

INSTRUCTORS' COMPETENCE IN ENGLISH PHONICS AND OUTCOME ON INSTRUCTION AND READING SKILLS OF PUPILS IN BUEA AND YAOUNDÉ, CAMEROON

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Abstract

This paper looks at lower primary instructor's competence in English phonics and outcome on phonics instruction and reading skills of pupils. The instrument used for data collection was a pre-test before a pedagogic workshop on the teaching of phonics to lower primary school instructors in Buea and Yaounde to find out the teachers' level in phonics and establish whether the teachers had the need for the workshop. Through the use of a five item test, the instrument was administered and data elicited from some primary one and two teachers in said towns in Cameroon. A total number of 43 teachers took the test in Buea while 48 others sat for the test in Yaoundé making a total of 91 teachers. Findings showed some teachers lack of competence in key issues in phonics such as sound blending, sound segmentation and sound identification and counting which will obviously produces a negative learning outcome and impact reading skills of pupils they are teaching.

Keywords: Instructors, competence, phonics instruction, outcome, reading skills.

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INTRODUCTION

The problem most higher primary school pupils encounter (class 3 to 5) in Cameroon that contributes to their poor achievement in tests and examinations in all subjects is knowing how to read the notes given them in English by their teachers and understand them, read and understand the tests and exams questions. In the course of observing English language lessons in primary four and five in Buea and Yaounde, I discovered that most pupils are still struggling in reading; a skill which they were expected to have acquired in lower primary level of education. This observation served as a pushing factor for me to go further and see where the problem is coming from by investigating lower primary school teachers' competence in phonics which has a direct link with their teaching and learners mastery of reading.

Reading as a concept in modern education forms the base of all educational activities. Modern society deems the ability to read as one of the most requisite skills to succeed at school and in the workplace. Several researchers have attest to the importance of pupils acquiring phonics and reading skills early in life and the importance of reading in all academic attainments (Pretorius & Machet, 2004; Klapwijk, 2011; Thrupp, 2013). According to McDonough and Shaw (1994:101), "reading is the most important and fruitful foreign language skill to teach, particularly in the case where students have to read English material for their own specialist subjects but may never actually have to speak the language". Many researchers have emphasized the primordial link between reading skills and success in life (Cimmiyotti, 2013; Shoebottom, 2007; Al-Dress, 2008). The best way of introducing pupils to reading is through phonics instruction (explicit teaching about individual letter sound correspondences, their sequences including spelling patterns, and the pronunciation of corresponding sounds) which begins at the early primary level of education. No wonder why several researchers (Perfetti 1985; Stanovich 1980; Chall, 1967; Bond and Dykstra, 1967) assert that, the development of good reading comprehension depends on transmission of phonics skills to children and beginning learners.

However, the success of pupils in phonics and subsequent reading primordially depends on the classroom instruction through the teachers'

role in helping students to improve in reading, and ability to effectively pronounce, articulate and read. A teacher's knowledge of phonics has a strong effect on his/her ability to teach phonics and reading and pupil's ability in reading (Carroll, 1990; Moats, 1995; Azikiwe, 2007; Rasinki, 2010) at the lower primary level. It enables the instructor to choose the best examples for instruction, to provide focused instruction, and to better understand students' reading errors in relation to developing language skills.

In line with the above, this study looks at the competence of lower primary school teachers in phonics and its impact on phonics instruction and reading skills of their target learners. The questions guiding this research are what are some of the difficulties lower primary school teachers may encounter in English phonics and what is the impact on phonics instruction and reading skills of primary school pupils in the target schools? This study is based on the premise that some lower primary school teachers show a poor mastery of some basic concepts in English phonics which constitute a challenge when teaching phonics in the primary school which hinders the students in reading.

