

Explicit instructional moves in teaching reading in grade one: Observations from four Amharic classrooms

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Abstract

In response to the recurring poor literacy achievement among learners in various mother tongue languages in Ethiopian schools, this study investigated teaching practices of four Amharic teachers at three government schools in Hawassa city, focusing on how the instructional content is implemented and what explicit instructional moves the teachers used in teaching early reading. Through a qualitative case study approach, utilizing video-recordings and checklist-based observations as data collection tools, the study revealed variations in implementation among all four teachers. Modelling, discussion, feedback and guided practice have been found to be the explicit instructional moves most prominently used by the teachers. Elements of explicit instruction seemed to be implemented simultaneously, albeit randomly, and the lesson content was delivered systematically from simple to more complex. The instructional content was found to be primarily grapho-phonological, where the *fidäl* was the minimal content unit of the instruction. Finally, the findings indicate that teaching practices are influenced by external factors such as lack of literacy materials and inadequate Amharic language competence among some teachers. The results might suggest the need for future policy changes and practical interventions aimed at enhancing teachers' competence and improving the provision of adequate literacy instructional materials.

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Introduction

Early literacy development lays the foundation for children's future academic success. Methods of teaching reading and its components in early grades have been a subject of considerable debate in the science of literacy (Castles et al., 2018; Connor et al., 2004; Seidenberg et al., 2020), and scholars are still in search of effective methods of teaching early-grade reading to improve children's learning and achievement (Connor et al., 2004; Kemp, 2018).

The debate over the teaching methods is caused by children's poor learning achievements in different grade levels across the globe. The literature reveals that the reading

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achievement of children is low in many parts of the world, including developed countries, which is persistent in developing countries such as Ethiopia (Connor et al., 2004; Piper, 2010a; Piper, Jepkemei & Kibukho, 2015). Earlier studies attribute these poor achievements of early grade reading to such factors as quality of the reading instructional materials, literacy environment, socio-economic conditions and teachers' qualifications and practices (Dubeck, Jukes & Okello, 2012; Mohammed & Amponsah, 2018; Odhiambo, 2008; Piper et al., 2015; Robledo & Gove, 2018; Sanden, 2012). These factors are globally prevalent, but scholars suggest they may vary across different contexts and countries, including Ethiopia (Dubeck et al., 2012). Despite extensive research into reading outcomes and the factors contributing to low reading achievement, little research has been done on the actual teaching practices employed in early-grade reading classrooms, particularly in the Ethiopian context. This study aims to address this gap.

To improve early-grade reading instruction, numerous scholars recommend systematic explicit instruction for the five basic components of early-grade reading: phonological awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary and comprehension (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Dean, 2007; Hughes et al., 2017; National Reading Panel (NRP), 2000; Reutzel et al., 2014; Reutzel, 2015; Rupley, Blair, & Nichols, 2009; Shanahan, 2005). These scholars have noted that systematic, structured and direct instruction effectively helps students to focus on the specific skills and strategies needed to decode and understand written language. Systematic and explicit reading instruction has additionally been claimed to be particularly beneficial for certain groups of students, e.g. second language learners (Goldenberg, 2020), struggling readers (Rupley et al., 2009) and those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (Mwoma, 2017). Thus, the use of explicit instruction in teaching reading literacy continues to be a focal point of curricular content, research and educational policy discussions both in Ethiopia and worldwide. Pretorius (2019) argues that explicit teaching of reading literacy might be a more effective and appropriate pedagogical approach in many African countries. Ethiopia is not an exception here, and poor reading literacy achievement has raised concern and highlighted the need for more research on early reading instructional practices (Anteneh et al., 2016; Piper, 2010b, 2010c; Abera, 2014; Read M&E, 2020).

Teaching practices and the instructional moves employed by teachers have been identified as some of the key issues affecting reading achievement in Ethiopian schools (Anteneh et al., 2016; Abera, 2014). Classroom teaching comprises the content of the lesson and the methods used for presenting it. The content refers to the five essential early grade reading components: phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension (NRP, 2000). The method refers to the specific teaching strategies such as the explicit instructional moves used by teachers to deliver the content. The objective of this study is to investigate how Amharic teachers in grade one implement reading instruction, focusing on the explicit instructional moves in their early reading teaching practice. As a result, the following research question is addressed in this study: What explicit instructional moves do teachers use when teaching early reading in grade one?

Given the strong support for the use of explicit instruction for teaching early-grade reading components among numerous scholars (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Connor et al., 2004; Hughes et al., 2017; NRP, 2000; Reutzel et al., 2014; Sedita, 2005), this study might

contribute to a better understanding of the ways early reading instruction is provided in Amharic classrooms and how specific content components are actually taught.

Theoretical Framework: The Importance of Scaffolding

This study is grounded in the sociocultural theory of learning, which emphasises the importance of social interaction and active learning environment in the development of cognitive and language skills. Vygotsky (1978) recognizes the role of a more knowledgeable other and how they through scaffolding can mediate and support children's learning. Scaffolding can be provided by the teacher but also by the materials in the learning environment or by peers. Vygotsky (1978) talks about scaffolding as a process that can occur in the zone for proximal development (ZPD), which refers to "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Teachers play an important role in scaffolding children's learning. This involves guiding them and mediating social interactions in the classroom through language and practice. These scaffolding principles, rooted in the ZPD, are of great importance for students to learn how to guide their own progress and development. This instructional strategy conveys the gradual release of responsibility (simple to complex release of content) in the process of lesson delivery, which makes it an explicit form of instruction. Explicit instruction is suggested as suitable and also commonly used in teaching early grade reading components (Doabler et al., 2015). In this study, explicit instructional moves are conceptualised as elements of scaffolding for providing support within the sociocultural theory.

