

Early Grade Reading (EGR) Project

Increasing and Optimizing Time for Classroom Instruction in Early Grade Reading and Writing in Modern Standard Arabic

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Since 2014, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MOEHE) has worked closely with USAID to advance educational initiatives.

The results from two major early grade-reading assessments and a study conducted to measure the amount of classroom time allocated to foundational reading instruction indicate the critical need to increase and optimize the amount of instructional time during the school day.

This policy brief documents the research process and findings which have led to the recommendation to increase and optimize instruction time allocated for MSA instruction.

BACKGROUND

The MOEHE has dedicated enormous effort in the last decade into fostering data-driven reform, seeking to advance educational progress. MOEHE has regularly developed “Education Development Strategic Plans,” (EDSP) which increasingly focus on the need to measure student outcomes and to adjust policies and instruction as a function of the student-level results.

In March 2014, the MOEHE and USAID cooperated to conduct an Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) for Grade 2, implemented by Research Triangle Institute (RTI), in a nationally representative sample of 150 MOEHE primary schools among 2,953 students, stratified by school gender and selected randomly from 17 directorates in the West Bank.

The results, representative of MOEHE Grade 2 students in the West Bank, revealed students’ overall performance to be less satisfactory than desired.



Results also showed consistent performance gaps between girls and boys on all EGRA subtests.

In 2015, the MOEHE recorded a Gross Enrollment Rate (GER) for the basic grades (Grades 1-9) of 95.9%, but a GER for secondary grades (10-12) of just 69.2%. This discrepancy indicated that over ¼ of ‘basic grade’ students were academically unprepared to transition to the secondary grades. Findings such as these from the middle and high school levels led the MOEHE to focus on measuring and improving students’ reading abilities in the earliest grades to ensure that they were competent readers before they advanced in their academic careers.

KEY POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Effective early grade literacy instruction typically requires 90-120 minutes daily, well above the average of 38 minutes devoted to daily literacy instruction
- Balanced instruction should combine opportunities to develop fluency, explore text types, and apply skills in writing for a strong foundation for growth

- If instructional time for literacy cannot be increased, teachers can find more time for independent practice
- If increasing the time for reading and writing is too challenging to do immediately, available instruction time can be maximized by balancing the time allotted to skill development, practice, review, and assessment
- Time for instruction should be split across reading and writing skills: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and writing
- Reading comprehension can be integrated into other subjects or separated into its own allotted time
- Time should be allotted during the week to review the content covered and to monitor the students' mastery

APPROACH

USAID, in cooperation with the MOEHE, conducted in 2017-2018 a reading assessment and a Time on Task Study (TOT), the first in the West Bank, to provide the data needed to guide policy in early grade reading and writing.

The Time on Task study in KG - G2 classrooms in randomly selected MOEHE schools in each region: north, south, and central. The TOT, conducted in December 2017, measured the time students practiced reading and writing during the school day in MOEHE schools. To conduct this snapshot study, EGR worked with the MOEHE to determine and pilot the methodology, select a sample, implement the study, and analyze the results. The TOT study report was submitted to the MOEHE in September 2018.

Another major study that EGR implemented was a reading assessment, conducted in April 2018 among 293 KG, 1,492 Grade 1 and 1,465 Grade 2 students randomly selected in 80 schools in the West Bank.

The instruments adapted to the Palestinian context included the EGRA for Grades 1 and 2 as well as Measuring Early Learning Quality and Outcomes (MELQO) for KG. The assessments measured students' pre-literacy and early grade reading and writing skills. MOEHE supervisors conducted the data collection, using instruments developed with Tangerine software downloaded on electronic tablets.

FINDINGS

Time on Task Study. The TOT results indicate that many aspects of literacy instruction are going well in MOEHE schools. Gaps in instruction that do exist arise when teachers do not provide enough instruction in some areas, or when they use instructional methods that are not aligned properly to the grade

they are teaching. One area to consider strengthening is the teacher's mastery of early grade reading and writing instructional techniques.

