

ACCELERATING FOUNDATIONAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT FOR ADOLESCENTS IN UGANDA

Teaching at the Right Level Approach for Upper Primary Learners:
Does It Work?



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This report is written by VVOB- education for development, UNICEF and the Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES).

Please reference this report as: VVOB, UNICEF and MoES. (2023). Teaching at the Right Level, Accelerating Foundational Skills Development in Ugandan Primary Schools.

Acknowledgements



Kingdom of the Netherlands

We gratefully acknowledge the Kingdom of the Netherlands for providing financial assistance under the Partnership for improving prospects for forcibly displaced persons and host communities (PROSPECTS) programme. This four-year programme (2019-2023) aims to facilitate transitioning from humanitarian to development-centred assistance, which can address long-term challenges and needs of the host and refugee communities and accelerate sustainable solutions to build a more inclusive, cohesive, and productive society.



We would also like to express our appreciation to TaRL Africa for their technical support and capacity development assistance during the TaRL project, and for providing valuable feedback in the development of this paper. TaRL Africa, a joint venture by Pratham and J-PAL, supports partners working to address the learning crisis in primary schools in Africa through the evidence-based TaRL approach.



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1. Executive Summary

Since 2016, Uganda has taken in more refugees than any other nation in the world. This increased influx has put a strain on Uganda's ability to satisfy the requirements of refugees and host communities, leaving gaps in the delivery of essential services including education. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers, school leaders, policymakers, and education development partners are facing the uphill task of helping all learners catch up on the learning loss. Interventions were and are urgently required that prioritise literacy, maths, and learners' social-emotional learning (AEWG, 2020). In this context, the Ministry of Education and Sports is seeking to identify effective approaches that can facilitate accelerated, remedial learning of foundational numeracy and literacy. One of the possible approaches, a contextualised, two-term Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) model, was tested in three refugee hosting districts.

Since 2020, the TaRL model has been tested in 180 schools targeting overage adolescents in Madi-Okollo, Terego, and Isingiro districts. In the three districts, 18 master trainers, 185 mentors, and 600 teachers were trained who implemented an average of 29 literacy lessons and 29 numeracy lessons in school terms 1 and 2 of 2022. In the 180 schools, teachers reached over 14,000 overage-for-grade learners in primary 4 and 5 to accelerate their learning and increase their

chances of success in completing a full cycle of education. As per the TaRL methodology, teachers periodically assessed their learners' skills, grouped learners by ability level, and taught these groups using level-appropriate teaching activities.

After two school terms, statistically significant changes were observed in foundational literacy and numeracy skills development among target adolescents. Not only are the learning outcomes promising, but the teacher professional development model used also demonstrates the viability and effective features that could be scaled up through the MoES teacher training structures. In terms of progress in learning the local language, by the endline, 32.3 percent of the learners were able to read a story fluently, up from 12.9 percent at baseline with a 19.4 percentage point change. Similarly, in English literacy, 32.2 percent of the learners were able to read a simple paragraph fluently up from 12.6 percent at baseline with a 19.6 percentage point change. In numeracy, 79.4 percent of the learners were able to solve subtraction and division operations combined up from 29 percent at baseline with a 50.4 percentage point change. This report presents key findings and lessons learned from the piloting experience of TaRL as a remedial learning strategy in Uganda and suggests next steps towards scaling up TaRL at the national level in Uganda.

In terms of progress in learning the local language, by the endline, **32.3** percent of the learners were able to read a story fluently, up from **12.9** percent at baseline with a **19.4** percentage point change. Similarly, in English literacy, **32.2** percent of the learners were able to read a simple paragraph fluently up from **12.6** percent at baseline with a **19.6** percentage point change.

2. Background and Issue

While an estimated 57% of school-age refugee children in Uganda are not in school, those who are enrolled are older than their grade level and are at risk of dropping out due to their poor academic performance. Over 60% of Ugandan adolescents who are in school at the age of 15 are enrolled in primary school, which adds further challenges to the learning process of refugee and host community adolescents. This disadvantaged group suffers from limited chances in learning progression and is at risk of dropping out of education (MoES, 2018).