Reutzel et al. (2014, p. 409) identified seven explicit instructional moves related to early reading skills: (a) direct explanation, (b) modelling, (c) guided practice, (d) independent practice, (e) feedback, (f) discussion, and (g) monitoring. The first explicit instructional move in Reutzel et al. (2014), *direct explanation*, is associated with giving 'overt' and 'concrete' explanation of content to be learned. It is concerned with giving clear description of concepts with precise, clear and comprehensible language. Direct explanation is highly associated with explicit reading instruction delivery (Allington, 2013; Archer & Hughes, 2011).

The next component of explicit instruction is *modelling*; this is when the teacher reveals ways of using specific concepts, processes, skills, strategies of doing things, etc. This element is considered as an essential part of effective interventions basically for special needs learners such as struggling readers and disabled learners (Allington, 2013; Archer & Hughes, 2011). It is also a feature used in early grade reading instruction across the components and sub-skills such as phonological and phonic components and sub-components.

Guided practice is a strategy consisting of the teacher's guidance, scaffolding, and support to the students' learning, in which the teacher and students keep active interaction through recurrent classroom practices with the teacher's active guidance and instruction (Reutzel et al., 2014; Rupley et al., 2009). As a result of the guided practice students receive from their teacher, they are expected to be able to run independent practice as an instructional outcome.

Independent practice is the next stage where learners become able to apply the new concepts by themselves, without support from the teacher or other relevant support providers

(Reutzel et al., 2014). This is an explicit instructional move which is used to ensure that learners have acquired new knowledge and experience and that they can apply it on their own (Archer & Hughes, 2011). Independent practice as an explicit instructional move is used to ensure learner progress; however, it is 'less recommended' for first graders, who may be too young to perform every task entirely on their own (Reutzel et al., 2014).

Feedback is an explicit instructional move whereby learners receive close follow-up and monitoring with practical teachers' written/verbal reaction (Reutzel et al., 2014). It could be used either to correct mistakes or to confirm accuracy of their learning applications. Feedback gives learners an opportunity to internalise the conceptual content in a more practical and memorable way through correction and/or approval of their work. As it helps to fill learning gaps (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Reutzel et al., 2014), feedback is a relevant element in reading instruction as well.

Discussion refers to the practical verbal communication/information exchange between the teacher and learners in the classroom. It may involve asking and answering questions, eliciting student responses, asking for elaboration of concepts, interaction between the teacher and learners or their peers (Wilkinson & Son, 2011). Usually, it appears during guided practice or direct explanations, and the teacher is often the initiator and facilitator for discussions (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Reutzel et al., 2014). Discussion is expected to be limited in grade one, and it will increase as learners become more exposed and attached to texts in the later parts of the instruction (Reutzel et al., 2014).

Monitoring is associated with teachers' critical follow-up of their learners' responses and progress. It enables teachers to scrutinize the lively performance of their learners, be informed about learners' progress, measures to be taken afterwards, etc. (Archer & Hughes, 2011). Monitoring can be realised through a formal assessment of learners' level of concept understanding, effective instructional practices, learners' outcomes, classroom management, etc. (Reutzel et al., 2014). Monitoring has been found to be a crucial teacher responsibility across various grade levels, including grade one (Reutzel et al., 2014).

We have adopted Reutzel et al.'s (2014) explicit instructional moves presented above when investigating the teaching practices of Amharic teachers related to teaching reading in the first grade.

Methods

Study Design and Sampling Techniques

This qualitative case study explored Amharic early reading instruction in grade one. Purposive sampling was used to select the research site, which is Hawassa city, the schools and the grade level. The research site and the schools were selected based on convenience. The selection of grade one is due to its importance in early literacy development. Three schools were chosen for the sake of data management, with a total of four participating teachers, two from the same school. As there were no more than two teachers in each school, available teachers in each selected school participated in the study after obtaining their consent.

Data Collection Tool

The main data collection instrument in this study was video-supported observation. To analyse the implementation of the instruction, a checklist was prepared based on the theoretical suggestions of explicit instruction, according to Reutzel et al. (2014). The observation was made with a co-observer in order to ensure reliability. The observation was intended to find out how the teachers' conducted the classroom implementation practices of the reading instruction. The video recordings were made for three full periods in each class; however, lessons in some cases were shorter than the planned duration. A single period was 25-35 minutes long. As the instructional data reached saturation level in the duration of the whole period, a single whole classroom observation of each teacher was used for the analysis in this study.

The observation checklist included the following explicit instructional moves: direct explanation, modelling, guided practice, independent practice, feedback, discussion, and monitoring. These elements were used to code the observational data from the video recordings through counting their frequency. Within each of the elements, the number of implemented activities for each teacher was counted, and it was specified which content components the instruction delivery included.

