

Implementing an Evidence-Based Phonics Program in a Rural Belizean School: A Case Report

Implementación de un programa de fonética basado en la evidencia en una escuela rural de Belice: un informe de caso.

Lisa Carballo

Universidad Internacional San Isidro Labrador

e.mail: lisacarballo7@gmail.com

Lupita Adela Polanco

Universidad Internacional San Isidro Labrador

e.mail: busylups@gmail.com

Abstract: This case report investigates the implementation of an evidence-based phonics program, UFLI Foundations, in San Jose Nuevo Palmar RC School, a rural, linguistically diverse, and resource-constrained primary school in Belize. The study addresses persistent literacy challenges among students who often speak Spanish, Kriol, or Indigenous languages at home, while English is the mandated language of instruction. Through a case study approach, the report documents the program's implementation during the 2024-2025 academic year, including targeted teacher training and ongoing mentorship provided by the non-governmental organization PathLight. Data were collected via student literacy assessments (Core Phonics Survey) at three intervals and qualitative insights from teacher interviews and observations. Findings indicate significant gains in students' foundational phonetic skills, including letter recognition, vowel knowledge, and CVC word reading. The study highlights the critical role of structured teacher support, adaptability of the curriculum to local contexts, and the positive impact of community partnerships in fostering effective literacy instruction. This report concludes that a comprehensive approach, combining evidence-based programs with sustained teacher development and collaborative support, can lead to substantial improvements in early literacy outcomes in similar challenging educational environments.

Keywords: *Foundational reading skills, Second language learners (ESL/EAL), Teacher professional development, Instructional coaching, Teacher efficacy*

Resumen: Este informe de caso investiga la implementación de un programa de fonética basado en evidencia, UFLI Foundations, en la Escuela Católica San José Nuevo Palmar, una escuela primaria rural, lingüísticamente diversa y con recursos limitados en Belice. El estudio aborda los persistentes desafíos de alfabetización entre los estudiantes que a menudo hablan español, criollo o lenguas indígenas en casa, mientras que el inglés es el idioma de instrucción obligatorio.

Mediante un enfoque de estudio de caso, el informe documenta la implementación del programa durante el año académico 2024-2025, incluyendo la capacitación docente específica y la mentoría continua proporcionada por la organización no gubernamental PathLight. Los datos se recopilaron a través de evaluaciones de alfabetización estudiantil (Encuesta de Fonética Básica) en tres intervalos y perspectivas cualitativas de entrevistas y observaciones de los docentes. Los hallazgos indican avances significativos en las habilidades fonéticas fundamentales de los estudiantes, incluyendo el reconocimiento de letras, el conocimiento de vocales y la lectura de palabras CVC. El estudio resalta el papel fundamental del apoyo docente estructurado, la adaptabilidad del currículo a los contextos locales y el impacto positivo de las alianzas comunitarias para fomentar una instrucción de alfabetización eficaz. Este informe concluye que un enfoque integral, que combine programas basados en la evidencia con el desarrollo docente continuo y el apoyo colaborativo, puede generar mejoras sustanciales en los resultados de alfabetización temprana en entornos educativos desafiantes similares.

Palabras clave: Habilidades básicas de lectura, Aprendices de segunda lengua (ESL/EAL), Educación continua docente, Coaching pedagógico, Eficacia docente

Case Context

Belize is a culturally rich and diverse country that uniquely occupies a space in both Central America and the Caribbean. While the country has made great strides in building a robust education system built on competencies and stipulates that all children ages 5-16 are legally mandated to go to school, literacy development remains a persistent challenge in rural regions of Belize. This is especially so in communities where structural inequities, limited educational resources, and linguistic diversity create a resounding barrier. One of the biggest challenges students face is the mismatch between home language and language of instruction. English is the official language of Belize and, hence, the mandated language of instruction in schools.

However, many children enter school speaking Spanish, Kriol, or Indigenous languages. This linguistic disconnect creates a complex and challenging instructional environment, both for the student and the teacher. Developing literacy skills is a complex process that takes years to master, even in one's first language. When the language of instruction is different from that of students' home language, students face additional learning challenges and strains. On the one hand, students are expected to acquire foundational reading and writing skills in a language that may be foreign to them while simultaneously navigating new experiences in formal education classrooms. Furthermore, teachers are expected to bridge the linguistic gap without proper English as a second language strategies training. These challenges are especially prominent in rural primary schools, where access to instructional materials, professional development opportunities, and specialized support services is often limited. Furthermore, students in rural areas often have limited exposure to English and reduced access to English texts. Teachers frequently rely on improvised literacy strategies or approaches to mediate these challenges. As a result, students in these early years may face persistent difficulties in phonemic awareness, decoding, fluency, and reading comprehension. This would in turn affect their academic career since these are skills that are critical for long-term academic success.

