

English Teachers' Perceptions of the Importance of Essential Components and Early Grade Reading Instruction

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Abstract

This study examines English teachers' perceptions of the importance of essential components and early grade reading instruction: Ethiopian context. To this end, the researchers chose a descriptive research design of quantitative-qualitative approaches. Twenty (20) randomly selected primary schools were the sources of data; 125 primary school English teachers of Hawassa City Administration filled in a questionnaire. Among the twenty schools, two were selected randomly and interviews were conducted with six English teachers of grades one to three (1-3). The quantitative data analysis was done by using software for data analysis (SPSS Version 25.0), descriptive statistics. The data gathered through semi-structured interview were analyzed descriptively in words. The results have shown that participant teachers were not practicing the strategies appropriate for literacy instruction although they have positive perceptions of importance of the critical components of early grade reading instruction. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that teacher preparation programs should reconsider the level of emphasis placed on early grade reading instruction, and practice focused trainings should be given to Ethiopian lower grades English teachers on early grade reading instruction and assessment.

Keywords: essential components, instructional practice, knowledge assessment, literacy instruction strategies, lower grades

The way teachers are viewed is nowadays changed. They are no more viewed as object of knowledge transfer. Instead, they are seen as creative, problem solvers and decision makers. They are also viewed as the academics who are thoughtful, questioning and critically inspired experts. As a result, teacher preparation and training schemes have been required to take into account the contributions of various approaches and strategies to the practice of classroom instruction (Roberts, 1998).

Speedy expansion of teacher preparation programs worldwide in the 1960s continued to the 1970s and turned its attention increasingly to quality preparation of second language teachers. In Behaviorist approach, the focus was on the effective teaching behavior, effective student performance and student-

teacher exchanges. The purpose of second language teacher preparation is to equip prospective teachers with the knowledge and skills that effective teachers need and identify the rules that such teachers use. Teachers of second language are expected to understand the principles of language and their application via teaching experiences. They are also required to use effective techniques of assessment to monitor students' progress (Richards & Nunan, 1990).

Then the communicative approach to second language teacher preparation evolved following the place of English in international trade and collaboration. The development of communicative approach during the 1970s influenced teachers' practices with the intent of recreating the real-life social and functional situations in the classrooms. The school leaders and university faculty who did not actually teach in the classrooms were in favor of this approach, but classroom teachers viewed it as superficial, uninspiring and unorganized (Widdowson, 1979). Later, in the mid-1970s new research perspectives revitalized the part of teachers as actively engaged in the teacher learning process that teachers can have their own theories and understand the processes involved in their learning to teach (Richards & Nunan, 1990).

The Applied Linguistics approach emerged when teacher training programs failed to prepare teachers to handle the dynamic classroom situations. It was to enable language teachers to come up with their own solutions for classroom problems instead of waiting for ready-made remedies. That is, teacher preparation programs should teach teaching, not about teaching. This approach was challenged by the introduction of changes to second language teacher preparation and development with emphasis on subject content knowledge and ability to teach. Issues like classroom observation, action research, linguistic awareness, supervision and mentoring were introduced (Brumfit, 1983; Bruner, 1986).

Mid 1980s started to see another perspective, socio-cultural approach to second language teacher preparation, which considers the complexity of teachers' practices and the way their practices are influenced by their previous learning, practical knowledge, values and beliefs they developed. In this approach student teachers do not come into the program empty minded and empty handed to be prepared with the knowledge of principles and pedagogical skills. Instead, teachers' knowledge of teaching is built through social interaction with students, other teachers, leaders and others of stake in the teaching force as a social setting (Johnson, 2009). Thus, pre-service second language teacher preparation is considered as the beginning of their professional development when prospective teachers practice in the school classrooms where they share experiences with peers, tutors and mentors and connect theories learnt in the college coursework and actual classroom-based teaching through field-experiences (practicum). Being able to reflect on one's practice enables teachers to critique, make better informed decisions and improve their teaching. Human learning and development, according to constructivist theorists (e.g. Vygotsky, 1978), occur in cultural contexts and are negotiated by language and

other symbols. This approach to second language teacher preparation associated with the reflective practice model of teacher education mainly guides this particular study.

There is a clear interplay between teacher preparation and the practice of literacy instruction; effective teacher preparation programs result in quality teaching. Well prepared teachers make a difference with students' literacy learning achievement (Ayalew, 2009).

None of the abilities is believed to add to lifetime learning and sustainable development as much as early literacy skills. Ability to succeed in academic endeavors, life time learning and contributing to sustainable development significantly depends on ability to read and write. Studies have also documented that being able to read and write at early grades crucially contributes to later academic achievement and participation in various spheres of life. Thus, it is clearly related to nationality, social identity, socio-economic status, basic rights, fairness, etc. (Smith et al., 2012).