Data Processing and Analysis Techniques

In this study, the data was first collected through video recording and note taking according to the checklist. One lesson from each teacher was used for the analysis. Each video was transcribed in Amharic and categorized under each element. Then, they were translated to English for references. After manual categorization, the transcribed data were coded by using NVivo 10 data analysing software. The nodes and sub-nodes were created in the software by using the explicit instructional moves as topics. The analysis was done by deductively coding the material with the explicit instructional moves, as mentioned above. In some cases, certain instructional moves were found to be overlapping, suggesting the possibility of them belonging to different nodes. In this case, data were coded under the node that seemed most fitting. The analysis was descriptive, and the results can say something about the four teachers' explicit instructional moves when teaching reading in first grade. The data presented as references in the analysis are presented in an order of Amharic raw data, IPA transcription and the English translation. Finally, during the data organisation and coding, schools and individual teachers were anonymised in numbers to ensure confidentiality.

Results

The observations from this study show that instruction is delivered in integrated manner and the focus is mostly on the grapho-phonological content. The most common teaching pattern observed was the following: the teachers wrote the targeted fidäls and their variants on the board, encouraging the students to identify and repeatedly articulate them, first with the teacher, then with peers. Instruction at the phoneme or sound level was not provided in isolation, as the minimum learning unit is the fidäl, which represents a syllabic combination of a consonant and a vowel. The exception was the sixth fidäl variant, which is

the only natural isolated phoneme existing in the writing system, and is usually presented in lessons and taught as an independent fidäl like other orders and not a phoneme. Consequently, induced by the alpha-syllabic writing system in Amharic, the minimal instructional content in teaching practices for early reading in grade one in the observed Amharic classrooms was the fidäl, which is a phonologically patterned grapheme and not an isolated sound.

To teach the targeted fidäls, different techniques were used by the teachers observed in this study. Fidäl variant reciting was the most common teaching-learning activity. Other activities included word formation with targeted fidäls, blending and segmenting the fidäls, etc. Such activities might be helpful for the students, reinforcing their skills in fidäl recognition. Regarding content delivery, the classroom observation documented learning activities in line with suggested activities in the Amharic grade one textbook and teacher guide, which were analysed earlier in another paper from this project (Nigist, in review).

Table 2 below summarises the teachers' use of different explicit instructional moves in the observations. As can be seen in the table, the teachers used all the seven explicit instructional moves, however, to varying degrees. While for Teacher 4 the total number of occurrences of explicit instructional moves was 117, for Teacher 3, 425 explicit instructional moves were identified. Guided practice, modelling, discussion, and feedback were the explicit instructional moves most frequently used by the teachers. In our analysis below, we present qualitative data with some examples of the explicit instructional moves observed.

Table 1

Summary of observation findings for teachers' implementation of systematic explicit instruction

Elements of Explicit Instruction	Number of Activities Performed in Each Element by Each Teacher				Total
	T1	T2	T3	T4	
Direct Explanation	14	5	2	4	25
Modelling	26	35	81	53	195
Guided Practice	40	55	94	24	213
Independent Practice	2	13	46	1	62
Explicit Feedback	7	35	21	5	68
Implicit Feedback	0	4	39	5	48
Discussion	26	30	118	10	184
Monitoring	29	30	24	15	98
Total	144	207	425	117	893

Direct Explanation

The data suggest that teachers consistently employ direct explanation in their lessons, however, not very often. Direct explanations were used in teaching different aspects of reading skills, for example, to tell which fidäl a symbol represents, how a fidäl should be pronounced, what a concept refers to, how a word is read and what it means, what an object is used for, what a concept/object consists of, how larger linguistic units such as the sentence

are formulated, where a fidäl appears in the alphabet arrangement, how many words can be formed by using a single fidäl, etc. For example, Teacher 1 explicitly and directly taught the meanings of blending and segmenting and provided examples for each concept. In her examples, she directly taught what the words formed by the target fidäls meant and what the fidäls were used for when mentioning the words ቁ ብ /qeb/ meaning ‘pullet’ and ቅ ር ጭት /qirṣʾat/ which means ‘basket’. She also explained the meanings of words by relating them to associated terms, for example, in her explanation of the word /abäba/ - ‘flower’, the teacher described it in relation to its different parts, naming the root, stem, and leaves. Teachers 2 and 4 also directly explained to their students that the fidäls ሞ /mo/ and ቆ /qo/ were the last units of each respective fidäl variant. An example of direct explanation in the lesson from Teacher 3 is as follows:

ይህ ‘በ’ አይደለም፡ ‘ባ’ ነው፤ ...‘በ’ የሚጻፈው እንደ ዚህ ነው፤ እግሮቹ እኩል መሆን አለባቸው፤

/jih ‘bä’ ʔajidällämm: ‘ba’ näw;...‘bä’ jämmis’s’afäw ʔindäzih näw; ʔigroṣṣu ʔikkul mähon ʔalläbbaṣṣäw/

‘‘This is not /bä/, it is /ba/...; /bä/ is written as such; its legs should be equal’’.

Compared to other explicit instructional moves such as modelling, discussion, feedback and guided practice, it seems that direct explanation was not used much by the teachers. There was also variation in the frequency of its use among individual teachers. Teachers 1, 2, 3 and 4 used 14, 5, 3, 4 direct explanations in the observed data, respectively. This might indicate that Teacher 1 employs direct explanation significantly more than the other teachers, which might suggest a more explicit approach for concept delivery to her students. Such a method may be particularly beneficial for young learners, as it is a recommended teaching strategy for their grade level.