A number of studies have been conducted around the world on challenges in handling phonics instruction at the lower primary grade and requires review to show their point of convergence and departure from this study thereby revealing the originality of the current study. Mubanga, (2010) carried out a study on the nature and prevalence of reading and writing difficulties in English language in grade two and findings revealed some difficulties in letter-identification from Mbala basic school among grade two learners. He further stated that learners had difficulties in differentiating letters such as 'b' and 'd', 'p' and 'q', 'e' and the digit '6'. In the same light, Swanepoel cited by Mubanga opines that when a phonological awareness deficiency is identified as a contributor to a pupil's reading and spelling difficulties, it is a relief because it is a trainable system that can be taught and practiced in the early stages of reading development that will undoubtedly improve reading and spelling systems. Mwambazi (2011) worked on the causes and the nature of the low reading achievement by grade two pupils in some basic schools in Zambia. The study confirmed that grade two pupils were not reading according to their grade level as very few learners were able to identify letters in terms of initial and ending

sounds. A study conducted by Mulenga, (2012) to assess grade three learners preparedness for the Read On Course (ROC) under the Primary Reading Programme (PRP) in reading/writing in Bemba (a local languages spoken in Zambia) as a first Language. The study showed that most learners faced a number of difficulties in reading/writing in Grade three when English and Bemba (a local language) are taught simultaneously. Findings depict that most learners in Grade three including some that had supposedly broken through by the end of Grade two were not able to read/write at the expected level. Mwanamukubi (2013) worked on the reading difficulties in grade six pupils and challenges encountered by teachers in teaching reading. Findings indicated that reading failure was mainly caused by failure to acquire phonological awareness and skills in alphabetic coding also confirmed by Mando (2008). This study push further by investigating if the failure in acquiring alphabetic coding skills may be due to the instructor's poor mastery of phonics.

Laohawiriyanon (2014) investigated the effects of systematic remedial phonics instruction on the improvement of pronunciation, spelling and reading comprehension skills. Results showed that systematic remedial phonics instruction could help improve the learners' pronunciation, spelling, and reading comprehension skills. However, remedial phonics instruction can only help when the instructor shows a complete mastery of phonics. That is where this current researcher departs from the earlier study. Kamalata (2016) and Nanchengwa (2016) revealed that phonics instructors need to have a lot of teaching/learning materials so that every learner can hold a book or be able to see from the chart what the teachers are talking about for reading phonics instructors to succeed. Tembo (2016) in the same light revealed the role of teaching materials in providing guidance to phonic instructors teaching initial reading skills and learning material on what to teach and consequently learners are able to grasp the concepts easily. The vitality of teaching aids cannot be underestimated in transmitting knowledge on phonics to lower primary pupils although this study does not focus on it. Mulenga et al (2020) investigated the challenges teachers encounter in teaching reading Phonic and Sight words with focus on fourth grade learners in some selected primary schools of Lusaka district in Zambia. Through a survey research design, both quantitative and

qualitative data were collected from teachers and fourth grade pupils. Findings revealed that the abscond of some pupils from phonics classes in the early days of their grade one where early reading was introduced, over enrolment, no attention given to learners with learning difficulties, and the shortage of appropriate quality teaching and learning materials for early grade reading were responsible for the challenges in teaching the target concepts.

The Levin Committee (2000) and the Shimron Committee (2002) investigated methods for fostering oral and written Language skills in preschool and Kindergarten age children and ways to reform reading instruction in the primary school grades respectively. Both committees hold that key components in literacy acquisition were phonetic awareness and alphabet recognition and recommended instruction in both concepts.

Thembi and Anne (2022) investigated the difficulties experienced by grade 3 teachers in full-service school encounter in supporting young pupils struggling with reading and identified problems such as unconditional promotion from grade 2 to grade 3 without any level in reading, overcrowded classes, lack of enough readers, poor reading attitude, lack of knowledge about diverse learning style and lack of parental support. Amani and Ligembe (2022) assessed the phonological awareness skills in reading English language among primary school pupils in Bunda, Tanzania. Guided by the interactive theory, findings showed that pupils in the public primary schools and some English medium schools express low phonological awareness skills at the level of pronouncing words with consonant clusters, decoding diagraphs, recognizing silent sounds and decoding words with irregular grapheme phoneme correspondences. The study proposes that pupils will excel more in learning phonological skills if teachers employ phonics strategies such as segmentation, blending, substitution, deletion, rhyming games and corporative teaching pairing teachers of two different schools. The above study assesses pupils' phonological awareness skills while this study moves a step behind in taking interest in teachers' phonological competence and how it impact learners reading skills.

