

Executive Summary: Teaching at the Right Level Pilot



Overview

From June to July 2018, Building Tomorrow conducted a pilot literacy program using an approach called Teaching at the Right Level, aimed at improving students' foundational literacy skills. At baseline, 85% of participating students were unable to read basic words. After 25 days of targeted lessons, 78% of students who began the program at week one were able to move up at least one literacy level, and 25% were able to read and comprehend a short story. Given these promising results, Building Tomorrow plans to scale Teaching at the Right Level to 400 schools in 2019, reaching an estimated 40,000 students with critical support to develop learning outcomes.

What is Teaching at the Right Level and Why Is It Needed?

Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) is an evidence-based approach pioneered by Pratham, an experienced education-focused NGO in India, that molds classroom instruction to a child's learning level. The approach involves grouping children according to their learning levels, focusing on basic reading and mathematics skills, and targeting instruction to a child's abilities.

Such an approach is particularly vital in Uganda, where only two out of ten P3 students (3rd graders) can read a P2-level story¹. These poor results are partially due to large, overcrowded classes (sometimes numbering over 100 students), where a teacher is expected to manage a class with a wide range of ages and abilities. With automatic promotion the status quo within government schools, students are promoted to the next class despite a failure to master basic skills. Struggling students are consistently left behind as teachers teach to the top of the class, unable to address the variety of learning levels packed into their overcrowded classrooms.

Facing these enormous challenges, many Ugandan teachers also rely on a "chalk and talk" approach, in which a teacher stands in front of the class and delivers information through rote memorization, leaving little opportunity for student exploration or critical thinking. Additionally, because a school's success is primarily gauged through their performance on the Primary Leaving Exam, teachers tend to "teach to the test," failing to ensure students grasp foundational principles. In contrast, TaRL lessons encourage the use of engaging, child-centered activities. Rather than following an over-ambitious uniform curriculum, the program addresses children's current learning gaps and focuses on building core foundational skills as opposed to rote memorization.

Not only does this approach make intuitive sense, it is also backed by over a decade of research demonstrating TaRL's ability to consistently improve learning outcomes. For example, in Pratham's initial TaRL implementation, children who were sent to remedial pull-out classes gained 0.6 standard deviations in overall test scores. In a more recent study in Uttar Pradesh, India, volunteers implemented high-intensity, short-burst "learning camps" during school hours, which led to an increase of 0.61-0.70 standard deviations in both math and language test scores, more than double the normal yearly gains in learning². This proven approach is now being replicated and scaled in government schools throughout India, Ghana, Kenya, and Zambia.

Building Tomorrow's TaRL Implementation

TaRL is implemented as part of Building Tomorrow's Thriving Schools Program, a community-centered initiative led by Building Tomorrow Fellows and teams of Community Education Volunteers (CEVs) aimed at providing primary-age students with access to an inclusive, quality education. Through the Thriving Schools Program, Building Tomorrow recruits and trains recent Ugandan university graduates

¹ Uwezo (2016): Are Our Children Learning? Uwezo Uganda 6th Learning Assessment Report. Kampala: Twaweza East Africa. <http://www.uwezo.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/UwezoUganda2015ALAREport-FINAL-EN-web.pdf>.

² Banerjee, Abhijit, et al. "Mainstreaming an effective intervention: Evidence from randomized evaluations of "Teaching at the Right Level" in India." No. w22746. National Bureau of Economic Research, 2016. https://www.povertyactionlab.org/sites/default/files/publications/TaRL_Paper_August2016.pdf.

as Fellows and deploys them to rural communities, where they aim to transform underserved schools into Thriving Schools. Fellows achieve change through partnership with Community Education Volunteers—local leaders who work to enroll out-of-school children while also providing targeted support to extracurricular and classroom learning.

