Phonological Awareness Instructional Practices and Challenges for Implementation in Ethiopian Primary School: A Case Study of Goffa Language Grade One

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Abstract

This article delves into the classroom instructional practices of teachers and the challenges they face in teaching phonological awareness. Employing a qualitative research approach within a case study design and drawing upon the sociocultural learning theory as a theoretical framework, the study involved four teachers, one school director, and one college instructor as participants. Data collection utilized observations and interviews, with deductive analysis methods including descriptive and narrative approaches. The findings underscore that teachers commonly utilize phonological awareness instruction techniques such as sound identification, syllable segmentation, phoneme manipulation, phoneme blending, onset-rime awareness, and rhyming. However, these strategies often fall short in addressing the diverse needs of students. Additionally, teachers predominantly rely on traditional methods such as sound and phoneme naming, counting, pointing, and repetition, rather than more interactive instructional approaches like demonstration, scaffolding, and modeling of sound and letter teaching methods. These instructional practices are compounded by various challenges, including low teacher phonological knowledge, lack of positive attitude and motivation, inadequate educational resources, and limited parental and community involvement. Addressing these challenges necessitates ongoing professional support to enhance teachers' phonological knowledge and capacities in essential instructional approaches. Moreover, stakeholders must foster conducive learning environments equipped with diverse educational resources to facilitate more effective phonological awareness instruction. Furthermore, broader studies are imperative to grasp the constraints and possibilities of phonological awareness instruction, ultimately enhancing children's reading abilities**.**

Keywords: Challenge, Early-grade reading, Phonological awareness, Phonological awareness instruction, Reading literacy

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Introduction

The importance of equipping children with fundamental reading skills during their formative years cannot be overstated, as it lays the groundwork for their ability to learn and comprehend textual information. Effective instruction in phonological awareness, in particular, plays a pivotal role in reducing academic hurdles and fostering both present and future educational achievements (Brady, et al., 2009; National Reading Panel, 2000). Consequently, there exists a significant emphasis on early grade reading instruction, with a particular focus on phonological awareness (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Kalindi & Kaani, 2017). Children's reading proficiency is influenced by a multitude of factors, including environmental stimuli, emotional and behavioral dynamics, cognitive abilities, and motivational challenges arising from general and specific learning difficulties (Brown, 2016; O'Connor & Jenkins, 1999). Thus, educators must grasp the context and milieu within which early grade reading instruction unfolds to effectively cater to children's requirements.

The knowledge of phonological and phonemic awareness is crucial for teachers. It would give them the confidence to design and implement classroom activities that could support their learners to read successfully. Nonetheless, the lack in phonological and phonemic knowledge would result in adopting inaccurate instructional approaches. This in turn would affect students' reading abilities (Binks-Cantrell et al., 2012). Understanding children's phonological knowledge gaps are the most important aspect to improve reading abilities. However, there are several obstacles affect their abilities. Some of them are environmental, availabilities of educational facilities, emotional, behavioral, intellectual disabilities and motivational issues arising from both general and specific learning difficulties (Brown, 2016; O'Connor & Jenkins, 1999). Thus, instructors should understand the context and setting that the early grade reading education is given so as to address children's needs.

The absences of phonological and phonemic understanding among rural primary school teachers have seen. These situations resulted children's poor mastery of phonemic awareness skills in the early grade education. Explicit teachers' practice could have a crucial role in helping students acquire phonemic awareness because it requires specific instruction. However, this role can only be fulfilled if teachers possess the necessary phonemic awareness to confidently and methodically teach the skill. The study result further indicated that children who participated in the early intervention

programme made more progress in primary grade education and is at lower risk for later reading failure (Ramaniar, et al., 2020). Moreover, Solomon and Chanyalew (2020) further discussed that children who were taught phonemic awareness showed a considerable gain in this aspect compared to those who were taught sounds and letters using the traditional ways: direct sound and letter signaling. Besides, the preliminary premises indicating that these techniques enhance children's learning to read phonemic awareness performance ratings.

In addition, Samuel and Binyam (2023) explained that teachers' lack of pedagogical understanding and subject matter expertise posed fundamental difficulties in teaching phonological awareness abilities. In addition, the biggest obstacles were teachers who were poorly prepared to teach these abilities. The two biggest things affecting teachers' instructional implementations are a lack of literature-rich environments and a shortage of educational resources (student textbooks, instructor guides, and other supplemental reading materials). Similarly, EGRA (2018) also indicated that there are a number of obstacles that Ethiopian teachers must overcome in order to provide better education in primary school settings. Lack of educational resources (children's textbooks, teacher guidebooks, supplemental reading materials, and adequate teaching aids), teachers' low phonological awareness, a lack of time, and a poor literacy-rich environment were some of the main obstacles.

