

Impediments in Teaching Kiswahili Phonemic Awareness and Alphabet Knowledge in Grade One in Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

Research has consistently pointed out the important role played by phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge in development of reading skills among pupils. Phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge are good predictors in reading competencies in early grades and higher levels of primary education. This study aims at exploring the constraints facing teaching of Kiswahili phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge in grade one. The study was qualitative in nature in which phenomenology design was employed. The purposive sampling technique was used to recruit ten grade one teachers and ten head teachers from ten public primary schools in Chemba district. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The collected data from teachers and head teachers were thematically analyzed. The research findings indicated that there were variations of the views among teachers and head teachers on the impediments in teaching phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge in grade one. The prominent mentioned challenges were truancy, mother tongue effect, parents' limited knowledge. It was recommended that teachers should collaboratively work with parents; revisiting of language policies to incorporate mother tongue in early grades is crucial; and attendance to PPE should be taken into account by the educational stakeholders.

Keywords: Phonemic awareness, alphabet Knowledge, reading skills, early grade, impediments

INTRODUCTION

Reading skills in early grades have drawn significant attention worldwide due to their vital role in helping pupils learn and develop academically. For early grade pupils to succeed academically in schools, they need to be able to read and write. In this regard, reading skills have significant contributions in pupils' learning in schools. Guzmán et al (2021) propose that reading skills among early grade pupils are crucial for their future success and persistence in schools and beyond. Moreover, reading skills in early grades enable pupils to develop their critical thinking abilities, concentration, increase their vocabularies and become independent readers (Dessemontet et al., 2022; Mwoma, 2017). On the basis of these benefits of reading skills, it would be argued that pupils should be supported to develop reading skills for their future success in schools and life in general. Despite the fact that reading skills help pupils learn and succeed in schools, a reasonable number of pupils experience long-term reading difficulties, which have detrimental impact on their academic progress (Milankov et al., 2021). In addition, Melesse and Enyew (2020) add that pupils who cannot read throughout grade one tends to lag behind in reading and performance in other subjects. As a result, some pupils may be at risk of completing primary education with limited reading skills. In the context of this study, reading skills means ability to decode and understand words in written text.

However, early grade pupils, must master two crucial reading skills, such as phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge, in order to develop reading abilities (Sucena et al., 2021). In this context, alphabet knowledge refers to the ability of grade one pupils to name letters and identify the sounds representing the letters while phonemic awareness means the ability to identify sounds in spoken words (Goldstein et al., 2016). In fact, phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge are believed to be closely related and crucial for pupils to be able to read a written text (Goldstein et al., 2016). Pupils with low phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge develop reading difficulties in grade one as well in later in higher classes (Piasta, 2014). It has been acknowledged that for successful development of reading skills among pupils, phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge should be taught together (Njiru & Karuri, 2022; Pfof et al., 2019; Ying & Cheng, 2020). Therefore, grade one teachers should make sure they integrate

phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge in teaching for improvement of reading skills among grade one pupils. This paper seeks to establish challenges that teacher of early grade pupils in Tanzania encounter in the promotion and development of reading skills. The paper argues that the support of early grade reading skills should not be left to the schools and early grade teachers only; it should also be the responsibility of the whole society – parents, community members and the government.

Rationale for the Research

Several educational issues in Tanzania justified the need for this research. First, for decades, educational policies and practices in Tanzania has concentrated mainly on formal school settings. Home and community environments, which are equally crucial for the children to grow and develop physically, cognitively, socially and culturally, have been largely neglected. As a result, this negligence marginalizes the foundations of children's cognitive development (Krishnan & Johnson, 2014). Secondly, there is a growing body of evidence globally indicating that family reading of books and stories with babies and children is important for language and literacy development (Shen & Del Tufo, 2022; Ledger & Merga, 2018) but this practice is not culturally promoted or institutionally supported in many developing countries (Heppt et al., 2022; Barone et al., 2021). Thirdly, in Tanzania, scholars have acknowledged the limitations of language policy, which encourages the use of Kiswahili in early reading, while children come to school knowing only their mother tongue. This makes it too difficult for them to make sense of the letters in a different language and hence become demotivated to learn (Kadau, 2022). Fourthly, in most schools, and specifically in early grade classrooms, textbooks and reading materials are in short supply and those available are often of poor quality (Ndijuye & Beatus, 2022; Mramboa & Ligembe, 2022). Although little is currently known about teaching Kiswahili phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge in grade one in Tanzania context, it makes sense to explore challenges that might have some implications to policy and practices.

