Examining Teachers' Practice of Phonological Awareness (PA) in Early Grades: A Qualitative Study of Koorete Language Classes, Southern Ethiopia

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the practice of Koorete language teachers in teaching phonological awareness in the early grades of Ethiopian public primary schools. The study was conducted at selected primary schools in the Koore zone in the southern region of Ethiopia. For this purpose, a qualitative research design inspired by case studies was used. An attempt was made to answer basic research questions: a) To what extent do primary school teachers practice the key components of phonological awareness in the teaching of Koorete language? b) To what extent do primary school teachers plan or prepare to teach the components of phonological awareness? Data were collected from four Koorete language teachers from four purposively selected primary schools through classroom observation and semi-structured interviews supported by video and audio recordings. The collected data were carefully transcribed, translated, coded, and then analyzed using a thematic approach. It has been noted that early-grade Koorete language teachers do not integrate and practice the key components of phonological awareness in their daily lessons. The teachers also have a knowledge gap in teaching the key components of phonological awareness, as revealed from classroom observation. Furthermore, there was an apparent lack of explicit and systematic lesson planning for teaching phonological awareness in the early grades. Therefore, it is recommended that teacher training programs include a major component in which language teachers are properly trained on how to teach phonological awareness in a systematic way. Besides, explicit in-service training needs to be given to Koorete language teachers on new ways and approaches of teaching reading in the early grades.

Keywords: Phonological awareness, Classroom practice, Early grade reading, Teachers, Koorete

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Introduction

Early-grade reading skills are the basis for school success in general and reading performance in particular. The teaching practice of teachers in teaching reading classes is critical to the success or failure of the targeted learning competency in the early grades. There are few studies in the available literature that profile the methods used and practices implemented to teach and assess the phonological awareness (PA) of teachers in the early grades. Consequently, little is known about how the key components of phonological awareness are implemented in teachers' classroom practice (Carson & Bayetto 2018). Understanding how teachers manage the practice of phonological awareness can provide useful information on whether it is being used effectively to support the early identification of challenges in reading instruction and in everyday phonological awareness practice.

Although teacher literacy practice plays an important role in early reading instruction in low-literacy classrooms, contemporary research pays little attention to the situation of emerging native languages in Ethiopia and elsewhere. A recent study in Ethiopia found that the reading gap begins in the early grades and persists, as children who cannot read at the end of first grade tend to lag behind in subsequent years (Melesse, Solomon and Enyew, Chanyalew 2020). Effective use of phonological awareness instruction in the classroom improves reading achievement in the early grades (Carson 2012, Gillon 2004, Samuel and Binyam 2023). The recognition of speech sounds explicitly and directly accelerates the learning of the alphabetic code (Moats and Tolman, 2009). Accordingly, lessons for beginner readers should also include phonological awareness activities. A central focus of phonological awareness teaching for many children is teaching them to pay attention to the sound structure of words. Therefore, children in first grade are expected to receive explicit and systematic instructional practice related to the key components of phonological awareness. To do so, when practicing with first graders, teachers need to focus on the components of reading proficiency, as these predict the future development of reading performance. An important aspect of literacy preparation is teaching phonological awareness (PA) to children (Layes, Guendouz, Lalonde and Rebai, 2022; Lonigan, Burgess and Anthony, 2000; Piasta and Hudson, 2022).

In this study, we want to examine teachers' instructional practices on phonological awareness (PA) because it forms the foundation for the development of reading skills in the early grades. In particular, the practice of Koorete language teachers among selected first graders in the primary schools

of Sing Kela, Dano Bulto, Kore Biko, and Karma in Southern Ethiopia is examined. More specifically, the key components of phonological awareness, namely syllable awareness (isolation, blending, deletion, segmentation); rhyme (identity, production); onset and rime (isolation, categorization); alliteration: sorting beginning and ending sounds; and phonemic awareness (identifying, isolating, categorizing, blending, segmenting, deleting, adding, and substituting), are closely studied. For this purpose, the following research questions were formulated: To what extent do early grade teachers practice the key components of phonological awareness in Koorete? To what extent have early grade teachers planned or prepared to teach the components of phonological awareness?

Background the Study

Different research reports and meta-analyses have examined what contributes to early reading success and have identified several key competencies that underpin positive reading outcomes, namely, spoken language fluency, phonological awareness (hereafter PA), letter-sound knowledge, vocabulary, reading fluency, and reading comprehension (e.g., Ehri et al., 2001). In preschool and early school age, PA provides a bridge between spoken (i.e., sounds) and written (i.e., letters) language by helping children decipher the alphabetic code. It is defined as the conscious ability to perceive and manipulate the sound structure of spoken words, including syllables (i.e., syllable awareness), onset rhymes (i.e., rime awareness), and individual phonemes (i.e., phoneme awareness) (Neaum 2017). Phonological awareness, particularly at the phoneme level, is considered a powerful predictor of early reading achievement. There was a close connection between expressive and receptive language and reading skills (Carson, Gillon and Boustead 2013; Catts, Nielsen, Bridges, Liu and Bontempo, 2015; De Groot, Van den Bos, Van der Meulen and Minnaert, 2017; Kaminski and Powell-Smith 2017).

Understanding how teachers approach PA teaching and assessment can provide useful information about whether it is being used effectively for early identification of risks for reading difficulty or proficiency in everyday classroom settings (Carson and Bayetto 2018). Early-grade teachers need to be encouraged and supported to improve children's literacy skills for later reading achievement. The acquisition of reading and writing skills is one of the main goals of the school (Research Triangle Institute (RTI), International 2014; National Reading Panel 2000). Among the five components of literacy, the first two sub-skills, namely phonological awareness (PA) and phonics (letter-

to sound correspondence), particularly need to be adequately practiced in preschools and early grades (Boudaoud 2016; Carson and Bayetto 2018; Dahmer 2010; Vesay and Gischlar 2013). Phonological awareness is defined as the ability to recognize, manipulate, or analyze the auditory aspects of spoken language. This may include saying rhyming words, clapping out the syllables of a word, or recognizing the initial sound of a word (including the ability to distinguish or segment words, syllables, or phonemes regardless of their meaning) (Layton and Deeny 2002).