Furthermore, employing diverse teaching methodologies for phonological awareness in early grades can notably enhance its efficacy. For instance, creating interactive and dynamic classroom environments, devising relevant content, prioritizing student engagement, utilizing a range of instructional strategies and techniques, and embracing integrated instructional approaches are crucial in nurturing children's reading proficiency (Hoffman et al., 2009; Roskos et al., 2009). Phonological awareness instruction encompasses a continuum of complexity, with children initially engaging in less intricate activities such as rhyming, rhyming songs, and sentence segmentation, which cultivate awareness that speech can be deconstructed into individual words. Subsequently, more advanced activities including word decoding, syllable segmentation, onset-rime awareness, phoneme identification, phoneme manipulation, and phoneme blending strategies can be introduced (Moats, 2020; Snow, Burns & Griffin,1998). The early grade reading components including phonological awareness, therefore, should be instructed through playful based approaches: singing alphabetic song, game, performing drama

and drill, telling stories, clapping (Miniwuyelet, 2020; Richardson & Nieminen, 2017). Therefore, it is imperative for primary school educators to possess a thorough understanding of these methodologies and to implement them effectively.

Phonological awareness plays a critical role if the skill is practiced effectively. In Ethiopian primary school context, evidences indicate teachers' reading instructional practices in general; phonological awareness instruction in particular and actual classroom implementations remain low. In the Ethiopian context, the proficiency of reading skills among primary school students has been a persistent concern, as evidenced by assessments conducted by the Ministry of Education (MoE) and other stakeholders. A considerable number of students in Ethiopian schools struggle to attain minimum literacy competencies by the conclusion of grade one, with many continuing to face difficulties in reading after several years of schooling. Data indicates that approximately 70 % of grades 2 and 3 children in the Southern Nation, Nationality and People region of Wolaita and Hadiyissa were unable to master basic reading components (EGRA, 2014). Similarly, an alarming 93.8 % of Grade 2 and Grade 3 children nationwide fail to achieve basic reading proficiency (EGRA, 2018). Furthermore, more than 50% of Amharic grade 4 children were unable to display reading abilities (Chanyalew & Abiy, 2015); and the percentage of children of grade 4 with reading difficulties were greater than 55 % in Afan Oromo learners (Anteneh, et al., 2016).

Primary school teachers in Ethiopia hold a central role in enhancing the quality of primary education, particularly in the domain of reading instruction. However, evidence suggests that a significant number of teachers lack adequate knowledge about reading and its foundational components, including phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, reading fluency, and comprehension (Anteneh, et al., 2016; Miniwuyelet, 2020). Enhancing the quality of reading instruction in Ethiopian primary schools requires a comprehensive intervention strategy aimed at bolstering teachers' capacities and promoting awareness regarding the importance of reading instruction, particularly in the early grades. To develop informed pedagogical approaches, it is crucial to understand the diverse instructional strategies and methods, foster dynamic classroom environments, and capitalize on available opportunities (Samuel & Binyam, 2023; Solomon & Chanyalew, 2020).

This article, thus, examines teachers' phonological awareness instructional practices and challenges for implementation in the selected government

schools of Goffa Zone; Sawla town and Demba Goffa districts. Goffa language is one branch with of the Omotic language family which uses Latin alphabet as the writing system. The language is used as a medium of instruction from pre-school up to grade 4. Sellassie (2016) discusses varied phonological features have seen in Goffa language. These phonological processes include phoneme manipulation, substitution, insertion, blending and adaptation processes have seen. In the language, consonant gemination and vowel elongation is phonemic.

Aligned with the preceding discussion, this article endeavors to explore teachers' instructional practices and the challenges they encounter in delivering phonological awareness instruction within selected government schools in the Goffa Zone, specifically focusing on Sawla town and Demba Goffa districts. Therefore, to address this objective, the study centers on the following pivotal research questions:

1. What is the depth of teachers' comprehension of phonological awareness, and how do they integrate phonological awareness skills into the classroom environment?
2. What are the primary obstacles impeding the effective implementation of phonological

The structure of the article unfolds as follows: the initial section furnishes background information, elucidating the aims and key research questions. Subsequently, the research methodology and design are delineated, leading into an examination of analysis and findings. Lastly, the article offers discussions, conclusions, and recommendations.

Theoretical Framework

This article adopts a theoretical perspective grounded in sociocultural learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978), positing that language acquisition occurs through social interaction within society. Our data analysis is anchored in this perspective, which asserts that language learning is a social process bolstered by active participation and interaction. Woolfolk (1998) similarly emphasizes the role of social interaction and experiences in knowledge development. We concur that the acquisition of reading ability is intricately linked to the specific social, cultural, and historical context in which it occurs. Language development, according to this perspective, originates from social processes, emphasizing the significance of available tools and opportunities for learning among different children.

Sociocultural theory encompasses both cognitive learning theory and critical literacy learning theories. These theories argue that language learning can be facilitated through social interaction and the decoding of sounds by applying linguistic elements (Tracey & Morrow, 2006). This theoretical framework has influenced language pedagogy by suggesting that teachers can impart higher-order metacognitive reading strategies to students through scaffolding, modeling, and thinking aloud methods. Language learning, in this context, thrives on interaction and collaboration. Early-grade children learn language through observation and interaction, highlighting the importance of parents in modeling reading activities and supporting children's emerging reading skills. Knowledge construction occurs through interaction with the environment, and learning is viewed as a connection with and appropriation from the social context.

