



# Why Lule still can't read at the end of P3?

The USAID/Uganda Literacy Achievement Retention Activity (LARA: April 2016 - April 2021) program aimed to improve the mother tongue and English reading abilities of children in the first four years of primary school through the implementation of an early grade reading program. *Predictable instructional routines* focused on graded texts and an appropriate progression of content (sounds, words, extended text) written into the week-by-week program. NORC at the University of Chicago conducted a third-party performance and impact evaluation of LARA and found that after three years of exposure to the program, there was a positive effect on the reading performance of P3 learners in the treatment schools. However, the level of reading was found to be still very low. Over a quarter of LARA P3 learners could not read a single word from a short P2 level paragraph. At the end of P3, learners' decoding skills were still very low and the average oral reading fluency (ORF) among P3 treated learners was 17 correct words per minute (cwpm) in their local language, far from the levels needed to be able to comprehend the text read (Menendez et al., 2020).



## Why is it that Lule still can't read?

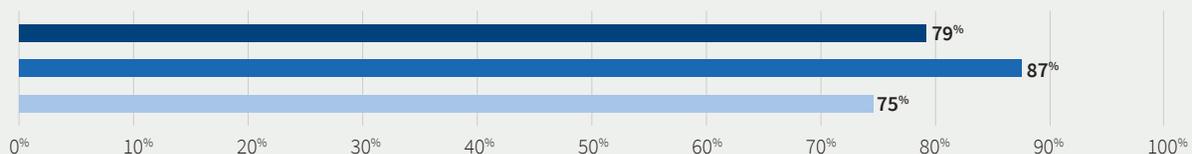
NORC's evaluation included a classroom-based research study (in term 3 of 2017, 2018 and 2019) to assess the implementation of LARA in schools and understand how it shapes teaching practices in P1 and P3 classrooms. The results of this study shed some light on why, despite relatively high implementation fidelity, the program has yet to show results in getting learners to read.

## High fidelity

Percentage of treatment lessons **implementing the LARA program**



Percentage of treatment lessons **conducted within one week of LARA's proposed timeline**



● 2017 (P1) ● 2018 (P1) ● 2019 (P3)

(NORC 2018, Hoadley 2019 and Hoadley 2020)

We identify five classroom-based issues that potentially undermine reading acquisition.

## 1 | Lule doesn't have the opportunity to read on his own

When it occurred, reading in all classes was constituted as a communal, oral performance with the teacher emphasizing pronunciation. It was highly repetitive leading to memorizing of the text. This is distinctly different from what the ultimate goal of reading is – to individually and silently retrieve meaning from text. In P3, individual ‘whisper’ reading is one of the steps of the program, but was seen in only two classrooms. Linked to this communal reading, the blackboard was the *dominant* text learners read from in 60 percent of the treatment classrooms. Further, opportunities to read extended text (longer than a sentence) was limited. In nine of the 23 P3 treatment lessons, there was no reading of extended text by learners in the course of the lessons and they were not read to by the teacher. Opportunities to read extended text were far fewer at the P3 level in both treatment and control school lessons than they were at the P1 level in 2018 (Hoadley, 2020). Only through opportunities to read on his own will Lule learn to read.



There is now widespread agreement that learning vocabulary, developing oral language skills, and acquiring background knowledge are as important to learning to read as the tasks of learning letters, sounds, decoding and fluency. These aspects were undeveloped or absent in the observed LARA lessons.

