USAID GRAND CHALLENGE
ALL CHILDREN READING, LITTLE THINKING MINDS: GRANTEE JOURNEY

Little Thinking Minds (LTM) is a company based in Amman, Jordan that produces educational resources that aim to enhance children's skills and learning outcomes and increase their connectedness to the Arabic identity. The company was founded in 2004 by Rama Kayyali and Lamia Tabbaa to create educational Arabic content for preschoolers in the form of videos and apps. LTM products are currently used by native and non-native Arabic speakers in over 200 schools in the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) region, serving more than 80,000 students globally.

GRAND CHALLENGE PARTICIPATION: Launched in 2011, All Children Reading: Grand Challenge for Development (ACR GCD) is a partnership of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), World Vision, and the Australian Government that advances EdTech innovation and research to improve reading outcomes for marginalized children in low-resource contexts. With the support from an ACR grant in 2014, LTM developed a child-centered Arabic early-grade reading and learning platform, Qysas. Qysas (Stories) features more than 125 eBooks, introduces reading through a leveled reading platform, and provides automated feedback and recommendation for a child-centered approach to learning. To complement the platform and participating students, after school literacy clubs were held twice a week for a full academic year.

SUSTAINABILITY: In 2018, the Qysas platform transformed into a wider-scale digital leveled library called Let's Live in Harmony, adding 120 digital books co-created with the Jordanian Ministry of Education and serving more than 20,000 Syrian refugee and Jordanian students in grades K–3 to ensure wider impact.

KEY LEARNINGS:
- Local leadership, understanding, and use of language were all key to the innovation's success.
- Having a MEL partner from the application stage onwards made good use of data and enabled continuous learning and adaptation.
- GC funding brought a private sector business model into the public sphere. This, and the role of the project's implementing partner, led to successful collaboration and government uptake.
- The ACR grant led to LTM developing inclusive learning platforms for children with learning difficulties.

IN 2014, LITTLE THINKING MINDS WON A GRANT WITH ACR (ROUND 2)

- **PROJECT NAME:** Qysas (Stories): An Arabic Leveled Digital Library for Every Classroom
- **CHALLENGE & SOLUTION:** Class discussion books in Jordan teach students overwhelmingly how to read whole words rather than first introduce vowel and letter phonics. This approach to Arabic teaching poses a challenge to young children learning to read. Qysas offers an interactive and animated early-grade Arabic literacy app, with over 125 eBooks and a leveled reading platform that automatically provides feedback and advice through a child-centered and diversified learning approach. Qysas also offers teaching materials that focus on developing letter recognition, word formation, and reading comprehension skills. Students access texts that match their appropriate reading level and graduate levels as they meet the necessary criteria established through built-in assessments to determine their readiness to advance to the next level of literacy.
- **STATUS:** Winner
- **COLLABORATORS/PARTNERS:** Integrated Services—Indigenous Solutions, a research/MEL organization, and Jordan Education Initiative and Abdul Hameed Shoman Foundation, and non-governmental organizations.
- **GRANT AWARD DURATION:** January 2015–July 2017

Students in the Qysas project at Jordanian public schools accessed the platform during literacy group sessions held at their school. The platform was also available to parents for home use with their children on digital devices.

Key Learnings

Meeting learners where they are. LTM designed the Qysas (Stories): An Arabic Leveled Digital Library for Every Classroom project to address the lack of leveled Arabic-language reading materials available to early primary school students in Jordan. LTM is a Jordanian women-owned for-profit business that creates engaging, digital literacy tools to improve children's reading skills in Arabic—specifically, oral language and vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. Qsyas provides self-paced, interactive, electronic reading materials that supplement ongoing classroom instruction.

Being Jordanian-based, the project was able to successfully mobilize resources to develop local and relevant content for children in the MENA region. Selected texts represented a range of reading levels and topics sensitive to gender and culture. LTM worked with regional publishers to select 145 engaging books to develop into eBooks and load onto the Qysas platform. Students logged on to the platform using a unique username and password, ensuring that each student's unique usage data was captured. Each eBook had corresponding audio voice overs to allow students to listen as they read and quizzes to assess their comprehension. LTM grouped the eBooks into seven levels, with each student beginning at level one.

