



EARLY GRADE READING IN NEPAL

TEACHING AND LEARNING READING IN THE EARLY GRADES

World Education, Inc.

In Nepal, teaching and learning reading in the early grades remains a significant challenge, with most primary school students unable to read at grade level. Although enrollment in public schools is high, drop-out and grade repetition are common. Teachers often resort to rote instruction methods, resulting in memorization rather than actual reading.

Although Nepal's net school enrollment rate reached 95.6% by 2013/14,¹ the nation still faces significant challenges in delivering high-quality public education to its seven million students. Nepal government research found that as of 2013, 7% of all students drop out by the end of first grade, and 17% of students repeat first grade.² The government has introduced additional teacher training modules and new textbooks, but most teachers still resort to the traditional rote instruction methods, and students in primary grades simply memorize and recite the texts.

Between 2012 and 2014, World Education conducted a three-stage learning assessment³ of early grade reading (EGR) and numeracy to better understand the scope of these learning issues and to find ways to improve reading. The study focused on 45 community schools in six village development committees (VDCs) across the Banke and Dang districts. These schools were among the weakest in each district because the children come mainly from Tharu⁴ communities, which are source villages for bonded labor.

The baseline assessment found that even after one or two years of schooling, most children had not mastered basic literacy and numeracy. This was largely because the children had little social interaction with anyone except their immediate families before they started school, so they spoke only their mother-tongue, Tharu.

World Education's analyses showed that nearly 80% of the students in grades 1, 2, and 3 were not proficient in consonant or vowel letters.

The United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) subsequent nationwide early grade reading assessment (EGRA) found similar results: 37% of grade 2 students and 19% of grade 3 students were unable to read a single word correctly in a passage. A reading comprehension test showed that half the students in grade 2 could not correctly answer any questions about a passage they read.⁵ Both assessments found that non-Nepali speakers had poorer oral reading fluency and comprehension than Nepali speakers,⁶ indicating the challenges in reading acquisition among students learning Nepali as a second language.

EARLY GRADE READING INITIATIVES AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

In 2012, World Education started its EGR work in schools under the *Opportunity Schools* initiative.⁷ The program includes teacher training and assessments of EGR and numeracy skills in grades 1-3. World Education also developed and disseminated Tharu language reading materials for transition into grades 1-3 in the Nepali language.

When the project began, it was clear there was a shortage of appropriate basic reading materials in schools. In 2012, World Education partnered with the Rato Bangala Foundation to develop a package of Nepali EGR materials under the *Reading Brings Rewards* program. Completed in 2013, UNICEF has since supported expansion and provided supplementary teacher trainings in UNICEF-supported schools. By 2014, the EGR materials package was rolled out to 364 schools⁸ and 40,000 students in the Dang, Banke, Gulmi, Lalitpur, Achham, Bajura, Kalikot, and Mugu districts. These districts have large populations of disadvantaged Tamang, Magar, Tharu, and Dalit people who speak west Nepal dialects. The *Reading Brings Rewards* program focuses on:

- developing grade-level appropriate reading materials
- addressing mother tongue issues
- conducting teacher trainings in EGR

- developing student assessment skills and materials
- promoting parental and community engagement in EGR.

DEVELOPING GRADE APPROPRIATE READING MATERIALS

In 2012, World Education and its partners assessed 650 children's books in public and private school libraries and found that only nine were suitable for early grade reading—most were targeted to grade 6 students. Moreover, the Ministry of Education's textbooks have traditionally focused more on learning how to write than on learning how to read.

As an initial step, the team convened grade 1 teachers, teacher trainers, education experts, writers, and artists to develop materials for reading, student assessment, teacher training, and reading motivation. The first challenge was to develop the reading levels and benchmarks based on the reading outcomes of the current Nepali school curriculum and teachers' perceptions of how children acquire reading skills in Nepal.

The design team identified six basic reading levels by combining experience in reading instruction in Nepal with an assessment of the existing curriculum.

By the end of 2014, the graded reading materials in Nepali and Tharu were distributed and are now being used. While graded

¹The primary net enrollment rate (NER) for grades one to five increased from 64% in 1990 to 81% in 2000, and to 95.3% in 2012 (UNDP, 2010). According to the Department of Education, the NER for basic education (grades 1-8) has increased from 73% in 2008/09 to 95.6% in 2013/14.

²Annual Status Report – 2013, Government of Nepal, Ministry of Education, Department of Education.

³December 2012 data generated by World Education's Opportunity Schools/ Sangai Sikau Sangai Badhaun Project.

