient reading fluency to be assessed on a broader range of comprehension and critical thinking skills than the EGRA can assess. The 2020-2030

Strategic Plan for Educational Development calls for a National Learning Assessment to be administered to grades 4 and 8. The National Testing Center may benefit from support to design and include a broad variety of comprehension questions, including recall, contextual vocabulary, function, and inference questions. The national assessment could then provide a richer body of data on higher-order skills, such as how students understand, interpret, and apply information drawn from different types of text (in contrast to just the simple story included in an EGRA).



Photo Credit: RTI International

Conclusion

EGRA has provided data for USAID program reporting and for the GOT and other development partners to report on Tajikistan's progress in meeting the education Sustainable Development Goal. However, it has not been well received in Tajikistan as a mechanism to improve instruction, to allocate resources, or to set standards for foundational learning outcomes. Given the high cost and low uptake of EGRA, this is an appropriate moment to repurpose it to serve as a formative assessment to aid the teacher in the classroom. Concurrently, given that a large proportion of early learners are demonstrating reading fluency, the GOT should consider implementing an assessment of educational progress that includes a robust reading comprehension component.