The Research Question

This study is aimed at establishing the challenges facing teachers in teaching phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge in grade one in Tanzania. In this regard, the study focused on the following question:

1. What are the barriers facing teachers in teaching phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge in grade one?

Review of Related Literature

Phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge for grade one pupils has been taken into account in various countries for the purpose of improving reading skills. However, despite the efforts that have been made by countries to ensure effective teaching of phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge, a number of challenges have been observed from various countries. In the United States of America (USA) for example, early grade teachers have been struggling to ensure their pupils are developing reading skills. However, a number of challenges have been observed that affect effective teaching of reading skills in the USA. These challenges are such as inadequate knowledge of teaching reading skills among teachers, insufficient reading materials and deficiency of pre-reading skills among grade one pupils (Lu, 2022). As a result, early grade learners are struggling to develop reading competencies.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, teaching of reading skills has been faced with a number of challenges which affect effective development of reading skills among pupils. For instance, in South Africa, despite the governments' efforts to support early grade education in terms of increasing access, training of teachers and improving of infrastructure, teachers still struggle to help pupils due to a number of challenges they encounter (Dagada, 2022). The author cited inadequate teaching and learning resources, inadequate community and school administration support, and overcrowded classrooms as some of the obstacles preventing teachers from developing reading skills among foundation phase pupils. In Ethiopia, Desta (2020), and Haile and Mendisu (2023) identified a number of obstacles that affect teaching of reading skills in early grades including: inadequate content and pedagogical knowledge of reading among early grade teachers; a lack of teacher training (both pre- and in-services training on reading); and a lack of an enabling literacy-rich environment. The authors recommended training for teachers on both content

and pedagogical skills for phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge and provision of enough reading resources in schools. In Kenya, like other Sub-Saharan African countries, a study by Marima et al. (2016) found that early grade teachers had limited knowledge and skills for teaching reading skills. Thus, it was suggested that teachers be involved in training about a variety of pedagogical approaches for teaching reading skills in early grades. In Tanzania, reading skills among pupils is currently a subject of focus in early grade classes. The government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have taken a number of initiatives to ensure that early grade pupils are adequately developing reading skills. Besides, the educational training policy and its curriculum have put much emphasis on teaching reading skills, Kiswahili phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge in particular (United Republic of Tanzania, 2014, 2019). In addition, various programmes have been established by international organs to improve reading skills in early grades such as Literacy and Numeracy Educational Support (LANES), Tusome pamoja, Education Quality Improvement Programme in Tanzania (EQUIP-T) among others (Oxford Policy management Ltd, 2019; United Republic of Tanzania, 2018; United States Agency for International Development, 2021). All the aforementioned programmes have focused on improving reading skills among early grade pupils. Despite these efforts, early grade pupils are still inadequately developing reading skills (Edward et al., 2022; Mramboa & Ligembe, 2022; Ndjuyue, 2023). Scholars (see for example Anney et al., 2016; Mramboa & Ligembe, 2022; Tandika & Kumburu, 2018), have consistently established the challenges of teaching reading skills in general little is empirically known about the impediments of teaching Kiswahili phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge.

Theoretical Framework

The study was informed by ecological system theory developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner in 1970s (Ettetal & Mahoney, 2017; Panopoulos & Drossinou-Korea, 2020). According to the ecological system theory, the environment around pupils has an impact on their learning (Popa et al., 2020). On this, Bronfenbrenner postulated four interconnected contexts such as micro-system, meso-system, exo-system and macro-system that may have an impact on pupils' learning and development (Panopoulos & Drossinou-Korea, 2020). Micro-system is an immediate pupils' home environment such

as parents, siblings and schools and this has direct influence on the pupils' learning (Popa et al., 2020). Furthermore, meso-system is the second environment where the pupil interacts with other people such as teachers, peers and the immediate community, and this interaction has influence on a pupil's learning and development (Ettekal & Mahoney, 2017). In addition, exo-system involves informal or formal environments such as parent's work place, parent's friends, or neighborhood. These may influence pupils' learning of reading skills (Panopoulos & Drossinou-Korea, 2020). Macro-system which is a wider environment and relates to the pupils' societal culture may have an impact on how well they learn to read (Ettekal & Mahoney, 2017; Panopoulos & Drossinou-Korea, 2020; Popa et al., 2020). On these grounds, the ecological system theory served as a useful framework for this study because these environments may in one way or another create conditions to constrain teachers from helping pupils develop their Kiswahili phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge. That is to say, for effective support of pupils to develop reading skills, teachers should have effective collaboration with parents, community and other educational stakeholders. This implies that all crucial elements should be prioritized in order to adequately facilitate the development of Kiswahili phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge among grade one pupils.