Modelling

Modelling was one of the most frequently employed explicit instructional moves in the data (195 occurrences registered in total for all four teachers). The participating teachers used modelling to guide students towards proper learning strategies and to correct inaccuracies. They wrote fidäls and words on the board every time so that those with no textbooks could have access to the instructional content, instructed those having books already, showed how to write fidäls correctly (direction, space in between, physical appearance of the fidäls, font size, etc.), how to sit properly so that they could have full access to the blackboard, etc. These were all manifestations of the teachers’ modelling activities to help their students learn.

Modelling activities were often performed by the teachers to guide the learners on effective learning strategies, including appropriate classroom behaviour and study techniques, e.g. that the students should follow their teacher, look at what is written on the board, concentrate, practice, or repeat after the teacher. The teachers also guided the students on how they could create connections between fidäls/symbols to aid memorization and retention through counting and visualization. Furthermore, the teachers linked new lessons to

the students' prior knowledge and instructed students in practical aspects like using stationery and navigating their textbooks.

Modelling activities typically occurred at the I DO stage of the gradual responsibility release model, where the teacher demonstrated the tasks. In the observed classes, teachers gave clear and practical instructions, outlining what students should and should not do during the lesson. Among the four teachers, Teacher 3 used modelling the most (81 times), followed by Teacher 4 (53 times), then Teacher 2 (35 times) and Teacher 1 (26 times). The modelling moves usually included the use of visual aids, numerical examples and connections to familiar concepts. For example, Teacher 1 was bringing her hands together to visualise blending and separating them apart to visualise segmenting for the learners. She was also using numeric representations of the fidäls in each fidäl variant list by asking which stage of the fidäl variant arrangement the selected fidäl belongs to at the selected root fidäl's horizontal list on the alphabet board. Moreover, she was asking for the name of the object picture whose name starts with the targeted fidäl.

Teacher 2 employed modelling mostly in a form of dos and don'ts. She also tried to establish connections by using terms that illustrated familial relationships between letter variants such as /lä/'s variants, /mä/'s variants (የ 'ለ' ዘ ሮ ቸ /jä'lä' zäroff/), የ 'መ' ዘ ሮ ቸ /jä'mä' zäroff/), etc. She also facilitated word associations by linking the fidäls to the words they formed and asking her students questions like "what did we write/form in 'lä' or 'mä'?", etc. Such an approach could help the learners remember the practiced activity and build upon this in their further learning. The modelling moves used by Teacher 4 were similar to those of Teacher 2 in that she also used the list of fidäl variants of /qä /ፈ/. By engaging students in a 'matching' exercise, she helped them recognize common features among visually similar fidäls, assisting them in identifying and internalizing the different fidäl variants.

In addition to using modelling most frequently among the four observed teachers, Teacher 3's modelling was quite innovative and creative. For instance, in her visualisation of the physical characteristics of the fidäl /ፈ/qä/, she said "ማን ናት ይቼ ወገ ሲን የያዘችው እንዲህ ወገ ሲን ይዞ ቆማለች: /mann nat jiftifti wägäbuan jejazetfifw: ?indih wägäbuan jiza qomalläff/ *what is this holding its waist; it stands this way holding its waist...*". In her attempt to visualise fidäl /በ-bä, she described the fidäl as a 'gate', saying "ማን ናት ይህ ቼ: በር ትመስለለች: /mann nat jiftifti:bärr timäsilalläff/ *what is this which looks like a gate?*". She also practiced counting of the diacritic markers of the fidäls, which she addressed as 'legs'. For example, she asked "ይህ ቼ ሦስት እግር ያለት ማን ናት? /jihftifti sost ?igir jallat mann nat?/ *what is this having three legs?*" to refer to the fidäl /ጠ/t'ä/, and "ይህ ቼ ስራት እግር ያለት ማን ናት? /jihftiftis ?arat ?igir jallat mann nat?/- *what is this fidäl having four legs?*" referring to /ጦ/mä/, etc. Such modelling moves might be important to support the students' memory and facilitate their learning.

Generally, modelling was one of the most frequently used explicit instructional moves in the observed classrooms. Teachers employed this instructional move to varying degrees, and the teacher who demonstrated most of the occurrences, was also quite innovative and creative in employing modelling. Sometimes modelling overlapped with other explicit instructional moves such as feedback, guided practice and monitoring.