Qysas helped to increase student engagement. According to a study conducted by Integrated Services, the average student in the Arab region reads one book per year. Through the Qysas program, children read 125 books over the course of one academic year, a huge achievement. LTM even added an additional 25 books to match the pace at which children were reading. The Integrated Services' study found that the Qysas platform boosted academic confidence and encouraged children to attend school. A scalability assessment conducted on the Qysas platform revealed that LTM scored highest of all the ACR grantees assessed. LTM has demonstrated that once children have access to engaging and appropriately-leveled reading materials, their literacy levels increase dramatically. The LTM team concluded that reading is an issue of access, not culture.

Having a learning partner right from the application stage contributed to continuous learning and adaptation in the innovation process. LTM collaborated with Integrated Services, an organization specializing in monitoring,

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evaluation, and learning (MEL), to maximize the impact of development projects throughout the MENA region. The collaboration strengthened the project portfolio by bringing in diverse and unique perspectives and adding to the rigor of the research. LTM focused on developing engaging content, while Integrated Services looked at dissecting the project from evaluation, testing, literacy acquisition, and pedagogical angles, richly contributing to the overall ACR goal of developing edTech for literacy.

> **Qysas is the only edTech program that has been controlled, trialed, and rigorously assessed."**
> — CASE STUDY INTERVIEWEE

In 2014, the year the grant was launched, a wave of Syrian refugees arrived in Jordan. A large number of refugee children were not enrolled in a school and lacked basic literacy skills. Around this time, research was conducted in the education sector on the poor performance of early grade children in Jordan and neighboring MENA countries. Children struggled to learn Arabic. Integrated Services identified a set of challenges, evidenced by the research, and worked with LTM to see how, together, they could address them. They crafted a proposal to develop a simple, product-level Digital Library. Notably, while the other grantees of ACR Round Two tended to hire or subcontract MEL firms for their specific tasks for baseline and end-line data collection, Integrated Services offered continuous monitoring, learning, and refinement to the Qysas project.

> **All Children Reading was particularly flexible in working with private sector actors who have really excellent content but have fears of entering into the working with ministries and governments, as it's an unreliable space for them."**
> — CASE STUDY INTERVIEWEE

ACR was instrumental in making a business model, which was active in the private sphere, open, and accessible to the public sphere. Without ACR, students in public schools might not have been able to use the reading facilities that they are accessing now. Prior to winning a grant from ACR, LTM's business model was to work with private schools on a subscription basis. Either the schools or individual students subscribed to access a wide range of literacy-focused materials. After the grant, this approach was successfully scaled, and through support from the Jordan Education Initiative (JEI), run in public schools. Private sector companies often have excellent content, but are deterred from working with government entities due to concerns about unreliability and unpredictability. With the backing of ACR's managing partners, USAID and World Vision, LTM could successfully collaborate with a government-based organization like JEI. Enterprises in the MENA region require strong partnerships with the government to achieve scale, and support from ACR strengthened LTM's sustainability and ability to grow. The project implementers agreed that LTM has benefited greatly from the public-private partnership.

LTM found that innovation demands continuous learning, adaptation, and transformation. One example that LTM identified included responding to problems with network and internet connectivity. LTM was flexible enough to transform its product from an online platform to an offline one depending upon network and internet availability in households and schools. Participating schools provided students with opportunities to use the tablets for the Qysas platform during class or after school during literacy group sessions. These sessions were held twice a week for 45 minutes, at which time students could listen to and read along with eBooks and take the corresponding quizzes.

The data and evidence generated on the use, effectiveness, and impact of the technology at the student level was a key to wider expansion of the technology. LTM implemented the Qysas project over two academic years with two cohorts of Grade 2 students at ten intervention schools. Implementation began in selected schools with the first cohort of Grade 2 students during the 2015–16 academic year with teachers and JEI interns responsible for overseeing the literacy groups. Student usage data was downloaded onto portable memory devices during school visits, and teachers and project staff monitored literacy group sessions to check on student progress and verify that students' reading abilities matched the level of eBooks they were reading on the Qysas platform. A new cohort of Grade 2 students was selected from the same schools in the second year.[1] LTM used data and learning from year one to improve the Qysas platform and stabilize the implementation model. During the second year, only teachers, not JEI interns, led literacy groups, opting to do so at the end of the school day as part of an unstructured literacy strengthening class
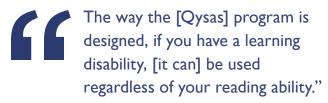
> **The transition during COVID-19 of the program to an online platform, based on the request of the ministry, was done completely pro bono at the cost of the two companies' interest to continue having kids read, particularly when they're at home."**
> — CASE STUDY INTERVIEWEE

Although not initially targeted at inclusive learning, through the ACR grant, Qysas was encouraged to develop learning platforms for children with learning difficulties. Qysas is accessible to students with learning difficulties and poor literacy abilities through the platform's audio function. Additionally, the books that were originally chosen for Qysas represented diversity in gender roles, showcasing the different roles that women and men can play in society on equal terms. This was expanded upon when LTM developed the Let's Live in Harmony project, which paid particular attention to inclusion and social cohesion for Syrians and Jordanians. The project is also actively considering including content for deaf children.

