CHALLENGES FACED BY LOWER PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS IN TEACHING PHONIC

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the challenges primary school teachers face in teaching phonics. Phonics Instruction according to the Open University Reading Development Course Team (1977, p.170) is "any method of teaching which draws attention to the relationship between phonemes and graphemes". The idea of phonemes brings to mind the teaching of sounds while the concept of graphemes deals with the writing system. Thus, every phonics instruction guides learners toward mastering reading and writing. Qualitative and quantitative research approaches were used to understand lower primary school teachers' challenges in teaching Phonics. Also, research observation and questionnaires were used as instruments to collect data through a research survey. Three lower primary school teachers from Government Primary School Atuakum Bamenda were selected respondents. The findings reveal that teaching Phonics to early elementary pupils has been very challenging for lower primary school teachers as they face many difficulties with the appropriate method. The results also reveal that only 66.6% of teachers know and understand Phonics, which prompts us to deeply research and understand the origin of their challenges in teaching phonics.

Keywords: Phonics, Phonics Teaching.

1- Introduction

Reading and writing skills are key language literacy skills which are expected to be acquired at the primary school level of education through the introduction of phonics by primary school teachers. A good phonics lesson well assimilated in primary school will probe learners to be both competent and performant in reading and writing skills; while a weak teaching method of phonics by teachers, will lead learners to subsequent challenges in reading and writing of the English language which represent the basic for good performance in other subjects (Okwara, 2009). Curving these challenges primary school teachers encounter in teaching phonics and posing possible solutions constitute the core of this work.

Various studies have been done about primary school teachers' experience in the preliminary reading and writing instruction process (Frazer, 2001; Mando, 2008 and Munsaka, 2011). Therefore, being a teacher is a broad, multifaceted and complex process, especially in the early grades, where teachers need sound

subject knowledge and training on how to teach Phonics. It is generally agreed that the input of the language teacher is an important factor for all children learning the language (Swain, 1988; Lightbown, 1992; Gass, 1997; Anthony, 2008; Ellis and Collins, 2009). Thus, as Eposi (2009) indicates, the learners' output may depend significantly on the teacher's input. Anthony (2008), for example, argues that both the quality and the amount of language input children experience around them influence both native language and second language acquisition. In other words, children who receive more input develop higher and better language skills than those who receive less input (Hart & Risley, 1995). This means those exposed to less input are deprived of the adequate amount and quality of language needed to give maximum output. Kimberly, (2009) points out that, for teachers to be able to administer relevant input to learners, the former must be knowledgeable in their area of study. In other words, following Metuge (2006), it is professionally necessary for a teacher to be familiar with pupils' difficulties in sounds reading and differentiation. These authors imply that to teach Phonics successfully, the teacher is expected to have a good mastery of the English language and be adequately knowledgeable of the salient facts that meet the needs of learners. According to Bachman and Palmer (1996), these facts consist of knowledge related to the communicative goals of the language user and the context in which the language is used functional ability, and socio-linguistic knowledge. Hence, effective teaching can partly be measured by a teacher's mastery of the language, which could be a prime predictor of students' learning. In light of this view, Fakeye (2012) points out that there is a high correlation between what teachers know and what they teach, arguing that a teacher whose understanding of a given subject is through using clearer language and more connected discourse and he/she is capable of providing better explanations than a teacher whose background is weak.It is essential to identify the area where teachers face challenges and the methods they must use in primary reading and writing instruction to improve the quality of the teaching process of Phonics and ensure that teachers work comfortably.

Reading and writing skills are key language literacy skills expected to be acquired at the lower primary school level of education through the introduction of Phonics by teachers. Contrarily, in Cameroon, some lower primary school teachers still face many challenges in teaching these essential language literacy skills (reading and writing), which serve as a base for pupils' understanding of all other subjects.

The following research questions were set to guide this investigation:

1. What are the challenges lower primary school teachers of Government Primary School Atuakum face in teaching phonics?
2. What can be done to help primary school teachers overcome those challenges of Phonics teaching?

From the above research questions, the following objectives and hypotheses were put forth:

1. Investigate the challenges Bamenda Atuakum Government's lower primary school teachers face in Phonics teaching.
2. Explore the possible solutions that could be brought forth to overcome those challenges.