Additionally, effective language learning is best achieved when children and educators cooperate with knowledgeable others, such as peers and parents. In teaching phonological awareness skills, collaborative learning approaches enable children to practice linguistic items, thereby enhancing the quality of early reading instruction. Access to cultural capital, including resources such as books and works of art, is crucial for developing reading abilities, particularly phonological awareness (Au, 1997). This perspective underscores the significance of a child's family background and context in their reading development, emphasizing that classroom practices must be analyzed to ensure alignment with an interactive approach.

Effective instruction delivered by well-trained professionals can enhance classroom instructional practices and widen opportunities for improved reading achievement and academic success (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Teacher effectiveness is closely linked to the quality of training received during their education, which can ultimately impact students' reading success (Barnett, 2003). Therefore, understanding varied contexts, settings, and opportunities within phonological awareness skills practice is essential for informed pedagogical approaches.

Research Methodology and Design

For this study, a qualitative case study design is chosen to address the research questions outlined above. This design offers a comprehensive and detailed exploration of the various cases (Creswell, 2013). Employing a qualitative descriptive research approach involving classroom observations and interviews, data is gathered from teachers, school principals, and college

instructors. This research design is particularly valuable for analyzing thematic similarities and differences in the results. This design would also provide us with the opportunity to have detailed understanding about different cases. Using a variety of information sources, including interviews, audiovisual content, observations, and in-depth data collecting, the researcher uses a qualitative technique to investigate a bounded system over time. In this approach, the researcher typically selects no more than four or five cases using this strategy. Besides, the researchers should provide a justification for the deliberate sampling approach they will use to choose the case and acquire data on it. Also, the goal of this approach is to collect detailed information from one or many cases rather than employing large number of subjects (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 2005). Furthermore, the qualitative descriptive research approach (observation and interview) was used to get appropriate data from the participants. This is due to for its significance to analyze similarities and differences of results thematically. The method is well-suited for investigating teachers' actual instructional practices, as well as their personal experiences, challenges, and opportunities that influence effective instructional delivery in classroom settings.

Research Setting

The research is conducted within the Gofa Zone of the South Ethiopia Regional State, with a specific focus on selected schools located in Sawla town and Goffa district, namely Guradde and Borda primary schools. Sawla town hosts around 8 primary schools, while Demba Goffa district accommodates approximately 38 primary schools. However, for the purpose of this study, two government schools were intentionally chosen from these areas due to their accessibility and notable teaching performance during the 2019 and 2020 academic years, as reported by the Goffa Zone Education Department in 2022 (Goffa Zone Education Department Annual Report, 2022). These selected schools are recognized for their established infrastructure and experienced staff. Moreover, the teachers at these institutions have undergone Goffa language reading and writing skill training sessions conducted twice within two consecutive years by the Arba Minch College of Teacher Education.

Participants and Sampling Technique

In this study, the participants consisted of four Grade One Goffa language teachers, one school principal, and one college trainer. The selection of these participants was carried out using purposive sampling techniques, in line with

Creswell (2013)'s assertion that purposeful sampling is integral to qualitative research. This method allows researchers to select individuals and sites that can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem. Therefore, we employed purposive sampling to gather pertinent data from carefully selected participants, ensuring relevance to the study.

Data collection involved various methods, including classroom observation and interviews with teachers to explore their practices, beliefs, and experiences. Additionally, insights from college instructors and school administrators were incorporated to enrich the teachers' responses. The selected teachers boasted extensive experience in teaching the target language and had completed diploma programs in Goffa language, either through regular or summer programs. In terms of gender representation, three of the teachers were female, while the fourth teacher, the school director (selected from Guradde Primary School), and the college instructor (selected from Arba Minch College) were male. To distinguish between participants, pseudonyms were assigned: T1, T2, T3, T4 for the teachers, SD for the school director, and CI for the college instructor.

Data Collection Instruments

To ensure effective data collection, observation and interview tools were utilized in this study.

Observation

Observation serves as a crucial method for collecting qualitative data, enabling the examination of individuals' experiences, practices, and realities in their natural settings (Creswell, 2013). In this study, classroom observation was utilized to gather data while teachers conducted their lessons in real classroom settings. Two phases of observation sessions were conducted to comprehensively understand teaching and learning practices in these environments. Each observation session lasted one week to ensure detailed and in-depth information gathering.

Before commencing classroom observations, specific criteria were devised to ascertain whether teachers were implementing the components outlined in the proposed language syllabuses and curricula. This observation checklist encompassed various teaching methods and strategies, including sound identification, syllable segmentation, onset-rime awareness, rhyming and alliteration, as well as phoneme blending and phoneme manipulation. The responses were assessed to determine whether the teacher utilized any of these

strategies in teaching phonological awareness and how they were implemented in the actual classroom setting. The observation sessions were supplemented by audio and video recordings to ensure thorough documentation.

Each classroom observation lasted approximately 45 minutes (one period), allowing for an in-depth understanding of the instructional processes occurring during that time.