Guided Practice

Guided practice was the most frequently used explicit instructional move in the observed classrooms (213 occurrences). This practice was typically structured in three main forms: interactive question and answer sessions, repetitive exercises and clear instructions on what to do and what to avoid. In addition, the teachers seemed to have established routines for opening and closing the lessons. The teachers first demonstrated practices and tasks themselves and afterwards performed the same activities together with the students, providing hands-on guidance. They frequently wrote the targeted fidäls on the blackboard and then posed leading questions about them. After the students answered the questions guided by the information delivered by the teacher, they were instructed to frequently practice the concepts through recitation or word formation. The teachers used various techniques in forming the questions to help learners remember what they learnt, such as what word they formed earlier by using the targeted fidäl, by using the horizontal fidäl variant counting system, by bringing visual conceptualisations to approach the fidäls, by limiting the number of fidäls in the word the learners had to form, by identifying similarities and differences across the individual fidäl variants, etc. For example, Teacher 2 delivered the following guided practice:

- መ. ሊ: በ ሊ ምን ጽፏል? /bä li min s'ifänall?/
 T. /li:/ what did we write with /li/?
 ተ. ሊ,ሊ... /lilli/
 S. Lili...
 መ. ሊ,ሊ ማለት ምን ማለት ነው? /lilli malät mn malät näw?/
 T. What does Lili mean?
 ተ. ስም ነው፤ /süm näw/
 S. It is a name.
 መ. የ ምን ስም? /jämn süm?/
 T. What name is it for?
 ተ. የ ሰው ስም፤ /jäsäw süm/
 S. A person's name.

In this conversation, the teacher asked leading questions to teach three concepts: that they wrote the word /lili-ሊ,ሊ/ by using fidäl /li-ሊ/, that /lilli/ is a 'name' and that it is a 'person's name'. These kinds of engaging activities were used throughout the lesson of each teacher to scaffold learning. Teacher 4 also practiced guided practice in the following way:

- መ. ይህ ጅ ማን ናት? ('ቃ'ን እየጠቆመች) /jihʃʃi mann nat?/ ('qa' n ?ijjät'äqqomäʃʃ)
 T. What is this? (pointing to fidäl /qa/)
 ተ. ቂ
 S. /qi/
 መ. ቂ ከ ማጋር...? /qi kämann gar...?/
 T. /qi/ with whom...?
 ተ. ከ ቂ ጋር... /kä qi gar.../
 S. With /qi/..

- ሙ. እዚህ ጋር ነው? (ወደ ቀ እየ ጠቆመች) /ʔizih gar näw?/ (wädä ‘qä’ ʔijjät’äqqomäṯṯ)
- T. Is it here? (pointing to /qä/)
- ተ. አይደለም! /ʔajidällämm/
- S. No!
- ሙ. እዚህ ጋር ነው? (ቁን እየ ጠቆመች) /ʔizih gar näw?/ (‘qu’n ʔijjät’äqqomäṯṯ)
- T. Is it here? (pointing to /qu/)
- ተ. አይደለም! /ʔajidällämm/
- S. No!
- ሙ. እዚህ ጋር ነው? (ቃን እየ ጠቆመች) /ʔizih gar näw?/ (‘qa’n ʔijjät’äqqomäṯṯ)
- T. Is it here? (pointing to /qa/)
- ተ. አዎ! /ʔawä/
- S. Yes!

In the above classroom practice, the teacher led the learners to identify both similarities and differences between fidäl variants. She deliberately connected the individual fidäls to the wrong matches first to test the students’ understanding and to guide them to the correct matches.

Furthermore, guided practice was found in the start of the lessons when the teachers recapped the previous lesson and introduced the content for the day to the students. From the lessons observed for this study, two of the teachers (T1 & T3) organized their lessons both recapping the previous lesson and introducing the lesson of the day, whereas two other teachers (T2 & T4) avoided recapping and moved directly to introducing the content of the day’s lesson. Such guiding practices might be important for the students’ learning as they connect the previous lesson to the current lesson. Introducing the content of the new lesson also might help the students to prepare for what is coming next in the lesson.

The teachers also guided the students at the end of the lessons. Recapping was also used to review what they learnt during that lesson and the students needed to practice more on. Some of the teachers gave the students homework so that they could continue practicing at home and prepare for the next day. For example, Teacher 1 started her revision by saying ‘አሁን ሰዓታችን እያለቀ ስለሆነ እንደገና እንከልሳለን፤ ...መነጠል ማለት ምን ማለት ነው ብለናል? /ʔahun säataṯṯin ʔijjalläqä silähonä ʔindägäna ʔinkällisallän; mänät’t’äl malät min malät näw billänall?/ *Now, as our time is getting over, we recap again...what did we say segmenting means?*’ After saying this, the teacher started reviewing all the content of the lesson, which was an interactive/engaging activity. This is an example that is representative of all the teachers except Teacher 4.

Independent Practice

Independent practice is a stage where students do not receive their teachers’ support so that they can exercise by themselves after receiving instructional orientations and procedures. This explicit instructional move was implemented in a limited manner across the teachers. This seems to be in line with previous research, which claims that learners at this grade level would benefit more from guided practice and modelling rather than working independently on their own (Reutzler et al., 2014). Consistent with this, the data in this study

showed that students in all four classes were more involved in guided practice, modelling and interactive learning activities rather than in independent practices.

The observed independent practice activities were related to reading (recitations of *fidäls*, words and sentences) and writing activities. For example, students engaged in independent writing by copying *fidäls*, words, and sentences from the blackboard. Among the four teachers, Teacher 3 was the one who frequently used independent practice (46 times), compared to other teachers (2, 13 and 1 times for Teacher 1, 2 and 4, respectively). After presenting the lesson in a discussion form, Teacher 3 practiced the lesson content together with the learners guiding them first and then allowing them to practice independently, asking them to come out to the blackboard one by one. During the independent practice time, she monitored the students' work and provided feedback. For example, she invited them to start the independent practice as follows: “አሁን ለ ክፍሉ የ ማል ማን ነው? ፣ እዚህ ወጥቶ የ ማዞ ስ ቆ ጥር ...? /?ahun läkiflu jämmil mann näw; ?izih wät'ito jämmijasqot't'ir...?/ *Now, who can say it for the whole class? Who would like to come here and recite...?*” Subsequently, the teacher selected students who then took turns coming to the front of the class to perform the activities.