H1: Lower primary school teachers of Government Primary School Atuakum Bamenda face no challenges in teaching phonics.

H2: There are no possible solutions to help overcome the challenges in phonics teaching.

2- **Literature Review**

The review of related literature examined the conceptual, empirical and theoretical frameworks. The conceptual framework looked at concepts related to the topic, such as Phonics (reading and writing) and phonics teaching. Empirical study reviews related works from other researchers to support and improve on this work. The Constructivism theory by Vygotsky (1978) was used in this work. The reason for choosing this theory is based on the fact that learners must construct their own knowledge, but before that happens, they will have to be well taught. One of the methods that have proven to be an effective method in the teaching of reading and writing has been the phonics method which is the system of teaching reading and writing that builds on the alphabetic principle; that is, the relationship between letters or groups of letters and their corresponding sounds and spelling. Much research has been done on reading and writing, but little has been done on teaching Phonics.

According to Adams (1990:50), Pho*nics is "a system of reading that builds on the alphabetic principle, a system of which a central component is the teaching of correspondences between letters or groups of letters and their pronunciation".* This method teaches small units like letters, short words, and spelling and punctuation rules in isolation, devoid of meaning.

Krashen (1989) thinks there is a role for the direct teaching of Phonics. This is not a "compromise" position. However, one fully understands this with the Comprehension Hypothesis: Phonics, or conscious knowledge of sound-spelling correspondences, can help when it makes the text more comprehensible. Smith (1994) demonstrates how this can happen. The child is reading the sentence "The man was riding on the h_____"; and cannot read the final word. Given the context and knowledge of 'h', the child can make a pretty good guess as to what the final word is. This will not always work (some readers might think the missing word is "Harley"). However, some knowledge of Phonics can restrict the possibilities of unknown words.

There are, however, severe limits on how much Phonics can be learned and taught, here is where teachers' challenges in teaching phonics derives. Smith (1994) points out that phonics rules can be very complex. Teachers often say they must review the phonics rules they are about to teach before coming to class. What does this tell us? If experienced teachers who have taught the rules often cannot remember them, how are six to eight years old supposed to remember them? Here is a simple rule for teachers: if you have to look it up, do not teach it. Some knowledge of Phonics can be helpful, but most of our knowledge of Phonics, Smith maintains, is the result of reading, not the cause. There has been, in other words, a profound confusion of cause and effect. It is almost exactly what the authors of *Becoming a Nation of Readers* concluded in a book widely considered to provide strong support for phonics instruction: *"...phonics instruction should aim to teach only the most important and regular letter-to-sound relationships... once the basic relationships have been taught, the best way to get children to refine and extend their knowledge of letter-sound correspondences is through repeated reading opportunities. If this position is correct, then much phonics instruction is overly subtle and probably unproductive"* (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott and Wilkinson, 1985, p.38).

The National Reading Panel (2000) came to two conclusions about Phonics. First, "systematic" instruction is more effective than analytic instruction. Second, "Skills" based approaches are superior to whole language approaches in helping children learn to read. There is good reason to question both of these claims. Garan (2002) looked closely at the panel's report and found that claim (1) was only true for tests where children read lists of words in isolation. It was not true for tests of reading comprehension. In fact, for reading comprehension tests given after grade 1, the effect of heavy phonics instruction was barely perceptible. When we give children tests of words in isolation, they have no choice but to appeal to their knowledge of Phonics; it is no wonder that intensive phonics instruction shows such a strong effect. This does not show that intensive Phonics helps learn to read. Smith (2003) points out, "This is like tying children's feet together to prove they must jump before walking" (p.13). In both cases, we have constrained the situation so that children are forced to use unnatural means of accomplishing a task.

The National Reading Panel (2000) did not distinguish between different tests when making their second claim: skills-based instruction is superior to whole language. Some texts were measures of reading single words in isolation, and some involved real texts. They also did not closely examine what went on in the treatments; the issue is not whether a treatment labelled "whole language", "skills", or "traditional" actually reads more than the group labelled whole language. To increase the reading attitude of Cameroonians, teachers should choose appropriate methods, such as the phonics method, in teaching reading for better understanding. This will help ameliorate the reading attitude of

Cameroonians and will make the teaching/learning process interesting and enjoyable.