Methodology

Research Approach and Design

This study was informed by a qualitative approach. The qualitative approach was seen to be relevant to this study because it emphasizes how participants interpret and make sense of their experiences to understand a phenomenon in a social context (Mohajan, 2018). In that sense, a qualitative approach was necessary to obtain information from grade one teachers and head teachers themselves on the barriers in teaching phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge in grade one. In a similar way, to collect data from teachers and head teachers, a descriptive phenomenology design was utilized. The descriptive phenomenology design concerns about detailed description of participants' lived experiences while researcher's pre-conceived views are set aside (Qutoshi, 2018). In this study, the descriptive phenomenology design was used to understand and describe teachers and head teachers' views on the

barriers to effective teaching of phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge in grade one.

Research Area, Sample Selection and Sample Size

The study was carried out in Chemba district. Chemba district is among the seven districts that make up Dodoma region. The district is composed of 26 wards with 107 primary schools (Chemba District Council, 2017); 10 public primary schools were purposively sampled to participate in this study. The selection of the 10 primary schools were based on their primary school leaving examination results and literacy performance in Literacy and Numeracy skills among children aged 9-13, which were relatively lower than other primary schools (National Examination Council of Tanzania [NECTA], 2017; UWEZO, 2017). The study involved 10 grade one teachers and 10 head teachers (HTs) which make up a total of 20 participants from the sampled primary schools. Participants were purposively selected based on their experiences in teaching grade one and their affiliation with the study's participating primary schools. In this stance, teachers were selected to participate in this study because they are the ones who were teaching reading skills grade one classrooms. They were expected to have rich information about the barriers they were encountering in teaching phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge in grade one. On the other hand, HTs were involved in this study because they are the quality assurers, with a role to supervise teaching and learning processes at the school level. In this regard, HTs were expected to have rich information on the barriers facing teachers in teaching phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge in grade one.

Data Collection Procedures

The study employed a semi-structured interview to collect data from the participants. The semi-structured interview was used because it is flexible as a researcher has opportunities to come up with additional questions to ask (apart from the planned questions) based on the conversation with the participants (Elhami & Khoshnevisan, 2022). Face to face interviews with teachers were conducted after class hours to avoid interference with classroom schedules. Specifically, teachers were asked about the barriers they encounter while teaching phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge in grade one in the classroom. HT's face to face interviews were done during

the class hours at their convenient time. HTs were asked about barriers encountered by their teachers in teaching phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge. In this study, each interview session took approximately 40 to 60 minutes for each participant and the collected data were recorded in the field notebook and audio-recorder.

Data Analysis Procedures

Following the data collection, the interview data recorded in field-note book and audio-recorder were subjected to transcription and translation processes from Kiswahili language to English for analysis and report writing. Specifically, the study employed both deductive and inductive thematic procedures, with themes emerging from the data. To become familiar with the data, the researcher read the transcriptions several times in the first step. Subsequently, the coding process to all transcriptions were done to generate various initial codes and categories (Ary et al., 2010). Then, revisiting of the developed codes was done in order to combine similar codes and create potential categories and themes in relation to the objective of the study. Thereafter, the developed themes were then presented and described to explore the barriers in teaching phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge in grade one

Trustworthiness of the Study Findings

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings in qualitative studies, use of trustworthiness is recommended (Shenton, 2004). Since this study was predominantly qualitative in nature, the trustworthiness of the findings was ensured through four criteria namely: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Stahl & King, 2020). Credibility which concerns the truthfulness of the findings was ensured through peer debriefing sessions with early childhood experts from the University of Dodoma (UDOM). In addition, transferability of the findings was ensured through provision of thick description of the research context and participants involved. Furthermore, the dependability in this study was ensured through an audit trail, in which all activities and events happening throughout the research process were documented. Moreover, confirmability was observed by using two strategies that is, step-by step description of research procedures; and bracketing strategy whereby the researchers' experiences

regarding the phenomena under investigation were set aside to avoid biasing the results.

Ethical Matters

Consideration of ethical principles in conducting research that involves human subjects is vital for any research. In this respect, before commencing the data collection process, the researcher obtained ethical clearance letters from relevant authorities such as the UDOM and Dodoma Regional Administrative Secretary (RAS) and then a permission letter was sought from the District Educational Officer (DEO) from Chemba district. Following the receipt of the permission letters, teachers and HTs were issued a consent after they had been informed of the study's goal, its methodology, and their involvement. The participants were also assured of the privacy of the information they provided, including their identities. In addition the confidentiality was ensured by conducting the interview procedure in a private room. On the other hand, the use of numbers and letters to designate participants and schools ensured that all information remained anonymous.