This case report focuses on San Jose Nuevo Palmar Roman Catholic School, a rural primary school located in the Orange Walk District of Belize. This is a very small school with a population of 145 students and 10 teachers. Many of the students in this school come from low-income or single-parent households and also face many other socio-economic challenges. This is further exacerbated by the fact that schools like Palmar RC often operate with minimal budgets funded largely through modest parental contributions. Resource constraints remain a persistent feature of rural schooling, with limited access to instructional materials, classroom libraries, and specialized support services. Requiring teachers to adapt instruction creatively while working within structural limitations. This school is a reflection of the many systemic challenges faced by rural schools nationwide. In the lower division at Palmar RC (Infant I, Infant II, and Standard I), teachers have observed significant gaps in students' foundational literacy skills. They have also raised concerns about the challenges they face when teaching language arts and the need for effective and efficient instructional strategies.

In response to these challenges, San Jose Nuevo Palmar RC School implemented the UFLI Foundations phonics program in 2024. This phonics program is an evidence-based literacy curriculum designed to “introduce students to the foundational reading skills necessary for proficient reading and follows a carefully developed scope and sequence designed to ensure that students systematically acquire each skill needed and learn to apply each skill with automaticity and confidence” (Ventriss Learning, 2026). However, simply handing over the manual to teachers would not address the pedagogical challenges teachers face. Hence, the program was introduced alongside targeted teacher training and ongoing mentorship support provided through a partnership with the non-governmental organization, PathLight.

This intervention offered an opportunity not only to address student literacy needs but also to examine the practical and methodological considerations involved in implementing a structured phonics program in a rural school.

This case report documents the implementation of the UFLI Foundations phonics program at San Jose Nuevo Palmar RC School for the school year 2024-2025 and analyzes the methodological and instructional lessons gotten from this experience that are telling for future program implementations. Specifically, the case investigates changes in students' phonetic skills, the role of teacher training and ongoing mentorship in supporting instructional practices. Also, it explores the impact and contribution of community and NGO partnerships and how this contributes to the sustainability of the intervention. By examining both student literacy outcomes and teacher experiences, the case aims to contribute to a growing body of knowledge on effective literacy interventions in under-resourced and linguistically diverse educational settings, with implications for policy, practice, and future research in similar contexts.

Conceptual and Theoretical Considerations

To validate the implementation of the UFLI Foundations phonics program at San Jose Nuevo Palmar RC School, it was paramount that this study be grounded on established theories of language learning, literacy development, and educational context. Together these theories help explain both the instructional challenges observed and the rationale for the implementation of the intervention.

Vygotsky's sociocultural learning theory states that learning takes place in social settings; this means that the learning taking place in the classroom is a socially mediated one, shaped by the interactions, language, and cultural context. In rural schools this would often take place in a multilingual context. Students will be taught in English in the classroom but might interact with their peers for recess speaking in Spanish. Hence, these interactions directly influence how students acquire foundational reading skills, regardless if it is in a formal classroom setting or the playground.

This suggests that all of these skills and experiences need to be taken into consideration when teaching English. The use of the UFLI explicit phonics instruction provides structured opportunities for interaction and scaffolding in a second-language learning context. This is further supported by teacher mentoring and coaching.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory further sheds light on how external factors, those outside of the classroom, influence literacy instructions. At San Jose Nuevo Palmar RC School, limited resources and family socioeconomic conditions are two of the major challenges students face. However, the involvement of external partners such as PathLight acts as a positive external factor and helps shape both the implementation and sustainability of the phonics program. Their role in training and mentoring demonstrates how external factors and systems have the potential to positively impact the local school environment. This highlights how collaboration between schools and community-based organizations can mitigate some of the constraints faced by rural educational settings.

Lastly, research on the reciprocal relationship between writing and reading (Graham, 2010) emphasizes the importance of integrated literacy practices in early years. Cooper et al. (2014) states that early skills in literacy predict later reading success. The UFLI Foundations program incorporates opportunities for students to apply phonics knowledge through writing activities, reinforcing decoding and spelling skills. This means that whatever students learn in phonics can then be applied to other subject areas. The observations from this case suggest that integrating reading and writing instruction supported students' development of foundational literacy skills in meaningful ways.

