

Impacts of Action Research-oriented Upgrading Training on Initial and Early Reading Comprehension Performances of Students

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ABSTRACT

This article reports impacts of action research-oriented upgrading training given to teachers on early reading performances of Grades 2 & 3 students. Initially a baseline assessment was conducted to determine the initial reading performances of the students, and a survey was conducted to identify the training and experience teachers had in teaching initial and early reading skills. Based on the findings of the baseline assessment and the survey made, a training module was prepared focusing on the nature of teaching of initial and early reading skills, and initial up-grading training was given for nine days. Six months later, impact assessment of the initial training was conducted to see improvements in students' reading performances, and school visits were made to see changes of initial and early reading teaching practices and to investigate further training gaps that teachers might have needed. The training module was revised based on the feedbacks received from the initial impact assessment and the observations made. Based on the noticed training gap, refreshment training was given for the same teachers for five days. Six months later, an overall impact assessment was conducted to see an overall reading skills improvement of the students because of the trainings the teachers received. The finding shows that students' reading performances greatly improved because of the action research-oriented up-grading trainings. Percentages of Grade 2 students who failed to identify alphabets (62.6%) and who scored zero in early reading comprehension test (47%) reduced to 34.4% and 38.3% after the initial training, respectively, and dropped to 1.3% and 29.8% after the refresher training. Similarly, percentages of Grade 3 students (49.15%) who failed to read common words in the textbook dropped to 14.5% and 6.9% after the initial training and the refresher trainings, respectively.

Key words: Action Research-Oriented; Impacts; Initial and Early Reading

INTRODUCTION

The downfall of the military government (Derg) in May 1991, and the formation of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) in June 1991 marked a significant historical change in the history of language and education policies of the country. The Transitional Government passed many resolutions that restructured the whole country based on the federal system, and changed different policies that the country had followed nearly for a century.

The Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) declared that nations and nationalities in the country had the right to use their languages as medium of instructions at primary level (Grades 1-8). The declaration of using mother tongues as medium of instructions was reinforced by the education policy designed in 1994. The 1994 education policy underlined the need to change the Derg curriculum, design new syllabuses and develop new teaching materials at primary and secondary levels. According to the directions given in the policy document, the regional states, according to their respective decisions, developed new teaching materials in

L1 for their primary schools. For example, new teaching materials were developed in Afaan Oromo, Afar, Sidama, Somali, Tigriya, Wolaita, etc. for the first time. Some of these indigenous languages, nowadays, have BA, MA, and PhD programs, and more than 50 indigenous languages serve as medium of instructions at primary level in the country.

Though there is no single doubt about the advantages of using mother tongues as medium of instructions, there are some challenges (human and material resources) face in using L1 as a medium of instruction at the initial stage of which shortage/lack of experts who design syllabuses and develop L1 textbooks, trained and qualified L1 teachers, lack of materials resources such as journals, literature, newspapers, references in L1, etc., are very common. According to Johnson (1989), Rodgers (1989), Richards (2001) and Nation and Macalister (2009), there are a number of programmatic constraints both from outside (time and money available, hidden-curriculum imposed from some external agency or group, values from outside the curriculum) and from within the curriculum (knowledge, skills and attitudes

which the participants possess and which constrain their ability to perform their roles) that affect the quality of the design/renewal of a language curriculum and the language teaching materials produced.

Since 1994, rigorous efforts have been made to expand educational opportunities all over the country which has rapidly changed the school primary environment in Ethiopia: primary schools have been established in each and every 'kebele', the smallest government administrative structure in the country, but a number of research findings, government and non-government institutions/agencies seriously decry about the ever deteriorating quality of education at all levels, including the L1 reading and writing performances of students.

The Ethiopian Ministry of Education (MoE) is often heard saying that it is doing its best to ensure quality of education besides expanding educational opportunities further in every corner of the country. According to the USAID/ETHIOPIA's (2010) report, MoE is interested in ensuring quality of primary education across Ethiopia that it reached on consensus with USAID/ETHIOPIA to explore mechanisms of assessing the quality of initial and early reading performances and 'allow the MoE to unpack the variety of impediments to early grade literacy acquisition and inform the development of interventions to improve the quality of early reading teaching and learning'. With the funding from United States Agency for International Development (USAID)/Washington and USAID/ETHIOPIA and with the collaboration efforts of the MoE, Research Triangle Institute International (RTI), the Education and Training Quality Assurance Agency (ETQAA) and the Improving Quality in Primary Education Program (IQPEP), several core processes, and stakeholders, the intended early grade reading assessment (EGRA) was conducted in May and June 2010 in six languages (Afaan Oromo, Amharic, Somali, Sidaamu Afoo, and Hararigna) across eight regional states in the country (Addis Ababa, Amhara, Benishangul-Gumuz, Harari, Oromia, Somali, Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Region (SNNPR) and Tigray, encompassing almost 96% of Ethiopia's school population.