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1   Due to technical and implementation challenges during the first year of implementation, the project was extended through the 2016–17 academic year.

> **"** The way the [Qysas] program is designed, if you have a learning disability, [it can] be used regardless of your reading ability."
>
> — CASE STUDY INTERVIEWEE

ACR required applicants to have strong local partnerships. This prompted LTM's collaboration with JEI, which opened doors for LTM. JEI is rooted in provision in the public sector and strengthened LTM's relationship with the USAID Mission in Jordan. Further, its connection to Queen Rania of Jordan, as one of ten education initiatives personally supported by her, gave them traction with the Government and others. JEI facilitated LTM's relations with Ministries and enabled project set-ups in the intervention schools.

Key Achievements and Sustainability Prospects

The Qysas program has the potential to scale across MENA and has demonstrated that there is a regional market for benchmarked, leveled literacy programs that generate tangible literacy results.[2] LTM's business model for the public sector is currently being scaled at the Ministry of Education in Jordan. During the 2018 RiseUp Summit in Cairo, LTM raised $1.265 million in Series A funding. The funding round was led by the largest Egyptian venture capital firm, Algebra Ventures, joined by recently launched Dubai-based Mindshift Capital, which invests in women led companies, and Saudi' Arabia's Al Turki Group.[3, 4]

LTM has expanded across the MENA region and has raised funding for Qysas. LTM now has offices in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE and was recently declared the winner of the first edition of the Access Sharjah program run by Sharjah Entrepreneurship Center (Sheraa). Launched in late 2020, Access Sharjah is a global platform that connects digital startups to relevant public and private entities in Sharjah and across the UAE. LTM was awarded a $100,000 equity-free grant to further their work in the

fields of knowledge and culture.[5] Additionally, LTM has signed a partnership agreement with Classera Inc., the international eLearning solutions provider with the biggest market share in Learning Management System (LMS) for the K–12 segment in the Middle East Market. LTM's flagship product, I Read Arabic, will be integrated into Classera's innovative eLearning solution for K–12, making it accessible to a global user base of over two million learners.[6]

LTM and Integrated Services have collaborated on a follow-on iteration of the project that remains student centered but is led by teachers and complemented by classroom-based activities. The focus of the Digital Library is social cohesion for Syrians and Jordanians, teaching a sense of self, community, family, and self expression through storytelling. The Digital Library is complemented by teacher-led classroom-based activities to reinforce the concepts taught in the stories.

Qysas has now transitioned from being a digital library of regionally sourced award-winning books to its current iteration, Let's Live in Harmony. In partnership with the Jordan Ministry of Education, Qysas has now been developed into an independent library corresponding to grades K through three. The Qysas curriculum has been approved by the Ministry of Education and, because design was considered from the outset of the program, Ministry officials have a sense of ownership for Let's Live in Harmony. This has led to greater momentum in scale up.

> **"** … to the extent that ministries are engaged from the get-go in the design, it also builds ownership."
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> — CASE STUDY INTERVIEWEE

This grantee journey is one of four that provides detailed studies of a grantee that demonstrates key learning about thematic priorities for the meta-evaluation: scaling and sustainability, partnering with USAID Missions, and using MEL to support acceleration and scaling. Evidence was largely qualitative and collected through in-depth interviews with grantees and USAID, and from secondary sources, including project reports, documents, and public information, such as grantee websites and media articles.

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2   https://www.globalinnovationexchange.org/innovation/little-thinking-minds

3   https://www.menabytes.com/little-thinking-minds-series-a/

4   https://www.arabnet.me/english/editorials/entrepreneurship/investment/little-thinking-minds-raises--1-265m-led-by-algebra-ventures

5   https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/350439

6   https://magnitt.com/news/little-thinking-minds-classera-partner-47670