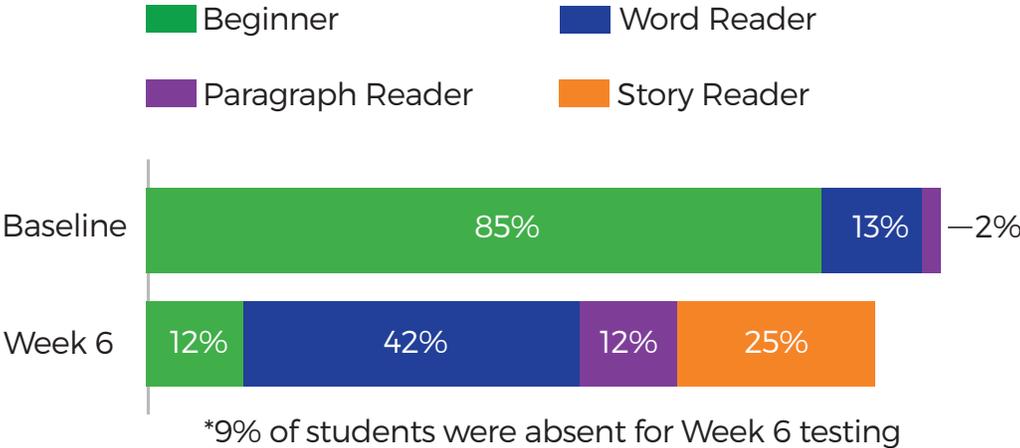
Building Tomorrow’s TaRL approach borrows elements from several successful Pratham models while contextualizing the intervention for Uganda. Under Building Tomorrow’s implementation, TaRL lessons take place at a dedicated time during the school day and are implemented by both teachers and Community Education Volunteers. Similar to the successful program implemented in Uttar Pradesh, the model involves high-intensity, short-burst periods of lessons, with 25 days for literacy and in a future pilot, 25 days for numeracy. Additionally, since monitoring and mentoring were key components of successful programs, TaRL lessons are monitored by Fellows and head teachers, and extra mentoring is provided by government-paid teacher trainers called Center Coordinating Tutors (CCTs). By integrating local volunteers, teachers, and CCTs into this TaRL program, Building Tomorrow aims to develop a sustainable, community-led approach which will continue even after a Fellow has completed their two-year term of support.

TaRL Literacy Pilot Program

In June 2018, Building Tomorrow began a TaRL literacy pilot program at ten schools in Kiboga and Kyankwanzi Districts, including nine BT schools and one non-BT government partner school. In total, 494 students in P2 and P3 participated in the study.

TaRL lessons were carried out by 59 facilitators, including both teachers and CEVs—none of whom dropped out during the pilot program. Facilitators and Fellows received five days of training which reviewed each participants’ role and explained how to assess and group students, carry out lessons, and collect data. After the baseline assessment period, facilitators carried out TaRL lessons over the course of 25 school days, during one-hour blocks specifically devoted to TaRL. In accordance with TaRL methodology, facilitators engaged students in fun, engaging, and interactive lessons focused on building core literacy skills. In week six, facilitators carried out the endline assessment using the same tool administered at the baseline (see tool in Appendix 1).

After 25 days of lessons, the pilot produced promising results:



At baseline, 85% of students were unable to read basic words, thereby classifying them in “Beginner Level.” However, by week six, **78% of students who started the program in week one had moved up at least one literacy level, and 25% achieved the ability to read and comprehend a short story.** These results demonstrate encouraging potential for TaRL to improve students’ foundational literacy skills in a very short period of time.

Next Steps

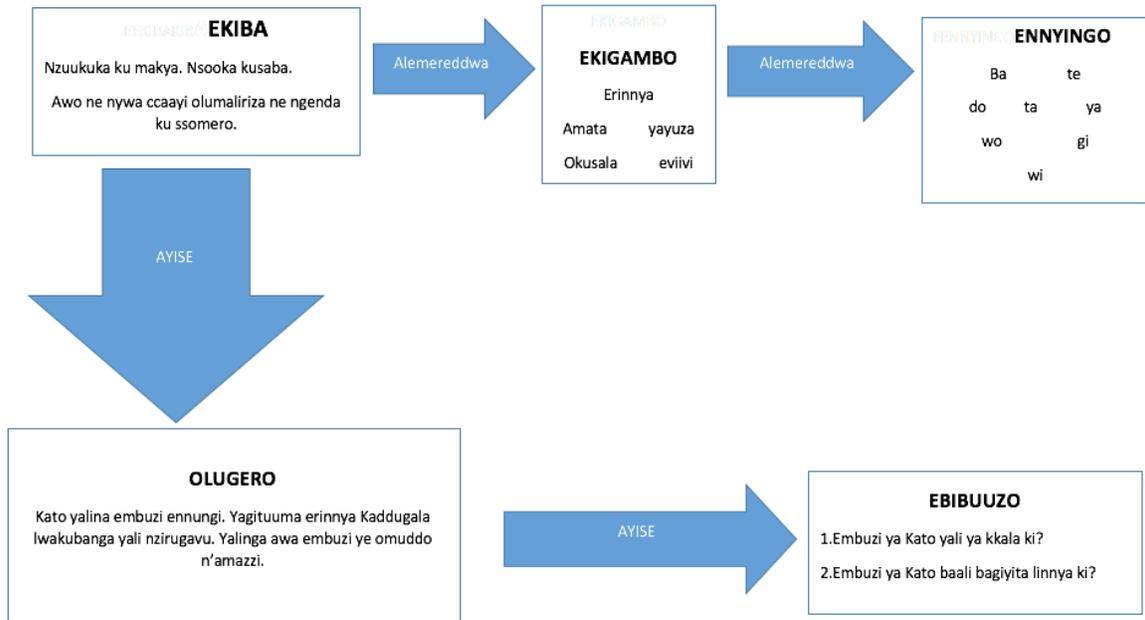
Building Tomorrow plans to begin a pilot numeracy program later this year, following a structure similar to this literacy program. In 2019, Building Tomorrow plans to scale up TaRL lessons to 400 schools, allowing us to serve an estimated 40,000 students with critical support to develop learning outcomes.

