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A comprehensive approach for Sinhala Literacy development in Early Grades: An intervention designed by “Room to Read”

M A A S Dias and Probak Karim

Room to Read Sri Lanka, 38, Dr E A Cooray Mawatha, Colombo 06

One of the key strategies of the Literacy Program of “Room to Read” includes developing and supporting an effective, high quality, replicable and low-cost model of teaching, reading and writing skills for young children in early grades. In Sri Lanka, the initiative started with a sample of 784 grade 1 students covering 27 classes of 20 Sinhala schools from one education zone in 2014. The intervention adopts an action research approach. This paper intends to capture and share some of the very early findings from the first two cycles. Through an intensive and comprehensive review of hundreds of scientific research in early grade reading instruction, the National Reading Panel of America had been able to pin point the most common components of an effective Reading Instruction program in early grades. Room to Read strives to build its model on the same components. Teaching of the Sinhala Language is done by using a comprehensive approach with five key components for reading improvement: phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. This is combined with writing, focusing on mechanics of writing, spelling rules and composition.

As the first step a scope and sequence (S&S) was developed for the first school term of 2014 involving the national experts in the relevant field which tried to identify ‘what’ needed to be taught in the first term following the National Curriculum. Based on that, instructional materials were developed both for teachers and students. Teachers were trained on the approach and program assistants were engaged to support teachers through on the job coaching support. Student’s progress was tracked on a monthly basis. Results of the first monthly tracking revealed that 70% of the students in programme schools have reached the expected level of phonemic awareness and phonics skills. It also revealed that there was a need for reducing the pace of the program in order for all children to be able to achieve the basic skills.

The plan for term 2 was basically the logical progression of term 1, but it was developed taking the findings from term 1 into consideration, which included: reinforcing key contents, systematic revision and re-teaching , capacity development of the teachers and the coaches, scripted instructional routine for teachers for each day and instructional materials for pupils. Data collected in the 2nd term revealed that the new plan is likely to be more effective than the one conducted in the first term. A comprehensive evaluation plan of baseline, midline and end line surveys has already been put in place which will independently evaluate both project and controlled schools which will complete in 2015.