Empirical evidence shows that phonological awareness is one of the most influential variables in the acquisition of reading skills in the early grades (e.g., Alonzo et al., 2020; Gutirrez 2017; Lacal et al., 2018). It is an important predictor of the later development of language and reading skills (Al Otaiba et al., 2011a; Melby-Lervg et al., 2012). The literature suggests that teachers' use of explicit phonological awareness instruction improves the early reading of children who lack phonemic awareness. Most children are likely to benefit from such instruction (Yeh and Connell 2008). In this regard, phonological awareness instruction need to follow the following continuum of phonological awareness skills in the early grades, namely: in word awareness (sentence segmentation, blending, segmentation, deletion); in syllable consciousness (blending, segmentation, deletion); in rhyme (identity, production); onset and rime (isolation, categorization); alliteration: sorting beginning and ending sounds; and in phonemic awareness (isolation, identification, categorization, blending, segmentation, deletion, addition, and substitution) (NRP 2000; Schuele and Boudreau 2008; Woldmo 2018). Likewise, studies of reading in early grades have shown that effective teaching strategies for phonological awareness include identifying, recognizing, deleting, and segmenting spoken words and syllable levels (rhyme, syllable, and alliteration) down to the most discrete level of individual sounds or phonemes (initial rhyme) or for blending, segmenting, blending, manipulating, and deleting (Sparks, Patton, and Murdoch, 2014; Kosanovich, Phillips, and Willis 2020).

The early-grade reading practices of primary school teachers play an important role in providing children with a framework for acquiring reading skills and enabling them to recognize the speech sounds of a language and read given words accurately. Teachers need to understand the key components of phonological awareness skills and integrate them into their classroom reading practices. Early reading in the classroom, which requires some understanding of the internal structure of words and explicit training in phonological awareness, is very effective in promoting early reading. Beaumont (2020)

stated that it is important for instructors or teachers to explicitly teach phonological awareness to all participants. Explicit instruction in letter-sound correspondence in the early grades appears to increase phonological awareness. Thus, teachers play a major role in developing children's literacy skills in the early grades, and teachers' implementation of phonological awareness significantly influenced students' phonological awareness of beginning sound perception skills (Carson and Bayetto 2018; Jaskoliski 2013).

In early grade reading, failures in the early development of reading skills are associated with children's inability to identify, recognize, and process the visual or orthographic components (i.e., letters and letter groups) in words. The studies have also shown that the problems are largely due to deficiencies in recognizing, identifying, and processing auditory or phonological components (i.e., syllables, initial letters, and phonemes) rather than visual or orthographic components (Milankov et al., 2021; Al Otaiba et al., 2012). Children with poor phonological awareness cannot decipher words accurately and quickly, and the inability to identify and process the sound units of spoken words is the leading cause of reading difficulties in children (Zhang, 2023; Varghese, 2015). However, once children develop phonemic awareness, they can easily master the alphabetic principle and begin to independently construct orthographic representations of words, making reading development more learner-dependent over time (Anthony and Francis 2005; Christensen and Bowey 2005).

The literature states that early grade teachers' reading instruction should integrate the key components of phonological awareness (Milankov, Golubovi, Krsti, and Golubovi 2021). The absence of these components in the early grades impacts children's later reading development and results in children struggling to read in the early grades. Previous studies conducted in Ethiopia identified gaps in the use of pedagogical practices in teaching reading comprehension (Nurie, Y. 2017). Young children's lack of reading skills in their mother tongue is also a common challenge in Ethiopia. Therefore, this study examines how teachers practice the key components of phonological awareness in the early grades as they correlate with later reading achievement and improve the reading skills of struggling readers, particularly in Koorete. When the teacher practices explicit and strategically effective instruction in phonological awareness, students reach the required minimum reading proficiency in first grade. The goal of strategically and systematically teaching reading is to provide explicit instruction and practice in a range of ways that will enable readers to be successful in their reading lessons (Denton et al., 2007).

Piper (2010) conducted a study to assess reading proficiency in the early grades, and the results showed that children in the 2nd and 3rd grades cannot read to the grade standard set by the Ministry of Education in Ethiopia. The EGRA results also showed that early literacy skills are very weak in lower grades. According to EGRA results, 34% of second graders in Ethiopia cannot read a single word in their mother tongue language, and 48% of children cannot understand a single question. Specifically, in the Sidaama region, 69.2% of children were unable to recognize a single sound or letter in words (Piper 2010). Based on the results, USAID Ethiopia conducted an intervention and assessment for seven mother tongue languages in Ethiopia since 2010, and the results showed that there has been no significant change in children's reading performance in early grades. For example, first grade reading assessment scores at the upper benchmark level in 2014 were 31.3%; in 2016 they were 34.2%; and they fell to 32.4% in 2018; the differences are too small to be considered particularly significant. The average correct results for reading comprehension questions are very low, at 20%, and students in Ethiopia were making progress, albeit slowly, in acquiring reading skills. Reading performance in primary school classrooms in Ethiopia is still sluggish and does not show the progress one would hope for after several years of reading support (USAID Ethiopia 2018).

Additionally, Getachew, Tekle, and Yemaneberhan (2016) found that the majority of students had serious problems with letter recognition, understanding phonological patterns, dealing with new words in texts, and understanding longer texts. The results of these studies suggest that teaching reading in the early grades is problematic and requires further empirical investigation. However, the revised primary school mother tongue curriculum indicates that reading instruction must focus on ensuring strong oral skills, with emphasis on phonological awareness, mastery of the most common sound-symbol combinations in language, and the development of reading ability from concepts to printing (MOE Ethiopia 2013, 2021). If children do not learn to read in early grades, they may fall even further behind in later years because they cannot read printed information, follow written instructions, or communicate in writing (Gove and Wetterberg 2011). Children's inability to achieve minimum reading proficiency in the early grades was directly or indirectly related to the quality of teachers handling of the reading difficulties of learners in their classes (Tadesse 2018, 2020). Therefore, providing explicit and systematic pedagogical and literature-based instruction plays a key role in early-grade reading success.