Moreover, the teachers instructed learners to practice independently in cooperation with their peers, without assistance from them. For instance, Teacher 1 said: “አሁን በ ጥን ድ በ ጥን ድ ሆናችሁ ዓ/ነ ገሩን ታነ ባላችሁ፤ /?ahun bät'ind bät'nd hōnaገገihū ?a/nägärūn tanäbballaገገihū/ *Now, you read the sentence in pairs*”. Teacher 2 also assigned various independent practice activities to her students. For instance, she asked them to create words of two *fidäls* by using each targeted *fidäl* from the day's lesson, saying: “አሁን በ ‘ለ’ ዘ ሮች ባለሁለት ባለሁለት ሆኔ ቃላት ማስ ረ ቱልኝ፤ /?ahun bā ‘lä’ zäroገገ balähulätt balähulätt hohe qalat mäsrütulij/ *Now, form words of two fidäls by using each variant of fidäl /lä/*”. This task was intended for students to complete on their own. In the observational data from Teacher 4, there was only one registered instance of independent practice, suggesting that this teacher seldom included such activities for her students.

In general, independent practices throughout the observed classes centred on recitation of *fidäls* and reading of words and sentences formed as extensions and demonstrations of the *fidäls* and their functions.

Feedback

Feedback as an explicit instructional move was observed in teaching practices of all four teachers, but also to varying degrees. Feedback was often provided in conjunction with other instructional moves like modelling, guided practice, independent practice, and monitoring. Feedback was delivered both orally after the learners' active reactions to the activities and in a written form by marking their exercise books for homework and classwork. Here are some examples of written feedback from Teacher 3: “በ ትክክል ጻፈው: /bätikkil s'afäw/ *write it correctly*; ይህ በ ትክክል አልተጻፈም: -/jih bätikkil ?altäs'afämm/ *this is not properly written...; በ ፊት ለ ፊት ጻፈው: /bäfit läfit s'afäw/ *write it on the front*”.*

Feedback was coded in the data either as explicit or implicit, for the teachers had their preferences to provide it in these modes (e.g., Teacher 2 and 3 provided more explicit feedback than Teachers 1 and 4). In the case of explicit feedback, the teachers for example were overtly stating their appreciation and approval of the learners' progress to encourage

and motivate them, or they could directly point out inaccuracies in their work, that their way is not accurate. Some of the feedback was accompanied by applause from the whole class initiated by the teachers. For example, when her students correctly formed words by using the variants of *fidäls* /ä -lä/ and /ጫ-mä/, Teacher 2 delivered word formation activities by using each variant of *fidäls* /ä -lä/ and /ጫ-mä/. Then, when the students correctly formed words by using each of the variants, she was saying: “ጎበአዎች! ጎበአዎች! /gobäz jäne lijōff! gobäzōff!/: clever, my children! Clever!” etc. When the children formed a word by using *fidäl* /ጫ-mä/, the teacher said, “ጎበአዎች! ለራሳችሁ አጭጭሱ! //gobäz jäne lijōff! /lärasaʃʃihu ʔac’äbc’ibu/ Clever, my children! Clap for yourself!”. These kinds of overt expressions of praise and encouragement were used among most of the teachers, which are again forms of explicit feedback. In addition, the feedback was constructive that it could inform and guide further student work. For example, Teacher 1 once said, “ይህ ትክክል አይደለም! ይህ ‘ቅ’ ነው? አይደለም! እነዚህ ‘ቃ’ እና ‘ቂ’ ናቸው። ነገ አስተካከህ ሰርተህ ና። /jih tikkil ʔajidällämm! jih ‘q’ näw? ʔajidällämm! ʔinnäzih ‘qa’ ʔinna ‘qi’ naʃʃäw; nägä ʔastäkakläh särtäh na/ This is not right! Is this /q/? It is not! These are /qa/ and /qi/. Come tomorrow with a correct one”. Thus, this is considered as a form of a corrective explicit feedback focusing on pointing out the student’s inaccuracy and encouraging the student stating that he/she should rework it for accuracy.

On the other hand, implicit feedback was delivered by the teachers in different ways. Some of the teachers, for example, left the students standing and gave the chance to other students to provide response to their wrong answers. In addition, they suggested other methods of doing things without saying this is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. For example, when a student made an independent practice of word reading by counting the individual *fidäls*, Teacher 3 said, “አንድ ላይ...!? አንድ ላይ...!? /ʔand lay...!?, ʔand lay...!/? Together...? Together...?”, which means that it is not right to separately read individual *fidäls* appearing in the word.

In general, feedback was one of the frequently employed explicit instructional moves, but there was also variation among teachers. Feedback was delivered both in isolation and in integration with other components. It was an extensive part of the instruction aimed to correct inaccuracies and improve learner performance. In some cases, however, the learners did not even understand that they were wrong, and they were standing for some time until the other students finished speaking, etc. In this case, explicit feedback seems to be more informative for the children at that grade level.