Interviews

In addition to data collected through classroom observations, face-to-face interviews with participants were conducted to enrich the dataset. Interviews serve as a method for gathering oral data within specific categories and capturing unforeseen insights (Brown, 2001). According to Creswell (2013), interviews are invaluable tools for eliciting individuals' feelings, attitudes, thoughts, and experiences through direct and indirect questioning.

For this study, individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews were employed to extract necessary information from each participant. Personal interviews on a one-to-one basis were deemed preferable over group interviews as they were more likely to elicit genuine responses from respondents. Moreover, verbal reports provided by participants allowed access to vast amounts of information and knowledge. A standardized structured format was adhered to, ensuring that each participant was posed the same set of questions in a fixed sequence (Patton, 1990).

Prior to conducting the interviews, participants were informed in advance to allow them to prepare accordingly. They were assured that their responses would be used solely for research purposes and that confidentiality would be maintained in handling the data. Efforts were made to establish a good rapport with participants to facilitate the collection of authentic information. Each interview was tape-recorded to ensure the accuracy of data collection, enabling researchers to focus more attentively on the interviewees (Patton, 1990).

Procedures

Prior to initiating the data collection process, a formal letter soliciting cooperation was drafted by the Department of Linguistics and Philology of Addis Ababa University and delivered to the Gofa Zone Education Department. Subsequently, the education authorities at the zonal level issued a letter of permission, which was then presented to each school administration.

Upon arrival at the schools, the purpose of the study was explained to the school management, who graciously coordinated schedules with the participating teachers. A mutually convenient time was agreed upon for conducting classroom observations. These observations took place during regular teaching sessions.

Interview sessions were conducted with the observed teachers, school director, and college instructor. The data obtained from these interviews were transcribed and translated into English for analysis. Thematic analysis was employed using a deductive approach.

Data Analysis

The data analysis methods in this study were guided by the research questions and the employed data collection techniques. Qualitative analysis of interview data aimed to reveal actual instructional practices and the challenges faced in teaching phonological awareness.

Following the procedures of case study data analysis, themes were identified, interpreted, coded, and elaborated upon (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative descriptive and analytical methods were applied to thoroughly examine the cases, facilitating the assessment and comprehension of their practical nuances and distinctions. Classroom observation and interview data were thematically analyzed using a deductive approach, with results presented through detailed descriptions and analyses focusing on these thematic areas

Findings

This section presents the findings of the study under the following two themes: teachers' phonological awareness and instructional practices and the prevailing challenges that affect the instruction of phonological awareness. These research themes emanated from the aforementioned research questions which were discussed previously.

Teachers' Phonological Awareness and Instructional Practices

During classroom observation, it was noted that Teacher 1 (T1) effectively taught various components of phonological awareness, including sounds, syllables, onset-rime awareness, and words. T1 employed diverse methods such as naming, counting, signaling individual sounds, and utilizing word repetition to foster phonological awareness among students. Additionally, T1 connected sounds with corresponding pictures to reinforce understanding and

provided ample opportunities for students to practice these skills. Utilizing words from both children's and teacher's books, T1 facilitated practice in sound and syllable segmentations, phoneme blending, and onset-rime awareness.

Furthermore, T1 employed specific examples like "ase" for "man," demonstrated as (/a/-/s/-/e/), and "boori" for "ox," demonstrated as (/b/-/o/-/o/-/r/-/i/) and (/boo/-/ri/) for sound and syllable segmentations, respectively. T1 also guided students in identifying individual sounds within words, including initial, medial, and final sounds, and encouraged independent, paired, and small group practice. However, T1 did not incorporate phoneme manipulation strategies such as phoneme addition, deletion, or substitution. Additionally, there was a lack of scaffolding methods employed to enhance students' phonological awareness.

While observing the T2's classroom instructional practices, we noticed that the teacher taught phonological awareness skills applying strategies such as sound identification, syllable segmentation and phoneme manipulations (addition, deletion and substitution). She also taught various sound segments by naming, repeating and counting individual sounds. In addition, she demonstrated segmenting sounds within words to identify their positions: initial, medial and final. She also asked children to count and tell the number of phonemes within words. During the classroom observation, we further observed that she taught the sound /v/ by repeating the sound again and again saying (/v/, /v/, /v/, /v/). Then, she taught its family sounds (/v/, /vu/, /vi/, /va/, /ve/, /vo/). She instructed the children to name each sound; then to identify its position within words. She also demonstrated the "read aloud" teaching strategies to orally practice the identification of the /v/ sound and words which were formed using this sound in initial, medial or final positions within the word.

In addition, T2 applied various words such as "kove" means "door" "zhave" means "disordered"; "zhvero" means "early morning" and "huve" means "material that blacksmith man used to pump wind". She demonstrated these words and their pronunciations. The children also followed her demonstrations. Then she asked them to repeat the individual sounds and the whole word following her. In doing so, she corrected incorrect pronunciations of the children and indicated differences in pronunciations between /zh/ and /j/. Furthermore, she instructed them to segment phonemes within words and they demonstrated together orally. For example the word "kove" and the

phonemes in the word are segmented as (/k/-/o/-/v/-/e/); and the word "huve" and phonemes were segmented as (/h/-/u/-/v/-/e/) and for the word "zhave" and phonemes were segmented as (/zh/-/a/-/v/-/e/). She asked the children to sing a song and clap their hands to identify various sounds in the given words. She further instructed them to demonstrate sounds through physical or lip movements, telling stories, signaling and writing sounds, letters and words on air and letting them identify. Furthermore, she demonstrated sounds by connecting with pictures to create a better understanding in children's minds to achieve phonological awareness.