Recent empirical research has shown that the first grade Koorete textbook does not achieve the minimum learning competency (MLC) set in the language curriculum because it does not integrate the standard teaching reading content and many reading activities of PA (Samuel and Binyam 2023). There is an existing gap in exploring teachers' practices regarding the teaching of phonological awareness in the Koorete language in particular and mother tongue languages in general in the early grades. Therefore, there is a need for research to examine teachers' practice of phonological awareness in early grades in the Koorete language and other mother tongue languages in Ethiopia and elsewhere. In fact, the Koorete language has been taught as a subject in primary school classes (1-4) since 2000 and has recently (2022) become the language of instruction in primary school classes. Although language has long been taught as a school subject, there is no research on teachers' classroom reading practices in particular or students' reading achievements in general. Studies in Ethiopia have also shown that several factors influence early grade reading instruction, including lack of textbooks and supplementary reading materials, over-enrolment and quality of teacher qualifications, lack of professional development programs, and availability of a library (Birhanu 2007; Samuel and Binyam 2023). Therefore, this study examines what and how first grade teachers' practice the continuum of phonological awareness instruction in early grade reading instruction.

In general, the poor reading performance of children in the early grades and the lack of comprehensive studies examining teachers' practice of phonological awareness in Ethiopia are the existing gaps (USAID, Ethiopia, 2014, 2016, 2018; Samuel and Binyam, 2023). Given these gaps, conducting a study of elementary school teachers' phonological awareness practices is an essential foundation for early reading achievement. The early assessment of reading skills clearly shows that reading instruction is inadequate in many schools and that student do not learn to read (Minwuyelet 2020). Accordingly, little is known about how teachers practice the key components of phonological awareness in Ethiopian in general and Koorete in particular. Conducting research to explore teachers' phonological awareness practices is a timely concern to suggest possible interventions and fill the gaps in how teachers' phonological awareness practices can improve early graders' reading achievement over time. Currently, when it comes to phonological awareness instruction, there is no empirical evidence for or against providing PA instruction appropriate to the child's current skill level. To this end, this study aims to examine the extent to which first graders of the Koorete language in Ethiopia implement the continuum of phonological awareness teaching. And

to what extent have elementary school teachers planned or prepared to teach the components of phonological awareness in the early grades?

Conceptual Framework

The theory of social constructivism proposed by Vygotsky in 1978 is the main framework adopted for the study. A social constructivist view assumes that knowledge is not only passed on but actively created by individuals, communities, and society. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) process and its direct implications for teaching and learning phonological awareness are the main concepts from which the theoretical framework emerges. In social constructivism, the idea of mediation is one of the central ideas. Regarding the teaching of phonological awareness, Vygotsy's theory implies that the teacher sees themself as an active collaborator with the students in the creation of their knowledge. To engage students in exciting activities that promote and facilitate learning, they create and set up an appropriate environment. Constructivist educators also place great emphasis on the quality of language in the classroom and believe that language is the means through which logical thinking is expressed. Language exercises therefore play an important role in lessons. All topics discussed need to be explored and practiced by learners.

Four fundamental ideas in Vygotsky's theory are crucial to both teaching and learning (Monteith 2006). These are: scaffolding, cognitive training, the zone of proximal development (ZPD), and a social context. First, social context and culture are believed to have a significant impact on a child's learning and long-term development. A child learns cultural customs through social interactions such as speech patterns, written language, and other symbolic knowledge that gives meaning to the child's experiences and shapes the way he or she constructs his or her own knowledge. Vygotsky (1978) examined the relationship between learning and development and concluded that children initially learn much more when working in groups than when working alone, and that this learning is then applied to other learning situations. Higher mental functions have historically developed both individually through social interactions with important people in a child's life and within particular cultural groups, according to Vygotsky's observations.

In addition, Vygotsky introduced the concept of "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD), which refers to tasks that a child cannot complete independently but can master with the help of adults or teachers. ZPD emphasizes the child's still-developing cognitive abilities and requires the

guidance of a more knowledgeable person, such as a teacher. Dialogue plays a key role in supporting children within the ZPD and emphasizes the importance of communication on the learning journey.

Thirdly, the concept of scaffolding is also linked to the zone of proximal development. In the Vygotskyan classroom, teachers' involvement in their students' zone of proximal development (ZPD) influences their learning activities. Over time, the adult interacting with the child eventually assumes most of the leadership and problem-solving responsibility, but the child eventually gains more authority. Children benefit from scaffolding by learning skills they probably wouldn't otherwise be able to. To help students learn to read, teachers must develop engaging reading activities. Teachers have a direct impact on students' reading skills. To help students become independent readers, teachers need to incorporate both efficient and thoughtful scaffolding activities into their lessons (Wessels, 2011).

The fourth method of cognitive training is called "cognitive teaching" and involves a learner gradually acquiring new skills through the observation and guidance of an adult or peer group member with more experience. Our interactions with others, influenced by context, history, environment, and other factors, are critical to forming mental habits and functioning (Dennen and Burner, 2008). Furthermore, Vygotsky (1986) suggested that social interactions between a child and an adult in societal and cultural contexts are essential for cognitive development. According to Vygotsky, a child is an apprentice who actively learns by interacting with an adult mentor who provides the child with access to information and intellectual resources. Cognitive modelling, in which teachers and capable students act as cognitive role models, is the central component of cognitive education (Dennen and Burner 2008). Cognitive education is, above all, an approach that helps students understand ideas and processes while working with a professional, such as a teacher.

