

## **Early Grade Reading in International Settings**

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In the wake of Education for All in the 1990s and the expansion of basic education, development organizations like the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) have pushed to advance education quality by improving early grade reading and expanding the measurement of learning. To launch this work, USAID and its major implementing partners adapted Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) and rebranded it as the Early Grade Reading Assessment, or EGRA (Hoffman, 2012). By 2011, EGRA had been adapted and applied in 50 countries and 70 languages; the results have been used to lobby Ministries of Education to reform the curriculum, teaching and learning materials, and educator professional development. While the tool has brought welcome and necessary attention to the quality of early grade reading globally, it nonetheless poses challenges that merit consideration, which we explore here.

### **Background on EGRA**

EGRA is rooted in the U.S. reading literature and specifically the National Reading Panel's (NRP) (2000) influential report, *Teaching Children to Read*. The National Reading Panel privileged cognitive and psychological studies with experimental designs (Coles, 2000) and based its recommendations on research published in English and conducted primarily on learning to read in English. The National Reading Panel Summary reduced the massive meta-review to five pillars of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. While the importance of these elements for learning to read alphabetic writing is established, the model does not include some essential features of reading (Bartlett, Dowd, & Jonason, 2015; Cunningham, 2002; Garan, 2002). A version of the NRP's model is codified in DIBELS, which has been widely criticized by literacy scholars (e.g., Goodman, 2006; Riedel & Samuels, 2007) but remains influential.

In 2006, USAID contracted with Research Triangle International (RTI) staff to develop an instrument for assessing early grade reading. With

the input of an expert panel, RTI took the DIBELS subtests, modified them slightly to different languages, and field tested them, resulting in a suite of short, adaptable, timed tests that have come to be known as EGRA (Gove & Cvelich, 2011; RTI, 2009). EGRA includes tasks such as letter naming, letter sounds, nonsense word reading, familiar word reading, reading aloud a short timed passage to measure fluency, and comprehension questions based on the part of the passage that the student managed to read in one minute. Sites have some flexibility in which tasks they use or exclude.

When EGRA launched, the measures of reading skills were shockingly low. These scores were attributed to students' limited reading abilities but may also have resulted from the fact that, prior to the test, students were generally not taught to segment sounds or read nonsense words. EGRA was used by RTI and partner organizations as a policy mechanism to encourage Ministries of Education to make changes to curricula, learning materials, and teacher professional development. The need to improve reading and the availability of a tool to measure learning prompted USAID to declare, in its 2011-2015 Education Strategy, a remarkable goal: "improved reading skills for 100 million children in primary grades by 2015" (United States Agency for International Development, 2011, p. 1). EGRA was the measure for "improved reading skills"; as funding for reading interventions became more available, implementing partners used EGRA to demonstrate impact. By early 2014, USAID had funded at least 25 three-to-five-year projects totaling \$700 million (Chabbott, 2015); each of these numbers is by now undoubtedly higher.

In international educational development circles, EGRA has become the hegemon—taken for granted and rarely critiqued. As a scholar interested in anthropological approaches to multilingual literacies, I believe these efforts warrant greater scrutiny and debate than they have received to date.

### **Three Concerns**

First, what are the limitations of the model of reading represented by EGRA? It ignores multilingualism and language development over time. It sidelines writing (and the mutual development of reading and writing) and does not include some essential features of reading, such as concepts about print, lexical knowledge, linguistic knowledge, syntax, or semantics. Each

subtask is timed. That feature may be convenient from a measurement standpoint, but it is not a familiar practice for students, which may interfere with performance. There are other limitations of this approach. Notably, the comprehension task is conditional upon the timed fluency task, limiting what we can learn about the relationship between fluency and comprehension across language groups (Dowd & Bartlett, in press; Graham & van Ginkel 2014). Finally, EGRA is based on a psychological model of learning to read; there is no sociocultural analysis of how inequality shapes who speaks what languages, what languages and knowledges are privileged at school, how teachers (with their language skills) are allocated, who has access to what background knowledge and why, or what students' literacy environments and literacy practices look like beyond school (e.g., Street, 1993). Each of these features matter to reading instruction. Given how EGRA is shaping pedagogy and curriculum, there is cause for concern.

Second, is the model of reading, based on a review of learning to read in English, appropriate for other languages? The language structure may well dictate reading pedagogy and assessment. For example, phonemic awareness may be a less important skill for shallow orthographies like Spanish (Goldenberg et al., 2014). For many African languages with a shallow orthography but long words, early grade reading pedagogies and assessments need to emphasize syllable recognition and morphemic awareness (Trudell & Schroeder, 2007). As Schroeder (2013) writes, "Appropriate and effective methodologies, then, will reflect the contexts of their use. Methodologies that have been developed and tested on learners using languages such as English or French in Northern contexts may not be applicable in different social, economic, or linguistic situations" (p. 3). Finally, EGRA assumes that students must reach a certain 'words correct per minute' goal to achieve comprehension—indeed, the test times fluency and restricts comprehension questions to those lines read in 60 seconds; yet one study has demonstrated, using untimed tests, that the speed at which students achieve comprehension varies across languages (Dowd & Bartlett, in press). Thus, there are serious questions about whether the model of reading represented by EGRA is appropriate for other languages and/or scripts.

Third, how can educational development work promote and support the teaching of reading in countries in the global South while avoiding a kind of assessment imperialism? While assessments can often seem 'clean'

and neutral, the politics of imposing a measure are inescapable and unavoidable. Who decides whether, in Arabic, a letter without a diacritic mark has a sound? What happens when development workers insist that comprehension learning should be delayed until phonemic awareness and phonics skills are strong, or they insist on professional development on a model of reading that doesn't include a feature, like morphology, that local educators think is essential? From a sociology of measurement perspective, as we move into a period of intensified measurement of learning, we need to be careful about what measures are used, normed on what populations, and how and by whom they are used to lobby for what kinds of changes.

### **Implications and Conclusions**

The international focus on early grade reading, an important expansion of children's right to education, should be applauded. However, in their effort to enhance reading programs, international development agencies are relying heavily on a flawed assessment tool that's producing some unexpected and largely unexamined problems. The success of this work may well depend on the willingness of multilingual literacy scholars to debate and improve these efforts

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