The main purpose of the assessment was to investigate Grades 2 and 3 children's reading skills (13,079 students in 338 schools) in the context of the General Education Quality Improvement Program (GEQIP) and the rapidly changing primary school environment in Ethiopia. Being leveled by MoE Minimum Learning Competencies, the assessment included a variety of subtasks such as alphabets reading fluency, phonemic awareness, common and unfamiliar words reading fluency, oral reading fluency, and performances in reading and listening comprehensions.

EGRA findings were released on October 31, 2010 showing surprising and shocking findings about the status of initial and early reading skills of Grades 2 and 3 students in the country. EGRA findings revealed that, on average, 33.9% of Grade 2 and 20% of Grade 3 students (Sidama/SNNP being the worst, 69.2% of Grade 2 and 54% Grade 3, while Addis Ababa being the best, 10.1% of Grade 2 and 3.8% of Grade 3 students) were found to be zero readers as they were unable to read a single word of a simple story targeted at the grade levels. Similarly, across the regions, on average, 47.7% of

Grade 2 and 30.2% of Grade 3 learners (again Sidama/SNNP being the worst, 72.8% of Grade 2 and 61.8% of Grade 3, while Addis Ababa being the best, 24.1% of Grade 2 and 9.7% of Grade 3 students) failed to read anything and answer a single reading comprehension question.

Being shocked by USAID/EGRA reports and with an intention to design relevant and appropriate intervention strategy, International Institute of Rural Reconstruction (IIRR), an international development, research and training institute, commissioned a consultant in June 2012 who assessed the initial and early reading skills of Grades 2 and 3 students in Gujii and Borena zones of the Oromia Regional National State. The main aim of IIRR/EGRA assessment was to identify the early reading achievements of Grades 2 and 3 students in order to establish baseline data of the early reading performances of the students at initial stage that would serve as a benchmark for comparing and contrasting changes, if any, in students early reading performances because of action research-oriented upgrading training teachers receive.

The IIRR/EGRA baseline assessment replicated the methodology employed by the USAID/EGRA and assessed the initial and early reading comprehension focusing on identifying alphabets, reading common words selected from the textbooks, reading invented words, and doing early reading comprehension test. It assessed the reading skills of 377 Grades 2 and 3 students in 18 lower primary schools supported by IIRR in Adolla and Goro Dola woredas of the Gujii Zone, and from Dillo and Moyalle woredas of the Borena Zone. Reports of the IIRR/EGRA baseline assessment revealed striking similarities with the findings of the USAID/EGRA. The baseline assessment revealed that 62.6% of Grade 2 students failed to identify correctly names of alphabets, and 47% of them scored zero in early reading comprehension test. Similarly, 49.1% of Grade 3 students failed to read common words selected from the textbook, and 47.2% of them scored zero in early reading comprehension test.

Both early reading assessments (USAID/EGRA and IIRR/EGRA) reported a number of factors that attributed to the very poor early reading performances of the students, and suggested a number possible intervention strategies of which changing/revising the textbooks, training teachers in L1 pedagogy, and providing ongoing professional development from time to time were the most evident ones.

According to the recommendations of the two assessments (USAID/EGRA and IIRR/EGRA), IIRR contacted the writer of this article and asked him to design/prepare a training package and train teachers teaching at lower primary (Grades 1-4) schools supported by IIRR in the Borena and Gujii zones of the Oromia Regional National State. This article reports the consultational intervention strategy designed and the action research-oriented upgrading training given to teachers to improve the initial and early reading performances of the students.

Rationale

Though the term "action research" was coined by Kurt Lewin in 1944, action research has blossomed in the last twenty years. Inevitably different people define it in different ways, but the universally agreed characteristic is that it is a re-

search designed to improve action. Theory is not created as end in itself, but to improve practice. The topics of enquiry, the methods of data collection, analytical techniques, and styles of presenting findings reflect the pragmatic needs of teachers; the intended audience may be no one other than the teacher researcher himself. The researcher engaged in this kind of enquiry often finds little in education literature to guide his/her enquiries and may need to invent procedures grounded in classroom practice in order to pursue the research. Burns (2010: 1) states that “The central idea of the *action* part of AR is to intervene in a deliberate way in the problematic situation in order to bring about changes and, even better, improvements in practice.”

Action research has fundamental features that distinguish it from other traditional academic research as it “has different purposes, is based in different relationships, it has different ways of conceiving knowledge and its relation to practice” (Reason & Bradbury, 2006a: 1). Thus, action research has been defined primarily as having a primary purpose of responding to local and practical concerns while producing practical knowledge useful to organizations and communities. The researcher can be seen as a change agent, someone who is directly and intentionally involved in the field while deliberately and actively engaged in a change process aimed at improvement (Walsham, 2006). Secondly, action research is founded on a collaborative and participatory research process (Greenwood & Levin, 1998) in which the degree of involvement of practitioners varies, ranging from consultation with practitioners to close collaboration in all stages of the shared project (Peters & Robinson, 1984). Hence, in contrast to traditional research where the researcher is solely responsible for determining research design, action research invites practitioners into the research process. Thirdly, action research draws upon ‘extended epistemology’, as it extends ways of knowing beyond the theoretical knowledge of academia (Heron & Reason, 2001). Finally, action research has a different relation to practice as it concerns concrete practices of specific people in specific places (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2003). Thus, the aim of action research is not to develop theory that can stand above practice, but rather to develop theory that is grounded in the particularities of the specific situations that practitioners confront.

