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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE EFFECT OF TEACHING EARLY GRADE READING COMPONENTS ON FIRST GRADERS LETTER WORD READING COMPETENCY: GISH ABAY GENERAL PRIMARY SCHOOL, WEST GOJJAM, ETHIOPIA

***Simachew Gashaye and Workineh Desalew**

Department of English Language and Literature, Debre Markos University, Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to investigate the effect of teaching early grade reading components on first graders' letter word reading competency. For this study, quasi-experimental research design was employed. Participants of the study were selected using group identification test and simple random sampling technique from the selected primary school. Pretest was administered to 50 students to check whether participants of the study were found at equal performance in letter word reading competency or not. The results of the pre-test revealed that all the participants of the study were found at equal performance. Hence, 25 students were assigned in the experimental group, and the other 25 students were assigned in the control group. Data were collected with pre and posttests, and analyzed using T- test. After the intervention, the independent T- test results from the post-test indicated that the performance of the students in the experimental group was found to be statistically significant in all early grade-reading components. However, the result of paired T- test in the control group indicates that there was no a statistically significant difference between the pre and post test. Therefore, teaching early grade reading components with explicit instruction enable first graders to improve their letter word-reading competency.

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INTRODUCTION

To bring about economic, human, social and cultural transformation, students should practice reading starting from early grade level (Pressley, 2000). According to Yeat (2010), the ability to read with fluency and accuracy might be considered as a definition for literate. This means that reading provides effective and adequate ways of learning language. Therefore, teaching reading, like other skills, needs carefully selected activities, methods and procedures at all levels of the education system. More importantly, the teaching of reading at primary level is the level where foundation is established (Pressley, 2000). In order for students to be efficient in reading, early grade reading components must be taught starting for grade one because the major language skill that enables learners to grasp ideas, facts concepts and thoughts is reading (Bright, McGregor, 1972). Some children who learn how to read without early grade reading components instruction perform well. However, most do not learn how to read well.

****Corresponding author:*** **Simachew Gashaye,**
Department of English Language and Literature, Debre Markos University, Ethiopia.

Those who do learn to read well probably practice the component skills explicitly alone or with family or friends (Snow et al., 1998). According to Adams (1990), the component of early grade reading should be taught starting from simple to difficult and complex skills slowly. One of the best and strongest predictor for first grades reading success is letter name knowledge of English alphabet (Adams, 1990). Children with fast and accurate recognition of letters' name will comparatively have easier time learning about letter sound and word spelling than children who do not know the letter name of English alphabet. Phonemic awareness is the other component which is the ability to hear and manipulate the individual sounds in spoken words. Phonemic awareness instruction is more effective when it is combined with alphabetic recognition. Bradley and Bryant (1983) clearly established the benefit of making explicit connections between sound segments and letter when teaching phonemic awareness. Those children who received instruction in sound segmentation score significant achievement in reading than the control group. Phonics is also another early grade-reading component that enables the student to know the sounds of English alphabetic letters. When young children write spelling, they often use letter names as a source of information about letter sound (Read, 1971).

Wagner (1998) conducted experimental study on learning letter names and sounds, effect of instructional letter type, and phonological processing skill. The study revealed that children receiving letter name and sound instruction were most likely to learn the sound of letters whose names include cues to their sounds. The other essential component that children should learn is word reading fluency. As the National Reading Panel (2000) stated that fluent readers read written material by identifying words accuracy and automatically without pausing to analyze letters name and sounds. Simmons (2001) suggest that reading familiar words fluently represents the automatic use of early literacy skills that we have discussed in alphabetic knowledge, phonemic awareness and sound-letter matching, and can be used to predict proficiency in letter reading skills.
The last early grade-reading component is reading comprehension. It is the end of learning to read and necessarily involves letter name knowledge, letter sound knowledge, phonemic awareness and word reading fluency (Algozzine 2009). This study, therefore, arose from the researchers' inspiration to investigate the effect of teaching early grade reading components on first - graders' letter- word reading competency in the Ethiopian context.