⁴The Tharu are an indigenous people who originate from the southern plains of the midwestern region of Nepal. The Tharu community has its own language and cultural practices. The Tharu often suffer from social and economic discrimination in the education system, the workforce, and in political representation.

⁵RTI International, June 2014

⁶For example, in Banke, where there are mainly Tharu-speaking students, 70% of children could not read one word after a year of schooling, and 45% after two years of schooling. In comparison, in Gulmi, only 11% of children could not read a word after one year of schooling, and just 2% after two years.

⁷Funded by the Banyan Tree Foundation.

⁸This number includes EGR programs funded by UNICEF, Banyan Tree (under the Opportunity Schools Project), and World Education.

As a major player in Nepal's social and economic development over the past three decades, World Education is recognized as a national pioneer in formal and nonformal education by the government and local communities.

World Education began developing and implementing innovative nonformal education programs in Nepal in the 1990s, including the USAID-funded Girls' Access to Education (GATE) program. GATE has provided more than 100,000 girls with basic literacy and numeracy skills, with an average of 75% of participants transitioning to school. Recently, World Education applied its longstanding experience linking education and community participation to develop initiatives for early-grade reading in formal schools.

reading materials are a new concept for teachers, both teachers and students are responding well. Students quickly recognize the color-coded reading levels and are eager to work their way through them.

The project introduced charts, rhymes, games, cards, crowns, and certificates that mark each milestone a child has achieved. These incentives are popular with children and their families. Teachers have also sent certificates to parents to inform them about their children's achievements. Student attendance has increased with these new approaches.

ADDRESSING MOTHER-TONGUE LANGUAGES

In 31% of Nepal's schools, enrolling students do not speak Nepali, but speak a common mother tongue. In another 26% of schools, students do not speak Nepali but speak one of as many as three mother tongues.⁹ In total, 57% of early-grade students in Nepal are not Nepali speakers. Because early-grade reading classes are often conducted in Nepali, these students can experience "classroom discrimination," which has a negative effect on their academic achievement. Teachers' attitudes toward students are typically influenced by students' ability to speak and comprehend Nepali.

Furthermore, many parents do not want their children to read in the mother tongue because they believe that early exposure to Nepali and English will improve their children's life opportunities.

World Education has developed early-grade materials in West Nepal's Tharu dialect and is showing parents how and why they should be supportive of their children learning to read in Tharu. Parents are motivated by the evidence, which shows that by using the mother tongue at home *and* at school, children are more engaged in class and perform better in their studies.

World Education has also been mobilizing communities to hire teachers with mother-tongue skills who can communicate in Tharu in the early grades. Such advocacy is conducted through the media and through parent teacher associations (PTAs), school management committees (SMCs), and mothers' groups. SMCs and PTAs provide input to their resource center, a government entity that serves a cluster of schools and the district education office (DEO) during the teachers' hiring process. In addition to producing mother-tongue reading materials, World Education has trained teachers how to teach early grade reading in the mother tongue and how to transition to Nepali.

TEACHER TRAINING TO SUPPORT EARLY-GRADE READING

Over the past two years, World Education and its NGO partners have **trained 670 teachers** to improve their skills in teaching EGR in Nepal's primary schools. Many of these early-grade

reading teachers had not previously participated in practical or theoretical training. However, simply introducing new techniques—e.g., child-friendly teaching methods—does not equip teachers to address children's individual learning, and any learning gains are often quite modest. Teachers need continual technical support to manage classrooms, develop instruction plans, and use reading materials.

To address these gaps, World Education and partners have provided a comprehensive teaching package that includes:

- materials that enable them to teach phonics better
- stories to read aloud that develop vocabulary and listening skills
- games and cards that help students reinforce basic reading skills

"I found phonics/sound teaching a very effective way to help students learn. I will not hesitate to use them in teaching in the classroom. I found the EGR training different from the others that I have received, as teaching is conducted through games and interactive activities." Sarita Rawal, BP Pra V, Dhadali, Kailashamandu, Bajura

⁹RTI International, April 2014.

- methodologies for individual, peer-to-peer, and group work.

These new methods and more engaging teaching materials have encouraged teachers to change their practices. Receiving guidebooks and reading materials during their training has significantly increased teachers' readiness and confidence and enables them to teach these lessons immediately.