On the other hand, T3 used different words to teach syllable segmentation and phoneme blending. She asked the children what they had learned in their earlier lessons before beginning the daily lesson. Some of the children responded well, but others didn't react well. She acknowledged and encouraged the class for further engagements. She used words like "dono," meaning "potato" which is segmented as (/do/-/no/); "kana" meaning "dog" which is segmented as (/ka/-/na/); "badala" meaning "maize" which is segmented as (/ba/- /da/-/la/); and "godareta" meaning "hyenas" which is segmented as (/go/-/da/-/re/-/ta/); "mallas" meaning "for example" is segmented as (/mal/-/las/). T3 also encouraged children to participate fully in class activities and gave them the freedom to practice in pairs and small groups. So, the children tried to practice phonological awareness skills, but they were not effective. T3 further asked students to combine sounds and syllables to form meaningful words using phoneme blending strategies. She also requested that the children read aloud the combined words. From our classroom observation, we analyzed that she addressed selected phonological awareness components: syllable segmentation and phoneme blending strategies. She did not use phoneme manipulation (deletion, addition, and substitution), alliteration and rhyming, phoneme substitutions, or sound identification (initial, medial, and final) to teach phonological awareness skills.

Finally, we also observed the T4 classroom instruction. T4 taught phonological awareness skills by writing words on the board by utilizing the two words "tama" meaning "fire" and "tamma" meaning "ten". She asked the children about spelling and pronunciation. Also, she asked about their similarities and differences. She explained about single and double consonant sounds and their similarities and differences. She said that the first word is pronounced unstressed, but the second word is pronounced stressed. T4 further explained the initial sounds and showed both words started with the same

letter, /t/. Nevertheless, there was a single /m/ sound in the first word and a double /mm/ sound in the second. These made the two words different in spelling and pronunciation. She also taught sounds and words through phoneme substitution strategies. She used words such as "daro" meaning "many" and "kalo" which means "not hungry"; the compound words "pola" meaning "finish" and "tola" meaning "nail it". However, she didn't teach the children how to recognize individual sounds, onset-rime segments, rhyming schemes, and medial and final sounds. She also didn't practice the phonological awareness components through phoneme blending and phoneme manipulation techniques.

According to the data obtained through the interview, T1 responded to the question on how she teaches phonological awareness, as follows:

> *I have usually practiced teaching phonological awareness through sound identifications, syllable segmentations, onset-rime awareness, phoneme manipulations and blending as well as oral word decoding strategies. Besides, I often use to teach sounds by employing alphabetic songs, playing letter and word games, clapping and tapping my hands to identify sounds, performing drama, demonstrations and other physical actions (Personal communication; November 20, 2019)*

In the same way, T2 forwarded the following points:

> *My teaching experiences of phonological awareness skills were through sound identifications, syllable segmentations, phoneme blending, onset-rime awareness and oral word decoding strategies. I didn't use phoneme manipulation strategy (addition, deletion and substitution) when teaching phonological awareness. This is because of my limited understanding of the strategy. The methods that I frequently used were singing alphabetic songs, playing letter games, through physical actions (performing dramas, drills and demonstrations), clapping hands as well as repeating and signaling individual sounds (Personal communication, December 18, 2019).*

In addition, T3 pointed out in the interview about phonological awareness instruction in the following ways.

> *Based on my long teaching experiences, I could say that I have taught phonological awareness skills by applying various strategies such as sound identifications, syllable segmentations, phoneme blending, and*

word decoding strategies. I have occasionally used phoneme manipulation strategy (addition, deletion and substitution) when teaching phonological awareness. This is because of my limited level of understanding of the strategy. Indeed, I haven't practiced enough teaching phonological awareness skills by using singing alphabetic songs, playing letter games, through physical actions (performing dramas, drills and demonstrations), clapping hands as well as repeating and signaling individual sounds (Personal communication, October 18, 2019).

Furthermore, T4 forwarded the following points:

I have usually practiced teaching phonological awareness through sound identifications, syllable segmentations, onset-rime awareness, phoneme manipulations and blending as well as oral word decoding strategies. Besides, in teaching sounds, I often employ alphabetic songs, playing letter and word games, clapping and tapping my hands to identify sounds, performing drama, demonstrations and other physical actions (Personal communication; February 2020)

Combined classroom observation data with interview reflections results indicated that all teachers (T1, T2, T3 &T4) frequently used strategies such as sound identification and syllable segmentation in teaching phonological awareness skills. T1 and T2 tried to teach individual sounds and syllable segmentation skills. On the other hand, T3 and T4 focused more on syllable segmentation, and phoneme blending strategies. Also, during observation, we observed that all teachers taught phonological awareness skills by focusing on writing rather than on oral drills. Moreover, they partially implemented various instructional methods and strategies that were promoted in the curricula and syllabuses. The national curricula strongly suggest that phonological awareness skills should be taught predominantly orally. All the respondents lacked better phonological awareness knowledge for effective classroom implementations.