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated challenges in education systems worldwide and amplified low learning levels in many contexts. In Uganda, nearly two years of COVID-induced school closures have disrupted learning for all children. The latest National Assessment of Progress in Education (NAPE) report in 2021 highlighted a negative trend in the percentage of Primary 6 (P6) learners who are proficient in literacy from 31.8 percent in 2018 to 27.1 percent in 2021. Similarly, numeracy proficiency among the same P6 learners was recorded at 41.2 percent in 2021 compared to 54.6 percent in 2018

(UNEB, 2021). While the pandemic has affected all learners, there is a pre-existing learning crisis that can be further aggravated if no remedial strategy is put in place. To illustrate, Uwezo (2021) reported that the percentage of Primary 3 learners who were able to read and comprehend a story did slightly increase between 2018 and 2021; however, the group of learners that could not recognise letters also increased from 12.7 percent in 2018 to 25.1 percent in 2021. UNEB (2021) indicated that learners in rural schools demonstrate lower scores than learners in urban schools for both numeracy and literacy (21.5 and 30.6 percentage point difference respectively). Likewise, learners in public schools were behind compared to learners in private schools with a percentage point difference of 35.1 for literacy and 27.4 in numeracy. In addition, fewer girls demonstrated proficiency in numeracy (36.1%) compared to boys (46.4%) (UNEB, 2021).

The learning crisis has had a disproportionate impact on refugees and learners in refugee hosting communities. As of 2022, Uganda hosts over 1.5 million refugees in thirteen refugee hosting districts (UNHCR, 2023). Refugee learners attend schools



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alongside their Ugandan peers. As a result, many schools in hosting communities have doubled in size, with some even increasing fourfold, which prompted the MoES to introduce a double-shift system for primary schools (Hicks & Maina, 2018; MoES, 2018; MoES, 2019). However, the influx of learners has caused a severe shortage of teachers. For instance, the learner-to-teacher ratio in primary schools in refugee hosting schools is 85:1, compared to 60:1 in non-refugee hosting schools and 43:1 as the national average. Moreover, there is no clear pathway for refugee teachers to be re-trained and become registered and licensed by the MoES. Additionally, refugee learners face unique socio-emotional and psycho-social challenges and have to study in a language that is different from their own. These challenges are not adequately addressed, and teachers are not equipped to handle them. Consequently, many refugee learners are placed at least two years below their age level or the level they had reached in their country of origin. However, this practice is not exclusive to refugee learners alone. Approximately 68% of host community primary 5 learners and 90% of refugee primary 5 learners in Arua and Isingiro are over-age (Hicks & Maina, 2018). An assessment across refugee hosting districts also showed that 33% of primary 3 and 5 students are unable to read more than one out of five English words (Uwezo, 2018).

While the Ugandan model of integrated education appears to foster friendly relations between refugee learners and their peers from the host population, its implementation poses significant challenges for educators. For instance, school leaders face rapidly

increasing enrolment and difficulties in placing learners due to growing shortages of teachers and classrooms. The teachers, on the other hand, have not been adequately prepared or supported to manage large classes, understand the unique challenges that refugee learners face, or adopt effective teaching methods suitable for the complex language situation of many primary schools in refugee hosting communities (Hicks & Maina, 2018; MoES, 2018).

Long-term state-led programmes are required to support educators in crisis-settings and beyond, to ensure learners remediate learning loss in foundational literacy and numeracy.

Therefore, there is an urgent need for interventions that equip teachers with strategies to support learners in Uganda in acquiring foundational literacy and numeracy skills, particularly those in refugee-hosting districts. Long-term state-led programmes are required to support educators in crisis-settings and beyond, to ensure learners remediate learning loss in foundational literacy and numeracy. This report introduces a teacher-led, government-driven Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) model and examines early outcomes of the first implementation cycle in 54% of government-aided schools from the three target districts. The progress in foundational skills of refugee and Ugandan learners is presented in Madi-Okollo, Terego and Isingiro in Uganda. Moreover, the report provides evidence-based insights into the implementation of the TaRL model to inform ongoing national efforts aimed at addressing the learning crisis in Uganda.