Since its inception in 1971 by John Heron, participatory research, also known as co-operative inquiry method, has been applied by practitioners in many fields of professional and personal development. In the field of language teaching, according to Burns (1999: 12) is to bring about change in social situations as a result of group problem-solving collaboration that brings together theoretical, practical, and experiential knowledge for reflections. Burns (1999: 13) states that collaborative action research encourages participants to “examine their existing assumptions, values and beliefs within the sociopolitical cultures of the institutions in which they work.” Thus, the participants collaborative action research inevitably examine what happens to the values they hold, and which they regard as intrinsic to transaction they are engaged in. Such critical appraisal of practice takes in three different factors which impinge upon practice, and shape the

activities within it- the perceptions and values of different participants, the official expectations and values embodied in the curriculum. Kemmis and McTaggart (1988: 5) state, “The approach is only action research when its collaborative, though it is important to realize that the action research of the group is achieved through the critically examined action of individual group members.”

Action research offers three modes of self-reflective practices: first, second, and third-person action research. First-person action research speaks to the researcher’s ability to cultivate a critical approach to her own understanding and research practice, and in general, to her way of being and acting in the world (Heen, 2005; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2003). Furthermore, several scholars suggest that first-person research is best supported when conducted in the company of colleagues who can both support and challenge the researcher through a collaborative inquiry process which may evolve into a second-person inquiry (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Second-person action research brings people together to discuss issues of mutual concern and themes of shared interest, and in third-person research, the inquiry is extended to groups too large to engage in face-to-face communication. Recently, grounding action research practice in first person inquiry has gained growing recognition (Marshall & Mead, 2005), and it has been argued that before we can engage in change processes aimed at improving society, we need to be willing ‘to engage in transformation of consciousness and behavior at personal and interpersonal levels’ (Reason & Bradbury, 2006b: xxvi).

According to Burns (2010), many teachers find out that training courses they receive at teacher training institutions often do not match the reality of actual teaching practices in school environment. Action research is an appealing mechanism of looking more closely at puzzling classroom issues for teachers. Burns (2010: 21) identifies five advantages of action research for teachers’ professional development: (a) it helps teachers to evaluate and reflect on their teaching with the aim of bringing about continuing changes and improvements in practice; (b) it helps the participants to identify and investigate teaching-learning issues within a specific social situation, the school or classroom: (3) it gives communities of participants the opportunity to investigate issues of immediate concern collaboratively within their own social situation.; (d) it shows them that changes in practice will be based on collecting and analyzing data systematically, and (e) it invests the ownership for changes in curriculum practice in the teachers and learners who conduct the research and is therefore empowering.

Mertler (2013) says that connection between action research and professional development helps an educator to focus on specific area of professional growth that an individual (or, as part of a collaborative team) identifies as being an area of his/her professional practice that needs improvement. Thus, she recommends the need to focus on schools, classrooms, students, and their improved achievement in conducting action research in specific situations that require adequate training and support, the provision of time, the encouragement of collaboration, and the inclusion of rewards or recognition.

Objectives

The general aim of the intervention strategy was to examine the impact(s) of action research-oriented upgrading training given to teachers on early reading performances of Grades 2 & 3 students. In other words, it targets examining the improvement(s), if any, of the early reading skills of lower primary students because of action-oriented initial and refresher trainings teachers receive on teaching initial and early reading skills.

By training teachers in designing/modifying early teaching activities/tasks, raising-awareness about early teaching skills and training them in techniques of teaching early reading skills, the action research-oriented upgrading training specifically aimed at helping learners to:

1. Identify names of alphabetical letters without rote memorization;
2. Develop skills of reading words that signify objects/things in their surroundings and matching the words with the objects/things they signify;
3. Develop skills of re-creating and reading short sentences by reordering jumbled words;
4. Improve early reading comprehension skills through comprehension exercises.

METHODOLOGY

Thus, an action research-oriented up-grading training strategy that had seven, but interrelated, phases was designed in order to examine the changes/improvements likely be seen in the ever deteriorating early reading skills of the lower primary children in schools because of the action research-oriented up-grading training given to teachers. The designed intervention strategy targeted two important issues: to show teachers how they can develop/modify early reading activities/tasks using resources available in school surroundings, and to train teachers in teaching early reading skills that mixed both a synthetic or phonic and analytic or global approaches in the specific contexts of the schools.

Intervention

The intervention phases were the followings.