To understand what is happening in society and to create knowledge based on this understanding, social construction emphasizes the importance of culture and context (Young and Collin, 2004). The scientist claims that learning is based on actual life experiences. For learning to take place, social and cultural interaction is essential. The teaching profession can benefit greatly from social constructivism. The constructivist teacher's job is to guide students and give them the opportunity to assess how well they currently understand things. According to Gagnon and Colley (2001), a constructivist approach focuses on

building knowledge by placing students in real-world scenarios under the guidance and supervision of teachers.

According to USAID Ethiopia (2018) and Read M.E. (2020), early graders in Ethiopia do not meet the learning competency standards required by the Ministry of Education, and students do not understand the assigned materials. Children's lack of reading skills indicates a lack of effective reading instruction. Preparing teachers to teach in their mother tongue requires more than just teaching content and pedagogical knowledge. Teachers must contextualize their everyday lesson planning and implementation with cultural knowledge and supplement it with subject-specific and pedagogical knowledge.

The teacher facilitates the activities while the learners take an active role in acquiring phonological awareness. With the help of the teacher, children can solve tasks that they cannot complete on their own. Bates (2019, p. 19) argues that through social constructivism theory, knowledge and interactions are constructed through social interactions with family, friends, teachers, and peers. This theory is relevant to studying teachers' phonological awareness practice based on these four parameters in the actual context of the teaching and learning process. In summary, social constructivist research on literacy focuses on the role of teachers and peers in mediating learning and the dynamics of classroom instruction.

Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research approach inspired by the case study design. The aim of this study is to examine teachers' practice of phonological awareness in first grade in the case of the Koorete language in Ethiopia. A qualitative study that explores the actual phenomenon of teachers in the classroom is relevant to this. It explains what happens in real-life situations such as a school and a classroom, according to Denzin and Lincoln (2020). It also enables a holistic understanding of large, contextual, and generally unstructured, non-numeric data. It also encourages conversations with research participants in a natural setting (Mason 2002). Creswell (2014:4) added that qualitative research provides researchers with the opportunity to examine the meaning that people attach to personal and social problems.

Additionally, a case study helps researchers examine a program, event, activity, process, or person(s) in depth (Cresswell 2009) and may refer to the description of the process, people, or group behavior as a whole sequence of

events in which the behavior occurs (Stake 2005). The case study design was found to be more appropriate because the purpose of the study was to examine the actual teaching practice of the phonological awareness teacher in the classroom and was used for the following reasons: The design helps researchers capture the rich and real teaching experience of PA by classroom teachers and seeks explanation in the frame of reference of the participant rather than the objective observer of the action (Ponelis 2015). This actual teaching experience helps researchers understand and interpret the gap between theory and practice because teaching practice is a social phenomenon that requires in-depth study in real-world settings (Bryman 2008; Merriam 2001; Yin 2009). Therefore, the current case study design is relevant to assessing whether teachers practice phonological awareness as provided in the primary school curriculum in Ethiopia (MOE 2013) and early grade reading literature (NRP 2000; Schuele and Boudreau 2008).

Participants

This study was conducted with first-grade Koorete language teachers in the Koore zone in the Southern Ethiopia region. There are about 74 government primary schools in the district, of which 4 were selected through the purposive sampling method based on experience in teaching the mother tongue, accessibility to a relatively rich literacy environment, recommendations from the school management, and availability of data. Therefore, four first grade Koorete language teachers were selected using the purposive sampling technique, taking into account their qualifications, experience, grade level, access, and the school principal's recommendation. In this regard, the teachers involved in this study had four to five years of teaching experience and participated in classroom observations and semi-structured interviews.

Data Collection Tools

Classroom observations and semi-structured interviews were used to examine teachers' practices in Grade 1 Koorete language lesson preparation. To increase the credibility of the tools, a pilot study and triangulation of the tools were conducted.

Observations

Classroom observations were conducted to capture the complexity of classroom practice related to the key components of phonological awareness. It helps researchers examine the quality of teaching practice in actual contexts to produce information that provides feedback to teachers and education

systems (Cresswell 2009). Therefore, classroom observation of the representative lessons on phonological awareness practice was conducted twice a week for six weeks. One of the classroom lesson observations in one week was supported by audio and video recordings consecutively for six weeks with the selected representative lesson, and a phonological awareness activity vignette was extracted for further analysis. By observing and recording naturally occurring interactions, researchers can return to the data in its original form as often as necessary (Liang 2015). An observation covers the following key areas: the key components of phonological awareness and teachers' teaching practices on components of phonological awareness (NRP 2000; Schuele and Boudreau 2008). This method helped researchers collect first-hand data from first-grade Koorete language teachers.

Interviews

This study used person-to-person, semi-structured face-to-face interviews to triangulate classroom observation data related to their phonological awareness teaching practices. This type of interview requires specific information from all respondents. Interview questions that focused on phonological awareness practice were designed to generate details about their teaching practice and to obtain information about factors influencing teachers' teaching practice of PA and its components. Therefore, a total of four teachers (one from each school and class) were selected through purposive sampling, and their voices were audio recorded based on their consent. In addition, teachers' lesson preparation and planning were observed during lesson observation and interviewed about their preparation regarding key components of phonological awareness before lesson presentation.

Data Analysis

This study used a qualitative approach inspired by thematic analysis to examine and describe primary school teachers' phonological awareness practices. The data generated through classroom observations and interviews were analysed qualitatively through thematic analysis. During classroom observation, the researcher used notes to accurately and systematically collect data about teachers' use of phonological awareness in classroom practice. The observational data were recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed. An observation protocol was used to separate descriptive notes from reflective notes based on NRP (2000) and Schuele and Boudreau (2008). In addition, as the interview progressed, the researcher took notes, wrote answers to questions, and summarized them to accurately capture data about teachers'

practices and teachers' plans to teach phonological awareness. The summary was checked at the end of the interview with the teachers to validate the researcher's conclusions.