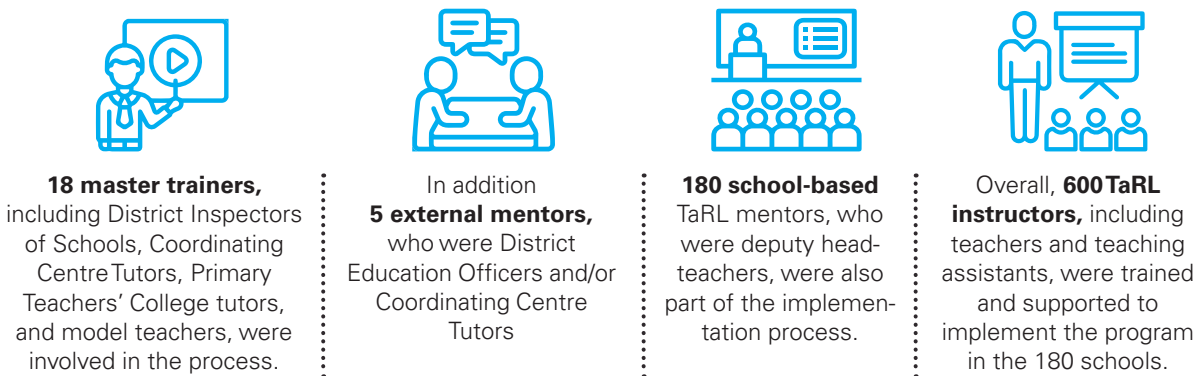
3. Strategy and implementation

TaRL accelerates the acquisition of foundational literacy and numeracy skills by learners who are lagging behind and need to catch up. The approach was originally developed by the Indian NGO Pratham more than 20 years ago and has been rigorously tested in India as well as several African countries since the early 2000s. As evidence suggests, when TaRL is well contextualized and implemented, learning progress is achieved in a short period of time. The key features of the methodology include assessing learners’ learning levels frequently; grouping learners according to their learning levels rather than their age or grade; and using engaging, fun, learner-centred activities focused on foundational skills (Banerjee, et al., 2016; Pershad, 2021; Vromant, Kuppens, Hazemba, & Kyulabantua, 2021).

TaRL can be implemented using various models. Since 2020, a teacher-led two-term model of TaRL was piloted and tested. Following the capacity building process for master trainers, mentors and teachers, TaRL lessons were implemented by trained teachers in 180 schools for two terms. The model is teacher-led which means that teachers took full responsibility of whether to conduct TaRL lessons or not. In 180 schools in three refugee hosting districts, namely: Madi Okollo, Terego, and Isingiro. In the first implementation cycle, over 14,000 learners who were over-age-for-grade (adolescents aged 12-19 years) in primary 4 and 5 participated in TaRL lessons. Effectiveness of TaRL as a remedial education model is dependent on five key components, which are described below.

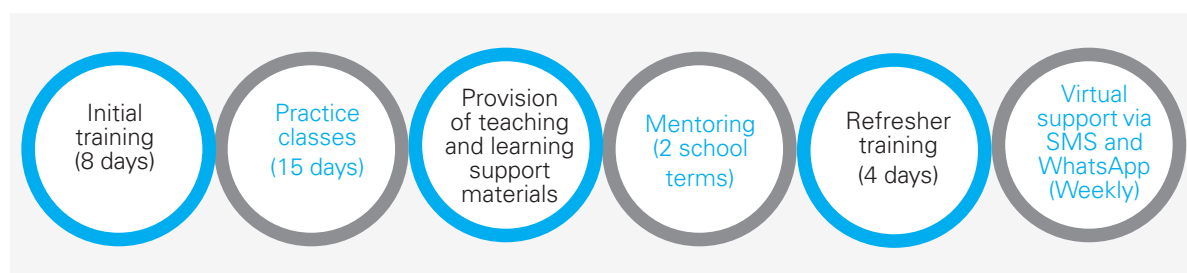
I. Setting up and developing the capacity for implementation

Educators and education officials from district offices and primary teachers’ colleges (PTCs) were trained and supported to lead the testing of TaRL model in 180 schools



To ensure the capacity of MoES stakeholders was strengthened, a comprehensive TaRL professional development program was implemented between 2020 and 2022. The trainings were hosted by PTCs or primary schools to ensure they were low-cost.