Ultimately, Building Tomorrow hopes such an intervention can reach the 700,000+ children throughout Uganda who remain out-of-school, as well as the millions of students who are in school but not learning foundational skills. If the Thriving Schools Program model can be scaled throughout the government school system, it has potential to ensure access to inclusive, quality education for millions of primary-age children throughout Uganda.

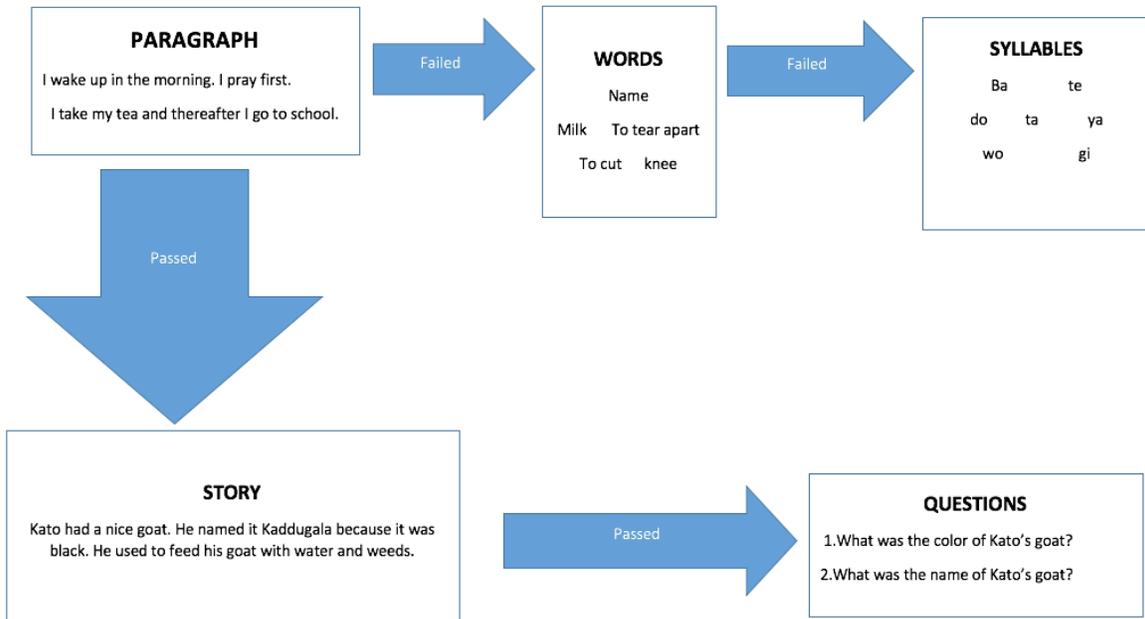
The Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sports has taken interest in the work of Thriving Schools and specifically the recruitment and deployment of CEVs. There is interest in nationalizing this part of Building Tomorrow's model, which would give rise to a grassroots, nationwide volunteer corps with the sole goal of ensuring children are not only in school, but learning, too.

Appendix 1: Assessment Tool

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LITERACY ASSESSMENT



Pictured above are the Luganda and translated English versions of the TaRL literacy assessment tool, used to group students into levels based on their abilities. The Luganda version of the tool was administered one-on-one by facilitators, and as shown above, contains a set of syllables, a set of words, a short paragraph, a short story, and two comprehension questions based on the story. This assessment was used at baseline and week six (endline), while different assessment tools were used to capture student progress in weeks two through five.

Appendix 2: TaRL Literacy Levels

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Graduate
Topics taught at this level	Sounds & Syllables	Words & Paragraphs	Stories & Comprehension	N/A
Achievement level	Beginner	Word Reader	Paragraph Reader	Story Reader
Achievement details	Students range from illiterate to struggling to read and sound out words	Students at this level can read words, but struggle to put them together into a paragraph	Students at this level can read a short paragraph, but have not achieved fluency and struggle to comprehend a story.	Students can fluently read and comprehend a basic story.