Based on the research questions, two main themes were derived, namely teachers' instructional practices related to the components of phonological awareness and teachers' lesson planning in teaching phonological awareness. The codes and themes are derived from the content of the data itself, so what the researchers present during analysis is largely consistent with the content of the data (Braun and Clarke 2012). The data analysis process included verbatim transcription, translation, coding, and categorization (identifying themes) several times until we identified the general categories and themes. Overall, data from classroom observations of phonological awareness practice and teacher interview results were analyzed to understand and accurately represent teachers' experiences in a particular setting. Data from classroom observations and interviews were transcribed, translated, organized, thematically coded, triangulated, and analyzed using a thematic approach (Creswell 2014).

Results and Discussion

The success of young readers in the early grades depends on the implementation of effective instructional strategies that focus on the fundamentals of phonological awareness. To integrate the essential elements of PA into a classroom presentation to students, it is necessary to validate teachers' PA practices. To improve students' reading performance, teachers are encouraged to apply the essential elements of phonological awareness activities.

Two different themes emerged from the classroom observation and interviews. These are: teachers' instructional practices related to the components of phonological awareness; and teachers' lesson planning in teaching phonological awareness. The participating teachers were coded as teacher one (T1), teacher two (T2), teacher three (T3), and teacher four (T4), and a direct quote from the observation and interview vignette was used for the analysis in the following section.

Theme 1: Teachers' Practices of the Key Components of Phonological Awareness.

Three fundamental gaps were identified in the teacher's practice of the phonological awareness component. These are: teachers' lack of syllable awareness; teachers' incorrect phoneme segmentation into words; and failure

to integrate some components of teachers' phonological awareness into daily lesson planning.

Teachers' lack of syllable awareness: Data from classroom observations showed that teachers were unaware of the components of phonological awareness. The syllable activities were not integrated into syllable awareness activities but were presented based on the Phonological Awareness Instructions (NRP 2000; Schuele and Boudreau 2008). The direct quote from the teacher's classroom observation of syllable awareness activities was presented appropriately. Teacher T1 presented the sound */q/* with short and long vowels. In the following section, an instructional vignette for teachers on syllable activity was presented.

> *... when we see here, the sounds produced with short vowels are qa, qe, qi, qo, and qu. Children follow him with long vowels: qaa, qee, qii, qoo, and quu, and read these words: eqo, 'string" qoro 'judge', koodʒe 'round stone' qirqace 'quail'.*

As demonstrated in the teacher's lesson, syllable awareness exercises were not consistent with the literature (NRP 2000; Schuele and Boudreau 2008). The Koorete language teacher had limited awareness of teaching syllable awareness, one of the essential components of phonological awareness and a predictor of later reading success. In the lesson, the given syllables, such as *qa, qe, qi, qo, qu*, and *qaa, qee, qii, qoo*, and *quu*, were discussed to teach syllable isolation activities. From teacher T2's lesson presentation, it observed that the lesson attempted to convert words into syllables. The following section presents a teaching vignette from the teacher's presentation on syllable awareness segmentation.

> *...this is /p/, pii, piire; this is /p/, poo, poosta; and /p/, poo, poolise.*

As shown in the teachers' class discussion (T2) above, he tried to represent syllables such as *pii* from the word *piire* flower, *poo* from the words *poosta,* posta, and *poo* from the word *poolise* police with their pictures. Although the teacher has an understanding of teaching syllable awareness, he lacks appropriate syllable segmentation and an understanding of blending.

The teacher cannot divide the words into familiar words into syllables and the syllable into manipulated syllables. These results show that teachers were unable to correctly syllabify Koorete language words. The teacher's T2 lesson presentation indicates that the teacher's perceptual ability is limited.

As shown in the teachers' T3 lesson presentation, she also presented syllable awareness activities to recognize each syllable in the word. The following direct quote from the teacher's class presentation shows the teacher practicing the word in syllabic exercises. It appears that teachers lack adequate syllabic awareness and the ability to teach syllable formation in phonological awareness lessons in the early grades.

> *Today we learn about the letter /p/, how to read it, piire flower, pila warp, poosta posta, poolise police, prapro butterfly, and narpe needle.*

The result of the lesson observation shows that the teachers did not discuss the syllables in the given words. For example: *piire* in *pii-re*, *pila* in *pi-la, pootsa* in *poo-sta, poolise* in *poo-li-se,* and so on. These results confirm that the Koorete teachers' presentation did not allow for proper syllable segmentation and syllable blending according to the syllabification characteristic of the language.

Teacher T4 presented lessons on the syllable awareness activity, as seen in the following section. In class, segmentation of the syllable with the given sound was demonstrated, but the other syllables in the word were not demonstrated.

> *...the words miiqe drill segmented into (qe, q); qalo kid segments into (qa, q); qino head segmented into (qi, q); or quluula queried, segmented into (qu, q).*

As can be seen from the observation, in the lesson, the teacher tried to represent a syllable within the given word: *qe, qa, qi, qu,* and the given sound. Although the teacher had an awareness of the syllabic nature of the language, he lacked a clear understanding of how to segment and blend the given words and lacked approaches to teaching syllable awareness.

In the above section, the participating teachers provided incorrect hyphenation. The words given must be represented in syllabic form, as in T1, *eqo* in *e-qo, qoro* in *qo-ro,* and *koodʒe* in *koo-dʒe.* In T2, the word *piire* must be divided into *pii-re, poosta* into *poos-ta,* and *poolise* into *poo-li-se* summarized. In T3, the word *piire* must be divided into *pii-re, pila* to *pi-la, pootsa* to *poo-sta, poolise* to *poo-li-se; and* in T4, the word *miiqe* must be syllabized into *mii-qe; qalo* becomes *qa-lo* and *qino* becomes *qi-no*. However, early grade reading literature suggests that the entire syllables of a word must demonstrate how to segment a word into syllables and how to reassemble the syllable into a word (Deborah 2019, .Mahfoudhi and Haynes 2009, NRP 2000,

Schuele and Boudreau 2008, Woldmo 2018). The words need to be arranged syllable by syllable according to the literature.