Together, this theoretical framework provides a lens for interpreting the instructional strategies, teacher practices, and student outcomes observed in this case. This framework offers an interpretive guide for understanding how evidence-based literacy instruction can be adapted and implemented in a multilingual, resource-constrained rural school context.

Intervention Implementation

The UFLI Foundations phonics program was implemented as a part of the daily language arts lessons. This was done across the lower division (Infant 1 to Standard 1) at San Jose Nuevo Palmar RC School. Classroom teachers underwent several training sessions in order to prepare them to serve as the primary instructors responsible for delivering the phonics lessons.

It is important to note that the national curriculum already allots time for phonics instruction, but the scope and sequence of the UFLI curriculum is structured to ensure that foundational skills are introduced systematically and reinforced through repeated practice. This was done through explicit teaching of letters–sound relationships, blending, decoding, and spelling.

Students engaged in a combination of whole-group, small-group, and individual phonics activities. This allowed the teachers to provide direct instruction while also addressing individual learning needs. During classroom instruction, students practiced phonics skills through guided oral phonemic awareness activities, reading, writing tasks, and comprehension. Individual tasks were done during assessment periods to monitor student progress and inform instructional decisions (i.e., if the teacher could move on or would need to spend more time on a given lesson).

To support the effective implementation of this curriculum, Pathlight International staff provided ongoing mentorship and instructional coaching throughout the school year. This support included teacher training sessions, classroom observations, feedback discussions, and problem-solving conversations focused on instructional challenges. Rather than functioning as external evaluators, PathLight mentors worked collaboratively with teachers to adapt instructional strategies to the realities of a multilingual, resource-constrained classroom environment.

To make this program sustainable, it was paramount that there was regular communication among classroom teachers, PathLight staff, and the school principal. Informal check-ins and quarterly meetings gave teachers a platform to talk about how the program was progressing and to reflect on student progress, address emerging challenges, and make necessary instructional adjustments.

However, in retrospect these impromptu, but structured, gatherings also served as an outlet for teachers to seek advice, provided emotional and professional support for teachers, and gave them a place they could go to unwind. This collaborative approach supported consistency in implementation while allowing flexibility to respond to the specific needs of students and teachers within each unique school context.

Data Collection

Data for this case included both quantitative and qualitative data and were collected through student literacy assessments and documentation of teacher experiences throughout the 2024–2025 academic year.

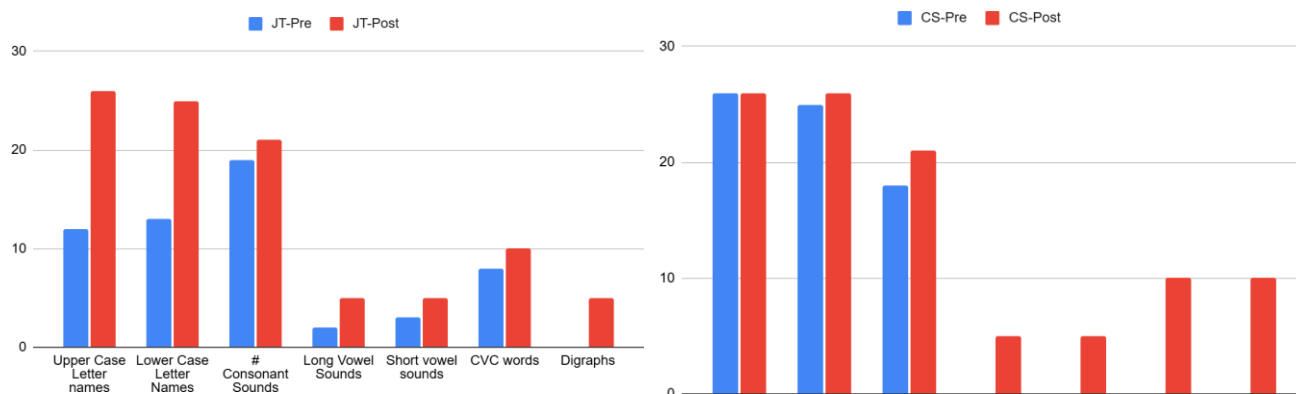
Student literacy progress was measured at three points:

- the beginning of the program (October)
- mid-year (February)
- end of the school year (May/June).

