



Teachers' implementation of LARA in classrooms

The USAID/Uganda Literacy Attainment and Retention Activity (LARA) aims 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. To this end, the program includes the provision of technical assistance to teachers and structured materials for use in classrooms – including a Pupil Book and a Teacher Guide. In the randomized control trial conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago, significant differences were found between treatment and control groups in relation to learner outcomes (Menendez et al., 2020). A classroom observation study (n=31) conducted across three years also found large differences in teachers' instructional practices across the groups and found relatively high implementation fidelity. And yet, reading levels remained very low amongst the treatment group, with over a quarter of P3 learners not able to read a single word from a short P2 level paragraph after three years of exposure to the program.



How did LARA classrooms differ from controls?

Differences between treatment and control classrooms, 2017, 2018, and 2019

	Treatment	Control
Language	 Use of local language was dominant	 Use of English was dominant
Exposure to text	 The vast majority of learners had their own reading book	 No Learners had any reading books
Learning reading opportunities	 Choral reading of text by learners (declines in P3)	 No learners read any extended text

In the LARA classrooms, most notable were the *predictable pedagogical routines* that were focused around text, as well as an appropriate progression of content (sounds, words, extended text) written into the week-by-week program. The absence of text, structure and clear purpose in the control classrooms was clear, especially in the unpredictable and unfocused whole class discussions. The lack of specified progression for literacy learning was evident in the very low level of content introduced in these classrooms. In short, lessons in LARA classrooms were more structured, coherent and contained appropriate grade-level content.

A novel classroom observation 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 study designed a tool that included both closed-ended items and open-ended narrative descriptions of classroom activity. In order to gain a deeper description in the narrative record, two fieldworkers each produced a detailed 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. In this way judgments required in the closed-ended items were subjected to a form of inter-rater reliability at the point of data collection. **The result? A more complete understanding of what was going on in the lessons and more reliable judgements on particular dimensions of instructional practices.**

What did LARA teachers focus on?

P1 Classrooms	P3 Classrooms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Phonics and phonemic awareness formed the focus of most lessons. • The dominant practice was rote recitation of syllables and sounds decontextualized from words or sentences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on syllabic awareness, but pertaining to sounds rather than the meaning of word segments. • Identification of single letters was also evident at this level as well as double consonant blends, even though these are not part of the lesson plans at this level.

What teachers included from the LARA scripted plans were constrained skills and those components amenable to repetition. Different steps of the program were delivered in a mechanistic, procedural way through very repetitive chorused routines around sounds, syllables, words and sentences.

What did LARA teachers leave out of the program?

Very repetitive readings of text dominated the classrooms, with little time for **oral language development**. The focus in the texts on local topics and learners' everyday worlds meant that the development of **new background knowledge and vocabulary** was limited, and learners' understanding of the world was circumscribed to their local environment. Theme discussions, picture discussions and open-ended questions were absent or restricted. Thus, the vagaries (and possibilities) of **student talk** were foreclosed and opportunities for students' oral language development was curtailed. Excessively repetitive reading of text took up the majority of time in most LARA classrooms.

There was a significant decline in the opportunities for learners to read, for learners to be read to and for the teacher to hear learners read across the three years. **The form of reading also did not change as learners progressed** – for example, from the teacher reading aloud to learners to learners reading individually silently. All forms of reading declined from 2017 to 2019. 'Whisper reading', a key element at the P3 level focused on individual silent reading, was practiced in only a few classrooms.

Teachers avoided the more challenging and complex steps in the lesson plans. Where these were attempted, the teacher's own knowledge (in say, retrieving the central idea from a text or identifying a grammatical feature) appeared lacking. Although the **teachers** appeared familiar with most of the instructional routines, they **did not appear confident in the instructional content**. The very procedural and often mechanical way in which the program is delivered suggests that teachers need support in understanding the different program components and their underpinning principles.

Teachers leave out the more complex, challenging and open-ended parts of the lesson plans.

Summary of teacher uptake

- No differentiation of pupils
- Very little collaborative learning
- Restricted assessment of the reading of text by teacher
- Very little discussion of text
- Limited development of print awareness
- Highly repetitive chorused readings of short text

How did the teachers understand the core LARA methodology?

The LARA program adopts a particular methodology called '**I do, we do, you do**'. The idea is that new content is modelled for the learners by the teacher 'I do'. Then learners and teachers practice the content as a class 'we do'. Finally, individual learners practice the content on their own 'you do'. The focus of 'we do' and 'you do' is to assess whether learners are able to produce the given content and identify where support is required. What occurs in practice is a very repetitive practicing (of phonics, words, a passage) by teachers and learners. The '**gradual release**' aspect of '**I do, we do, you do**', **methodology becomes repetitive rather than progressive in the learning process, and is stripped of its evaluative component**. It is likely that this method is grafted onto existing classroom discourse, which is repetitive and involves extensive oral chusing. Thus, what was observed in many of the classrooms was 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). Observations of learners producing or practicing lesson content on their own or with peers was very rare.

Reading or remembering?

At the beginning of a P1 lesson in 2017 most of the learners are unable to read the short passage introduced from the Pupil book. The teacher reads the passage with the class in chorus 7 times. She corrects words that are mispronounced. She then asks groups of learners to read, and the passage is read another 4 times. Finally, she selects individuals and then rows to read 11 times. Finally, the passage is read successfully by the whole class with the teacher. The passage is read a total of 23 times, so that by the end the whole class is able to recite the passage. It is likely that those who were unable to read the passage at the start have now memorized the words rather than developed the ability to read the passage.



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How can instructional practice be improved?



Program principles and methodology Teachers need further development in two key areas. First, understanding the principles underpinning the program – and the purpose behind the different steps. Second, understanding the gradual release methodology and its difference from mere repetition.



Individual reading Pupils need more opportunities to read on their own, especially at P3 level. The teacher also needs to hear and assess pupils read on their own and a simple mechanism to record reading levels needs to be made available to the teacher.



Oral language development Teachers need support in conducting theme discussions and asking questions. Developing their own background knowledge could foster greater confidence in allowing more open discussion in the classroom.

References

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