Additionally, we observed that teachers were struggling to employ phoneme manipulation, phoneme blending, onset-rime awareness and word decoding strategies. In classroom implementations variations have been observed among the teachers. These might be due to differences in their previous trainings that they have received. It is also possible that differences in classroom delivery among the teachers could be related to accessing various

reading materials, variation in preparedness as well as differences in their motivation to implement phonological awareness skills.

Subsequently, we analyzed relations and differences that T1, T2, T3 and T4 have demonstrated in actual classroom teaching and outside classroom. Both of them replied that they were so interested to instruct in their mother tongue; however, they have faced unawareness of the subject matter among their peers, staffs and other stakeholders which made them reluctant in implementing effective instructions. This in turn resulted in children unable to master phonological awareness skills effectively. In the interview, all respondents mentioned that they employ important phonological awareness strategies: sound identification, syllable segmenting, onset-rime awareness, phoneme blending and word decoding strategies. They also claim to use some instructional methods: singing songs, playing games, demonstrating role play, performing dramas, clapping hands, acting body or lip movements. Besides, they further stated that they use scaffolding materials such as flashcards, photos, pictures and other real objects to support classroom instruction. On the contrary, during classroom observation, we observed that both teachers were not actually (at least in the sessions we observed) employing the teaching of phonological awareness skills that they mentioned during the interview. Likewise, we understood similarities and differences in and out of classroom performances. Even if there were some mismatching reports in between classroom observation and interview, the majority of the responses were similar and they also align with the classroom observations.

Challenges Affecting the Instruction of Phonological Awareness Skills

The results found through interviews with teachers showed that there were various prevailing challenges encountered during the implementation of phonological awareness instruction. Accordingly, the crucial challenges which are faced in the practices of phonological awareness instruction as raised by the interviewees were related to the poor phonological awareness knowledge, inadequate training that teachers have received in their previous college training, lack of home and community reading literacy, low attitude and motivation towards mother tongue education, low commitments and preparedness, in adequate educational facilities (textbooks, teacher guide, supplementary reading materials like story and picture books, teaching aids and physical learning environment and classroom setting), lack of trained teachers in the subject area, lack of pre-school attendance and low socio-economic status, shortage of time and opportunity, ignorance from peers and

low parental community and government support and lack of continuous trainings to refresh their knowledge and awareness levels.

In response to a question about challenges faced in classroom instruction, T1 shared:

> *"I understand the importance of developing strong phonological awareness at the grade one level to improve later reading abilities, but it can be quite challenging. I have encountered several challenges in my classroom instructions. These include low phonological awareness knowledge among educators, lack of continuous professional development, lack of awareness among peers, lack of support and appreciation from stakeholders, inadequate reading materials, and insufficient home and community reading practices. Additionally, in my school, poor physical learning environments and classroom settings, as well as limited time and opportunities to develop reading abilities, are major challenges" (December 22, 2019).*

Similarly, T2 addressed the question regarding challenges in classroom instruction:

> *"I recognize that teaching early grade reading, especially phonological awareness, is crucial for developing children's reading abilities. However, there are various challenges encountered in actual classroom practices. Some of the major challenges include poor development of home reading literacy, low socioeconomic status, lack of motivation and interest in teaching and learning in the mother tongue language. Additionally, the absence of a preschool program, poor commitment and willingness, limited access to reading materials, inadequate classroom organization, low home and community reading habits, and the lack of a well-organized pedagogical center contribute to the difficulties faced" (January 3, 2020).*

In the interview T3 replied on the prevailing challenges in the following ways.

> *My argument was that effective and practical phonological awareness instruction by far is very important to improve early grade reading skills. From my long years of teaching I observed that a few years ago, children used to be admitted directly to one classroom without attending pre-primary school education especially those who were in remote areas. As a result, children faced difficulties in mastering basic*

oral skills. Teachers were also faced with difficulties in teaching phonological awareness skills. In recent years, the situations have been changing in every direction so they have started attending kindergarten schooling before directly joining grade one education. I could see that still, some children didn't go through kindergarten classes and their reading proficiency has not been improved after the completion of grade one.

Furthermore, T4 explained the challenges in the following way:

I suppose that I have a good understanding towards phonological awareness skills and the classroom instructional strategies. Moreover, I believe that teaching phonological awareness, especially in grade one classrooms, could support the children to ensure their future academic success. Likewise, I argue that phonological awareness instruction is a crucial skill to make young children become proficient readers. Teaching phonological awareness skills take an extended time and energy as far as I am concerned. To accomplish effective instruction, teachers try to use varied teaching aids like flashcards, cartoons and simple and locally made real objects when teaching phonological awareness components.