This present study underscores its originality in assessing lower primary school teachers' competence in some phonics strategies listed above and

more as opposed to the previous studies which focuses on pupils. Furthermore, previous literature that had to do with teachers was limited to primary school teachers pedagogic skills in supporting pupils struggling in phonics while this study traces back the instructor's mastery of phonics which might play negatively on phonics instruction. Furthermore, findings from literature reviewed on challenges encountered by teachers in phonics instruction were based on experiences from different parts of the world and not in Cameroon. Therefore, it was relevant and imperative that a study was conducted in Cameroon to gather empirical evidence pertaining to the subject matter.

This paper opens with an introduction which covers the problem, objectives, research questions and hypothesis, literature review and structure of the study. It will be followed by the methodology, results and discussions and ends with a conclusion. The conclusion will cover recommendations and suggestions for further research.

METHODOLOGY

A survey research design was used. The population of this study were primary one and two teachers of Buea and Yaoundé. Through purposive and convenient sampling, a total number of 43 teachers took the test in Buea while 48 others sat for the test in Yaounde making a total of 91 teachers. The reason for choosing this level is because this is where the teaching of phonics is mostly done and if pupils are not appropriately taught, they will likely never master phonics and it will play negatively on their reading skills on the one hand and on the other hand on their entire academic performances. The table below gives a picture of the different primary schools in Buea and Yaounde where the teachers came from.

Table 1

Sample population for the study

Schools	Sampled number of teachers
Government Primary Schools Bonduma-Boboko, in Buea.	10
Government Primary Schools Bokama in Buea	13
Government Primary Schools Tiko in Buea	9
Government Primary Schools Buea Town	12

Government Primary School Bastos 1, Yaoundé.	12
Government Primary School Bastos 2, Yaoundé.	10
Government Bilingual Primary School Etougebe	11
Government Bilingual Primary School Biyemassi	14
Total	91
Percentage (%)	100

The instrument used for data collection was a test and precisely a pre- test before a pedagogic workshop on the teaching of phonics to find out the teachers' level in phonics and establish whether the teachers had the need for the workshop. The 2018 workshop was for primary school teachers of some selected primary schools of the above-mentioned localities to enhance their knowledge of phonics teaching in Cameroon. The test paper consisted of closed ended questions whereby teachers were only allowed to choose answers from the options provided concerning consonant blends, importance of word blending, importance of word segmentation and open-ended questions whereby they had to say the words and later count the sounds that those words contained.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the results and generates discussions based on the four items test administered to the target teachers. It focuses on teachers' ability in identifying consonant blends, teachers' ability in knowing the importance of blending, teachers' ability in knowing the importance of sound segmentation and teachers' ability in identifying and counting sounds in words.

Teachers' identification of consonant blends

Teachers' competence in phonics and precisely consonant blends impacts effective teaching and reading outcomes. That is why during the test, teachers were tested on their skills in identifying consonant blends. This is the list of consonant blends that were to be selected among words and other sounds: cl, br, str. The table below gives us the performances of teachers in terms of consonant blends identification.

Table 2.

Statistical score on identification of consonant blends

Identification of consonant blends	Correct Answer		Wrong answer		Total	
	Buea	Yaounde	Buea	Yaounde	Buea	Yaounde

Respondents	23	26	20	19	43	45
Percentage	53.49	60.42	46.51	39.58	100	100
Total percentage	56.95		43.05		100	

Results above shows that in Buea, out of 43 teachers only, 23(53.49%) provided a complete correct answer to the question while 20(46.51%) teachers provided wrong answers and. In Yaounde, out of 48 teachers who responded to the question, 29 (60.42%) pass while 19 (39.58%) fail. Here, it is important to note that some of the teachers who fall under the category of wrong answers were able to identify a single answer out of a total of three answers and thus fall under the category of those who failed. Generally, it is important to note that the percentage of teachers who were not able to identify consonant blends in Yaounde and Buea stands at 39.58% and 46.51% respectively making a total of 43.04% giving us the possibility to assume that they will not be able to teach it appropriately to lower primary pupils and thus, it will impact their reading skills at the early secondary level. Further assumptions that can be made from the above results is that, the teachers who failed will impact the teaching and learning outcomes which can lead to mislearning.