Phase I: Reviewing existing textbooks and preparing training module

Based on the recommendations of the USAID/EGRA and IIRR/EGRA, Grades 1-4 Afaan Oromo textbooks were assessed to see to what extent they promoted early reading skills, identify gaps they might have and prepare a training module to fill-in the gaps to help the learners to develop early reading skills. It was also hoped that textbooks might had ill-designed early reading activities/tasks that might have not helped the children effectively to develop the skills, and that teachers might have lacked experience and expertise to modify/prepare appropriate early reading activities/tasks that matched the specific contexts of the students. Research findings in Ethiopia indicate that teachers in the country are expected to implement strictly the prescribed textbooks that modifying/

adapting activities/tasks in the textbooks are considered as deviations from normally accepted norms that often result in criticisms and, even, punishments (Alemu 2009, 2010). Thus, it was hoped that the intended training module would fill-in the gaps of the then existing textbooks and also would train the lower primary teachers in modifying/adapting the ill-designed early reading activities/tasks and would also show teachers mechanisms of preparing teaching aids that would fit the specific context of their students. It was also planned to involve supervisors concerned from district education offices and directors/vice-directors of the target schools in the initial and refresher training in order to alleviate possible resistance from school administration in attempts that were to be made in implementing the training inputs.

Phase II: Preparing the training module

Module for the training was prepared based on the principles gained from the task-based approach to teaching initial reading and early reading comprehension skills so that the teachers would practice teaching reading during the training sessions. The module focused on the nature of early reading tasks/activities to be conducted in the classrooms to help learners develop the initial reading and early comprehension skills targeted in the Grades 1-4 syllabuses.

Tasks of the early reading and comprehension skills at the primary level focused on teaching initial reading and ways of helping students develop different reading skills at early grades of the lower primary level. They were designed in such a way they that would help teachers to exercise different approaches to teaching initial reading and reading comprehension skills. The designed tasks/activities for teaching early reading and reading comprehension skills guided the teacher-trainees to capture and exercise:

- purposes for reading in general, and the concept of teaching reading and comprehension skills at early grades;
- texts that students read at early grades, and how they could exploit them;
- different reading skills at lower grades;
- nature of reading tasks to be used at lower grades;
- types of comprehension questions to be set to train learners in order to help them develop different reading skills at lower grades;
- advantage and disadvantage of each comprehension question type;
- problems of reading texts in the textbooks and how to improve/modify them;
- problems of comprehension questions in the textbooks and how to improve/modify them;
- techniques of teaching reading and comprehension skills at lower grades, and sample materials/demonstration lessons used for teaching reading.

Though language skills are usually classified into four (speaking, listening, reading and writing), the four skills are highly integrated in real life. Therefore, attempts were made to integrate teaching reading and writing skills in the preparation of the teaching module.

Phase III: Giving initial training

The initial training was conducted at Negelle Borena and Yabello training centers for nine days at each center. All in all, 65 participants from the two zones received the initial training at the two centers. Of these, forty-seven were teachers drawn from 18 lower primary schools from the two zones, and the rest were supervisors and coordinators (12) and directors/vice-directors (6).

Phase IV: Visiting sample schools

Three months later after the initial training, 10 schools were visited from the two zones along with IIRR technical staff, supervisors and coordinators to see impacts of the initial training, if any, on teaching practices of the trained-teachers and changes in school environments, and identify the training gap the teachers still needed.

Phase V: Assessing impacts of the initial training

Five months after the schools field visits, IIRR commissioned an independent consultant to assess the first impact assessment in order to see improvement of the students' reading skills, if any, because of the inputs of the initial training and follow-up school field visits made in comparison with the reading performances reported by the earlier conducted baseline assessment (IIRR/EGRA) before the intervention. Thus, the first impact assessment replicated the methodology used by USAID/EGRA and IIRR/EGRA.

Phase VI: Revising the training module and conducting refresher training

Based on the feedbacks received during the field visits at sample schools and that of the first impact assessment, the training module was revised and refresher training was conducted at Adola and Yabello centers for five days. The refresher training was given seven months later after the report of the first impact assessment targeting the same participants who had received the initial training.

Phase VII: Assessing overall impacts of the intervention strategy

An overall impact assessment was conducted by the consultant seven months later after the refresher training. The main aim of the overall impact assessment was to see the improvements seen on the early reading skills of Grades 2 and 3 students because of the initial and refresher trainings the teachers had received. Thus, this paper compares and contrasts the early reading performances of the students as reported by the three assessments: IIRR/EGRA (baseline assessment, impact assessment of the initial training and overall impact assessment).

Procedures

The trainee-centered approach was employed in conducting the training sessions. The trainee-teachers did themselves

the tasks designed in the training module, and then discussed the advantages and disadvantages of each task in terms of specific skills intended to be developed by their learners/children. The training followed the following distinctive, but interrelated procedures.

Brainstorming/Reflections on prior knowledge

Before the teacher-trainees did the tasks in the module, they were encouraged to explore their prior knowledge about teaching reading skills at lower grades. In other words, they were asked to write down and discuss what they already knew about teaching reading skills at early grades. Thus, they were asked to write down what they knew, and what they did not know and what they wanted to know about teaching skills at lower grades as follow.

Write in the following table 'what you already know', and 'you do not know' and thus 'you want to know' about teaching early reading skills (Table 1).

Reflections on previous knowledge and experience enabled the teacher-trainees to compare and contrast the perceptions/prior knowledge they had and the inputs they received from the initial up-grading training sessions.