Incorrect Phoneme Awareness: A teacher who does not understand phoneme awareness will not be able to properly teach the elements of phoneme awareness. In class, it was observed that the teacher had awareness and skill gaps in teaching phonological awareness, with particular emphasis on phonemic awareness. For example, teacher T1 used the sound */q/* several times with vowel sounds, as shown in the following lesson vignette.

> …these letters are with short vowels *qa, qe, qi, qo, qu* and the next ones are with long vowels *qaa, qee, qii, qoo* and *quu.*

To teach phoneme recognition skills, in the above section of the lesson, the teacher tried to demonstrate to students the */q/* sound with long and short vowels and get them to distinguish between them. However, the lesson cannot show how the sounds occur in the initial, middle, and final positions of the word as described in the literature (Mahfoudhi and Haynes 2009, NRP 2000, Schuele and Boudreau 2008). Phonemic awareness instructional strategies that involve identifying, categorizing, blending, segmenting, and manipulating sounds in spoken words in activities were not used as frequently by first grade Koorete language teachers as in NRP (2000); Schuele and Boudreau (2008).

Furthermore, as seen in the following excerpt, T1 used several words to represent the /q/ sound, but the lesson fails to demonstrate phoneme mixing and segmentation in the words. Observing how they teach isolating, categorizing, blending, segmenting, adding, deleting, and replacing phonemes in spoken words, these strategies are not often used in phonological awareness instruction.

> *…when we come to this section they are pronounced eqo "string," qirqace, kind of bird, hayqe intestine, qoro "judge" and so on.*

As shown in the T1 teacher's lesson presentation above, he attempted to introduce activities that involved phoneme isolation and identification. However, to practice phoneme recognition, the children were not asked by the teacher to tell them the same sound that appears in *eqo* "string," *qirqace* "kind of a bird," *hayqe* "gut," and *qoro* "judge." Additionally, the teacher did not ask children to say the initial, middle, or final sounds of the given word to practice phoneme isolation activities. This shows that there is a gap between ward teachers when it comes to using systematic and explicit instruction to teach the components of phonological awareness. Teacher T2 provided long

and short vowels, as shown in the following section, to teach phoneme identification and isolation.

> …the short vowel sounds are *(a, e, i, o, u)* and the long vowels are *(aa, ee, ii, oo,* and *uu).*

As shown in the section above, teachers pronounce both short and long vowels by having children repeat them. However, teachers may not be able to teach the same sounds in different words and get children to identify these individual phonemes. Similarly, Minwuyelet (2020) concluded that teachers do not understand how to practice early reading instruction. Most teachers didn't realize that when they taught early reading, they were practicing the basics of reading. The teachers are untrained and had no idea what they were teaching or how to teach reading.

Teacher T3 discussed the phoneme */p/* in the Koorete language and read out the given words formed from the words. The lesson vignette from the teacher presentation below showed that individual phonemes are not practiced separately. This was confirmed in the teacher's presentation about the phoneme */p/.* The teacher did not mention how the sound in the given words is produced in the word-initial, word-medial and word-final, except when reading the words. Individual phonemes in the given word, for example, in the word *piire, p-ii-r-e;* in the word *poolise, p-oo-l-i-s-e,* is not practiced in class.

> *…what do we say about this noise? It is /p/ and refers to the word piire (flower), pila (chain), poosta (posta), poolise (police), prapro (butterfly) and narpe (needle) who can read.*

As revealed in the above section, Teacher T3 pronounced the words without identifying the specified sound in the specified words. She simply read the words, and the children repeated them after her. The specific sound in each word is not pronounced separately and is treated individually for better understanding. Research strongly and consistently supports the importance of phonemic awareness to reading success and highlights that phonemic instruction is most effective when begun early and taught systematically (National Reading Panel 2000).

Furthermore, teacher T4's lesson presentation showed that the */q/* sound is used in several words in the following vignette lesson. The results of the classroom observation indicate that the phoneme awareness activities were rarely performed by the first-grade Koorete language teacher whose classroom was observed.

> *How do we read this word? Pointing to the word, Ss [still], T: /miiqe/, pointing to the word [miiqe], why do we use it? Ss: It is written in long vowels for framing. What does that mean, which points to another word? Ss: [quietly], T: qalo, you know, qalo, billy goat, qalo is written in short vowels.*

The result for teacher T4 showed that the phoneme */q/* is discussed in the given words. The individual phonemes in each word cannot be segmented. For example, teachers segmented the words "*miiqe*" into (*miiqe, qe, q*); *qalo* goat kid in (*qalo, qa, q*), rather than segmenting */m/, /ii/, /q/, /e/,* etc. However, teachers can best demonstrate how to isolate individual phonemes in words and words into their individual sounds by working with the whole class and then with small groups or individuals as needed to support students (Otaiba et al., 2016).

Teachers incorrectly segment the phonemes into words: It has been observed that teachers don't know how to segment words into phonemes. For example, in lesson T4, the word *miiqe* became (*qe, q*) instead of */m/, /ii/, /q/, /e/;* the word *qalo* goat kid was parsed into (*qa, q*) instead of */q/, /a/, /l/, /o /,* as in Woldmo (2018). This representation obviously shows that the phonemes in the words are misrepresented and therefore there is poor segmentation. However, researchers noted that phoneme segmentation was developed to measure children's ability to break words down into individual phonemes (Kenner et al., 2017).