Teachers’ knowledge on the importance of blending to children

This section was a follow-up question from above with the aim of testing teachers’ knowledge on the importance of blending to children. The teachers were given two options to choose the most appropriate which were; “enable children to read words” and “enable children to write words”. The table below gives us teachers’ performance in Buea and Yaounde.

Table 3

Statistical score on knowledge of the importance of sound blending to children

Importance of sound blending to children	Correct Answer		Wrong answer		Total	
	Buea	Yaounde	Buea	Yaounde	Buea	Yaounde
Respondents	36	41	7	7	43	48
Percentage	83.72	85.42	16.28	14.58	100	100
Total percentage	84.57		15.43		100	

Statistics indicates that in Buea, out of 43 teachers who responded to the test question, 36 (83.72%) pass while 7 (16.28%) fail. In Yaounde, out of 48 teachers who sat for the test, it is clearly seen that 41 (84.42%) pass while 7 (14.58%) fail. Generally, the failure rate of the both locations stands at 15.43%. From the percentage gotten above, we can say that the teachers who were unable to identify the importance of word blending to children will likely not raise awareness of the reason for teaching pupils sound blending and thus find it difficult to set the right learning outcome of that lesson. Such a teacher might not be able to motivate pupils to acquire skills in blending since their teacher might find it difficult to raise awareness on the importance of this concept to learners thus an increase in the low standard of reading exercised by learners in these regions.

Teachers' knowledge on the importance of sound segmentation to children

This section dealt with teachers' knowledge on the importance of sound segmentation to children. This was the third question of the test administered to teachers. The question requested to know what segmenting or sounding would help the children to do and answers were proposed for teachers to choose the appropriate option. These options were; a) to read words, b) to write words and c) others. The statistics will be presented on the table below:

Table 4

Statistical score on knowledge of the importance of sound segmentation to children

Importance of sound blending to children	Correct Answer		Wrong answer		Total	
	Buea	Yaounde	Buea	Yaounde	Buea	Yaounde
Respondents	43	48	0	0	43	48
Percentage	100	100	0	0	100	100
Total percentage	100		0		100	

Statistics shows that this question was a favourable one given that all the 43 and 48 teachers in Buea and Yaounde provided correct answers giving a total percentage pass of 100. So, if all the teachers were aware of the fact that segmenting or sounding enable the children to read, it means that they will likely raise awareness of the reason for teaching pupils' sound segmentation or sounding and set the right learning outcome when

teaching such a concept. Such teachers might be very motivated to teach sound segmentation since they know the importance thus an increase in the standard of reading of learners which will be manifested by their target young learners.

Teachers' ability in identifying and counting the number of sounds in words

Question four of the test was meant to test the ability of teachers in identifying and counting the number of sounds in words. This question carried seven words and numbered from A to G. The word A had 3 sounds, B had 4 sounds, C had 5 sounds, D had 3 sounds, E had 4 sounds, F had 2 sounds and G had 9 sounds. These words were; 'cat', 'sleep', 'sister', 'moon', 'clap', 'in' and 'helicopter'. The table below shows the number and percentage of teachers who responded correctly to this question.

Table 5

Statistical score on counting and identifying the number of sounds in words

Counting and identifying the number of sounds in words.	Respondents		Correct answer		Percentage		Wrong answer		Percentage	
	Buea	Y'de	Buea	Y'de	Buea	Y'de	Buea	Y'de	Buea	Y'de
A	43	48	32	34	74.42	70.83	11	14	25.58	29.17
B	43	48	15	14	34.89	29.17	28	34	65.11	70.83
C	43	48	28	05	65.12	10.42	15	43	34.88	89.58
D	43	48	34	34	79.07	70.83	9	14	20.93	29.17
E	43	48	16	09	37.21	18.75	27	39	62.79	81.25
F	43	48	36	38	83.72	79.17	7	10	16.28	20.83
G	43	48	11	08	25.58	16.67	32	40	74.42	83.33
TOTAL	43× 7 =30 1	48× 7 =33 6	172	142	57.14 %	42.26 %	129	194	42.86 %	57.74 %