As the ability to read and understand serves as the foundation for the next levels of education, those with insufficient reading skills experience academic, social and financial problems. For instance, failure to read brings shame (Stygles, 2016). Learners who fail to read and benefit from lessons are less likely to complete high school (Vaughn et al., 2015). Illiteracy is associated with many social worries such as poverty, crime, and imprisonment (Cuevas et al., 2014).

Moreover, people with poor reading skills may encounter financial problems. One's ability to earn a living can be influenced by his/her ability to read (Wexler et al., 2015). Today's global labor market demands highly skilled workers who have received quality college level education (Autor, 2014). On the contrary, those with poor reading abilities possibly work low-skilled, low-paying jobs or may remain unemployed (UNESCO, n. d.). Thus, there is a pressing need for knowledgeable and skilled early literacy teachers who can help young learners learn to read and succeed in later education and life.

Taking the above and other issues into consideration, it is important to work towards making the children in early grades good readers. If that is not the case, the golden opportunity may be missed, and it later becomes difficult to reverse the situation with the remedial reading instruction. To make an effective early grade reading instruction happen, teachers need to have a profound knowledge of instructional procedures and readiness. Teachers of young learners are expected to be familiar with teaching phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension (Learning Points Associates, 2004).

Effective reading instruction, language of instruction and effective teacher preparation and professional development make the basis for preparation and execution of language and literacy instruction of early grades. This implies that an improvement in early grade children's language skills and reading is a result of a set of particular trainings that teachers receive on language and literacy teaching (Smith et al., 2012).

When modern education was introduced during the regime of Menelik II (1889-1913), education policy was formulated by the emperor, aristocracy and foreign advisors (Zewdie, 2000). Ethiopia's imperial regime was concerned with assigning enough teachers to the schools following the expansion of modern education in the 20th century (Tesfaye, 2013). The regime attempted to see different options of obtaining teachers such as importing expatriate teachers from countries that had a good diplomatic relation with Ethiopia at that time (e.g. France, USA, and Great Britain) and the Coptic Church of Egypt (Tesfaye, 2013). Since then, Ethiopia's education system has undergone different reforms to its policies, programs and strategies (Tesfaye, 2014). The first teacher preparation institute was begun at Menelik II Secondary School in 1940s. After two years a real teacher training institute was opened at Gulele, Addis Ababa. Thirty years later, three more teacher training institutes were opened in Harar, Debre Berhan and Jimma. To upgrade the capacity of graduate teachers three more teacher training colleges at diploma level were opened in Addis Ababa (Kotebe), Bahir Dar (Academy of Pedagogy) and Harar (Alemaya College of Agriculture) (Tesfaye, 2013).

Derg, the socialist rule, made some changes. Completing grade 12 was the only requirement to join teacher preparation program during the Derg regime, the socialist regime that governed Ethiopia from 1974-1991. The acute shortage of teachers, led to making certain candidates teach without any pedagogical preparation (Alemayehu, 2012). Graduates of high school who failed to join higher learning institutions to study other disciplines joined primary teacher preparation programs, so the quality of teaching and the reputation of the profession deteriorated (Alemayehu, 2012; Tesfaye, 2014).

A new education and training policy (1994) was formulated and teacher training institutes were upgraded to diploma level colleges and certain new colleges were also added after the downfall of the Derg regime. The teacher development program which contained the activities related to English Language Improvement Program (ELIP), teacher preparation methodology, knowledge, skills and attitudes of those involved was also part of Education Sector Development.

Revisions have been made to teacher preparation to increase subject matter content, professional courses and practicum, and prioritized reading, science and mathematics. However, disparities were observed across colleges. Ethiopian education is currently under serious reform within the Education Development Roadmap (2018-2030). In the provision of this roadmap primary English teachers have to be qualified with a bachelor degree. The reforms undertaken so far in the sector enabled Ethiopian young learners to access primary education, yet the quality of students' literacy learning is desperately poor (MOE, 2018). Further studies are required to look into teachers' knowledge, literacy instruction skills and ability to systematically assess children's progress in terms of learning to read. Thus, this study attempted to look into English teachers' perceptions of the importance of five critical

components – (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension of early grade reading instruction; and teachers’ instructional practice).

Attention paid to quality of education, particularly primary education is a key to societal transformation. This is the case when it is understood that primary education lays a basis for later learning and active involvement of citizens in different development activities (Riner, 2000). Among the things that enable to maintain quality of education, well prepared teacher takes the central place. The other inputs are less likely to make a difference in absence of a well prepared teacher (Anderson, 2002). Amare (1998) also states that teacher’s ability results in quality teaching, which in turn is an outcome of a quality teacher preparation.