Figure 1 Components of the TaRL teacher professional development model

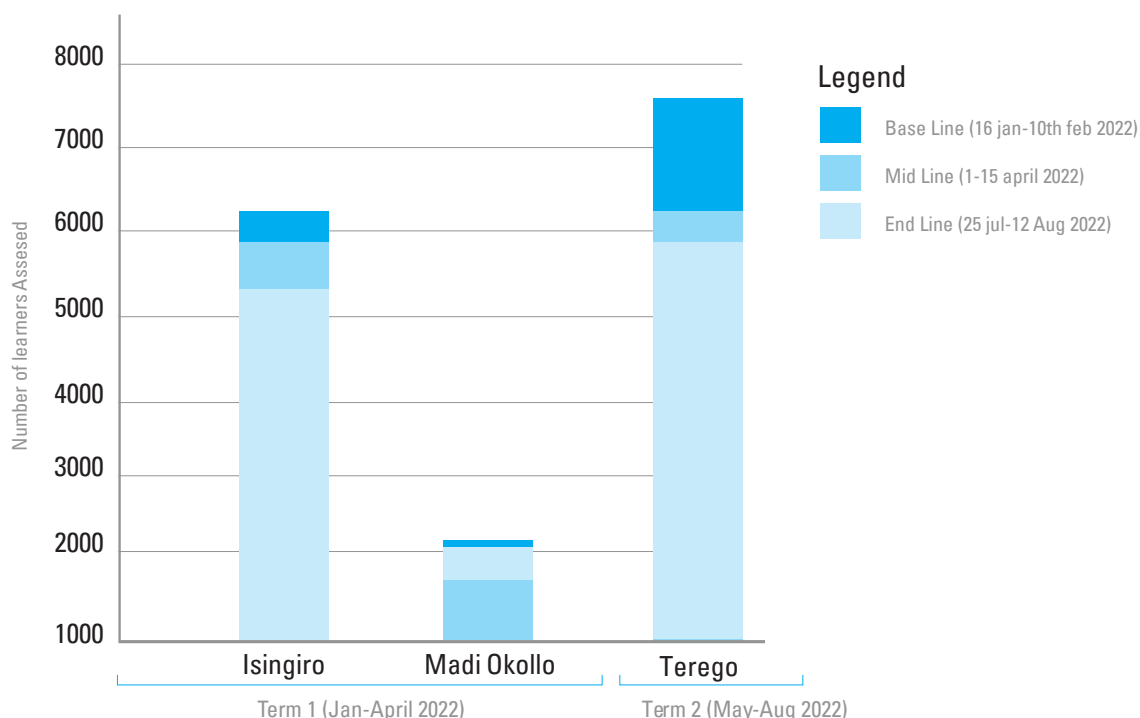


II. Adapting and contextualising the TaRL model

To meet the specific contextual needs in Uganda, the contextualisation and translation process of the TaRL support materials was completed in close collaboration with the Uganda National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDCC), Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB), and the MoES. Based on the demographics of the target locations, TaRL materials were translated into seven languages, namely: Lugbarati, Runyankole/Rukiga, Kiswahili, Kinyarwanda, Nuer, Dinka, and Bari.

III. Periodic assessment of learners' literacy and numeracy abilities

TaRL model testing began in January 2022¹, immediately after schools reopened following the COVID-19 pandemic. At the beginning of the program, teachers assessed the literacy and numeracy skills of 15,893 adolescents in Primary 4 and Primary 5. In the following periodic assessments, the number of learners assessed was 12,885 and 14,000, respectively



Teachers use individual assessments to determine each learner's literacy and numeracy abilities. For example, for local language literacy, the teacher begins by providing a paragraph for the learner to read to establish if they can read at that level. If the learner can read the paragraph, the teacher moves on to the next level; if not, the teacher provides a task at a lower level until the correct level is identified. TaRL focuses on three skill domains (local language literacy, English literacy, and numeracy) and identifies five ability levels for each (as shown in Table 1). Based on this assessment, learners are grouped with others of the same ability level, regardless of age or grade. A similar approach is used to assess learners' numeracy levels. The oral, one-on-one assessment method allows teachers to identify individual learners' needs and motivates them when they see improvement. Regular assessments also reinforce a focus on specific learning goals related to foundational literacy and numeracy development.

¹ In 2021, a pilot of TaRL was initiated in 50 schools. However, this was interrupted by the closure of schools. In 2022, the 50 pilot schools resumed the programme with a baseline and implemented TaRL for two terms, along with the 130 expansion schools.

Table 1. Numeracy and literacy levels according to TaRL approach.

	Numeracy	Literacy in the local language	Literacy in English
Level 1	No number recognition	No letter recognition	No letter recognition
Level 2	1-digit number recognition	Letters	Letters
Level 3	2-digit number recognition	Words	Words
Level 4	2- by- 2 subtraction with borrowing	Paragraph	Simple sentence
Level 5	Division with a non-zero remainder	Story	Simple paragraph

IV. Adapting and implementing classroom methodology

TaRL lessons were implemented over a period of 13 weeks, spread across two school terms, excluding time for assessment and teacher's industrial action in term two of 2022. During this time, schools provided an average of 29 hours of numeracy and 29 hours of literacy lessons, which equates to an average of five lessons per week. In total, 14,000 over-aged adolescents enrolled in P4 and P5 received TaRL lessons. These lessons were scheduled before and/or after class, and/or during weekends.