Individual work

The teacher-trainees were made to do each of the training tasks in the module first individually by writing down the nature, purpose (what students get from doing each task), and the advantages and disadvantages of each task. This encouraged each teacher-trainee to establish prior perceptions and belief systems about early reading skills and teaching early reading skills that might be modified and readjusted because of the inputs of the initial training.

Group work and presentations

The teacher-trainees were made to bring together what they did individually and then discussed in groups comparing and contrasting their views/notes as depicted in Figure 1. Group works focused on analyzing the nature of reading activities in the Afaan Oromo textbooks and those included in the training module. The teacher-trainees were made to examine the nature of the reading activities/tasks (their designs, purposes, advantages and disadvantages) of the Afaan Oromo textbooks and those included in the training module. This gave the teacher-trainees the opportunity to reflect more and more on the nature of reading activities/tasks to be used in lower grades, and the opportunity to learn from each other that they would practice when they would go back to their

Table 1. Reflections on previous knowledge and experience

What I already know about teaching early reading skills	What I do not know and want to know about teaching early reading skills

respective schools. The group activities also showed the teacher-trainees how to promote collaborative language learning in the classrooms.

Whole-group discussions

During the whole-group discussions, the teacher-trainees presented what they had discussed in groups through their group leaders/secretaries as seen in Figure 2. After each group's presentation, whole-group discussions were conducted according to the following procedures focusing on feedback comments. First, the teacher-trainees were encouraged to give their own comments and suggestions on the presentations of each group's work. Then, the trainer and the IIRR technical experts gave feedback comments on the presentation of each group and on the comments/suggestions given by other teacher-trainees for possible reconsiderations/revisions. This enabled each group to realize its strengths (what it did well), its gaps (areas that needed improvements) and ways of doing it better. Finally, each group revised its group work incorporating the feedback comments/suggestions received and included in its portfolio for using them in teaching early reading skills in schools.



Figure 1. Group work (Yabello)

Preparing own activities/tasks and peer-teaching sessions

Based on the inputs gained from the training module, and feedback comments received during the group works and whole-group discussions, the teacher-trainees were encouraged to design their own reading activities/tasks in groups, and were made to conduct peer-teaching session through their team leaders/secretaries as shown in Figures 3 & 4. Each peer-teaching session was followed by feedback comments and suggestions from peers, the trainer and the IIRR technical experts. The feedback comments focused on the aim and nature of the designed reading activity/task, relevance of the activity/task to its specific aim, appropriateness of the teaching aids/methods used, and feasibility of the designed activity/task and the employed teaching aid/method to the specific local context of the students. Incorporating the feedback comments received from peers, the trainer and the IIRR technical experts, each team revised the activities/tasks it developed activity/task, modified the teaching aids/methods it used, and added to its portfolio for using them in schools.

Sum-up session

On the last day of the initial training, the teacher-trainees were made to summarize main areas covered during the



Figure 3. Peer-teaching session (Adola)



Figure 2. Presentation of group work (Adolla)



Figure 4. Peer-teaching session (Yabello)

training sessions in groups using the guidelines given in Table 2. This was aimed at helping the teacher-trainees to recapture main areas/issues covered and reexamine main training inputs gained with regard to the nature of reading skills to be developed, reading activities/tasks to be used, types of early reading comprehension questions to be set, and nature/type of teaching aids/methods to be employed in teaching initial reading and early reading comprehension skills at lower primary schools (Grades 1-4). Procedures described in sub-sections 6.3, 6.4 and 6.5 were used to enrich each group's summary.

Sorting out specific inputs of the initial training

At the end of the initial training session, the teacher-trainees were encouraged to sort out specific new inputs they gained from the initial training (that they had never used before in teaching reading and early reading comprehension skills) that they would like to exercise in their respective classrooms using the following tables.

New inputs I have got from the training that I would like to exercise

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Making promises and setting targets

At the end of the initial training, the teacher-trainees, directors and supervisors were made to make promises to strive to their best potentials to implement the inputs of the training and set targets to be achieved in improving initial and early reading skills of their students by completing the following statements.

We promise to do our best to implement the inputs of the training we have received and reduce the percentages of students that could not identify alphabets and that could not read common words (baseline assessment) from 62.6% and 49% to _____% and _____%, respectively.

We promise to do our best to implement the inputs of the training we have received and reduce the percentages of students that scored zero in reading comprehension (baseline assessment) from 47% to _____%.

FINDINGS

Results of the Textbook Analysis

As mentioned earlier, the main aim of the intervention strategy was to improve the early reading skills of lower primary children (might be attributed to teachers' gaps in teaching) by giving up-grading training on teaching initial reading and early reading skills to their teachers. It was felt that students' very poor performances in early reading skills might be attributed to ill-designed early reading activities/tasks in the textbooks (they might have lacked appropriate and adequate tasks/activities that train learners in early reading and reading comprehension skills). Thus, the intervention strategy included analysis of early reading activities/tasks used in the textbooks.