The study also revealed some of the reasons literacy development is less than what is needed in the early grades. The daily-allotted time for language development in kindergarten is well below the internationally recommended allocation, and kindergarten teachers are not making sufficient use of the time they do have to engage students in productive pre-literacy or early literacy activities.

The TOT findings indicated that KG students and teachers are engaged in productive instruction only 43% of the class time. More than 50% is spent on class management, breaks and various interruptions. Furthermore, across the three grades, less than 50% of time during the entire day was found to be used for instructional purposes. Moreover, the instructional activities that teachers use are not targeting the appropriate mix of skill areas within and across the three earliest years of school.

During the Arabic lesson, as figure 1 indicates, only 47% of time is allocated for reading and writing in KG, 60% in the first grade and 36% in the second grade. While more time is allocated for language and literacy development in grades 1 and 2, teachers are not sufficiently engaging students in productive activities focused on skill development during that time.

Project baseline assessment. The results of the baseline assessment were consistent with the findings of the Time on Task study.

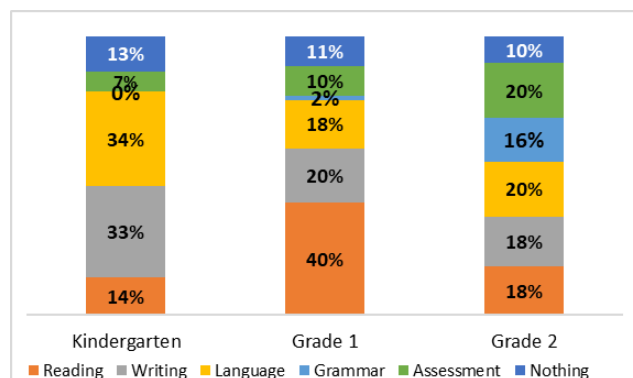


Figure 1: Allocation of time during the Arabic lesson

The Time on Task study indicated that although many aspects of instruction are going well, there are areas in which pedagogy can be refined or improved and areas

where teachers can provide students greater opportunity to practice their skills. By building on existing effective instructional practices and maximizing the amount of time teachers are devoting to literacy and writing, students could be placed on a more successful trajectory for developing strong foundational reading and writing skills.

The baseline assessment revealed that by G2, students are beginning to show appreciable levels of skill development. However, performance in G1 and on pre-literacy skills in KG suggests that an opportunity to have students develop those skills sooner and with greater mastery is being missed.

The first three years of schooling – KG, G1, and G2 – can be deliberately treated as a continuum during which children can be expected to progress through a developmentally appropriate sequence of skill development.

It should then be possible to see children making greater gains in G1, thus, advancing further in their reading and writing capacity in G2. Compared to other countries where a similar assessment (EGRA) has been implemented, the proportion of students scoring zero is very low in the West Bank.

However, students in G1, in particular, are not showing the level of automatic skill development (e.g., easily recognizing letter sounds, rapidly reading or decoding familiar words) needed to establish a strong foundation for literacy. Teachers are providing instruction in these areas, but student levels of performance indicate that they are not getting enough opportunity to practice and become automatic in applying and extending those skills, as confirmed by the Time on Task study.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Increase the amount of time allocated for language and literacy instruction in the early grades

Effective early grade literacy instruction typically requires 90 to 120 minutes daily, well above the average of 38 minutes devoted to daily literacy instruction in West Bank schools. This recommended time includes quality instruction to develop oral language and phonics understanding. The consensus among educators is that the more time students are engaged in research-based instruction, coupled with ample time to practice and automatically apply their skills, the greater likelihood of their increased reading proficiency.

Balanced instruction that combines opportunities to develop fluency, explore text types, and apply skills in writing provides a strong foundation for further growth.

When each of the reading and writing skills are included and sufficiently practiced, the time for instruction easily reaches 90 to 120 minutes daily. Less than that, some important skills would likely be overlooked.

