



## Improving Pre-Service Teachers' Ability to Teach Oral Reading at the Primary School Level

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### Abstract

The teaching of oral reading in primary schools is confronted with a number of challenges. This study, which is an action research, was aimed primarily at improving pre-service teachers' ability to teach oral reading fluency at the primary school level. The teaching of reading is a very fundamental aspect in enhancing pupils' ability to comprehend written language. This study was carried out in order to determine the readiness of pre-service teachers to teach reading at the early grade level, i.e., classes 1, 2 and 3. The participants for this study were pre-service teachers enrolled in the Teacher Education department at Njala University who were in their second year of study pursuing the Teachers Certificate programme. The participants were given a reading task to determine whether they themselves could read fluently and comprehend the text as well. After some coaching by the researchers, the participants were asked to prepare a lesson to teach in any class from class 1 to 3. The lesson was to be modelled on the one taught by the researchers. The study revealed that the participants' performance in teaching the reading lesson they prepared was quite impressive. They followed the steps they were taught in teaching reading. This shows that some remarkable improvement was made as a result of the intervention of the researchers.

Keywords: reading fluency, comprehension, repeated reading, choral reading, pre-service.

## Introduction

The ability to read and make meaning from what one reads constitutes an integral part in the learning process. Reading is a process that involves decoding signs and symbols in a language. Reading constitutes one of the four language skills which unlike speaking and listening is not a natural process. Some conscious effort has to be applied to teach people how to read. Grabe, (2021, cited in Pradhani 2025) emphasizes the importance of reading which involves an interaction between the reader, the text, and context. This often requires the integration of linguistic knowledge with cognitive processing strategies. Although every 'normal' human being can speak a language, it is not everybody that can read. Reading is special task, which requires training and practice. The ability to read can be directly related to learners' performance in the learning process. Sierra Leone is a multilingual country, where sixteen languages are spoken. In addition to this, English is the official language as well as the medium of instruction. Teaching reading at the early grade requires training as the pupils come from different linguistic backgrounds. Thus, learners need to be taken through the stages of reading for them to be able understand what they read. At the earliest stages, pupils should be taught how to identify and name the sounds of a language, which constitutes phonemic and phonological awareness. Since pupils are coming from different language backgrounds, it is very crucial for teachers to make their pupils familiar with the sounds and symbols used to represent those sounds in English. Sound recognition is important because this helps learners to develop their reading skills. This is even more important in the case of English Language whose sound inventory constitutes an area of learning difficulty for second language learners. This is true because there are a lot of inconsistencies between sounds and the symbols used to represent them.

There have been several claims that early grade learners cannot read well as the Sierra

Leone National Early Grade Reading and Mathematics Assessment Baseline Study conducted in 2021 indicate that 'learners needed more practice with beginning literacy skills that precede whole word reading as the largest percentage of non-readers was registered on the letter-sound correspondence (54 per cent) and decoding subtasks (non-word reading – 66 per cent)'. The study revealed that learners performed better in listening comprehension than reading comprehension.

An earlier study by Montrose (2015) in the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) indicated that the majority of pupils in Sierra Leone found difficulty in learning how to read ("decoding skill"). According to this report, 97.4% of the grade 2 students and 86.5% of the grade 4 students do not know a single letter sound in English; and that 92.6% of the grade 2 students and 68.2% of the grade 4 students cannot read a single invented or 'non-word'.

This same study revealed that teachers demonstrated "emerging skills" in utilising a variety of teaching methods. This means that their pedagogical skills were neither not to the required level of proficiency, nor exemplary. In the area of teaching and learning materials, it was revealed that no textbooks were available at all in 48.8% of the lessons observed. These two factors could be contributing to the low level of performance of pupils in reading. Thus, grade 2 and grade 4 pupils cannot read fluently enough and at the same time cannot read with comprehension.

One of the reasons why pupils do not read well is as a result of the fact that teachers do not teach reading fluency well. This is supported by data obtained from the EGRA report. A good number of the teachers especially in the remote rural areas are untrained and unqualified. This problem is further compounded by the lack of adequate reading materials in many of these schools. Even with the intervention of Non-Governmental

Organisations to ameliorate the problem, there still remain to be some challenges.

In order to enable pupils to read with understanding, teachers need to be fully grounded in the rubrics of teaching oral reading. In a study by Aldhanhani & Abu-Ayyash (2021), teachers used plenty of reading-aloud strategies such as repeated reading, pair reading, individual reading-aloud, practice reading, choral reading, reading practice, and assisted reading to build and improve students' reading fluency. This approach could only be successful if the teachers themselves are properly trained to carry out these strategies in their classrooms. Reading is often perceived to be a complex activity which involves a number of cognitive and linguistic challenges. Studies have shown that non-fluent readers take a lot of time and a significant amount of mental capacity to make meaning out of what they read.

