8 best practices for early grade reading in multilingual contexts

With mother tongue or national language reading instruction at the forefront of funders’ goals (such as [USAID](https://www.usaid.gov/what-we-do/education/improving-early-grade-reading)), practitioners and governments alike are striving to create curriculum, materials, and learning environments that are *responsive* and *sensitive* to the complex multilingual contexts we serve.

*Sound impossible*? Admittedly, it’s a challenge for many education practitioners, but luckily, they are not alone. A multitude of organizations have made valiant efforts in the past decades to learn from their contexts and many have been quite successful. Below is a curation of eight best practices identified by FHI 360 and derived from experts and experiences worldwide. FHI 360 strives to apply these practices in all of its literacy work in [DR Congo ACCELERE!](https://www.fhi360.org/projects/accelerating-equitable-access-school-reading-student-retention-and-accountability-accelere), [Ghana Learning](https://www.fhi360.org/projects/usaid-ghana-partnership-education-learning), [Nigeria RANA](https://www.fhi360.org/projects/reading-and-numeracy-activity-rana), and [Haiti Ann-ALE](https://www.fhi360.org/projects/usaidhaiti-lets-learn-read-and-write-ann-ale).

**First and foremost, get to know your context!**

**Best practice 1**: Engage in a **language mapping**

This exercise is designed to capture:

* the **languages that students and teachers predominately speak—**if a language policy doesn’t exist, this mapping can help governments make a choice for language of instruction that reflects the languages most commonly spoken in and outside of school.
* whether **teachers can speak, read, and write**the language of instruction—this will help you identify teacher needs and better plan for trainings.
* **needs for distribution**of resources and materials—this will help you better plan materials distribution according to predominant languages spoken in the school.

Want to know more? Here is an example of a [language mapping study](http://mlenetwork.org/content/moving-towards-bilingual-education-mali-bridging-policy-and-practice-improved-reading-instru) conducted by the Education Development Center in Mali.

**Best practice 2:** Ensure the chosen language(s) of instruction is**standardized**

As is often the case, there are many “dialects” of the same language. For example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), there are dozens of different versions of what is called “Swahili”. In a perfect world, we would write materials in every dialect. But in practice, that’s not realistic. That’s why it’s important to identify and standardize an orthography. This can be done in a few steps:

1. Gather information and existing documents on the language.
2. Identify/recommend orthography.
3. Develop a scope and sequence of phonemes and grammatical particles per language.

Check out [SIL international’s resources](http://www.sil.org/literacy-and-education/resources-developing-orthographies) on establishing orthographies in previously unwritten or non-standardized languages.

**Best practice 3:** Understand the**language elements and structure**

Even if you aren’t a linguist, understanding the language will help you **determine how to most effectively teach reading skills in this language.**Some example questions you could ask:



**Next, you have to do something with the information collected!**

**Best practice 4:** Develop**context-sensitive approach to instruction**

Using the information gathered, reading program design can now begin. To do this, you have to:

* *Determine the****approach to reading******instruction***. In a multilingual context, a good model for reading instruction depends on several elements including **the language structure**and**teachers’ past experience**—how they learned to read, in what language, how they’ve taught reading in the past. Don’t select anything too far-fetched as this will diminish the likelihood for successful implementation.
* Determine how to best prepare students **for reading in two (or more) languages**—often, students in these contexts are expected to eventually learn to read in one or more other languages (often an international language). Depending on the country’s language policy, this could be done using the bilingual approach or the transition into another language. In both cases, transfer of skills and sometimes language structure can happen. As such, the linguistic structure of all languages students will learn will effectively inform what can and cannot transfer from one language to the next, i.e. what needs to be taught explicitly in each language and what we can expect students to transfer. See these [resources](http://www.sil.org/literacy-education/multilingual-education-mother-tongue-first-education-multilingual-world) that can help get you started.

**Best practice 5:** Develop a**realistic and systematic scope and sequence**

Feed in your scope and sequence of phonemes and grammatical particles into the sequence of reading skills you want students to master. This comprehensive document will help you determine the pace at which you want students to be acquiring different skills and content. Remember, language structure and complexity will influence this pace.



**Best practice 6:** Develop**language**and**context-appropriate student texts**

You’re finally on to the fun stuff—writing student books. A few tips to keep in mind when writing in different languages:

1. **Don’t simply translate books from one language to another**. When doing this, the leveling changes AND the systematic progression of word frequencies or letter frequencies fails to translate. Therefore, **develop leveling criteria**specific to each language (or a similar group of languages) and write from that.
2. When writing [decodables](http://www.righttrackreading.com/decodabletext.html%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank),**make sure texts respect the scope and sequence of phonemes and high frequency morpheme or word lists**. This will ensure children CAN read the texts you develop for the purpose of learning to decode. Programs like [SynPhony](http://www.sil.org/resources/software_fonts/synphony%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) or [PrimerPro](http://www.sil.org/resources/software_fonts/primerpro%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) are prime examples of word-generating software.
3. **Ensure themes are accessible and familiar to students**. Early readers use cues like illustrations and prior knowledge to help them build their reading skills. Therefore, pick themes that are close to the child’s reality and culture.

**Best practice 7**: Develop**appealing, quality,**and**vocabulary rich reading materials**



Grade 1 students sitting in a classroom in Kimpoko village, DRC

**PHOTO CREDIT: NATHALIE LOUGE**

Develop vocabulary-rich materials like [big books](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20199981?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents) or [supplementary reading materials](https://www.readinga-z.com/samples/leveled-reading.html)**in local language to cultivate a love of reading and to build oral language**. Big books are often the sole vehicle that children in these contexts have for being read-aloud to and exposed to rich vocabulary in a language they understand. Day to day oral language is often quite repetitive and adults aren’t used to discussing “adult-like” subjects with their children. So, read-alouds are all the more important for developing the necessary vocabulary.

Developing appealing books in a child’s language also reinforces cultural pride and buy-in to using the language at school.

**Best practice 8**: Address**sensitivities around language of instruction**

Last but not least, it is essential to bring up**language sensitivities**and**perceptions**of the language chosen for instruction in activities like**trainings, campaigns**or**sensitization events**. Address these issues head on rather than letting them crop up later as “excuses” for resistance to implementation.

These conversations will help develop buy-in and will help you come up with solutions to mitigate the potential conflict for the overall delivery of a reading program. Do this with [parents](http://www.sil.org/sites/default/files/files/languages_in_educ_and_development_kenya_june2015.pdf) who are often opposed to their children learning to read in a non-international language, and with **teachers**who may themselves be sensitive to using the selected language of instruction. See toolkits by the [Center for Education Innovations](http://www.earlylearningtoolkit.org/content/mother-tongue-instruction) and [UNESCO](http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001521/152198e.pdf) on multilingual education advocacy.