Results of the textbooks analysis indicate that the types of reading tasks/activities that train learners in early reading skills are extremely rare in Grades 1- 4 Afaan Oromo textbooks. Appropriate early reading tasks/activities that match L1 learners are almost none in Grade 1 Afaan Oromo textbook. For example, the textbook does not consider learners' L1 proficiency and wastes time on asking students to greet each other and alike, which students perfectly do in L1 even before starting schooling. Grades 2-4 textbooks have also the same problem. Tasks/Activities that train learners in developing key reading skills at early stages that include raising phonological awareness (discriminating different spoken sounds in word), phonics (sound to letter relationship), fluency (ability to read orally aloud or silently with speed, accuracy, and proper expression and contributing to comprehension), vocabulary (acquiring sight vocabulary, inferring new words), and comprehension (meaning-making) are not properly and adequately addressed in the textbooks. Discussions conducted with the target lower primary teachers in the two zones show that the training they received at teacher

Table 2. Summary of the overall training inputs

Teaching initial reading at Grade 1		
Approaches	How to conduct in the classroom	Advantages/and disadvantages
Teaching initial and early reading skills at Grades 1 and 2		
Activities/tasks	How to conduct in the classroom	Advantages/and disadvantages
1		
2.....		
Teaching early reading and early reading comprehension skills at Grades 3 and 4		
Types of comprehension questions	Specific reading skill they train students	Advantages/and disadvantages of such comprehension questions
1.		
2.....		

training colleges were not linked to the nature of early reading skills to be developed at lower primary schools.

Inappropriate Pre-Service Training

As mentioned earlier, a number of factors have been attributed to the poor reading proficiency of students at lower primary level of which teachers' poor teaching methodology is often decried by many. Pieces of evidence also show that teacher training colleges do not offer courses on teaching initial reading and earlier reading comprehension skills. The module on language teaching focuses on general teaching methods without making any specific reference to teaching L1 or L2 at the lower primary level. It has been noticed that the training courses given at the teacher training colleges are not logically linked to the lower primary language curriculum. In other words, trainees do not receive training on teaching specific language skills such as reading, writing, speaking, listening, grammar and vocabulary at lower primary level. In addition, there are no courses on modifying and adapting language textbooks to specific situations of the students, though theoretically it is often advocated by many. Therefore, results of the textbook analysis have also helped to narrow the gap by giving practical-oriented in-service training to the lower primary teachers on the nature of initial and early reading activities/tasks and showing ways of adapting/modifying ill-designed initial and early reading activities/tasks in the textbooks to meet specific contexts of their students.

Impacts of the Initial and Refresher Training

Two impact assessments were conducted to see impacts of the initial and refresher trainings the teachers received on the early reading performances of Grades 2 and 3 students in identifying alphabets, reading common words in the textbooks and invented words, and in doing reading comprehension tests in comparison with the scores of the students reported by the baseline assessment before the up-grading trainings.

The first impact assessment was conducted five months after the initial training, and the final version of the report was produced two months later with the title '*Early Grade Reading Assessment of Grades 2 and 3 Students in Selected Schools of Goro Dola, Moyale, Dillo and Adolla Woredas of Oromiya Region*'. The main aim of the second/overall impact assessment was to see the overall impacts of the training, and carried out seven months after the refresher training. The final report version of the second/overall impact was produced with the title '*Early Grade Reading Assessment of Second Grade and Third Grade Students in Selected Schools of Adolla, Dillo, Goro Dola, Moyale, and Yabello Woredas of Oromiya Region*'.

Results of the baseline assessment and that of the two impact assessments are presented in Figures 5 and 6. Figure 5 show percentages of Grades 2 and 3 students who failed to identify alphabets and read common words in the textbooks, and that scored zero in reading comprehension tests in the three assessments. Figure 6 depicts aggregate mean scores of Grades 2 and 3 students in identifying alphabets, reading

common words in the textbooks and invented words, and in doing comprehension tests.

As the above graph shows, the baseline assessment result shows that 62.6% of Grade 2 students failed to identify correctly names of alphabets correctly. However, results of the impact assessments of the initial and refresher trainings show that percentages of Grade 2 students who failed to identify alphabets dropped to 34.4% and 1.3%, respectively. This shows the improvement of 61.3% that can be attributed to the impacts of the initial and refresher trainings the teachers the teachers received. Likewise, result of the baseline assessment shows that 47% Grade 2 students who scored zero in the reading comprehension test dropped 38.3% because of the initial training and to 29.8% because of both the initial and refresher trainings. This shows the overall success of 17.2% in helping Grade 2 students to perform better in doing the comprehension test. In other words, after the refresher training, the percentage of Grade 2 students that could not identify letters radically dropped to 1.3% from that of 62.6, and percentage of students that scored zero in doing comprehension test to 29.8% from that of 47%, recording the success of 61.3% and 17.2%, respectively.