First, when teaching Phonics at the Basic Code, teachers should introduce vowels and their short sounds, consonants and their sounds, then they begin blending short vowels with consonants and blending and reading one vowel words and short sentences. Secondly, long vowel sounds should be introduced. Students should practice blending long vowels with consonants, begin blending and reading two vowel words and introduce two special rules (the one-vowel rule and the two-vowel rule). Thirdly, teachers should introduce the Phonics Charts, which include the Special sounds made when letters stick together (Phonic Talk, 2010-2021).

Advanced Code phonics instruction teaches students how to decode using the word analysis of advanced phonics patterns, basic syllable types and morphological features of words; these skills are necessary to read most texts. The best way to teach Phonics is systematically. This means moving children through a planned sequence of skills rather than teaching particular aspects of Phonics as they are encountered in texts, which can become very challenging for teachers.

There are, however, many teaching approaches and techniques that fit many teachers' particular teaching styles and teaching situations. According to Sue Lloyd (2011), there are seven steps to follow in teaching reading and writing through Phonics. Here are the teaching steps she produced, which aim at providing a clear structure for teaching Phonics letter sounds and skills, alongside tips and advice for teaching reading and writing with Phonics. The steps covered include:
1) Teaching letter sounds in groups and how to write them.
2) We are teaching how to blend to read regular words and words with diagraphs.
3) Teaching tricky words in groups and how to spell them.
4) When to introduce capital letter and their sounds.
5) When and how to start dictation words and independent writing.
6) When to introduce letter names and teach long vowels.
7) When to introduce decodable reading books.

These authors' ideas whose works have been reviewed differ from this work in that they capitalize their viewpoints on the teaching methods of Phonics. In contrast, this work is more interested in lower primary school teachers' challenges in teaching Phonics. Before proceeding to the analysis of the data, it is worth briefly presenting the methodology used in this work.

3. Method of Data Collection
The data for this study was collected and analyzed using a survey research design. Two instruments were used, namely observation and questionnaire

given to a sample of 3 primary 1, 2 and 3 teachers in Government Primary School Atuakum Bamenda to find out the methods they use in teaching Phonics to pupils and the possible challenges they may face in that teaching area.

We indulged into classroom or Phonics research observation in lower primary school classes. This means that we observed teachers during their teaching of Phonics to lower primary school pupils to see if they are following, if not all, but at least some components of phonics teaching, such as segmenting, blending and counting. In Government Primary School Atuakum, we worked with three teachers who willfully filled out our questionnaires and gave no objections during our research observation. The sampling technique was purposive because the primary 1, 2 and 3 teachers were intentionally selected.

For the questionnaires to be administered to respondents and for classroom teaching observation to be done, the researcher had to, first of all, get an authorization letter to present to the head teacher of that particular school from the head of the Department of Applied Linguistics of The University of Bamenda declaring her apt to collect data. Furthermore, she had to contact the head of the institution where data was supposed to be collected, considering the teachers are under the school administration. The authorization from the head of the institution was to permit respondents to provide the necessary information needed by the researcher for the study's success. The authority issued a research authorization which the researcher presented to the respondents before collecting data.

4. Data presentation and analysis
This part of the study presents and analyses the questionnaire administered to lower primary school teachers on knowledge of the concept of phonics and phonics teaching and the challenges they face teaching phonics. It equally gives brief information about what was noticed by the researcher during her research observation. The tables below highlight some areas of lower primary school teachers' knowledge of the concept of Phonics, their Knowledge of the Teaching of Phonics, the features of a good phonics lesson, their knowledge of what should be taught in primary school during phonics lessons, method of integrating reading and writing during phonics lessons, creation of a Real-life Situation in Teaching Phonics, lastly, collaborative teaching which appears to be one of the solution to the teachers' challenges in teaching phonics which precedes the difficulties they face during phonics teaching.

4.1 Teachers' knowledge of the concept of Phonics
Teaching reading and writing should be systematic, and this cannot be successful without the proper knowledge of Phonics. Sound teaching of a particular subject or skill demands a total understanding and mastery of the subject matter. During data collection, 'phonics' seemed strange to some lower primary school teachers. However, after an explanation by the researcher, they

understood better. The table below investigates the knowledge teachers have of Phonics.