Discussion

Discussion was the third frequently implemented explicit instructional move in the observational data. All the teachers had quite interactive and conversational style in the observed classes, primarily using a question-and-answer format. The teachers asked questions first, waited for the students’ responses and then provided further elaborations, explanations and conclusions, or they presented content in conversation with the learners. Discussions found place mostly during and after direct explanation, guided practice and independent practices. The teachers were often the initiators of the discussion as highlighted in previous research (Archer & Hughes, 2011).

Teacher 3 was the one who had most registered cases of discussion (118 occurrences). Her teaching style seemed quite interactive, as she made students recurrently practice the whole lesson content interactively, first by modelling, then providing guided practice for the students, followed by their independent practices. To the contrary, Teacher 4 was comparatively more reserved and less interactive, resulting in less frequent occurrences of discussions in her class (only 10 times). Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 had 26 and 30 discussions, respectively, during their observed lessons. The following is a discussion excerpt from Teacher 1.

ጤ. ይህ ምን ድን ነው? /jih mindinn näw/

T. What is this? (Teacher pointing to the picture of the former Ethiopian 1 birr note)

ተ. ብር ../birr/

S. Birr

ጤ. ይህንን ብር ታውቁ ታላችሁ? አሁን ይሰራል? ገበያ ላይ አለ? /jihnn birr tawuqutallaſſihū? ?ahun jisärrall? gäbäja lay ?allä?/

T. Do you know this birr? Does it work now? Is it available on the market?

ተ. የለም... /jällämm/

S. It is not available.

ጤ. የለም! አይሰራም: : /jällämm! ?ajisäramm/

T. It is not available; it does not work.

In this example, the teacher tried to explain that the currency unit (Ethiopian Birr) was not available on the market, and that it is not in circulation anymore.

Summing up, although discussion seems to be one of the most frequently used explicit instructional moves in the data, there is variation in the frequency of its application by different teachers, suggesting that their teaching practices may differ.

Monitoring

There seems to be less variation in how often the teachers used monitoring as an explicit instructional move in the observed lessons. Monitoring in the data is usually associated with the teachers moving around the classroom closely observing the students' work, mainly when learners were given classwork in written or oral forms. Feedback and modelling were often integral parts of the teachers' monitoring efforts.

In monitoring the students' activities, for example, Teacher 3 instructed them to only raise their hands when she asked learners to answer questions. “እጅ ብቻ ነው የምረጥ ገደብ እጅ ብቻ...፤ -?idzdz biſſja näw jämmifälligäw; ?idzdz biſſja... *I need only a hand; only a hand*”. Implicitly, the teacher here meant that the students should keep quiet and raise their hands only if they wanted to respond, which was a mode of monitoring. Teacher 2 gave once a quite bold instruction in her monitoring move: “አሁን ጻፍ አለልሁም፤ ወደ ሰሌዳው ተመልከቱ፤ ሁላችሁም ደብተራችሁን ክደኑ፤ - ?ahun s’afu ?lalhummm; wädä säledaw tämälkätu; hullaſſihumm däbtäraſſihun kidänu; *now, I did not say write; look at the board; all of you close your exercise books.*” By saying this, she prohibited the students from undertaking tasks that she had not requested from them. When moving around the classroom while students were working on activities, Teacher 1 once said, “ፊደል ያለ መጣችሁ: በዚህ

መስ መር ምን ም ፊደል የለ ም፤ ‘በ’ዎች እና ‘ቀ’ዎች እዚህ መደር ደር አለባቸው፤ -fidäl jalamät’t’afñihu, bāzih mäsmär minmm fidäl jällämm; ‘bä’wəññ ‘qä’ wəññ ‘izih mäddärdär ሻalläbbaññäw. *Those of you who did not bring fidäl, there is no fidäl in this row; the /bä’s/ and the /qä’s/ should be arranged here*’. With this comment, she communicated that it was not appropriate to come to class without the fidäls. She also stated that the students should arrange the fidäls in front of them, so that they could use them as instructional inputs.

Our analysis shows that the teachers used monitoring in their classrooms, by posing questions, supervising the students’ work, issuing warnings or punishments for disruptions, and by directly reacting to the students’ behaviour to tell them what to do and not to do. Despite the teachers’ monitoring, students’ attention levels varied throughout the lessons, which might suggest that it might be necessary with even more frequent monitoring moves to keep the attention of the learners in the first grade.

Discussion

In this study, we investigated how four Amharic teachers implemented explicit instructional moves in their Amharic reading lessons in grade one. Focus on the implementation of reading instruction is important as persistent underachievement in reading literacy among various mother tongue languages in Ethiopia has been a matter of concern, with related factors such as provision of instructional materials, teacher competencies, and learner characteristics contributing to this issue (Melese & Gulie, 2019; Mohammed & Amponsah, 2018; Mupa & Chinooneka, 2015; Muthanje et al., 2020; Piper, 2010c). Investigating teaching practises in early reading and explicit instructional moves implemented in reading instruction can give some insight into what is focused on and not when it comes to teachers’ scaffolding of students’ early reading. We will discuss the findings from this study, regarding the variation between the teachers when it comes to the degree of support they provide to the students through explicit instructional moves. Furthermore, it is relevant to discuss what types of explicit instructional moves are more frequently used in the observed classrooms, and how this might affect the students’ early reading development.