As students’ ability to use English is enormously influenced by teachers’ ability to teach the language, preparing English language teachers draws attention (Wubalem & Sarangi, 2019). Ethiopia has trained English language teachers and those who use it as a language of instruction. Currently, although English is taught as a subject from pre-primary in all the federal states of the country, differences exist across the states in terms of making English a language of instruction (Abiy, 2005).

Efforts have been made through English Language Improvement Program (ELIP) and strategies for improvement of English language competence of public school teachers. Despite government and different development partners’ efforts to improve the quality of education as well as English language instruction, ability to use English language keeps on declining (Geberew & Demoze, 2014).

The elementary education in Ethiopia is inadequately resourced in terms of teaching English language and using it as a language of instruction. One of the major problems is the presence of poorly trained teachers in the two cycles of primary education (Abebe, 2012). Berhanu (1999) cited in Abebe (2012) also states that English language instruction in primary schools faces a serious shortage of well-prepared teachers in addition to other deficiencies.

The efforts made so far to improve Ethiopian education could not bear the desired outcomes. As a result, it is customary to hear teachers, teacher trainers, parents, employers and development partners complain about Ethiopia’s education system failure to succeed more than access and equity. According to Haregewoin (2003), poor performance of English language use prevails among graduates of colleges and universities. Among other things, students’ failure to take advantages of the lessons is attributed to their deficient reading skills (Atkins et al., 1996).

Studies also reveal that reading difficulties secondary school students face are the manifestations of poor education at the lower grades (e.g. Gemechis, 2014). Similarly, Eba (2014) blames deficient teacher preparation for English teachers’ lack of knowledge of the strategies and techniques of early grade reading instruction.

No educational gadget can replace a qualified teacher. For instance, a teacher cannot be substituted by well-planned curriculum, well-resourced classrooms, abundantly available resources or technologies, well prepared materials, etc. However, inadequately prepared teachers contribute to deficient education system and poor student learning. Ethiopian English teachers take the blame of contributing to poor English language use in the country. The problem of low ability of teachers in teaching English language reading is customary at all levels of the country's education (Abiy, 2005). English teachers of grades 1-4 are said to have very weak proficiency and poor language teaching abilities, so that they cannot teach the lessons put in student textbooks. It is therefore so difficult to ensure access to quality primary education unless the issues related to teacher training and professional developments are seriously considered. These include well-handled in prospective and on-job teacher training and continuous professional development with due consideration of content knowledge, pedagogy and language skills (Workneh and Tassew, 2013).

Quality teaching considerably influences students' learning. Researches also report that almost 15 percent of the difference in the young learners' reading achievement at the end of a given grade is associated with the skill and competence of the teacher. There is a strong relationship between student academic achievement and teachers' skills. Teacher skills specific to a subject have significant influence on student learning over different categories. For example, a rise of one standard deviation in teacher subject specific skills leads to a rise of 7.3 percent of a standard deviation (Marc et al., 2014). Rockoff (2004) confirms that teachers' academic skills are predictors of students' learning. This study shows that word knowledge and text comprehension scores would rise by nearly 0.15 and 0.18 standard deviations for teachers of some years of teaching experience. Consequently, Anderson et al. (1985) state that some teachers can teach without materials, but there are no materials that can be taught in absence of a teacher.

On the contrary, candidates of low academic achievement and poor commitment are enrolled into teacher preparation programs and make a teaching force of poor quality. Low level of content knowledge and skills to teach are commonly observable deficiencies among teachers. Language proficiency of both teachers of English language and those who use it as language of instruction is a severe limitation. The school-college partnership is loose and does not enable student teachers to gain enough knowledge and experience of the instructional process, contents in the school curricula and the students. There are observable language skills insufficiencies; particularly the basic reading and spelling across Ethiopian languages are also observable among children of early grades. Practicum (field experience) is also poorly coordinated and appraised, and the prospective teachers are insufficiently mentored (MOE, 2018).

Education system requires, more than anything else, filling early grades classrooms with qualified teachers (Mullis et al., 2000). An improvement in

education quality is significantly attributed to an improvement in teacher quality; on the other hand, education quality is impeded by a deteriorating teacher quality (UNESCO, 2014).

Various studies have been conducted (e.g. Ayalew, 2009; Workneh & Tassew, 2013; Koye, 2014) and have witnessed the importance of qualified teachers to ensure quality education. For instance, Workneh and Tassew (2013) state that the way teachers are prepared has either positive or negative effects on quality of education. They also put that well prepared and experienced teachers positively influence students' academic achievement. The quality and commitment of teachers significantly determine the strength of a given education system, and quality teaching and teachers' commitment are the outcome of a well-run teacher education (Ayalew, 2009).