Table 1: Teachers' Knowledge of Phonics

What do you understand by Phonics?		
Relationship between sounds and spellings	2	66.6
Relationship between letters and words	1	33.3
The study of phonemes and graphemes	1	33.3
Total	4	100

The question here presented statistically on the table concerned the teachers' knowledge of Phonics. 66% chose the right answer, while 33.3% chose the wrong options, respectively, which were relationship between letters and words; and the study of phonemes and graphemes'. A teacher with a good understanding of Phonics will confidently handle the teaching. However, given that some teachers show a slow understanding of the concept, it might lead to mislearning on the part of the pupils.

Phonics involves teaching how to connect the sounds of spoken English with letters or groups of letters. Finding out whether teachers have complete knowledge of how it should be taught will go a long way to help the researcher discover if lower primary school teachers face some challenges in that area of teaching and bring forth some remedial solutions.

4.2 The features of a good phonics lesson

As we said earlier, Phonics involves matching the sounds of spoken English with individual letters or groups of letters. For example, the sound /k/ can be spelt as /c, k, ck or ch/. Teaching children to blend the sounds of letters helps them decode unfamiliar or unknown words by sounding them out. The table below shows what a good phonics lesson should start with or what it should engulf.

Table 2: The features of a good phonics lesson

What does a good phonics lesson look like?	Freq.	%
Begins with sound-spelling/blending	2	66.7
Begins with word reading	1	33.3
Begins with word writing	1	33.3
Total	4	100

The question in the table above was, 'What should a good phonics lesson look like?'. 66.7% of the respondents said it should begin with sound-spelling/blending, and 33.3 said it should begin with word reading and word writing, respectively. The above statistics show that some teachers do not know how to go about phonics lessons. They lack both material and method, which

becomes a severe problem to consider by stakeholders, teachers, trainers and recruiters.

4.3 Teachers' knowledge of what should be taught in primary school during phonics lessons

Receiving basic training in Phonics can be a good guide as to what should be taught to primary school pupils. Though collaboration among teachers and seminars could greatly help teach Phonics, teachers must also consider how these lessons could be organised and how they should be transmitted for a better understanding. The table below brings out the various parts of Phonics that should be taught to pupils and will equally evaluate the level of understanding of teachers as far as what they know about Phonics that should be taught to children.

Table 3: What children should be taught at the primary school level about Phonics

What should children be taught at the Primary school level in Phonics (classes 1, 2 and 3)?	Freq.	%
Blending	1	33.3
Segmenting	1	33.3
Counting	0	00
Sounding	1	33.3
Writing	1	33.3
All of the above	2	66.7
Total	6	100

The area of interest in the table above, which was about what children should be taught at the primary school level, reveals that 33.3% of the teachers said pupils should be taught blending, segmenting, sounding and writing, respectively, and 66.6% said children should be taught everything that is being proposed on the table. As we can observe from the table, no teacher considers teaching counting as part of phonics teaching, giving a null percentage. Knowing all the parts to teach during phonics classes is an essential part of teaching. The worst result as far as primary school teaching of Phonics is concerned was recorded at this level. It was noticed that some lower primary school teachers do not teach or do not know to teach counting in Phonics. Overlooking the counting exercise by these teachers is a gracious mistake because being able to count sounds/syllables in words or sentences, known as segmentation, is a great phonological awareness activity that cannot be ignored.

4.4 Method of integrating reading and writing during phonics lessons
Research studies indicate that children need to be explicitly taught the principles for applying phonic knowledge (letter-to-sound correspondences) to decode and spell unfamiliar words (Adams, 1990; Tan et al., 2007). According to Simmons et al. (2007), there is a window of opportunity to teach young children these decoding skills using well-focused and intensive instruction, as shown in the table below.

Table 4: integrating reading and writing during phonics lessons

How do you combine reading and writing activities during phonics lessons?		
They repeat words after I have read	2	66.7
They write words according to the sounds they get from my reading	2	66.7
They look at images and write down what they see	1	33.3
It is quite impossible	1	33.3
Total	6	100.0

Concerning the combination of reading and writing activities during phonics teaching, 66.7% of the respondents indicated that they make pupils repeat words after they have read. They write words according to the sound they get from their reading. Also, 33.3% of the respondents indicated that they make pupils look at images and write down what they see. The same percentage of teachers indicated that combining reading and writing activities in a single period of phonics teaching was impossible.