It is important to note that Y'de on the table above stands for Yaounde. Results show that for question 4A in Buea, out of the 43 teachers who sat for the test, 32 opted for a correct answer giving a percentage of 74.42%

pass and 11 (25.58%) fail. Question 4B show that 15 (34.89%) teachers pass and 28 teachers (65.11%) fail. Question 4C presented 28 (65.12%) pass and 15 (34.88%) fail. For 4D, 34 (79.07%) pass and 09 (20.93%) fail. 4E shows that 16 (37.21%) teachers responded correctly and 27(62.79%) responded wrongly. Question 4F had a total number of 36(83.72%) teachers with correct answers and 07(16.28%) wrong answers. Lastly, for the 4G, only 11(25.58%) teachers could provide the correct answer and 32(74.42%) wrong answers.

In Yaounde, results show that for question 4A, out of the 48 teachers who sat for the test, 34(70.83%) opted for a correct answer and 14(29.17%) teachers proposed wrong answers. Question 4B shows that, 14 (29.17%) teachers passed while 34 teachers (70.83%) failed. Question 4C presented 5 (10.42%) correct answers while 43(89.58%) of them were wrong. The 4D portion of this question presents 34 (70.83%) correct answers and 14(29.17%) wrong answers. 4E shows that 9(18.75%) teachers responded correctly and 39(81.25%) responded wrongly. Question 4F had a total number of 38 (79.17%) teachers with correct answers and 10(20.83%) had wrong responses. Lastly, for the 4G, only 8(16.67%) teachers could provide the correct answer and 40(83.33%) wrong answers.

From the statistics gotten above, it is worth noting that the percentage of teachers in Buea and Yaounde who had challenges in counting the sounds of the target words came up to 50.3(42.86+57.74/2) respectively. According to each word, 27.37% (25.58 +29.17/2) could not count the sounds of the word "cat" and 67.97% (65.11+70.83/2) failed in the counting of sounds in the word "sleep", At this level, we come to realise that the notion of blending that they did not know equally important since some of the teachers identified 5 sounds though there was a vowel blend in the word which constituted a single vowel sound. With the word "moon" the percentage fail stood at 25 (20.93+29.17/2), as for the word "sister" 62.32% (34.88+89.58/2) failed. For the word "clap" 72.02% (62.79+81.25/2) failed, and for "in" 18.55% (16.28+20.83/2) failed. The percentage of teachers who failed in the counting of the word "helicopter" stood at 78.87 (74.42+83.33/2). The general failure rate of question four for Buea and Yaounde stood at 50.31% (42.89+57.31/2) above average. Their failure is of evidence that they will not be able to teach children to count words. All the above rates of failure shows that, such category of teachers will not be able

to appropriately teach children how to count and identify sounds in words and pupils taught by such category of teachers will suffer challenges in counting sounds due to mis-learning.

CONCLUSION

From the findings in chapter four, it is obvious and very clearly stated that some primary school teachers will have serious difficulties in the teaching of phonics because they cannot blend, segment and count words appropriately neither do they know the importance of sound blending and segmentation to children hence students' shortcomings in reading. This can be linked to the falling standard of language literacy and reading culture exercised by young learners in Cameroon.

However, it is recommended for the Ministry of Basic Education in Cameroon to approve compulsory teacher training workshops on phonic teaching and especially Jolly Phonics which has proven to be very successful in other West African countries like Nigeria and Ghana in helping lower primary school children to learn how to read, blend, segment and write sounds. The pilot phase of this training started in Cameroon in 2018 where I served as the Lead Academia in the training and it was later suspended and lower primary school teachers were targeted in some schools in Yaounde, Douala, Bamenda, Buea and Ngaoundere respectively. Lower primary school teachers are equally expected to make conscious efforts and take serious measures in self-learning of phonics and phonics teaching methods to children so as to enhance their mastery of the concept and teaching strategies.

Further research on the teaching of the target issue is recommended with focus on a longitudinal study on the competence of teachers before and after a jolly phonic workshop. Further studies can be exploring better ways of teaching phonics through a pilot and a control group of learners and why not brainstorming ways of teaching from experienced teachers. Another study may focus on the challenges encountered by lower primary pupils in understanding phonics or identifying pupils struggling with phonic and give them special redo classes through differentiation strategies.

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