Although Ethiopia has improved the amount of attention paid to education sector development and achieved a track record of success and has introduced research based educational ideas such as practicum (field experiences), action research, continuous assessment and reflective teaching in its teacher preparation, its children's literacy learning progress has kept falling and has become a concern of those who are stakeholders (Dawit, 2008). Deterioration of education quality is observable at all hierarchies of Ethiopian education. However, it is very much shocking in primary schools; a significant number of schools are filled by teachers who passed through inadequate teacher training and do not possess the required subject matter knowledge and pedagogical skills (Tsfaye, 2014).

Researches done in Ethiopia have not considered how early grade English teachers perceive the importance of the essential components of early reading and classroom instructional practice of teaching early grade reading. A few researches conducted so far have placed attention on issues such as learners' reading ability, teaching reading, reading strategy use, the use of age appropriate readers, factors that affect teaching reading in early grades. For instance, Eba (2014) looked into practices and impeding challenges facing teaching English to young learners and found out that teachers use mother tongue to teach English and lack understanding and knowledge of the strategies and techniques for teaching English to early grade students because of lack of proper prospective teacher preparation and on-job professional development courses on how to deal with young learners. Chanyalew and Abiy (2015) studied teachers' current practice of teaching English reading and grade four students' reading achievement and report low student achievement, low infusion of teaching strategies in reading lessons and poor assessment of reading skills.

Mebratu (2015) studied the status, roles and challenges of teaching reading and found out that a serious English proficiency problem prevails among English language teachers, teachers of natural sciences and students of primary and secondary schools. Almaz (2015) examined teaching reading to first cycle primary students and its challenges. In addition, Tsehay (2012) reports the assessment of early grade children's reading. Tsfaye (2014) reports

Ethiopian schools, especially primary schools are staffed with teachers who lack subject matter knowledge and skills for teaching. However, none of the studies available have considered teachers' perceptions of critical component of reading instruction and how they are taught in early grades reading classrooms.

The review of research works and other relevant documents has shown that the problems of poor education quality are largely associated with the way Ethiopians are brought to the teaching force, the way they are trained and the professional development schemes they undergo (Tesfaye, 2014). The effect of this manifests itself in low literacy learning achievements of the young learners (e.g. Piper, 2010, the 2010 EGRA results; Ethiopian Learning Assessment results of lower grades in the years 2000, 2004 and 2007 as reported in (MOE&USAID, 2008) show that students in early grades are not learning the expected knowledge and literacy skills. Thus, this article aims to examine English teachers' perceptions of importance of essential components of early grade reading instruction and classroom instructional practices as it is set below.

Objectives of the Study

General Objective

This study mainly aimed to investigate English teachers' perceptions of importance of essential components of early reading instruction and the classroom instructional practices.

Specific Objectives

Particularly, this study attempted to:

1. determine English teachers' perceptions of the importance of five critical components of early reading.
2. examine instructional practices of teaching reading skills in early grades English classrooms.

Research Questions

This study has attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of English teachers about the importance of five essential components of early reading instruction?
2. How do teachers reflect on their instructional practices of teaching reading in early grades English classrooms?

Methods

Research Design

This study employed descriptive research design of mixed methods. Questionnaire of closed ended items was used to collect quantitative data. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain qualitative data.

Context

This study was conducted in one of the thirteen regional states of Ethiopia (Federal Democratic Republic Ethiopia (FDRE), Sidama National Regional State, the residence of the corresponding author of this research work. Particularly, it was conducted in Hawassa City Administration that is located 273 kilometers south of Addis Ababa, the capital of FDRE. The city administration had 44 public primary schools sparsely distributed in eight sub cities.

Participants

One hundred and twenty-five English language teachers drawn from 20 randomly chosen public primary schools in Hawassa City Administration in the academic year of 2022/23 made the actual sample of this study. Among these 20 schools, six English teachers of grades 1-3 in two randomly chosen schools participated in the interview.

Sampling Techniques

Hawassa City Administration had 44 public primary schools. The up-to-date data of English teachers in public primary schools of the city administration was not available with Human Resources Management Directorate of Education Department when data for this study was collected. Thus, twenty public primary schools were chosen randomly. There were one hundred and thirty-one English teachers in these schools. One hundred and twenty-six English teachers volunteered to take knowledge assessment test and completed the questionnaire. Out of One hundred and twenty-six teachers, one test paper and a piece of questionnaire were discarded because of incomplete responses. Two out of twenty public primary schools were also selected randomly and six English teachers of grades one to three (1-3) were interviewed. So that one hundred and twenty-five English teachers in the twenty randomly selected schools were participants of this study.

Data Collection

The data needed for this study were collected by using semi-structured interview and questionnaire. First, six English teachers of two randomly chosen schools were interviewed. Then English teachers filled a questionnaire.