Classroom observations conducted by mentors indicated that teachers had largely implemented key TaRL techniques. Mentors oversaw the quality of implementation and rated teachers an average of 31.5 points out of a maximum score of 45. On average, the domains with the highest scores were engagement of learners, classroom management, and subject-matter knowledge, suggesting enhanced quality implementation of TaRL lessons.

Attendance data showed that learners regularly attended TaRL lessons, with 82% of learners attending at least 80% of the lessons.

V. Continuous data collection to enhance the TaRL approach

Throughout the implementation period, the TaRL model was monitored at all levels to support an evidence-based approach to continuous improvement. Data was collected at the school level, capturing attendance rates of learners, assessment of literacy and numeracy outcomes, and the number of lessons delivered. TaRL lessons were observed by both school-based and external mentors, using observation rubrics. The data from these rubrics were immediately used by the mentors to offer guidance to the teachers on how they could improve their teaching practices. This form of support supervision is key to the success of the TaRL model.

For the periodic assessments of learning outcomes, teachers used record sheets, which were collected and scanned using Optimal Mark Recognition. On a termly basis, the data was analysed and discussed with key stakeholders at the district and national level to troubleshoot and respond to emerging needs. For example, data on lesson progress, learning outcomes, and TaRL class sizes was used by external mentors and district leaders to prioritise mentorship visits to schools with the most need for support.

In total, **14,000** over-aged adolescents enrolled in P4 and P5 received TaRL lessons. These lessons were scheduled before and/or after class, and/or during weekends.



Implementing TaRL - experiences from the frontline

After close to two-years of school closure, teacher Susan noticed that many learners were set-back due to the lock down: “Many children are not in the classes they are supposed to be because of lock down as a result of COVID 19.” TaRL offered her and her team an approach to handle learners with different levels of ability. “We started in a local language. [...] We grouped learners as beginners and middle and third level but all in different languages; Kinyarwanda only, Kiswahili only and Runyankole only.”

At the start, TaRL caused a buzz around the school attracting many learners to try and join, Susan recalled “TaRL would attract all children, so it would be difficult to send a way a child because of their lower age. The learners expected much, so when they understood what TaRL is about, the disturbances stopped.” One of Susan’s learners, Topi, explains she likes “everything about TaRL, I like TaRL because it is helping me to learn languages very fast.” Topi explains that there is a difference between TaRL and regular lessons: “In TaRL we learn Kinyarwanda, and in the ordinary classes we learn in English. In TaRL we write on the ground and in the normal classes we write on the blackboard. But I love all.”

Susan and her colleagues managed to implement TaRL through team work and role distribution, but also through the support of several people such as the school leader, mentors, VVOB district support coordinator and parents. Louisa, one of the parents explains why she has actively ensured her daughter participates in the TaRL classes, even on a weekend “she told me [my daughter] that they come on Saturday to read, when I asked why they don’t carry books, she told me that it’s because they find their books for reading at school. [...] So, I asked her about reading, she reads for me and I can see her reading well. I want to be sure she comes to school at that time.”

Susan and her colleagues also faced some challenges working in a school with a large portion of refugee learners. “Refugee learners absent themselves because they have many activities, like on the day of food distribution, harvesting or any other activity. Some learners won’t come during those times.” Language is another challenge, especially for refugee learners, Peter one of the refugee parents explains “At first our children did not have a teacher who speaks the refugee language but later they got one who is also overwhelmed he teachers both Kiswahili and Kinyarwanda.” The prolonged school day also challenges learners who do not have school lunches, Susan explains that “a big number of children spend a whole day without eating.” Susan’s deputy head teacher adds unique challenges that over-aged-for-grade adolescent girls face in participating in education, including the remedial classes “[a challenge is] child marriage especially for girls, other girls who are big in body fear being in class that they will be laughed at, so they end up staying back at home.”

All in all, Susan is proud of the results she and her colleagues achieved through TaRL “[I am proud of] the improvement of learners. Most of the learners in all levels are promoted to different levels. Those on story level left TaRL with a very big change.”