Lack of integration by teachers of some components of phonological awareness into daily lesson planning: The syllable blending that connects the given syllables to form a new word was not well represented in teachers' lessons. For example, as in the literature, the syllables are: *e-qo* becomes *eqo, qo-ro* becomes *qoro, pii-re* becomes *piire*, and *poos-ta* becomes *poosta* (NRP 2000; Schuele and Boudreau 2008). However, teachers' lectures cannot allow the mixing of syllables in class. Additionally, the teacher's lesson demonstrated an inability to incorporate phoneme-blending activities in her classroom. Syllable blending, in which a word is broken down into its syllable components and put together to form a new word, was not implemented well by the lecturers. For example, as in literature, the phonemes /*e/, /q/, and /o*/ must be mixed with *eqo*. The phonemes */q/, /o/, /r/,* and */o/* were blended with *qoro* to form the new word, as in Woldmo (2018). However, no phoneme-blending activities were provided in the teacher's lesson.

As observed in the teacher's lesson, they made an effort to demonstrate phonemic activities (identifying, isolating, and segmenting to some extent) during their daily lesson presentation. Other aspects of phonemic awareness, namely phonemes (categorization, blending, deletion, addition, and substitution), were not integrated into teachers' classroom presentations. It is evident that teacher instruction is much more effective when phonemic awareness activities are added to phonological awareness activities. To help children understand phonemic awareness techniques, not every phoneme was practiced in the activity. However, as the NRP reports, phonemic awareness instruction was still beneficial for all students (2000).

Furthermore, the other critical aspects of phonological awareness activities: rhyming (listening and producing rhymes), activities such as rhyme identity, rhyme recognition, and rhyme production activities as described in the literature (NRP 2000; Schuele and Boudreau 2008), were not addressed in the teacher's classroom. However, according to the National Reading Panel (2008), songs, games, poems, and stories play a large role in rhyming, and alliteration exercises must be used to represent these activities. Children need to discover it in the early school years, as it is the foundation for early phonemic awareness (Carson 2012; Kilpatrick 2015). Also, alliteration (beginning and ending sounds) is the recognition and reproduction of the same beginning and ending sounds in words. It is a key skill for reading and helps to isolate the individual sounds in words (Schuele and Boudreau 2008). The literature suggests that children who become familiar with rhyme and alliteration and beginnings and endings in early grades are more successful than children who do not (Turan and Gul 2008). Alliteration, which involves identifying and playing with the same initial sounds in words, was not part of the teachers' daily lessons, as shown by the lessons of the selected participating teachers.

Additionally, the onset rime action is another crucial part of PA training. As a result, "onset" is a syllable-initial consonant or group of consonants; whereas rime is the syllable-final vowel or vowel-consonant sequence (Goswami 2001). As a literature teacher, you need to include tasks at the beginning of your phonological awareness lessons, e.g., those that distinguish the initial consonant or consonant cluster from the middle vowel and its final consonant or cluster. In the two-syllable word *matse*, meaning "thought", the consonant */m/* is the beginning and the following vowel, while the consonant */atse/* is the rhyme. The word *marts'a*, meaning "eye booger," has the initials */mar-/* and the final consonant */-ts'a/*. However, none of the teachers had added morning

exercises to their typical lectures. The important components of phonological awareness are not included in the first grade Koorete language students' textbook and teacher's guide, as stated in the recent study by Samuel and Binyam (2023). This study also finds that the teachers' classroom presentation was unplanned and did not take into account the key components of the phonological awareness activities. Teacher T1 stated in the interview that a lack of in-service training in early grade reading support was responsible for her lack of pedagogical and content knowledge. For example, as in the vignette, T1 stated the lack of textbooks and overcrowding of students in the classroom.

> *...the lack of textbooks, the absence of a well-organized library and reading materials, and over-enrolment in the classroom are major challenges in teaching reading.*

As teacher T1 reported, the lack of access to a textbook in first grade was the school's biggest challenge. Likewise, the lack of textbooks, supplementary reading materials, and integration of the key components of phonological awareness were cited by Samuel and Binyam (2023) as the biggest challenges in teaching the Koorete language. Similarly, another recent study reported that Ethiopian language teaching is unsuccessful due to a lack of in-service training in the assessment and practice of teaching young children (Hailay and Abate 2022). In addition, teacher T2 also mentioned the lack of a textbook and the lack of integration of the key components of phonological awareness activities.

> **...** *In my opinion, the main obstacle to carrying out reading activities is the lack of textbooks to practice reading and the lack of integrating the components of phonological awareness in the existing textbook adequately.*

Access to textbooks is a critical challenge for developing reading skills in the early grades, especially in mother-tongue languages. Textbooks are essential teaching tools that serve as supplementary materials in most mother-tongue languages (Zemenu 2013). Samuel and Binyam (2023) stated that the lack of textbooks in the Koorete language and the lack of integration of the key components of phonological awareness are identified as major factors hindering teachers' practice of phonological awareness in first grade. The result of the current study showed that teachers do not integrate the key components of phonological awareness into first graders' textbooks. In most early mother-tongue grades in Ethiopia, the textbook is the only teaching tool

in many schools. Therefore, the accessibility and quality of textbooks play a large role as a primary document in examining how to teach phonological awareness skills and other reading lessons.

Theme 2: Teachers' Instructional Preparedness or Planning in Teaching Phonological Awareness

Participating teachers were observed during the lesson presentation regarding lesson preparation and planning of key components of phonological awareness. As evident from teachers' classroom presentations, participating teachers come to class without a daily lesson plan and without scheduling time for specific phonological awareness tasks during class.

As shown in the result, the Koorete early grade language teachers observed stated that there was a problem with time management and that they misused the time allotted for lesson presentation. For example, of the 40 minutes allocated, teacher T1 used 20:10, teacher T2 used 20:42, teacher T3 used 27:45, and teacher T4 used 21:14. They came to class late, left class early, and spent most of the time copying the lesson from the board. This shows that participating teachers' pay little attention to lesson preparation and planning when teaching phonological awareness in the early grades.