An interview was also conducted with the school director (SD) and college instructor (CI). SD reported that in her school, observations were conducted twice a week in collaboration with vice directors, unit leaders, department heads, and peer teachers to assess the teaching-learning processes. She explained that some teachers were struggling while others were unable to effectively deliver instructions on phonological awareness skills. This challenge, she noted, partly stemmed from the fact that teachers were primarily hired for their language proficiency in the mother tongue rather than their training to teach other subjects in the target language. Additionally, during classroom visits, SD observed that some students struggled to distinguish various components of phonological awareness, and teachers often provided incorrect explanations on the differences between sounds, syllables, and word segments, indicating a lack of basic understanding of important instructional strategies among some teachers.

On the other hand, CI provided further insight into the curriculum content at the college level. He explained that distinct modules addressing phonological awareness were integrated within broader courses such as "The Early Grade Literacy Development" and "Developing Cognitive Skills for Early Grade

Children." However, he highlighted deficiencies in these modules, noting a lack of diverse phonological awareness content and inadequately organized instructional strategies and practical tasks. CI emphasized that the modules lacked appropriate structure, clear instructions, illustrations, and concrete activities.

Furthermore, CI described his own instructional approach, which involved teaching sounds, sound-letter connections, syllables, and word decoding skills using various strategies. For example, he utilized learners' names, names of furniture, and names of domestic and wild animals to illustrate phonological concepts. He explained that in Goffa culture, personal names often begin with similar initial sounds, providing examples such as "Dara Dafa Dada," where each initial consonant letter (/D/, /D/, /D/) represents sound identifications, syllable segmentations, onset-rime awareness, and phoneme manipulation, segmentation, and blending strategies.

In the interview, SD shared his insights on the prevailing challenges:

> *"My experience, both from classroom visits and my general knowledge as the school director has revealed several interconnected challenges. These include teachers' poor preparedness and planning, insufficient parental and community support, limited utilization of teaching aids such as flashcards and real objects to teach sounds, inadequate phonological awareness knowledge among teachers, shortages of educational resources, and poor physical learning environments and classroom settings. Additionally, families often fail to follow up with the consolidation of learning and educational achievements. Teachers struggle to implement phonological awareness effectively due to inadequate planning, preparation, and the use of varied teaching aids to support children's language skills. Consequently, children often lack the basic phonological awareness skills necessary for developing reading abilities, highlighting the need for significant efforts to enhance children's reading abilities"* (Personal communication, March 11, 2020).

Similarly, CI offered his perspective on the prevailing challenges:

> "*I am aware of the numerous instructional challenges that impact phonological awareness skills. From my experience, these challenges include teachers' poor understanding and lack of phonological knowledge, as well as a deficiency in attitude and motivation.*

Additionally, there is a shortage of educational materials such as textbooks, teacher guides, and supplementary reading materials, along with inadequate school support and a notable lack of continuous professional development trainings" (Personal communication, April 15, 2020).

The data gathered from interviews with teachers, directors, and college instructors reveal a convergence of challenges encountered in their instructional practices, highlighting several key areas of concern. When asked about prevailing instructional challenges during the interview sessions, respondents consistently mentioned issues such as:

- Lack of phonological awareness knowledge.
- Inadequate educational resources.
- Limited parental, community, and government support and involvement.
- Low socio-economic status.
- Poor physical learning environment and classroom settings.

During classroom observations, these challenges were further elucidated, with additional limitations identified, including:

- Deficiencies in phonological awareness knowledge among educators.
- Shortages of educational materials such as textbooks, teacher's guides, and supplementary reading materials.
- Poor organization of the physical learning environment, including class size, reading rooms, and pedagogical centers.
- Low motivation towards teaching and learning in the mother tongue language.

If left unaddressed, these challenges have the potential to detrimentally impact classroom instruction. For example, when teachers lack fundamental phonological awareness knowledge, positive attitude, motivation, and preparedness, they may struggle to deliver effective phonological awareness instructions. Additionally, shortages of educational resources, coupled with poor physical learning environments and classroom settings, as well as limited parental, community, and government involvement, can hinder phonological awareness instruction in actual classroom settings. Furthermore, the absence of supportive home and community literacy practices, combined with low

socio-economic status, can further exacerbate challenges in implementing phonological awareness instruction effectively.

Discussions

This article has delved into teachers' phonological awareness and instructional practices, shedding light on the challenges they encounter in delivering classroom instructions. It underscores the importance of equipping teachers with solid knowledge of phonological awareness and effective instructional strategies and methods. Studies have emphasized the value of employing varied instructional approaches that support children in exploring phonological awareness through practical and playful methods (Bradly, et al., 2009; Solomon & Chanyalew, 2020). Additionally, teachers are advised to teach sounds and letters using engaging activities such as letter games, singing alphabetic songs, performing dramas, drills, and other demonstration methods (Miniwuyelet, 2020; Richardson & Nieminen, 2017).

However, the findings of both classroom observations and interviews in this study reveal that teachers' practices in teaching phonological awareness skills are notably inadequate. Components of phonological awareness and instructional strategies and methods are consistently and insufficiently implemented in classroom settings, consequently leading to lower reading performances among children in early grades.