4. Progress and results

Learners booked significant progress in foundational literacy and numeracy

With an average of 58 hours of TaRL lessons, targeting literacy and numeracy skills of overage adolescents in P4 and P5, data from 11,087 learners obtained from 180 schools at baseline and endline confirm that TaRL can effectively accelerate foundational numeracy and literacy development. Within two school terms and an average of close to five lessons a week (not considering assessment weeks), significant progress was made in all competency domains, including numeracy, English literacy, and literacy in the local language.

Literacy in the local language

In local language literacy, 32.3 percent of the learners were able to read a story fluently, up from 12.9 percent at baseline, with a 19.4 percentage point change. This change is statistically significant at $P < 0.05$, indicating significant improvement in local language literacy among learners.

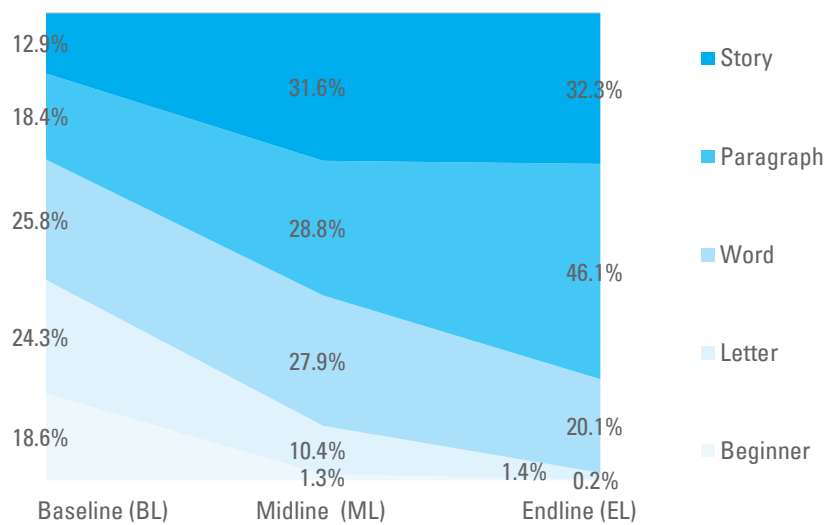
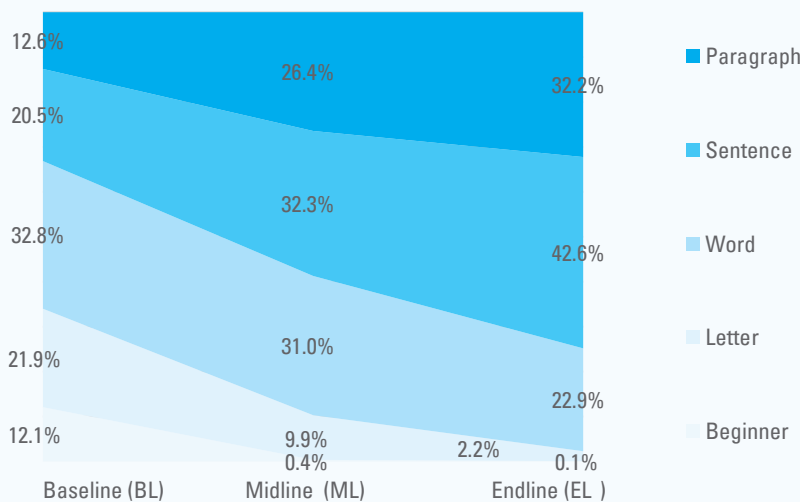


Figure 2: Comparison between baseline, midline and endline assessment results of literacy in the local language



Literacy in English

In English literacy, 32.2 percent of the learners were able to read a simple paragraph fluently, up from 12.6 percent at baseline, with a 19.6 percentage point change. This change is statistically significant at $P < 0.05$, indicating significant improvement in English literacy among learners.

Figure 3: Comparison between baseline, midline and endline assessment results of literacy in English

Numeracy

In numeracy, 79.4 percent of the learners were able to solve subtraction and division operations combined, up from 29 percent at baseline, with a 50.4 percentage point change. This change is statistically significant at $P < 0.05$, indicating significant improvement in numeracy skills among learners.