Although principals reported that in G1 and G2 a consistent 400 minutes per week should be devoted to Arabic, the study found that teachers were actually spending an average of 38 minutes per day (190 minutes per week) in Arabic instruction.

If the instructional time for literacy cannot be increased, teachers can be encouraged to find additional time during the day for independent practice. Schools can work with parents to encourage reading practice at home.

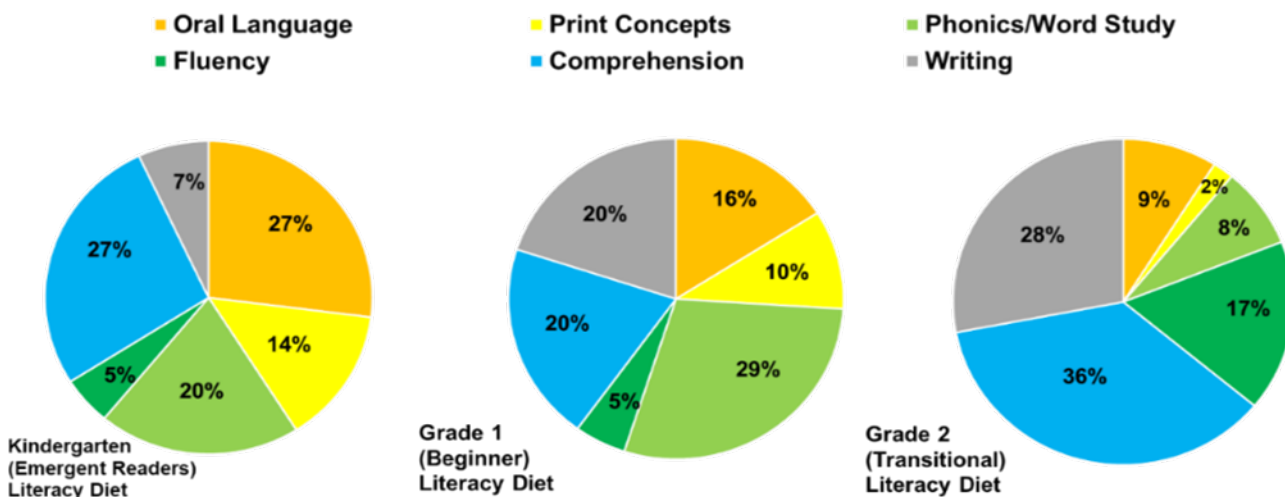


Figure 2: Optimal allocation of time for each skill

Optimize the amount of time allocated for language and literacy instruction in the early grades

When increasing the time for reading and writing instruction is too challenging to implement immediately, available instruction time can be maximized by balancing the time allotted to skill development, practice, review, and assessment. The following approaches can be effective in optimizing instructional time:

- The time allocated for instruction should be divided across the basic reading and writing skills: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and writing. The time allocated to these skills should not necessarily be divided equally but rather balanced appropriately to match where students are in their skills development. Figure 2 indicates the optimal allocation of time for each skill each grade early grade level.
- The time allocated each day to literacy instruction can vary over a week. The primary objective is to ensure that sufficient time during the week is allocated to developing each skill.
- The allocation of time shifts during an academic year and from one year to the next as students increase their reading proficiency.
- Reading comprehension can be integrated into other subjects or can be separated into its own allotted time. In the early primary grades, having designated time for reading comprehension activities is preferable. Teachers need also to learn the specific techniques for teaching students reading comprehension skills.
- Time should be allotted during the week to review the content covered and to monitor the students' mastery of the content.

CONCLUSION

Palestinian teachers in the West Bank are providing some quality instruction in the early grades or primary school. However, consideration for how much time is allocated and how that time is used for developing and practicing vital early literacy skills is needed if students are to build the strong foundations that will serve them throughout the rest of their education and lives.

REFERENCES

1. Time on Task Study Report
2. Early Grade Reading (EGR) Project Baseline Assessment Report

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