4.5 Creation of a Real-life Situation in Teaching Phonics
Creating a real-life situation in teaching young children is very capital since it helps them keep the lesson in their minds for longer. In the table below, teachers explain how they teach pupils sounds to make them love the lesson and remind it for a long time.

Table 5: Real-life situation in phonics teaching

Sounds	Real-life situation	Freq	%
/a/ as in apple, average, ant, arrive	- I bring an apple to class for illustration. - I teach the sound through a flash card. - I illustrate through body action	1 2 1	33.3 66.7 33.3
Total		4	100
/s/ as in snake, slide, spoon, slash	- I gum a rob on the board with the help of scotch in the form of s - I make snake sounds - I teach through a plastic letter	2 1 1	66.7 33.3 33.3
Total		4	100

/h/ as in hot, happy, heart, help	- I teach through action in class (hupe) - I draw it on the board - I used plastic letters to illustrate	1 1 1	33.3 33.3 33.3
Total		3	100

Statistics in the above table are very revealing and vary from 33.3% to 66.7% since no teaching technique is a mistake. Any teacher masters his/her classroom, most especially his/her learners' level of understanding and knows which ways best suit them in sound teaching; so here, there can be no comparison between teachers or which way is the best. Rather, teachers can collaborate to share ideas, skills and methods for the betterment of their learners, as collaborative teaching is part and parcel of this research.

4.6 Collaborative teaching
Collaboration is the most successful promotion of teaching programs in education for most students. Co-teaching is potentially a genuinely per-learning relationship in which communication shifts between different contexts within and beyond the classroom. Teachers need, at some point in time, assistance from a more knowledgeable colleague who has more understanding in a particular area as far as phonics teaching is concerned. The table below will unveil whether primary school teachers collaborate or not.

Table 6: Collaborative Teaching among Lower Primary school teachers

Do you ask for assistance from your colleagues during phonics teaching?	Freq.	%
Always	2	66.7
Sometimes	1	33.3
Never	1	33.3
Total	4	100

The preceding table about collaborative teaching among primary school teachers shows that 66.7% of teachers always ask for assistance from their colleagues during phonics teaching. In comparison, 33.3% do ask for assistance sometimes, and 33.3% never ask for assistance from colleagues. From these statistics, we can understand that, though some teachers have no phonics training and no understanding of phonics teaching, as seen in this table, they are equally unwilling to cooperate with their colleagues who are more knowledgeable in that teaching area. Teachers must understand that in teaching, no one is all-knowing. They need to collaborate with their colleagues to bridge the gap in teaching Phonics to lower primary school pupils to avoid them to later on face difficulties in those skills in the future by elaborating good teaching activities in the classroom as it can be seen on the table below.

Table 7: Activities during reading and writing lessons

During reading and writing activities, what do you usually do?		
Read aloud to the listening of the entire class	1	33.3
Ask pupils to read aloud to the entire class	1	33.3
Ask pupils to repeat after me	1	33.3
Dictate a paragraph for them to write	1	33.3
Ask the pupils to copy the whole text	1	33.3
Ask the pupils to write a short story about what they read	1	33.3
Total	7	100

Findings, as revealed in the above table, indicate that 33.3% of lower primary school teachers indicated that they read aloud to the listening entire class, ask pupils to read aloud to the entire class, ask pupils to repeat after them, dictate a paragraph for them to write, ask the pupils to copy the whole text, ask the pupils to write a short story about what they read respectively during phonics lessons. Teaching Phonics to pupils requires most times, reading aloud to children (sounding); providing opportunities to students to read, write and talk about texts; reading texts repeatedly to support fluency; teaching children the tools to figure out words they do not know; provide time for studying spoken language, including vocabulary and spelling.

4.7 Difficulties faced by teachers during teaching

Teachers do face challenges teaching Phonics in primary school, even if some are trained teachers. Teaching primary school pupils sounds without any basis in Phonics becomes problematic and challenging. At this level, the saying "no one or no teaching method is perfect" ties in perfectly. Teachers, too, have difficulties teaching Phonics in primary school, even if some are trained teachers. The table below highlights some areas of difficulties teachers may face during phonics lessons as advanced by teachers.