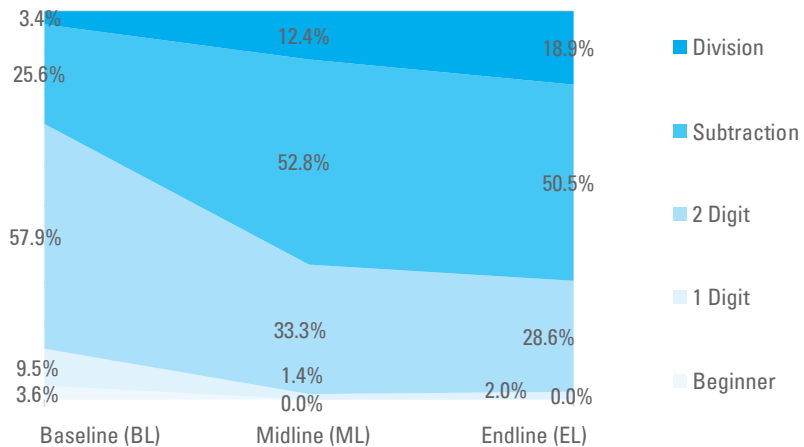


Figure 4: Comparison between baseline, midline and endline assessment results of numeracy

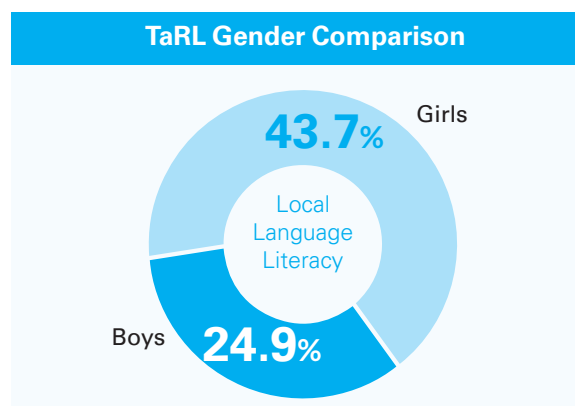
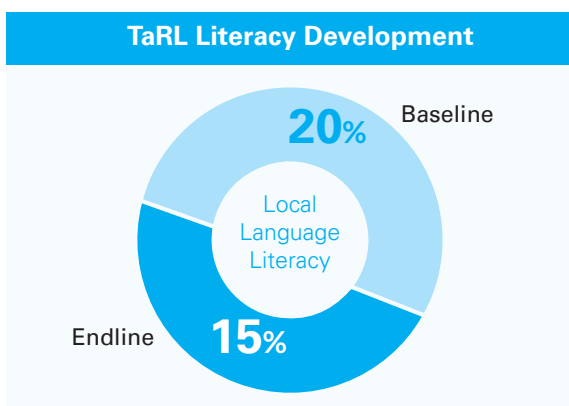
Although it is not possible to methodologically attribute this progress to the TaRL intervention, we can assume that if a learner progresses by two levels, learning has been accelerated. Based on the results, a large group of learners improved by at least two levels in local language literacy (75.7%) and English language literacy (70.9%) among those who could improve by two levels or more. However, for numeracy only 23.1 percent improved by two levels or more among those who could have improved by two levels or more.

TaRL as an approach to equity

TaRL was able to reduce the gap in literacy development between Ugandan and refugee learners, but not in numeracy. In local language literacy, when looking at the progress made during the two terms, the gap between Ugandan learners and refugee learners who could read a simple paragraph and/or a story slightly narrowed. The difference was 20 percentage points at baseline and 15 percentage points at endline. Ugandan and refugee learners achieved comparable levels in English literacy. Comparing performance at the two highest levels (paragraph and sentence), there were no statistically significant differences in the mean scores of Ugandan and refugee learners. However, in numeracy, the gap between refugee and Ugandan learners widened between the baseline and endline. Comparison at the two highest levels (division

and subtraction) revealed a statistically significant difference in mean scores between Ugandan and refugee learners at the division level.

In terms of gender, moderate differences at the baseline were reduced at the endline. Boys made more progress in the local language than girls, but the gender gap was significantly reduced by the endline. At baseline, 43.7 percent of girls were placed at the beginner or letter level, compared to 24.9 percent of boys – a difference of 18.8 percentage points. At the endline, this difference narrowed to less than 1 percentage point. The gender difference in English literacy competence was moderate at the start of the programme before being further narrowed towards the endline. Looking at the highest levels (sentence and paragraph), the difference between boys and girls declined from a 1.6 percentage point difference at the baseline to a 0.6 percentage point difference at the endline, which was statistically insignificant. Boys and girls achieved similar progress in numeracy. Boys showed slightly better performance at the baseline, but this gap was reduced at the endline. The small difference between the proportion of boys and girls at the highest two levels at baseline (5.2%) was significantly reduced to a statistically insignificant difference of 0.2 percentage points, indicating gender parity at the endline.