The Nepali school curriculum allocates six hours weekly (in eight 45-minute sessions) for reading and writing Nepali. This time is often poorly used, because many teachers rely on rote learning and memorization. Without adequate practice, students quickly forget letters and fail to develop vocabulary. World Education's teacher trainings emphasize pedagogies that enhance skills such as time on task, developing an effective instruction plan, and teaching different reading components. Teachers get suggested lesson plans to make the 45-minute Nepali classes more dynamic and that feature activities that promote actual reading and vocabulary development.

The World Education team also conducted monthly teachers' meetings, with a different school hosting successive meetings. These mobile forums are opportunities for teachers and headmasters to learn from each other's experiences and from the literacy coaches/mentors who facilitate discussions about common issues and challenges.

Since 2013, World Education has trained teachers to facilitate small learning circles and provide technical support to the weaker teachers in their schools. To ensure the effectiveness of this process, World Education has collaborated with local NGOs. For example, the orientations and trainings of motivators were led by local NGO staff. Reading motivators¹² inspire parents and promote community involvement in reading programs. Reading *melas* (fairs) give children a chance to demonstrate their reading skills and teachers to introduce reading materials to other teachers, PTAs, and community members.

DEVELOPING STUDENT ASSESSMENT SKILLS AND MATERIALS

A central element of the teacher trainings and ongoing guidance has been to develop teachers' ability to assess students' individual learning abilities. This allows teachers to group students by reading level and identify individual student's difficulties.

Assessment tools were simplified and used for a student progress evaluation process that involved teachers, parents, and students.

PROMOTING PARENTAL AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Getting parents to encourage their children to read has been challenging in less privileged environments, where many parents lack basic education and access to books and reading materials. The gap between the educated teachers and parents often makes parents feel marginalized, and they do not have the confidence to monitor their children's reading progress.

To mitigate this, World Education programs have encouraged parents—especially mothers—to visit their child's classroom at the beginning of each month to learn about upcoming reading activities. Children's progress is "rewarded" by teachers with stars on reading charts and crowns and reading level certificates that they can take home to show to their parents. Parents are also encouraged to participate on library management committees and local materials development workshops.

World Education found that mothers who participated in home-based learning assessments talked with their children and explained new words to build vocabulary, listened to children reading aloud, and encouraged them to read more.

To secure the important benefits of community mobilization, World Education's Early Grade Reading program:

- Held orientations for 5,400 SMC/PTA members and teachers in 363 schools



- Worked with PTAs and SMCs to address school management and upgrades through the school improvement plans
- Encouraged schools to use their own funds and leverage additional funds to improve the physical school environment
- Mobilized community members, social mobilizers, and local NGOs to hold teachers and schools accountable for better instruction in early-grade reading
- Engaged communities in reading *melas*
- Provided orientations to community-based groups (like savings and credit, forest users, and mothers' groups) about the importance of reading

THE RESULTS: IMPROVED OUTCOMES IN FLUENCY AND READING

World Education's three EGR learning assessments demonstrate significant improvements in students' learning achievements, even in schools with predominantly Tharu students. The assessments were conducted in 27 intervention schools and 18 control schools at the beginning of the 2012 academic year, the end of the academic session in 2013, and at the end of the following academic year in 2014.

The main findings can be segregated into oral reading fluency (ability to read text accurately, at a good pace, and with good expression) and Nepali subject scores (comprehension, vocabulary, etc.).

Over the two-year period, oral reading fluency improved between the baseline and round-two testing in both the control and intervention groups, as seen in **chart 1**.

The second assessment showed that, on average, the intervention schools achieved 30% higher reading fluency scores than the control schools in grades 1, 2, and 3, even for cohort 2, where the intervention schools were considerably *weaker* than the control schools at baseline. Overall, intervention schools showed an improvement in absolute scores in reading fluency after two years of the early-grade reading programming.

As evident in **chart 2**, the trend for composite reading scores is similar to the one for reading fluency. The intervention schools demonstrated marked score increases compared to control schools. In this graph, cohort 1 (learners who started grade 1 in 2012) showed the most significant improvement.

At the end of the second assessment, the intervention schools had achieved 42% higher reading scores than the control schools. Moreover, the overall gap between the two groups has been incrementally increasing each year since 2012.

In sum, these results show that students in the intervention schools have made substantial progress in EGR. This progress resulted from a multifaceted and concentrated effort involving teachers, students, parents, communities, and materials designers. To sustain this effort, systems were established and nurtured over time. There were also ancillary benefits from the program, as government resource persons replicated some elements of the EGR activities. The improvements in EGR in the control schools provide clear evidence of this impact and suggest that schools and communities find the approach relevant and beneficial.