## 2 | Lule's lessons focus on constrained skills

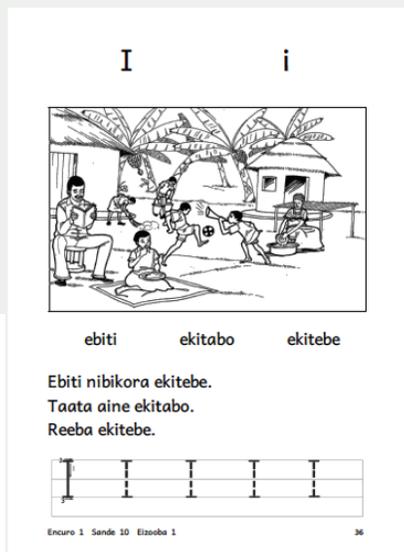
It is relatively straightforward and rewarding to teach young children phonological awareness and phonics, as these are constrained skill domains and children can generally master them. Skill domains like vocabulary and comprehension are much larger, less well-defined, and thus less likely to be taught in many instances. They are, however, crucial determinants of long-term literacy success. The more difficult and open-ended elements and steps of the program were left out. In P1, the dominant focus was on phonics and the extensive repetition of sounds (NORC 2018 and Hoadley 2019). These lower order decoding skills took the place of teaching vocabulary, engaging in understanding the meaning of text and discussing themes and background knowledge. At the P3 level, vocabulary and language structures were taught superficially. Rather than understanding the meaning of word segments (morphological awareness), the focus was on identifying and counting syllables. Comprehension questions were infrequent, closed and low-level. Emphasis on constrained skills for Lule came at the cost of developing fluency and comprehension. Extensive practice in phonemic awareness and phonics also didn't translate into high levels of decoding skills in assessments at the end of P3 (Hoadley 2020).

### 3 | Classroom talk is restricted and repetitive

Classroom discourse generally consisted of simple chained sequences of teacher initiation and learner chorused response. In P1, teacher initiation entailed a closed question or close phrase requiring a single word response from learners. This was a highly ritualized form of instruction, with the two-move exchange structure precluding feedback on learner responses (Hoadley 2019 and NORC 2018). Likewise, most of the talk at P3 level consisted of repetitive chants of sounds, words and on occasion a paragraph. There was very little discussion of text or ideas. Across all the classrooms only one learner was seen to ask a question, and this question was deferred by the teacher (Hoadley 2020). Low levels of oral language ability and poor overall language skills have consistently been linked to reading comprehension difficulties (Snow, 2017). Lule needs to engage in rich classroom talk that provides opportunities for meaning-making, extends understanding and models rich vocabulary.

Across observations of  
93 lessons, only once did a  
learner ask a question!

#### Lara Pupil book. Term 1, Week 10.



### 4 | Lule is not motivated to read

The reading of passages in the classrooms was very repetitive, with little time expended on getting learners to engage in the contextual meaning of the text and its relation to learners' prior and new knowledge. In one classroom the class read a single passage 23 times. By the end, most had memorized it. In another lesson, the teacher began the lesson by asking pupils to close their eyes and recite the passage from the previous day. Reading was often construed in this way – as remembering text rather than retrieving meaning from it, thus undermining Lule's motivation to read. Further, the themes and topics across lessons were very local, reflecting Lule's everyday world. Relying so heavily on the community's knowledge base has limited interest and motivation for Lule (Menon et al, 2019). Community-based knowledge should be invoked in order to move Lule beyond his everyday understandings of the world to give him the background knowledge and vocabulary to read widely and think beyond his existing experience.

## A novel research methodology

When measuring classroom practices at scale, it is common to use closed-ended instruments requiring relatively low inference judgments on a range of features of instruction. The NORC classroom observation studies from 2017 to 2019 used a novel methodology that collected both process and input data by designing a tool that included both closed-ended items and open-ended narrative descriptions of classroom activity. To gain a ‘thicker’ description in the narrative record, two trained observers each produced a description of the same lesson. The two descriptions at the point of analysis were then read together. In addition, the closed-ended part of the tool was completed *after* the lesson by *both* fieldworkers. The mixed method approach was used to obtain a more complete understanding of what was going on in the classrooms. At the point of analysis, it was used to confirm the quantitative measures with qualitative accounts and to explain some of the quantitative results.

## 5 | Lule’s teacher doesn’t know that he can’t read

No informal or formal continuous assessment monitoring (CAM) of reading was seen in any of the classrooms. Across the years many teachers could not produce a CAM form for their learners. While 14 teachers produced a CAM in 2017 and 15 in 2018, only 2 teachers produced a CAM in 2019. In addition, given that most reading and oral activity occurs through whole class chorusing, it would be difficult for teachers to identify individual learners’ reading levels. Although the teachers were observed to circulate amongst learners at times while they read, the purpose was invigilatory rather than instructional. Lule’s teacher did not know that he could not read.

### References

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### For more information, contact NORC at the University of Chicago:

Ursula Hoadley, [uk.hoadley@uct.ac.za](mailto:uk.hoadley@uct.ac.za) | Alicia Menendez, [menendez@uchicago.edu](mailto:menendez@uchicago.edu)