5. Lessons learned



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1. TaRL shows promise to accelerate foundational numeracy and literacy acquisition of learners who need to 'catch-up' in Ugandan primary schools

The outcomes of TaRL in three refugee hosting districts in Uganda suggest that even with a relatively low number of lessons, TaRL can be effective in accelerating the numeracy and literacy skills development of overage-for-grade learners in primary 4 and primary 5. TaRL helped to narrow the gap between the literacy abilities of Ugandan learners and refugee learners; however, a gap still persists in numeracy levels.



2. Teachers can master the TaRL approach through training, mentoring and contextualised teaching and learning materials

In the three districts, teachers were able to master and effectively execute key methods of the TaRL approach, as demonstrated in the outcomes of periodic assessments and classroom observation scores. This suggests that the TaRL Teacher Professional Development (TPD) model, which consists of training, mentoring, and the provision of contextualised teaching and learning materials, can equip teachers with the required competencies to improve the literacy and numeracy levels of learners. However, the number of mentoring visits remained low on average. Additional review is needed to evaluate the quality of and barriers to mentoring support. This will further enhance the mentoring component, which is central to the TPD model. To achieve scale, the coordinating centres and PTCs can be further leveraged to offer skilled master trainers and external mentors.

3. While achieving the golden standard of 120 hours of literacy and numeracy before and after class may be difficult, it is still possible to make significant improvements with fewer hours

Schools, on average, implemented only 29 hours of literacy and 29 hours of numeracy lessons, out of the recommended 120 hours for each subject. While it is common to see variations in the number of lessons implemented in teacher-led TaRL models, the 120 hours can be seen as aspirational. Despite the low number of lessons, promising outcomes were witnessed. However, increasing the number of hours can be worthwhile in order to optimise outcomes for all learners and to help more learners achieve level five in foundational numeracy and literacy. Nevertheless, increasing the hours would only be possible if TaRL lessons are scheduled without significantly increasing the workload for teachers.

4. The data system for TaRL in Uganda requires fine tuning

In the TaRL model implemented in Isingiro, Madi-Okollo and Terego, teachers collected data on learner performance and TaRL lesson implementation. While the return on learner assessment data was generally good, attendance data was incomplete. However, data on teaching quality was not representative as only a few external mentors submitted observation records. Furthermore, data analysis and reporting in current TaRL projects are mostly led by VVOB, both at the district and national level, and are not integrated into the Ministry's education management information systems. This highlights the need for further investment to revitalise the Education Management Information System (EMIS), with a focus on learning indicators that can inform decision-makers about learners' acquisition of foundational literacy and numeracy skills.

6. Next steps

To address the learning crisis resulting from two years of school closures, the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) is continuing its efforts to adapt and validate a scalable version of the TaRL model that can accelerate the development of numeracy and literacy skills for affected learners. The next steps will focus on increasing the evidence base for TaRL and developing a strategy for scaling up the approach.

A. Increasing the evidence base for TaRL

The effort to generate evidence on the effectiveness and contextual fit of the TaRL approach will continue to support the scaling-up efforts. To this end, a second cycle of TaRL implementation in Terego, Madi-Okollo, and Isingiro is planned for 2023. This cycle will explore the impact of modifications made to the model on learning outcomes, data collection and utilisation, and frequency of TaRL lessons. The aim is to build on the lessons learned from the previous testing experience in target schools to monitor the extent of improvement based on the modifications applied. This complements the MoES efforts to identify effective and efficient remedial education strategies that can be scaled up. In addition, a process evaluation study is planned for 2023-2024 to examine the fidelity of implementation and scalability of the two-term TaRL model, in line with MoES priorities.

B. Developing a scaling-up strategy

The evidence and insights generated by testing the TaRL model will inform ongoing conversations and action planning led by MoES towards developing a scaling-up strategy for TaRL in Uganda. The Education Scalability Checklist has been adopted as a tool to support MoES in developing an action plan that operationalizes a government-led TaRL model for Uganda and sets a roadmap to scale up the TaRL model, including its professional development model (VVOB, 2021). To ensure scalability, proposals being considered include integrating TaRL into the regular timetable, reducing the cost of implementation (especially for teaching and learning support materials), streamlining teacher training through existing frameworks, and aligning monitoring systems with existing Government systems. To achieve the latter, the process of mapping existing Government data systems and capacities has begun to explore linkages with national data initiatives and mainstream data collection efforts.



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