All four teachers in this study used the explicit instructional moves of modelling, guided practice, and discussion most frequently. All these three explicit instructional moves can be said to support the youngest students in suitable ways as they then get scaffolding in the teacher’s mediation through both language and modelling (Vygotsky, 1978). Through the guided practice, the teachers also help the students to get a structure in their learning by, for instance, recapping the previous lesson and connecting it to the current topic. The teachers’ scaffolding by guided practice might be an important support for the students’ understanding of reading as it connects the different components in the language. Direct explanation and independent practice were less common explicit instructional moves in the observed classrooms. One possible explanation for this could be that the students are young and that they need a closer guidance of the teacher within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZDP) (Vygotsky, 1978). The students at this grade level might not yet be ready to understand more direct explanations or work independently (Reutzel et al., 2014). Nigist (in review) states that the content components tend to appear more in association with the nature of the writing

system, rather than just bound only with the theoretical suggestions of early reading theory for content presentation. Therefore, variations in the content delivery at the implementations level might suggest that while teachers implement systematic explicit instructional moves as recommended for early grades (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Connor et al., 2004; Dean, 2007; Doabler et al., 2012; NRP, 2000; Reutzel et al., 2014; Rupley et al., 2009; Sedita, 2005) and the contents are not bound only to the theoretical suggestions of previous research (NRP, 2000), the poor achievement among Amharic learners may not solely be attributed to factors such as instructional implementations. This study may suggest that future research needs to examine in more detail the links and relations between teaching practices, instructional content presentation and students' reading achievement.

Another important finding from this study, which also points out the complexities of early reading instruction, is that there is great variability between the four teachers regarding which moves they are using and to what extent they implement them in their teaching. While some teachers prefer certain instructional moves, others use these moves less frequently. This variation could potentially have an impact on how effectively students engage with reading content and how they develop their skills in different classrooms.

In the context of teaching reading in alpha-syllabic languages like Amharic, the central instructional content has been identified as predominantly grapho-phonological, focusing on *fidäls*, a grapheme representing a syllabic combination. Thus, it might be presumed that isolated phonological awareness instruction may not be as relevant as in alphabetic languages due to the writing system's characteristics (Nigist, in review). Teaching phonological elements separately is not practical in such a system, as they do not stand as meaningful units alone. Our data confirm this content focus, as the learning activities in the observed classrooms were mostly connected to the *fidäls*. This approach to reading instruction in alpha-syllabic languages diverges from the studies conducted on reading instruction in alphabetic languages. Consequently, it might be important to take into consideration that while some findings in the research on reading instruction might be plausible universally, others might be specific to different writing systems. Internationally, different scholars suggest systematic explicit instruction for early grade reading classes as the most effective tool for improving the children's reading outcomes (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Connor et al., 2004; Dean, 2007; Doabler et al., 2012; NRP, 2000; Reutzel et al., 2014; Rupley et al., 2009; Sedita, 2005). However, it should be discussed whether this recommendation applies universally and can be valid in all contexts. This consideration of research findings for reading instruction not being universal across all writing systems, may initiate more research into teaching practices as applied to early reading instruction in alpha-syllabic languages like Amharic.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

Based on the findings, we can conclude that all the teachers have used explicit instructional moves. However, there are differences in how they use them and to what extent. This can have implications for how the students are scaffolded in the first grade reading

instruction. As we know, scaffolding is of great importance for young learners. The following conclusions are drawn based on the study's finding.

In most cases, the elements are implemented interdependently that a single activity can manifest different elements, so they are not purely sequential but appear simultaneously too. In addition, the content seems to have been delivered systematically as seen from the nature of the activities and the teachers' creativities.

Writing systems might influence content presentation; the prevalent lesson content throughout the instruction is found to be the grapho-phonological component here too. Moreover, as the fidäls are naturally syllabic components made up of consonant and vowel phonemes making a single symbol, phonological features were integrated with phonics and made the content grapho-phonological, which has happened because of the nature of the alpha-syllabary writing system the Amharic language uses. Therefore, we conclude that the feature of writing systems needs to be considered while preparing instructional materials.

Recommendations

As has been seen in this study, there were more elements related with lesson opening and closing, which might demonstrate that systematic explicit instruction is not limited only to the elements that appeared in the frame of analysis. It might embrace more elements, so it might be prone to change depending on the nature of the activities.

The nature of writing systems needs to be considered in the preparation and implementation of curricular and instructional content. Having these foundations in mind, this study also suggests further research on the factors that could affect child learning achievement such as correlation between writing systems and the learning achievement.

Limitation of the Study

This study is not a correlational study or an experiment confirming that the causes of the achievement failure are (are not) the materials' content or the teachers' implementations. In addition, it might not be generalizable as it is a case study.

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Ethical Statement

In order to ensure that the research is conducted only for academic purpose, a permit letter from Addis Ababa University, department of Linguistics & Philology was collected. Then, Hawassa Education Bureau was communicated. The schools were informed, afterwards. Explanation about the purpose of the study and the nature of the data to be collected from the classroom observations, was given to the teachers. Then, the participants were selected based on their consent. To ensure anonymity, the respondents were also not required to provide any private information.

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