These pre-, mid-, and post-assessments were done using the Core Phonics Survey and focused on foundational literacy skills aligned with the UFLI Foundations program. This included assessment in phonemic awareness, letter/sound correspondence, decoding, word reading, and fluency. It was essential that assessment be administered at multiple intervals to monitor growth over time but also to identify areas where instructional adjustments were necessary. Assessment results were recorded and compared across the three periods to observe patterns of progress and remaining skill gaps. It is also important to have this information documented since the UFLI program is designed to be a three-year program from kindergarten (Infant 1) to 2nd grade (Standard 1) and this information would then indicate a transition into the next academic year. In addition to student performance data, qualitative information was gathered through teacher interviews and reflective group discussions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participating teachers to document their experiences implementing the phonics program, perceived student growth, and the challenges they encountered.

These conversations provided insight into how teachers interpreted the intervention and how it influenced classroom routines and decision-making. Furthermore, it served to inform future practices and shifts in instructional practices. Teacher reflections gathered during professional development and mentorship meetings with PathLight staff documented instructional adaptations, classroom observations, and ongoing concerns about language diversity, student engagement, and resource limitations.

Paired with the pre- and post-phonics survey results from the UFLI Foundations implementation at San Jose Nuevo Palmar RC School (2024–2025), these qualitative insights provide a fuller picture of how instruction shaped student outcomes. Overall, the cohort showed clear gains in core phonetic skills—most notably letter recognition, vowel knowledge, CVC word reading, and digraph identification—changes that classroom observation and teacher reports attribute to structured teacher training, ongoing mentorship, and fidelity to instructional routines. Case examples illustrate this pattern: CS sustained ceiling-level uppercase knowledge (26→26), reached mastery in lowercase (25→26), and made substantial gains in vowels and decoding (long vowels 0→5; short vowels 0→5; CVCs 0→10; digraphs 0→10), indicating rapid transfer to Word reading; JT showed dramatic letter-name gains (upper 12→26, lower 13→25), improved vowel knowledge (long 2→5, short 3→5), modest consonant and CVC progress (consonants 19→21; CVCs 8→10), And emerging digraph skills (0→5).



These results, together with teacher reflections and the support of community and NGO partnerships, suggest that targeted coaching and resources can produce rapid phonics gains even in linguistically diverse, resource-constrained settings; next steps should prioritize consolidating consonant accuracy and automaticity in CVCs, expanding vowel and digraph instruction in word contexts, and maintaining regular formative checks to sustain progress.

Conclusions

This case report highlights the opportunities and challenges of implementing the UFLI evidence-based phonics program within a multilingual, resource-constrained rural school context. The experience at San Jose Nuevo Palmar RC School validates the importance of strengthening early literacy in a strategic way. Doing so needs careful consideration and is not simply about introducing a new curriculum, but it is also about supporting teachers and understanding the linguistic experiences and realities of students while building collaborative relationships among educators.

The implementation of the UFLI Foundations program and its consequent results showed that when teachers are provided with an evidence-based curriculum, structured guidance, and ongoing mentorship, they feel better prepared to deliver literacy instruction. Furthermore, this study showed that when teachers are given a space for reflection, their confidence is raised and they feel able to respond to students' learning needs. The combination of these factors contributed to observable growth in students' performance of foundational literacy skills and increased teacher efficacy.

At the same time, this case highlights the persistent challenges and contextual factors, such as language diversity, limited resources, and socioeconomic conditions, that influence the classroom. Understanding these realities shapes how interventions are implemented and serves as a reminder that successful literacy initiatives must be adaptable rather than prescriptive.

Adapting the UFLI Phonics Program to the Belizean setting allowed teachers to contextualize the curriculum to cater to their students' needs. Also, the partnership with PathLight illustrates how collaboration between schools and external organizations can help bridge gaps in capacity and provide sustained support for instructional improvement.

It is important to note that although this case report is centralized and reports the findings of one school, the lessons drawn extend beyond a single school. They point to the need for reforms in policies and programs that place importance in literacy as both an instructional and systemic issue.

This is particularly imperative in rural and linguistically diverse settings. Investing in teacher development, fostering partnerships, and ensuring access to structured literacy resources can play a critical role in improving early reading outcomes and later academic success.

Ultimately, this case contributes to a growing understanding of meaningful literacy improvement in Belize. It highlights the importance of giving attention not only to what is taught but also to how, where, and with whom teaching occurs. By documenting both the process and outcomes of this intervention, the study offers insights that may inform future efforts to support early literacy development in similar contexts.

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