In many developing countries, reading instruction is not given adequate attention and is not explicitly and systematically planned for in early-grade mother tongue languages. In contrast, the primary school mother tongue curriculum allocates 40 minutes for daily lesson presentations, and teachers are supposed to spend the time spent on phonological awareness activities depending on their daily lesson presentations (MOE Ethiopia 2013). This result showed that there is a lack of explicit planning and implementation of the key components of reading skills in general and the key components of phonological awareness in particular to develop children's reading achievement.

Teacher 3 (T3) also reportedly felt that the lack of a textbook caused him to waste a lot of time writing the lesson on the blackboard. However, in early grades, reading lessons, children's literature, curricula, and textbooks are considered effective teachings of reading (Bremholm 2020). As mentioned in the teacher interview, the time given is not used appropriately for phonological awareness.

> *… The lack of textbooks prompted me to copy the lessons and spend the given time. As I said, I didn't make an annual plan and weekly plan due to the lack of a textbook.*

As stated in the above section, teachers reported that the lack of reading materials in the mother tongue is considered one of the major challenges in the early Koorete language classroom in Ethiopia. Likewise, Teshome (2014) found that the major problems in teaching reading are the limited application of appropriate reading techniques by teachers and the lack of relevant reading materials for students. Additionally, teacher T4 reported that providing supplemental reading materials at her school and other schools in the district was the biggest challenge, as shown in the vignette in the following section.

> *...through our teaching reading, we experience the lack of textbooks, the lack of a responsible body for revision and reprinting of textbooks, and language development in general.*

Teachers' reflection shows that there is a lack of access to textbooks and high-quality teaching materials in the early grades. Likewise, USAID, Ethiopia (2014), and Joshi et al. (2009a) reported that textbooks did not adequately cover evidence-based research on phonological awareness, and many classrooms had few high-quality printed materials. It was found that participating teachers did not use planning to support their daily lesson presentations.

The participating teachers claim in an individual interview that the school and educational administration failed to provide textbooks and create a supportive environment for reading practice. Also, classroom observations showed that teachers struggle to teach phonological awareness in the early grades due to a lack of content awareness, pedagogical awareness of the use of explicit words, systematic lesson planning, and a relevant environment for literacy practice. Tesfaye (2014) also claimed that many teachers in Ethiopia do not have the necessary skills to teach early reading. Additionally, Tadesse (2015) found that many teachers lack reading practices in the early grades. Accordingly, teachers did not master these refined skills and did not adequately teach students to develop a deep understanding of phonological awareness (Spence et al., 2008).

Conclusions and Recommendations

From the results and discussions of the data collected through various classroom observations and semi-structured interviews, the following conclusions were drawn and certain recommendations were suggested.

Conclusions

Based on the results presented and discussed, some conclusions were drawn. Early graders of Koorete language teachers have deficits in awareness, skills, and preparation for practicing the essential components of phonological awareness in early grade reading classrooms.

Studies show that early graders' phonological awareness practice plays a critical role in the success or failure of early reading development. Early grade teachers must have adequate content and pedagogical awareness of early grade literacy practices. Additionally, teachers must use explicit and systematic planning to deliver effective reading instruction, particularly the components of phonological awareness in the early grades. However, the results of this study show that first grade Koorete language teachers have awareness gaps in integrating and implementing the key component of phonological awareness into their actual classroom presentations. If teachers in the early grades are not able to provide sufficient early reading support, this has a particular impact on children's later reading achievements and on school performance in general. In fact, unless teachers make great efforts to teach phonological awareness, children will no longer be enthusiastic about developing their reading skills.

Additionally, classroom observation identified a lack of awareness of the key components of phonological awareness and their integration into daily instruction. The results of the observed lessons showed that teachers did not apply the majority of effective phonological awareness instruction in their daily lesson presentations. Furthermore, in the lessons observed, teachers did not often prepare and plan lessons and did not create a literacy environment that could support children in learning to read. There are gaps in creating a supportive environment for literacy, and the use of explicit and systematic planning in teaching phonological awareness was observed in the first grade classroom. Despite these gaps in classroom presentation, teachers neglected the challenges and made little effort to solve these problems. It was also observed that the lessons for early graders did not include literature-based literacy activities to support children's reading development, which in turn implies little or no literacy based practice and exercises in the classroom.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions drawn from the study, a few recommendations are forwarded. It is believed that the findings of this study might have some important implications for Koorete language teachers and early-grade mother tongue language teachers in Ethiopia.

Efforts are needed to increase teacher awareness of the key components of phonological awareness in the early grades. It is important to adequately integrate the key components of phonological awareness into elementary school curriculum, teacher training programs, and student textbooks. It is also important to organize in-service capacity-building training in reading instruction for teachers, particularly in the Koorete language and several local languages in a similar context. In-service awareness training must focus primarily on practicing phonological awareness activities such as syllable awareness activities, rhyming, alliteration, and rhyme and phoneme-level activities in their daily classroom presentations.

Ministry officials, policy planners, curriculum designers, textbook developers, teacher training institutions, the regional education office, the zone education office, early grade teachers, and relevant bodies need to seriously consider integrating these key components of phonological awareness in teaching reading materials and in raising awareness among Koorete language teachers in particular and for mother tongue teachers in general. Likewise, in-service capacity-building training needs to be designed specifically for first-year Koorete language teachers to train them with relevant approaches and methods.

In general, primary school teachers need theoretical and practical knowledge in the area of phonological awareness, and early grade teachers need to receive systematic, explicit, and practical in-service training on essential components of reading skills, phonological awareness teaching practice, and lesson planning. Therefore, teachers must prepare and apply systematic and explicit lesson planning for each activity based on the allotted time.

Limitations

The sample of this study is limited to four schools and four teachers in the Koore Zone of southern Ethiopia. In addition, this study focused on the practice of PA by first-grade Koorete language teachers. Therefore, future studies need to attempt to survey more schools and teachers in Ethiopia to establish a more holistic profile of phonological awareness practice. Other

components of reading skills, such as phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and reading comprehension, are not included in the study. Future studies therefore need to attempt to explore teachers' practices in relation to other components of reading literacy.

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