Table 8: Teachers' challenges in teaching Phonics

What are the challenges you encounter in teaching Phonics?	Freq.	%
Pronunciation	2	66.7
Sound description /y/, /h/, /ng/	2	66.7
Rendering tricky words	1	33.3
Teaching sounds in company (diphthongs and triphthongs)	1	33.3
Teaching silent sounds	1	33.3
Total	7	100

Statistically, 66.7% (2 teachers out of 2) said they find it difficult teaching pronunciation and sound descriptions like /y, h, and ng/ respectively, 33.3%of the teachers said it is difficult for them rendering tricky words, teaching sounds in company (diphthongs and triphthongs), and some said they face challenges teaching silent sounds respectively.

Since some teachers face challenges in teaching certain sounds in Phonics, this is a flaw in them and those who sometimes see or characterise some pupils as dull or slow in learning to read and write. Such teachers should be sent back to a training school or be encouraged to attend more seminars, conferences or workshops in Phonics. The world is fast evolving; teaching techniques and approaches, too, with the help of ICT, with which no teacher is supposed to be ignorant as far as Phonics, sounds teaching, and their differentiation are concerned.

5. Conclusion

Finally, this work that investigated the challenges teachers face in the teaching of Phonics has a clear justification for the following verified hypotheses:

Research Hypothesis 1: Lower primary school teachers of Government Primary School Atuakum Bamenda do face challenges in teaching phonics.

This study investigated lower primary school teachers' competence in phonics teaching and the challenges they may encounter during phonics lessons. 66.7% of the respondents indicated that all the options (blending, segmenting, counting, sounding and writing) should be taught in primary 1, 2 and 3. Then, 33.3% of the respondents indicated that blending, segmenting, sounding and writing should be taught at this primary level. At the same time, no teacher chose to count as an option. 66.7% of the respondents indicated that a good phonics lesson begins with sound, spelling/blending.

Research Hypothesis 2: There are possible solutions to help overcome the challenges in phonics teaching.

This study also investigated how reading and writing skills are being developed at the lower primary school through phonics teaching methods which constitute the solutions to the challenges teachers face in teaching phonics: good phonics teaching methods.
Statistically, 66.7% (2 teachers out of 3) said they find it difficult teaching pronunciation and teaching sounds like /y, h, ng/ respectively, and 33.3% of the teachers said they find it difficult rendering tricky words, teaching sounds in company (diphthongs and triphthongs) and teaching silent sounds respectively. Since some teachers face challenges in teaching certain sounds in Phonics, this is a flaw in them and those who sometimes see or characterize some pupils as dull or slow in learning to read and write. Such teachers should be sent back to a training school or be encouraged to attend more seminars, conferences or workshops in Phonics. The world is fast evolving; teaching techniques and approaches, too, with the help of ICT, with which no teacher is supposed to be ignorant regarding sound teaching and their differentiation.

School administrators and other agencies, such as Ministries of Basic Education, should emphasise developing skills in teaching Phonics, especially reading and writing skills, by organising frequent growth activities such as

workshops and seminars. The theme of developing reading and writing skills should be emphasised during seminars. To enhance phonics teaching, the government should provide schools and resource centres with relevant instructional resources, such as textbooks and computers. Uncountable seminars, conferences and phonics training centres should be implemented to ease phonics teaching and practice in primary schools. Teacher trainers should guide trainees in effectively teaching reading and writing through Phonics.

The limitations of this research suggest the need for future research to include other skills and teaching methods, such as listening and speaking, to prepare complete learners for future academic or professional challenges. Future research may wish to replicate the present study regarding theoretical and methodological approaches. The replications should not be primarily to find out whether the current study's findings would be the same or not but tounderstand how and where learner problems in reading and writing the English language originate and improve on phonics teaching methods. The teacher should be creative in choosing the appropriate methods to facilitate his or her pupils in the learning process because it also determines the success of the English teaching-learning process. As the presenter, the teacher should make the teaching-learning process more joyful to avoid the learners being bored during the teaching-learning process. To enrich the learners' vocabulary, the teacher should apply the word association technique as one of the techniques in the classroom.

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