Findings

Barriers in teaching phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge in grade one

Data collected for this objective were analyzed to establish barriers facing teachers in teaching phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge in grade one. The findings revealed that there were variations on teachers and HTs' responses regarding the challenges. Table 1 summarizes participants' responses about obstacles in teaching phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge in grade one.

Table 1. Barriers in Teaching Kiswahili Phonemic Awareness and Alphabet Knowledge in Grade One

Categories	Views	Teachers, number of responses (%)	HTs, number of responses (%)
Learners-based	Truancy	8 (14)	5 (14)
	New learning environment	3 (5)	
School-based	Physical resources	8 (14)	3 (8)
	Overcrowded classes	5 (9)	4 (11)
	Long distance to school	4 (7)	5 (14)
Community-based	Mother tongue	12 (21)	3 (8)
	Parents' limited literacy	7 (12)	3 (8)
	Poverty	1(2)	2 (5)
	Shortage of teachers		5 (14)
Policy-based	Professional development		1(3)
	Overloaded curriculum content	2 (4)	
	Absence of pre-primary education	5 (9)	3 (8)
Teachers-based	Teachers' knowledge	2 (4)	
	Teachers' welfare		3 (8)
Irrelevant			
Grand Total*		57 (100)	37 (100)

Source: Field data (2018)

Data from Table 1 present the responses from teachers and HTs on the barriers in teaching phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge in grade one in selected primary schools in Chemba district in Dodoma. As Table 1 shows, teachers and HTs' responses were grouped into six categories: learner-based, school-based, community-based, policy-based, teachers-based and irrelevant.

Truancy among Pupils

Development of reading skills among early grade pupils is supported by regular attendance at school. Regular attendance in the classroom gives pupils the opportunity to interact with the learning environment, which helps them

improve their reading skills. However, the findings of this study reveal that some grade one pupils were not regularly attending school. Data in Table 1 show that 14% of the teachers and HTs' responses pointed out that truancy among grade one pupils was among the prominent obstacles in teaching phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge in grade one. They said that pupils were not attending school regularly as a result; they lacked the continuation of learning phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge. Commenting on this, a teacher from school A had this to say:

Some pupils do not attend school regularly. A pupil can be present today but not show up the next day. As a result, they lag behind in learning to read because they do miss some reading skills' components such as phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge.

In a similar way, another teacher added:

In my class, truancy is a big challenge. Pupils may come to school this week but never do so in the next week. As a result, when they return, they are unable to understand what their fellow pupils have learned in their absence. So, they end up just copying what their fellows wrote.

On the same point, HT from school C had the following to contribute:

You may find that a pupil is absent today, present tomorrow and absent the next day because of child labour at home.

Considering the three statements made by two teachers and HT regarding pupils' truancy, it can be interpreted that irregular attendance in schools affects pupils' development of phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge. In their views, teachers believed that if pupils could attend school regularly they could have continuation of learning components of phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge which may help them to develop reading skills. The child labour reason for truancy as the statement from HT shows that some parents were prioritizing economic activities over their children's education.

Pupils' Mother Tongue

Use of familiar language is crucial for pupils to understand what they are learning. It was established from this study that some pupils were struggling to understand the Kiswahili language and at the same time, its phonemes and alphabets. As it is evidenced in Table 1, 21% and 8% of the responses from teachers and HTs respectively, revealed that pupils did not effectively develop phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge because they were being taught in a different language from their mother tongue. The majority of the respondents believed that the difference between the mother tongue and the school language created a gap in the development of phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge in grade one pupils. The following statements from the teacher and HT illustrate this:

Some children are affected by their mother language. For example, you may ask pupils to pronounce the sound /z/ they might instead pronounce /s/ because they are affected by their mother tongue. So it is challenging to help these kinds of pupils develop phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge in Kiswahili.

Some pupils come to school knowing to communicate in their mother tongues only. It becomes very difficult for them to learn phonemes and alphabets in Kiswahili language.

The aforementioned quotations from the teacher and HT highlight mother tongue as an obstacle hindering teachers from developing Kiswahili phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge among grade one pupils. From their quotes, they claimed that pupils did not understand Kiswahili as they were much familiar with their mother tongues. Therefore, it was challenging for teachers to successfully develop phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge to pupils who were unfamiliar with Kiswahili language.