Chart 1: Oral Reading Fluency

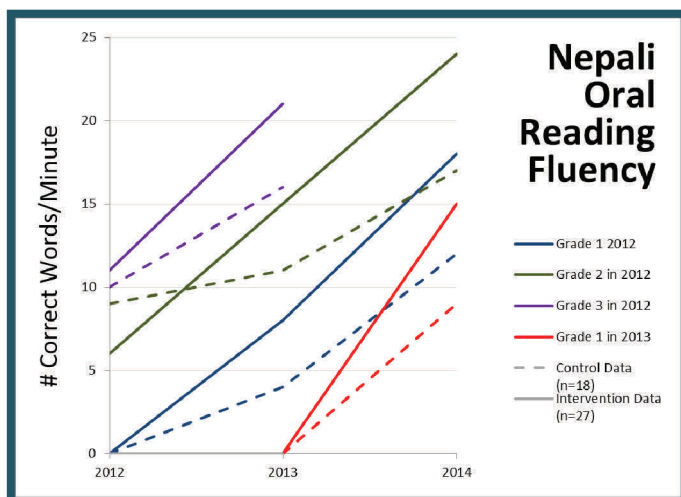
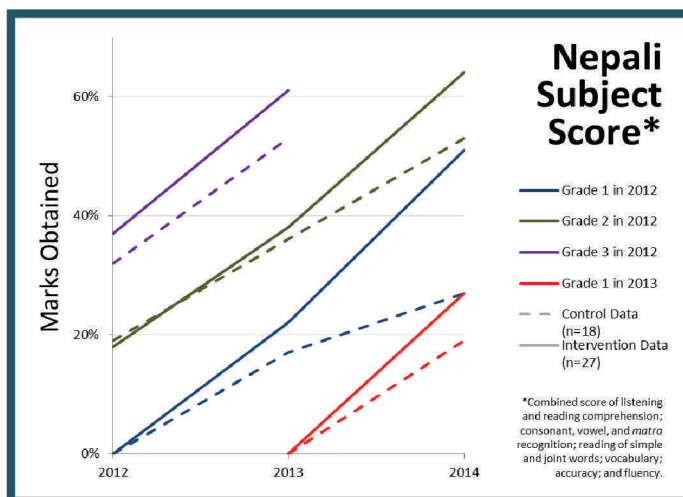


Chart 2: Total Reading Score



CONCLUSION

World Education will continue to work with the government and its partners to expand the early-grade reading program in priority districts. World Education is supporting an additional 1,040 schools in remote areas under the *Food for Education* program (sponsored by the government and the World Food Programme). World Education is also supporting the development and progress of Nepal's National Early Grade Reading Program.

Throughout the program's implementation, World Education and the Rato Bangala Foundation will continue to work with students, teachers, and parents to improve the materials and teacher trainings. World Education will also help teachers' apply new early-grade reading skills in the classroom. Another priority will be to work with the Department of Education to strengthen the acquisition of pre-reading skills in early childhood development centers.

Other near-to-medium term measures include:

- developing ongoing back-stopping, guiding, and mentoring strategies for teachers, especially to help them implement what they learned in the training sessions into the classroom
- developing early-grade reading materials tailored to the needs of children of other marginalized ethnic minorities, e.g., Tamang and Maitheli, as well as for children with disabilities
- continuing to promote broader and deeper parental and overall community involvement and accountability to enhance children's reading achievements.

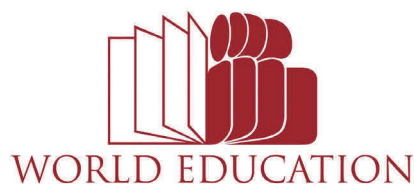
Early Grade Reading Achievements to Date

As of September 2014, World Education and the Rato Bangala Foundation in collaboration with other partners had:

1. Developed and tested 107 distinct reading materials in Nepali.
2. Provided reading materials to 40,000 students in 364 schools.
3. Trained 670 teachers to improve their skills in teaching early grade reading.
4. Built the capacity of early-grade reading teachers to assess students' progress in reading skills.
5. Helped orient 5,400 SMC and PTA members in 364 schools to support EGR.
6. Increased student attendance in and enhanced learning through rhymes, games, cards, and leveled readers.
7. Developed EGR materials in Tharu and promoted teaching in the mother tongue.

World Education is a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the lives of the poor through integrated literacy programs, and economic and social development.

This series of technical briefs highlights program approaches that are breaking new ground and achieving results for populations where implemented.



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