Similarly, the reading performances of Grade 3 students greatly improved following the initial and refreshment trainings given to the teachers. As Figure 5 above reveals, result of the baseline assessment shows that 49.1% of Grade 3 students failed to read common words in the textbook that was dropped to 14.5% and 6.9% after the initial and the refresher trainings, respectively. It is also shown in Figure 5 above that 47.2% of Grade 3 students who scored zero in reading comprehension test dropped to 33.3% and 12.1% after the initial and refresher trainings, respectively. This implies the records of 42.2% and 35.1% successes in helping Grade 3 students in reading common words in the textbook and in performing in the reading comprehension test, respectively.

The conducted impact assessments also show aggregate mean improvements of Grades 2 and 3 students in identifying letters, reading common and invented words, and in doing comprehension tests because of the initial and refresher trainings. Figure 6 below indicates the aggregate mean scores improvements in identifying letters, reading common and invented words, and in doing comprehension tests.

As Figure 6 shows, results of the baseline assessment show that the calculated aggregate mean score of Grades 2 and 3 students in identifying alphabets was 34.2 that improved to 67.9 and 75.3 following the initial and refresher trainings. This implies the improvements of mean scores of 35.7 and 41.1 because of the initial and refresher trainings given to the teachers, respectively.

Likewise, aggregate mean scores in reading familiar and invented words of Grades 2 and 3 students improved greatly after the trainings given to the teachers. As indicated in Figure 6 above, findings of the baseline assessment show that the aggregate mean score of Grade 2 and 3 students in reading familiar words in the textbooks was 12.4 that improved to 33.1 and 38.1 mean scores after the initial and refresher trainings, respectively. This implies the improvement of 41.1 aggregate mean score in reading common words in the textbooks because of the trainings the teachers received.

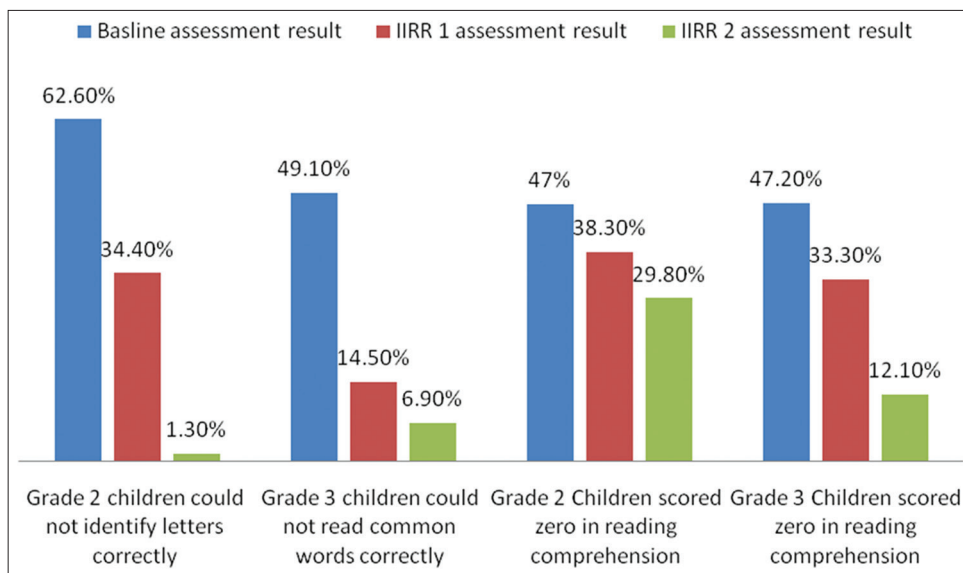


Figure 5. Grades 2 and 3 non-readers

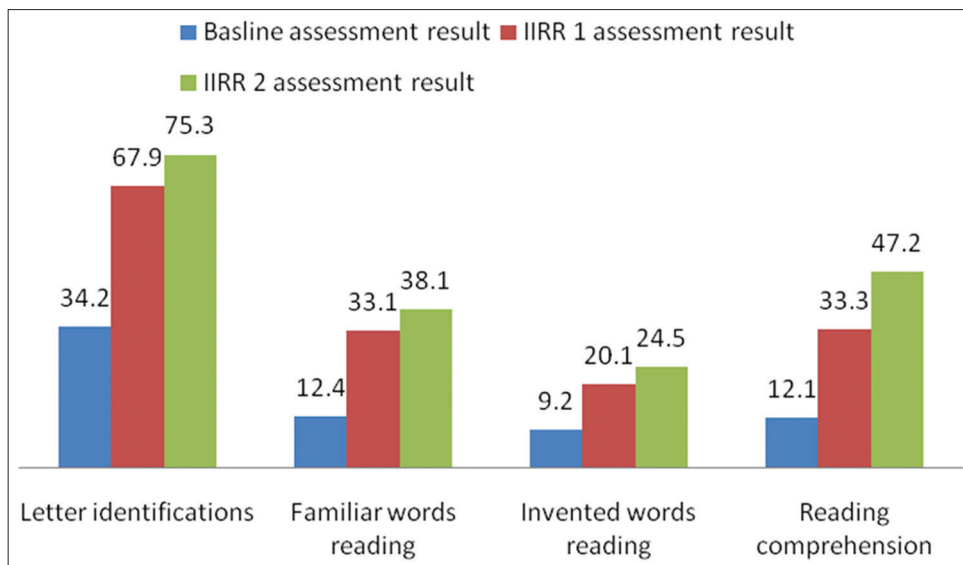


Figure 6. Aggregate mean scores

Figure 6 also shows that Grade 2 and 3 students showed significant improvement in reading invented words- words which did not appear in the textbooks. The aggregate mean score of the students who could read new/invented words was 9.2 as reported in the baseline assessment that improved to the mean score of 20.1 because of the initial training and to 24.5 after the refresher training. This entails that aggregate mean score improvement of 15.3 in reading uncommon words that can be attributed to the impacts of the trainings given to the teachers.