In addition, the aforementioned phonological awareness instructional strategies could support the children to explore phonological awareness components effectively (Miniwuyelet, 2020; Solomon & Chanyalew, 2020). Moreover, the knowledge of phonemic awareness is crucial for teachers as it would give them the confidence to design and implement classroom activities that could support their learners to read successfully (Ramaniar, et al., 2020). Solomon and Chanyalew (2020) further described that phonemic awareness reading strategies could improve children's phonemic awareness performance if it is used in appropriate ways. Also, the effective provision of phonological awareness instruction is fundamental because it promotes young children to become proficient readers, which is strongly associated with current and later academic success (Snow, et al., 1998).

Without a strong and explicit commitment from teachers and other stakeholders to these principles, it is challenging for children to understand and implement phonological awareness skills effectively. Improving children's reading abilities requires significant attention from various

stakeholders, both within and beyond the classroom environment. However, addressing children's needs to develop reading skills can be a daunting obstacle. Success in reading instruction for children is influenced by a multitude of factors, including phonological awareness knowledge, socio-economic status, environmental factors, family literacy levels, accessibility of educational materials, behavioral, intellectual, motivational, and disability issues (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Brown, 2016). Studies suggest that ample time and opportunities should be provided for children to practice phonological awareness skills. Moreover, it is crucial to offer diverse-opportunities for children to understand the strategies they are learning and how to develop their reading abilities. Various possibilities can contribute to effective classroom instruction, including designing interactive activities, creating positive instructional environments, producing challenging and appropriate content, focusing on student engagement, employing diverse teaching methods, and ensuring access to adequate educational resources (Hoffman, et al., 2009; Roskos, et al., 2009).

Furthermore, to effectively practice phonological awareness skills, teachers should prioritize explicit instruction of different components, embed opportunities for continuous practice, design and implement phonological awareness tasks, teach children individually, in pairs, and small groups, and encourage them to develop the skill independently both in and out of the classroom (Miniwuyelet, 2020; Solomon & Chanyalew, 2020). Additionally, teachers should utilize diverse and playful instructional methods such as singing alphabetic songs, playing games, performing dramas and drills, storytelling, matching sounds, letters, and words with pictorial representations, and engaging in physical actions such as lip movement, clapping, and tapping to identify sounds and syllables (Anteneh, et al., 2016; Samuel & Binyam, 2023).

Conclusion

In conclusion, effective early grade reading education hinges on explicit knowledge of phonological awareness and the implementation of effective instructional practices to foster children's learning to read abilities. This article has explored the current practices of teachers in teaching phonological awareness in classroom settings and the challenges they encounter. The findings from observations and interviews confirm that teachers' knowledge of phonological awareness and instructional practices are inadequate. Teachers struggle to deliver successful classroom instructions, particularly in applying

varied phonological awareness strategies such as phoneme manipulation, blending, and onset-rime awareness. Despite their efforts, they predominantly rely on direct instructional methods such as sound and letter counting.

Furthermore, teachers face difficulties in implementing playful pedagogical methods like singing alphabetic songs, playing word games, and performing dramas and role plays. The inability to effectively implement phonological awareness instructions results in poor reading achievements among children. These instructional challenges are compounded by various factors, including limitations in classroom practices, school environments, and educational resources, as well as family educational backgrounds, socio-economic status, and lack of home and community literacy practices. Consequently, poor teaching practices contribute to children's inadequate reading competencies, impacting both their current academic performance and future success. The low performance of teachers stems from inadequate proficiency in these skills acquired during their education and training.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Teachers should prioritize explicit and effective instruction of phonological awareness, employing a variety of instructional strategies and methods. Classroom instruction should be made practical and interactive, with connections drawn between instructional practices and children's everyday lives.
2. Primary school directors and supervisors should actively support teachers in their implementation of classroom instruction. Efforts should be made to ensure the accessibility of educational materials and to promote home and community literacy practices to enhance phonological awareness skills among students.
3. College instructors should align their training with the primary school curriculum, emphasizing the importance of developing children's reading abilities, particularly focusing on phonological awareness. This will help ensure the provision of quality education in early grades and beyond.

4. Stakeholders, including educational experts and local government authorities, should provide continuous professional development opportunities for teachers. Short-term subject matter trainings should be offered to refresh knowledge of phonological awareness, and efforts should be made to develop and supply educational resources such as children's textbooks, teacher guidebooks, and supplementary reading materials. Additionally, creating a relaxed physical learning environment and classroom setting will facilitate the implementation of effective phonological awareness skills.

5. Further comprehensive studies should be conducted in this area, extending across early grades, to gain a better understanding of phonological awareness instruction and the challenges for implementation. This will contribute to achieving effective early grade reading proficiency and inform future educational practices and policies.

Limitations of the Study

As mentioned earlier, this article has examined current practices of phonological awareness instructions among grade one Goffa language teachers in Ethiopian primary schools and the challenges they face in implementation. However, several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the study employed a limited sample size within a specific setting and context, aiming to qualitatively understand the given cases. Consequently, the findings may not be generalizable to all related contexts and settings. Nevertheless, the findings can serve as a benchmark and offer valuable insights for improving reading instruction, particularly phonological awareness, in Ethiopian primary school classrooms and similar contexts.

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