Semi-structured Interview

Seven items interview guide was used to conduct semi-structured interview with six English teachers of grades 1-3. These six English teachers were obtained from two randomly chosen schools. The aim of the interview was to gain teachers' opinion on essential components of early reading instruction and instructional practices to substantiate the results of quantitative data. To help Ethiopian early grades English teachers express their opinions as easily as possible, Amharic, the language widely used in most parts of Ethiopia, was used to conduct the interview. The interviews took 30 minutes on average. Attempts

were made not to disrupt teachers' daily teaching activities, so that the interviews were held on the school compounds at teachers' free periods.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire of different items, divided into three parts, was used to obtain data from English teachers on their perceptions of importance of critical components of early grade reading instruction and classroom instructional practices. The questionnaire of 40 (five items on importance of essential components of early grade reading instruction and 35 items on instructional practices of five critical components) items on four likert scales was adapted from (Nguyen, 2013).

Validity and Reliability of Instruments

The Amharic and English versions of the interview guide were given to two instructors (one Amharic language instructor at Hawassa College of Teacher Education and one instructor of Linguistics and Communication at Hawassa University) and encouraging comments received enabled to make sure that the tool is valid. The questionnaire for importance of basic reading skills in teaching in early grades had the alpha coefficient .867 which is very good. The questionnaire on instructional practice had the Cronbach alpha coefficient .919, excellent.

Data Analysis

After the entire data gathering was completed, the researchers cleared, sorted and made the data ready for analysis. SPSS Version 25.0 was used to analyze quantitative data (Descriptive Statistics). The qualitative data from semi-structured interview were interpreted in words. The purpose of qualitative information was to substantiate quantitative data.

Ethical Consideration

Before it commenced, the plan of this work was reviewed by the committee for graduate program, Addis Ababa University. The researchers communicated the selected schools through letter from Addis Ababa University. The participants were made clear in advance with the purpose of this study and prior verbal consent was obtained. English teachers were also informed that they are not required to disclose their names and other personal information. Moreover, enough care was taken not to use any disgracing expressions against sexes, identities, abilities and disabilities.

Procedure

The city administration education department and its subsequent structures were communicated to through a letter from Addis Ababa University to get permission to access the schools and the teachers. To contact English language teachers, the school principals and head teachers of English were communicated to through the same letter directed to them by the head of city administration education department. Twenty schools were randomly selected for this study. Then six English teachers in two randomly selected schools were

interviewed, and a questionnaire was completed by 125 English teachers. The data were cleared, sorted and made ready for analysis after making sure that all data needed were in hand. Data analysis was done by using data analysis software –statistical package for social science (SPSS Version 25.0). The data from interviews were analyzed qualitatively and discussed in words to substantiate the quantitative data.

Results

This section presents the results of the data. Table 1 below presents the analysis of demographic information of participant English teachers.

Table 1

Demographic Information of Participants (N=125)

Characteristic	N	%
Sex		
Male	51	40.8
Female	74	59.2
Age		
25-30	78	62.4
31-35	37	29.6
36-40	7	5.6
> 40	3	2.4
Qualification		
Certificate	3	2.4
Diploma	82	65.6
BA/B.ED	40	32
Teaching Experience		
0-5	23	18.4
6-10	49	39.2
11-15	38	30.4
> 15	15	12.0

Table 1 shows that most of the participant English teachers were females 74; 59.2%. It can also be observed in the table that majority 78; 62.4% of English teachers were in the age range of between 25 and 30 years. When the data for this study were collected 82 65.6% English teachers were diploma holders. Only 3 2.4% of public primary school English teachers who participated in this study were at certificate level. When the participant primary school English teachers' teaching experience is considered, 49 39.2% and 38; 32.4% of the participants had six to ten and 11-15 years of teaching English respectively.

Teachers' Perceptions of the Importance of Critical Components of Early Reading Instruction

The result of teachers' perceptions of the importance of foundational reading skills in teaching reading in early grades has been presented below.

Table 2
Teachers' Perception of Importance of Critical Components of Reading Instruction

N	Items (N=125)	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1	Phonemic awareness is one part of the five critical components in teaching students to read properly	30	24.0	70	56.0	18	14.4	7	5.6
2	Phonics is one of the five important components in teaching reading effectively for my students	34	27.2	66	52.8	15	12.0	10	8.0
3	Vocabulary is one of the five necessary components in effective teaching in reading for my students	24	19.2	71	56.8	19	15.2	11	8.8
4	Reading fluency is one of the five necessary strands of effective reading instruction for my students	30	24.0	64	51.2	25	20.0	6	4.8
5	Reading comprehension is one of the five important components of effective reading instruction	28	22.4	61	48.8	24	19.2	12	9.6

1= Strongly disagree 2 = Disagree 3= Agree 4= Strongly agree

As it has been presented in Table 2 above, the participant English teachers have positive perception about the importance of foundational reading skills in teaching early reading, the lowest 61; 48.8% for reading comprehension and the highest for vocabulary 71;56.8% of English teachers have shown agreement. This indicates that most of English teachers agree that these five critical components are essential strands in teaching reading in Ethiopian lower grades. When compared to other foundational reading skills, greater number of English teachers showed agreement with the importance of teaching phonemic awareness (90%) and vocabulary (86%), aggregate agreement.