Statement of the Problem: To gain benefits from learning English, Ethiopia is in the way of giving English as one major subject starting from grade one to higher education level, and it is used it as a medium of instruction from secondary schools though higher education level (Ethiopian Ministry of Education, MOE, 2009). Teaching reading along with other language skills has received better attention in the Ethiopian language teaching system. This starts from early grade to higher education level to promote the learners academic achievement and their future carriers. However, the students' letter word reading fluency of lower grade levels tends to be low. In the study of Early Grade Reading Assessment(EGRA, 2010), children's letter sound fluency, letter naming knowledge phonemic awareness, familiar and unfamiliar word reading fluency and reading comprehension were assessed, and the overall Grade 1-4 children's performance was below the standard set by the MOE. The average score is well below what is expected from students' minimum learning competency of each grade level. The ability to read and understand a written text is the most fundamental skill a child should learn. EGRA (2010) indicates that learning to read early with sufficient speed and comprehension is essential for their overall academic success. EGRA adds that children who do not learn to read in the first few grades are more likely to repeat and eventually dropout or will fail behind others for the rest of their lives.

However, as EGRA (2010) identified, the current textbook is not interesting and it does not motivate learners to be effective in language learning. It is designed containing the most important early grade reading components with explicit instruction. The reading components for lower grades are presented in an implicit way. Ibid (2010) also states that the newly published English textbook for grade one is complex. To the best knowledge of the researchers, when children are asked to read, name letters, sound out words and blend sounds, they are unsuccessful to do what they are ordered to read. This appears to be too late to suggest interventions in the quality of reading instruction. EGRA (2010) suggested that children need clear instructions and practices to use those skills to accomplish tasks with text. There are a number of global researches such as Bradley and Bryant (1983), Carrol (2004) and Holewinski (2007) who conducted on the effect of teaching each early grade reading components on first graders letter- word reading abilities. The purposes of the studies were to determine the effect of explicit instruction to improve reading skills of first graders. Although there are global research related to the present study, the above mentioned researchers did not try to see the effect of teaching all the five early grade components together rather they tried to see their effects separately. Moreover, the context and the methodology employed make this study different from those studies. Therefore, this study was conducted to examine the effect of teaching early grade reading components on first graders letter word reading competency at Gish Abay General Primary school, West Gojjam, Ethiopia.

Hypothesis

The Null Hypothesis (HO): There is no statistically significant difference in the letter word reading competence mean scores between the experimental and control group after the intervention

The Alternative Hypothesis

There is statistically significant difference in the letter word-reading competency mean scores between first graders who learn with early grade reading components and those who learn without such components.

METHODOLOGY

The main objective of this study was to investigate the effect of teaching early grade-reading components on first graders letter word reading competency. The study employed quasi-experimental research designed.

Participants of the Study: The participants of the study were Grade One students selected from Gish Abay General Primary School, West Gojam Zone, Amhara Regional State, Ethiopia. 50 students were selected from two sections purposively as their score was similar in the group identification test. All the selected participants were between the age of 7-8 years, and they were almost similar in their socio-economic and cultural background. These students were assigned in two sections (25 students in each group) as experimental and control groups using lottery method of random sampling technique.

Data Collection Instrument: Pre-test and post-test were used as the data-gathering instruments. Similar subjective oral tests were used to collect data from both the experimental and the control group participants about their letter word reading before and after the treatment. Here, the students were assessed using Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA, 2010) toolkit. The test was prepared based on the five early grade components to determine students' early grade reading components achievement. Pre-test was given before the treatment was done to make sure whether participants of the experimental and control groups were at the same level in their letter word reading abilities or not; whereas, the post-test was administered to examine the students' change on early grade reading components performance. In order to see whether there was a change in their letter word reading abilities of students due to treatment, a post - test was given to both the experimental and control group participants.

Table 1. The Independent t- test mean scores for experimental and the control Groups' pretests results

	Group	N	M	SD	Df	T	Sig (2 tailed)	Levine's test for equality of variance	
								F	Sig
Pretest Result	Contr.	25	45.4	2.00	48	1.45	0.153	2.037	0.160
	Exp.	25	46.4	2.8					

T-Table or critical valve 2.000 at 0.05 level of significant

Table 2. Independent t-test mean scores for the Experimental and the Control groups' post-test results

Scores	Group	N	M	SD	Df	t	Sig (2 tailed)	Levine's test for equality of variance	
								F	Sig
Post test	Con.	25	47.08	3.58	48	61.23	.000	11.544	.001
Results	Exp.	25	136.96	6.41					

T-Table 2.00 at 0.05 level of significance

Table 3. The pre and post test mean scores of the control group

Paired 1		N	M	SD	T	Df	Sig(2 tailed)
	Pre		46.4	4.09	-1.464	24	0.156
	Post	25	47.08	3.58			

The value of t-Table is 2.00 at 0.05 level of significance

Table 4. The letter word reading competency of the experimental group's pre and post test mean score

aired 1		N	M	SD	T	Df	Sig (2 tailed)
	Pre	25	47.08	4.122	-56.795	24	.000
	Post		136.96	6.406			

T-Table= 2.00 at 0.05 level of significance.