It is also depicted in Figure 6 above that reading comprehension performances of the students improved greatly after the trainings. It is shown in the Figure that the aggregate mean score of the students in reading comprehension test was 12.1 that improved to the aggregate mean score of 33.3 after the initial training and to 47.3 after the refresher training, recording the overall improvement of 35.2 mean score.

Perceptions about the Training

At the end of the training session, the trainee-teachers were asked to reflect on the training processes and likely impacts of the training inputs on their early reading teaching behaviors. Almost all gave similar comments and had similar feelings that have been merged to avoid unnecessary repetitions.

- The inputs we have gained from only a- two week’s training are much better than the inputs of all training the courses we received at teacher training colleges for two years;
- We should have received this training at the beginning of this academic year;
- We had felt that we knew everything about teaching reading at lower grades. The training we have now received, however, has enabled us to realize that we did know, almost, nothing about the nature of teaching reading skills to be developed at early grades, and techniques of helping learners to develop the early reading skills;

- We wish all lower primary teachers in Ethiopia received such an interesting and important training that they do not normally receive at teacher training colleges;
- We consider ourselves lucky to be trained by such resourceful experts, and
- We would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to IIRR for organizing and sponsoring such an extremely invaluable training and the trainer for his time, approaches, and his unreservedly sharing us his knowledge and experience.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SIMILAR CONTEXTS

Nowadays, very poor reading performances of students at the lower primary level are among the top concerns of African nations. Reports of studies conducted in some African nations such as Ghana, Kenya, Mali, Senegal, Tanzania and Uganda show that quite a majority of students who complete lower primary education are non-readers. This implies that findings of USAID/EGRA and IIRR/EGRA are not peculiar to the Ethiopian context.

Experiences gained from the practice-oriented intervention action project, however, show us the possibility of improving the ever deteriorating reading performances of students within a short period of time by training teachers in teaching methodologies in early reading skills, and showing teachers ways in which they can modify/design tasks/activities that fit specific contexts of the students. Therefore, it is very important to indicate implications of the training processes and outcomes in designing up-grading in-service training for teachers in similar contexts.

Results of this practical-oriented intervention training strategy have shown a number of interesting findings about the teachings of initial reading and early reading skills at lower primary schools. Firstly, results of the textbooks analysis confirm that reading activities in the textbooks are ill-designed that they do not train learners in early reading and reading comprehension skills. The reading tasks/activities are not prepared based on recent findings on teaching initial reading and early reading comprehension skills at lower primary level.

Secondly, the teacher training program or 'a curriculum within a curriculum' that gives teaching materials spirit is not linked to the 'host' curriculum'. In a coherent curriculum, teacher training would clarify policy aims as expressed in the syllabus, would show how ends and means relate, how they are embedded in the teaching program and how particular classroom procedures complement the program materials and optimize learning opportunities. However, teacher training program in Ethiopia is not logically linked to the lower primary language curriculum. As a result, trainees do not receive appropriate training on teaching specific language skills such as reading, writing, speaking, listening, grammar and vocabulary at lower primary level in the pre-service program.

Teachers who teach at lower primary level do not receive any training on teaching initial reading and early reading comprehension skills at lower primary level, and on ways

of adapting/modifying textbooks to specific contexts of the schools and students. These two factors (ill-designed textbooks and lack of relevant/appropriate training) result in very poor reading proficiency of the students at lower primary level.

Thirdly, the practical-oriented in-service training given yielded encouraging and motivating outcomes. Students' performances in letter recognitions, reading familiar and invented words, and reading comprehension tests have shown significant improvements. This implies the need to link theory to practice in training programs, and the need to contextualize training programs to specific contexts. The fact that the teachers have very positive attitudes and perceptions about the training shows that teachers are interested in training programs that clearly demonstrate them how to implement or exercise teaching methods that have positive learning outcomes.

Fourthly, practice-oriented training program can easily change teachers' attitudes and their teaching behaviors. Observations made during the schools visits show that schools established reading corners and teachers prepared different teaching aids for teaching letters, words and sentences using available local resources.

Finally, experience gained from this practice-oriented up-grading training underlines that supports of technical and the supportive staff such as directors and supervisors contribute a lot to the improvements of the teachers' teaching behaviors that greatly improve academic successes of students in schools. This entails the importance of informing and involving bodies and stakeholders concerned in efforts to be made to improve learning and teaching activities in schools.

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