Teachers' Instructional Practices of Teaching Reading

Examining the instructional practices of teaching reading was one of the objectives of this study. To this, teachers filled a questionnaire of 35 items adapted from Nguyen (2013) and six teachers of grades one to three were interviewed. The data have been analyzed and presented in the tables that follow.

Phonemic Awareness Instruction

The results of English teachers' instruction of teaching phonemic awareness in the early reading classrooms are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3
Teachers' Instruction of Teaching Phonemic Awareness

N	Items (N=125) o I...	<i>Strongly agree</i>		<i>Agree</i>		<i>Disagree</i>		<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1	teach my students to recognize individual sounds in words in small groups	9	7.2	56	44.8	51	40.8	9	7.2
2	teach my students to recognize common sounds in various words in small groups	13	10.4	52	41.6	51	40.8	9	7.2
3	teach my students to recognize words with odd sounds in a sequence in small groups regularly	11	8.8	67	53.6	40	32.0	7	5.6
4	teach my students to listen to separate sounds and combine those sounds to make new words in small groups	16	12.8	66	52.8	39	31.2	4	3.2
5	teach my students to separate words into their individual sounds in small groups periodically	15	12	61	48.8	39	31.2	10	8.0
6	teach my students to be able to add, delete, or substitute phonemes to make new words in small groups regularly	15	12	55	44.0	44	35.2	11	8.8
7	assess and record the growth of students in phonemic awareness development Periodically	10	8	52	41.6	56	44.8	7	5.6

The results in Table 3 show that most of the participant teachers report that they use phonemic awareness instruction strategies from 55; 44% to 67; 53.6%. However, the results have shown that teachers do not usually practice systematically assessing and recording students' learning progress 56; 44.8%.

Phonics Instruction

The results depicted in Table 5 below indicate English teachers' use of phonics instruction strategies in early grade reading classrooms.

Table 4
Teachers' Use of Phonics Teaching Strategies

N o	Items (N=125)	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
	<i>I....</i>								
1	review with my students the relationship of letters and sounds in small groups	13	10.4	47	37.6	58	46.4	7	5.6
2	apply letter-sound knowledge with my students in small groups during daily reading practice	12	9.6	50	40.0	55	44.0	8	6.4
3	teach phonics along with word study instruction to my students	16	12.8	48	38.4	48	38.4	13	10.4
4	teach my students to look at words and recognize regular patterns and similarities in small groups periodically	15	12.0	64	51.2	37	29.6	9	7.2
5	teach my students to be able to use word recognition strategies in small groups during our daily reading activities	16	12.8	59	47.2	43	34.4	7	5.6
6	teach my students consonants, short and long vowels, beginning and ending diagraphs, various blends, high frequency words, silent letters in words, and inflectional endings in words in small groups on a regular basis	13	10.4	60	48.0	44	35.2	8	6.4
7	assess and record the progress of students in phonics periodically	12	9.6	57	45.6	44	35.2	12	9.6

Phonics instruction is most effective in leading to reading success when it is started early and taught systematically. This has strong and consistent research bases (NRP, 2000). The findings in Table 4 also show that the participant teachers' instructional practices involved some of phonics instruction strategies. The participant English teachers 64; 51.2% said they teach to recognize regular patterns and similarities. Moreover, 60; 48% of

participant teachers said that they teach consonants, short and long vowels, beginning and ending diagraphs, various blends, high frequency words, silent letters in words, and inflectional endings in words in small groups. They also replied that they teach word recognition strategies 59; 47.2% and systematically assess and record students’ progress in phonics learning 57; 45.6%. However, participant English teachers did not practice reviewing letter-sound relationship 58; 46.4%; did not help students apply letter-sound knowledge in reading practice 55; 44%; equal proportion of English teachers 48; 38.4% reported that they teach and do not teach phonics in combination with word study instruction respectively.

Vocabulary Instruction

The results depicted in the Table 5 below indicate English teachers’ use vocabulary instruction strategies in early grade reading classrooms.