The pre and post test items were constructed based on the principles of EGRA- 2010 toolkit. The test items were open-ended and were translated to the students' mother tongue, Amharic language to make them clear for the participants of the study.

Material Preparation and Treatment Procedures: During the teaching material development for the experimental group, an attempt was made to follow the underlining principles of EGRA (2010) which is a leveled sheet designed to enable the researchers to determine early graders' letter- knowledge, phonemic awareness, phonics, early word reading fluency and reading comprehension. Accordingly, the material was designed to teach the early grade reading components explicitly. In preparing the material, a number of exercises and activities were adapted and adopted from different books like EGRA (2010), the newly drafted Grade One English language textbook and EFL Teachers training manual Almaz Barake, et al., (2013). The teaching material for the control group was not prepared because the already prepared English textbook for first graders was used to teach them. That is the group was taught in a conventional way through the already published English textbook. To avoid personal bias, the treatment was given by a Grade four English language teacher who has received training for three days on how to teach the five reading components. The treatment was conducted for seven consecutive weeks, and the components were taught sequentially from simple to complex (Letter naming →Letter sound→ Phonemic awareness →Word reading fluency → Reading comprehension).

Data Collection Procedures: To gather data from both experimental and control group, first pre-test was administered containing the five early grade reading components. The purpose of the pre-test was to see whether there is statistically significant mean score difference between the letter- word reading competence of the study group and control group before the intervention. Second, the post-test was administered immediately after the experimental and control group of early graders were given the treatment.

Method of Data Analysis: The data collected through pre and post-tests were analyzed quantitatively using descriptive statistics namely mean and with inferential statistics mainly with independent sample t- test and paired sample t- test. The independent sample t- test was employed to compare the mean score of the experimental and control group participants in the pretest and posttest, whereas the paired sample t- test was used to compare the mean score of both the experimental and control groups' performance in the pre and post-tests.

Data Analysis and Discussion of Results

Analysis of the Experimental and the Control Groups' Pre-test Results: The following table presents the data obtained from the pretest results. As can be seen from Table 1 above, the mean scores of the control and the study groups were found to be similar, 45.4 and 46.4, respectively. However, we cannot say that there was significant difference between the reading performances of the two groups by simply looking at their mean scores. In order to know whether this difference is significant or not, an independent samples t-test is sought. As shown in Table 1, the t-calculated of the pretest was found less than the value of t-table with 48 degree of freedom (t-calculated =1.454 t-table =2.000, DF = 48). Accordingly, one can conclude that there is no statistically significant difference between the letter word-reading competency of the experimental group and the control group. In addition to this, the p-value is greater than the assumption 0.05 (p=0.153> 0.05), and this shows that there is no difference between the two groups being compared. This means there was no statistically significant difference in the letter word reading competency of the experimental and the control groups' pretest.

Analysis of the Experimental and the Control Groups' Post Test Mean Scores: In order to check whether there is statistically significant change or not in the intervention, an independent sample t- test was calculated. The following table presents the data obtained from the post-test results of the control and experimental groups. As indicated in Table 2 above, the critical t-value (df=48) at 0.05 level of significance is 2.00, and the calculated t-value was found to be 61.23. When the calculated t-value is less than the critical Table value t, then there is no significant difference between the two means. However, the observed value in Table 2, the calculated t-value is greater than the critical t-value (61.23>2.00 at (df) =48) and it shows that there is significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups. Similarly, if the p-value is less than 0.05 (the standard limits of significance), it can be said there is significant difference between the average scores of the groups. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected and the alternative hypothesis was accepted because students who have learnt the reading components performed better than the group that has not received treatment or the p- value is less than 0.05 (0.000<0.05) or 61.23>2.00 at (df) =48. From this, one can conclude that intervention is essential for early graders for fostering their letter word-reading competency

Analysis of the Control Group's Pre and Post Tests Results on Letter

Word Reading Competency: The paired sample statistics in Table 3 below shows the pre and post-tests mean score differences of the control group. The comparison was made to verify the hypothesis that states there is no statistically significant mean score difference in the pre and post tests of the participants who learnt reading without early grade reading components. In the above Table, the calculated Table value of t is -1.464 and the critical Table value of t (df=24) at 0.05 level of significance is 2.00. To say there is a significance difference on the mean scores of students' letter-word reading competency of the control group, the calculated t-value should be greater than the critical Table value of t. Hence, the calculated t-value (-1.46) is less than the critical Table value (2.00). Therefore, it is insignificant. Besides, the p-value (0.156) is greater than the standard level of significance (0.05). Therefore, the proposed null hypothesis is rejected.