Parents' Limited Knowledge on the Value of Education

Parents' knowledge on the value of education to their children is of paramount importance for children's early learning and development of language skills including phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge. When parents are aware of the importance of education for their children, they may find ways to teach their young children and collaborate with teachers to support the children

academically. Nevertheless, the findings from this study show that some parents were not aware of the importance of education to their children as they were not concentrating on it. In describing this, the teacher from school X made the following comments:

Parents may occasionally ask permission for their grade one's absence due to illness. However, you'll discover later that the pupil wasn't ill, but was taking care of younger siblings while parents were away in economic activities.

On the same point, the HT added:

Some parents do not follow up on their pupil's learning progress. Once children get home, parents do not check their exercise books. They are only interested in their performance in domestic activities like fetching water, herding livestock and other household chores.

Reflecting from the aforementioned statements from the participants, it could be noted that parents were not aware of the importance of education to their children. Limited knowledge among parents affects pupils' development of phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge.

Absence of Pre-Primary Education

Attendance in pre-primary education (PPE) is vital for pupils to adapt with the school environment and develop phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge, which are important pre-reading skills essential for them to develop conventional reading. The findings from this study revealed that most of grade one pupils did not attend pre-primary classes. As it could be evidenced from Table 1, 9% and 8% of the participants' responses show that lack of PPE was among the obstacles in teaching Kiswahili phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge among grade one pupils. According to the participants, pupils who did not attend PPE lacked important reading skills which would help them to be able to read. On this, one teacher was quoted as saying:

The majority of grade one pupils in my class did not attend PPE. They start grade one with limited pre-reading skills. So,

I spend a lot of time assisting them in acquiring phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge because they struggle to understand them

It was further elaborated by HT that:

Most grade one pupils did not pass through PPE. They were enrolled in grade one with an old age (8 to 9 years). So, you cannot ask pupils to start pre-primary class because if you do, they might completely drop from school.

The two assertions regarding attendance of PPE could be interpreted that teachers find it challenging to develop phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge to grade one pupils who did not pass through PPE. They believe that PPE helps children to acquire some pre-reading skills that support learning of phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge in grade one.

Discussion

This study examined the impediments in teaching phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge among grade one pupils. Grade one teachers and HTs from various public primary schools were interviewed to explore barriers facing teachers in teaching phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge in grade one. Generally, the findings indicate the variations of responses among teachers and HTs on the barriers in teaching phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge in grade one. Importantly, it was found that teaching of phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge was affected by recurring truancy, mother tongue issue and parents' lack of the importance of education to their children, and lack of pre-primary education. These findings are consistent with the previous studies such as Ampofo et al. (2022) and Yusuf et al. (2023) who noted that parents' education and socio-economic activities as among the factors behind truancy among pupils in Ghana and Malaysia respectively. Further, studies by Edward and Shukia (2021) and Ndjuyeye and Beatus (2022) established that learning of reading skills among early grades was affected by pupils' mother tongue. It should be noted that a number of studies suggest that in teaching reading skills to early grades, pupils' cultural and linguistic diversities should be considered to facilitate learning of Kiswahili reading skills (Agbevivi, 2022; Mohohlwane et al., 2023; Serede

& Mwoma, 2022). On the absence of PPE among grade one pupils, these findings corroborate those of Mabagala and Shukia (2019); Ndijuye et al., (2020); Ndijuye and Beatus, (2022); Serede and Mwoma, (2022). Serede and Mwoma, (2022) develop this as a major impediment in teaching phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge in grade one and stressed that PPE should be taken seriously as it has a significant impact on pupils' learning and development of reading skills in primary school.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study came to the conclusion that teachers' and HTs' views regarding the impediments in teaching phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge in grade one varied. However, the observed challenges have shown to affect teachers in teaching phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge to grade one pupils in many primary schools. This leads to low development of reading skills and later learning and understanding other subjects, which results in poor academic performance. On these grounds, the study recommends that teachers, HTs, parents and other educational stakeholders should collaborate to ensure pupils are attending school regularly in order to have continuity in learning phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge. Additionally, educational policy makers should revisit language policy and see how to incorporate mother tongue languages in early grades. Furthermore, Educational stakeholders should ensure that the established policies such as attendance of PPE are a pre-condition for entering Standard One.

Limitations and Future Research

This study was limited to the small number of participants due to the nature of the design and the sampling technique employed. Thus, it is difficult to generalize the findings in other areas. Also, use of one data collection method may affect the rigor of the study findings to some extent. Therefore, the study encourages further research to include enough number of participants like parents and quality assurers (ward and district), and use multiple data collection methods. In addition, the study suggests that further study could be done to investigate the role of mother tongues in improving mastering of Kiswahili phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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