Table 5
Teachers’ Use of Vocabulary Instruction Strategies

No	Items (N=125) I...	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1	teach and engaging my students in word learning and meaning of words in small groups on a daily basis	22	17.6	62	49.6	31	24.8	10	8.0
2	read to my students after the introduction of new words in the stories in small groups during my daily reading instructional practice	14	11.2	70	56.0	31	24.8	10	8.0
3	teach my students to use words that they have learned in small groups on a regular basis	12	9.6	70	56.0	36	28.8	7	5.6
4	use various active word walls for different subjects for my students to be engaged in learning and reviewing old and new words periodically	20	16.0	60	48.0	41	32.8	4	3.2
5	teach my students various word-attacking strategies for them to become independent word learners	16	12.8	72	57.6	35	28.0	2	1.6
6	teach my students word roots, prefixes, suffixes, word families, letters and words patterns in small groups on a daily basis	22	17.6	61	48.8	38	30.4	4	3.2
7	assess and record the progress of students in vocabulary acquisition on a regular basis	13	10.4	63	50.4	42	33.6	7	5.6

As presented in the Table 5, participant teachers 60; 48% to 72, 57.6% practice vocabulary instruction strategies. When compared to other vocabulary instruction strategies, greater number of participant teachers 72, 57.6% said they teach various word-attack strategies followed by 70; 56% of teachers said to practice reading to students after introducing new words in a story and making students use the words they have learnt.

Fluency Instruction

The results in Table 6 present English teachers’ practices of fluency instruction in the early grade reading classrooms.

Table 6
Teachers’ Practices of Teaching Fluency

N o	Items (N=125)	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1	spend at least 15-20 minutes daily to teach or model fluent reading to my students	14	11.2	64	51.2	39	31.2	8	6.4
2	read to all of my students daily in both whole and small groups	9	7.2	60	48.0	45	36.0	11	8.8
3	encourage repeated readings to my students by reading and rereading the same text more than twice on a regular basis	10	8.0	55	44.0	45	36.0	15	12.0
4	support my students in fluency by having them read with other fluent readers in the class on a regularly basis in small groups	12	9.6	52	41.6	46	36.8	15	12.0
5	make certain that my students read texts at their independent reading levels on a daily basis	12	9.6	56	44.8	48	38.4	9	7.2
6	require my students to use their listening skills in the classroom to enhance their skills in loud reading on a regular basis	11	8.8	58	46.4	48	38.4	8	6.4
7	assess and record the progress of students in reading fluency periodically	14	11.2	48	38.4	55	44.0	8	6.4

As has been displayed in the Table above, English teachers often use the strategies appropriate for children’s reading fluency practice, which in turn leads to effective reading comprehension. Participant English teachers 52; 41.6 % to 64; 51.2% said they practice different fluency instructional strategies. However, 55; 44% of participant teachers said they did not often systematically assess and record students’ progress of reading fluency development.

Teaching Text Comprehension

Table 7 brings the results of English teachers’ instruction of text comprehension strategies in the early reading classrooms.

Table 7
Teachers’ Instruction of Text Comprehension Strategies

N	Items (N=125)	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1	build background knowledge for my students by telling and discussing with them about the topics to be read prior to actual daily readings	14	11.2	56	44.8	49	39.2	6	4.8
2	use “connection to read-aloud” to help my students create mental images while they are listening to my daily readings	13	10.4	61	48.8	44	35.2	7	5.6
3	use “compare and contrast” to help my students to make connections of new things to be learned from their daily readings to what they already know	15	12.0	61	48.8	41	32.8	8	6.4
4	teach my students to make associations between themselves and the settings, authors, illustrators, characters, and various events in their daily readings in small group	14	11.2	58	46.4	47	37.6	6	4.8
5	engage in brief discussions and questions with answers throughout the daily readings with both whole and small groups	17	13.6	66	52.8	39	31.2	3	2.4
6	teach my students on how to summarize their understanding of texts in their daily readings by both oral presentations to whole and small groups within the class	15	12.0	70	56.0	36	28.8	4	3.2
7	assess and record the growth in reading comprehension of my students on a regular basis	12	9.6	58	46.4	48	38.4	7	5.6

The findings in Table 7 indicate that participant teachers said they teach comprehension strategies 58; 46.4% to 70; 56 %. Compared to the other comprehension strategies, teachers said they practiced summarizing understanding of texts better 70, 56% followed by engaging students in discussions and questions 66; 52. 8%.

Discussion

The results have been discussed in details on the basis of each of critical components of early grade reading instruction.

Importance of Essential Components

The participant teachers are aware of the importance of five critical components of early grade reading instruction (Table 2). However, their awareness was not manifested in their instructional practices.