Analysis of the Experimental Group's mean score comparisons on

Letter-Word Reading Competency: This analysis is made for the comparison of the experimental group in their pre and post test scores after the experiment using t-test especially paired t-test analysis to verify the hypothesis stated. The following Table 4 shows the mean score of the experimental group. From this analysis, the critical t-value (df =24) at 0.05 level of significance is 2.00 and the calculated Table value of t was found to be -56.795. When the calculated t-value is greater than the critical Table value of t, there is significant difference between the two mean scores. Here, the observed t-value (-56.795) is greater than the critical t-value showing significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group's in the pre and post-tests. Likewise, the p-value (0.000) is less than 0.05 showing that there was statistical difference between the mean scores of the experimental group in the pre and posttest. Therefore, from this analysis it is possible to conclude that early grade reading components intervention on early graders brought progress in the students' letter-word reading competency.

Hypothesis Testing: As stated above, this study had two hypotheses that were proposed as objectives of the study. The null hypotheses (Ho) states, there is no statistically significant difference in the letter word reading competence mean scores between first graders who learn with early grade reading components and those who learn without such components. The alternative hypotheses (Ha), on the other hand, states there is statistically significant difference in the letter-word reading competence mean scores between first graders who learn with early grade reading components and those who learn without such components. According to the result obtained from independent t-test and paired sample t-test, the t-value and p-value (as shown in Tables 2 and 3 above), there is a statistically significant difference of mean score between the control group and the experimental group in the post-test. The experimental group performed significantly higher than the control group, and this in turn declares the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is accepted (p<0.05).

Discussion of the findings

The findings of the study were discussed in relation to the theoretical framework as follows. One of the objectives of this study was to see the effect of teaching early grade reading components on first graders letter word reading competency. The findings in relation to this objective, as indicated in Tables 2 and 3 or the independent sample T-test comparison of experimental group and control group post-test results showed that there was statically significance change of mean score difference between the two groups after the intervention made. Therefore, the experimental group scored better result than the control group of students in each early grade reading components. According to Snow et al., (1998) some children who learn how to read without early reading components instruction perform well. However, most do not learn how to read well. Those who do learn to read well probably practice the component skills explicitly alone or with family or friends. Furthermore, they add that children need explicit instruction and practice to use those skills to accomplish the expected tasks. For the control group, the results of analysis obtained from paired sample T-test in Table 3 shows that there is no significance difference in the pre and post test mean scores. Because the students did not learn the five early grades, reading components arranged from simple to complex with clear instructions and activities. According to Adams 1990, the component skills of early grade reading for the students should be taught starting with easy, simple skills and then slowly introducing more difficult and complex skills. Here, we can understand that if students have letter name and letter sound knowledge, they can improve their phonemic awareness. Regarding this. Bradley and Bryant (1983) clearly established the benefit of making explicit connections between sound segments and letter when teaching phonemic awareness. The experimental group result analysis of paired sample T-test in Table 4 shows that there is significance difference between the pre and post-test mean scores. This is because. Before the post-test, the students had been taking treatment using the material which contains the five early grade reading components. The students scored better results in each early grade reading components in the post-test. This indicates that the overall reading competency of the students in the experimental group performed better. Bachman (1991) in his research, he identified that the combination of the five early grade reading components has positive effect on students' letter word reading competence. He also concluded that implicit instructions in the five early grade components alone did not significantly

improve the overall letter word-reading abilities of children. Generally, based on the findings to enable first graders' to have better letter word reading competency the five early grade reading components are needed.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions are made.

- Teaching early grade reading components explicitly has significant effect on the improvement of students' letter word-reading abilities. Because the intervention results from the post-tests indicated that the performance of the students in the experimental group scored better than the control group in all early grade-reading components.
- Teaching early grade reading components explicitly enables first graders' to have better letter word-reading competency
- The students of the experimental group were more interactive during the treatment than the control group.

Recommendation

According to the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made.

- The importance of explicitly teaching early grade components in school and out of the school should be emphasized and teachers and parents should work together to improve students' letter word reading ability.
- Teachers should be given training how to employ explicit teaching of the five early grade reading components.
- Syllabus designers should include early grade reading components explicitly with simple and clear instructions.

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