Phonemic Awareness

It has been presented in Table 3 that teachers said they use some of the phonemic awareness instruction strategies. However, the results show that teachers did not practice some of the phonemic awareness instruction strategies such as phonemic identity and systematically assessing and recording students' learning progress. Moreover, teachers' scores on knowledge measure reveal that English teachers have knowledge gap on early grade reading instruction, phonemic awareness. Teachers' responses in the interview also confirm that they lack adequate knowledge of teaching phonemic awareness. For instance, **T5** had to say "I do not have enough understanding; I only know things like making and using flash cards". This finding confirms the results of Belilew (2016).

Phonics

The teachers' instructional practices of teaching phonics are limited to certain instructional strategies (Table 4), and there is lack of adequate understanding of instructional process. Teachers' responses in the interview also show that their instructional practice in this regard is limited. For example, **T6** replied as, "I take this question as a comment; I think it is better to teach these things instead of the other activities which are over-repeated in the students' textbooks." This result is in line with the findings of the previous studies that lower grades English teachers lack adequate understanding of purposes, approaches and procedures of teaching reading in lower grades (Eba, 2014; Chanyalew & Abiy, 2015).

Vocabulary

As can be noted in the results presented in Table 5, teachers' practices of using vocabulary teaching strategies looks good. However, when teachers' scores in knowledge assessment test and their responses in the interviews are considered, their knowledge of teaching early reading, vocabulary, is deficient. **T4** responded as, "I usually write the words first and tell their meanings in Amharic or Sidama language." English teachers may simply write words and tell their meanings in local languages. However, some other English teachers use pictures and portable real objects in the classroom.

Fluency

Participant English teachers replied that they practice fluency instruction strategies; however, (55, 44%) of participant teachers said they did

not systematically assess and record students' progress of reading fluency development. Teachers' deficient knowledge of fluency instruction and their responses in the interview also reveal the fact that many different fluency instruction strategies are not used by English teachers. **T5**, for example, said, "I usually make students practice by reading repeatedly." Fluency instruction, of course, involves but not limited to repeated reading.

Another participant teacher (**T2**) also had to say, "When a story is read, the sentence itself gives clue whether it is declarative or interrogative. Aren't the children so early? I read first and make them read after me; in this I help them learn to read. In fact, as teachers, we do not use the techniques that help us teach and assess children's reading fluency. We have a serious inadequacy in this regard." Eba (2014) also reports that English teachers lack adequate knowledge of the strategies and techniques of reading instruction in Ethiopian early grades.

Comprehension

Although the participant English teachers responded in the questionnaire that they practice different reading comprehension strategies, it has been revealed in the interview that their knowledge of early reading instruction in general and teaching comprehension in particular is inadequate. For instance, **T3** had to say, "I read first and translate it into Amharic. Then they understand; they also try to answer some questions." This statement of the respondent teacher shows that teachers often read a text, translate it into Amharic, a local language that most Ethiopians in the urban areas commonly understand. There is somehow questioning after students are read to. However, techniques such as activating and building background knowledge, pre-teaching key vocabulary in the story, relating the story to students' experiences, etc. were raised by none of the interviewees. These findings are in line with the reports of (Chanyalew & Abiy2015; Eba, 2014; Belilew, 2016). Based on the results and the discussion of data gathered in different ways- knowledge test, interview and questionnaire, some conclusions have been drawn.

Conclusions

On the basis of the findings presented and discussed, some important conclusions have been reached. Though participant English teachers have positive perceptions about the importance of five critical components of early grade reading instruction and reported that they practice most of early literacy instruction strategies, responses in the interview revealed that teachers have serious knowledge limitation and their instructional practices are limited to certain instructional strategies.

Compared to the other essential components of early grade reading instruction, participant English teachers had more serious limitations with practice of phonics instruction. Particularly, English teachers did not practice reviewing letter-sound relationship; did not help students apply letter-sound knowledge in reading practice and did not teach phonics integrated with word

study instruction. Moreover, participant English teachers did not systematically assess and record students' progress of learning to read.

Recommendations

From the conclusions reached, some recommendations have been suggested. Teacher preparation curriculum ought to be revised in a way that can help the colleges produce knowledgeable and skillful Ethiopian lower grades English teachers. The ongoing education sector reforms should seriously make sure that there is clear alignment between primary English education and teacher preparation curricula. Practical learning should get due attention in teacher preparation process, especially literacy instruction strategies training. English teachers' continuous professional development in primary schools should consider focused, systematic, explicit and hands-on trainings on early reading instruction strategies. Moreover, primary English teachers ought to be trained on systematic assessment and recording students' progress of learning to read. In addition to training English teachers of primary schools on literacy instruction strategies, awareness of literacy leadership and literacy supervision team should be raised, so that they can provide technically sound support to literacy teachers. Though this study has attempted to show Ethiopian English teachers' perceptions of critical components of early grade reading instruction and their instructional practices, further related studies with wider scope, larger sample size and diverse contexts may lead to better description of the situation.

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