The goal of literacy instruction according to Abadiano & Turner (2005) is to enhance reading with comprehension. This view is similarly held by Lorraine (2002) that oral reading fluency is a necessary condition for good comprehension and enjoyable reading experience. This is what teachers should aim at. Sadly though, in some of our classrooms, we have observed that teachers lack the expertise to teach children how to read, especially at the early grade levels because they themselves have not been adequately prepared for the task.

Also, in our lessons we observed that pre-service teachers lack the techniques of enhancing pupils' oral fluency in reading. This is evident as these pre-service teachers lack the basic knowledge and skills in teaching oral fluency. Some of these pre-service teachers are unable to read fluently. In addition to this, other colleagues have also complained that some of their pre-service teachers don't read fluently and even their level of speaking English is poor. Some of them make a lot of grammatical mistakes and some even speak Krio - our lingua franca - most of the time when they are on

campus. It was also observed that oral language development is a fundamental aspect of learning to read and write. This helps the child to know that words are made up of various sounds, and that decoding such sounds requires some training. Decoding requires special skills that enables learners to match sounds to their corresponding letters. (Winsor, 2009, Kuyvenhoven, 2014). Children with oral language capacity do well in learning to read and write, which ultimately leads to the development of pupils' ability to speak English well.

For these reasons mentioned above, in our action research we intended to make an intervention so as to improve pre-service teachers' ability to support their pupils' oral reading fluency at Njala University, Bo Campus. Our new harmonised Teachers Certificate (TC) syllabus makes provision for the teaching of reading in primary schools. It is therefore essential for our pre-service teachers to be taught the appropriate strategies for teaching reading to primary school pupils.

This Action Research we adopted follows the action research spiral of Kemmis & McTaggart (2000) which includes the steps of planning, acting and observing. This is represented in the diagram below:

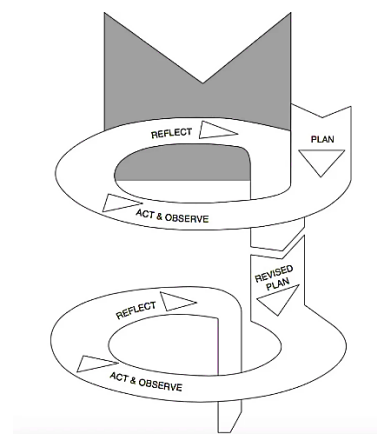


Figure 1: Action Research Spiral (adapted from Kemmis & McTaggart 2000)

Carr & Kemmis (1986) mention that an action research project should involve those

responsible for the practice in each of the moments of the activity; widening participation of the project gradually to include others affected by the practice, and maintaining collaborative control of the process. Dick (2000) also highlights the primary aim of action research as one that is intended to contribute to the practical concerns of the people with a view to bringing solutions to those problems. It is mainly participatory in nature as it requires active collaboration of the researcher and the client. It therefore stresses the importance of co-learning as a primary aspect of the research process. Dick (2000) emphasizes that Action Research is cyclic, participatory, qualitative and reflective. Action Research often involves the following key steps; plan, act, observe and reflect.

Action Research is important because it lays emphasis on real-world problem-solving and also enhances research competency among educators. Hine (2013, cited in Ilhan 2025) indicates that 'AR fosters beneficial transformations, enhances teacher competency, promotes self-reflection, and improves learning outcomes, refining the processes and consequences of classroom instructional practices.' By following the steps outlined above, it becomes imperative for the researcher to make positive interventions during the research cycle together with the clients.

In discussing the importance of action research in teacher education programmes, Hine (2013) emphasises the process that is followed in carrying out action research. Hine (2013) categorises the action research cycle into five key steps, which include; designing the study, collecting data, analysing data, communicating outcomes, and taking action. This is represented in figure 2 below, which is adapted from Stringer 2004.



Figure 2: Action research cycle (adapted from Stringer, 2004)

Keski-Mäenpää, (2018) in a study of student-centred pedagogy with Ethiopian village teachers cited lack of pedagogical knowledge and skills as the major challenge for both primary and secondary level teachers in Ethiopia. Although the policy lays emphasis on innovative teaching and learning, yet the traditional lecture method and rote learning predominate in most of the classrooms. Learners are expected to memorise information so as to pass examinations. Learners are not given enough time to engage in practical activities that would enhance active learning. It is a common view that pre-service teacher training should not only enable future teachers to start teaching with competence and confidence, but to also provide them with the requisite capacity for further development in their career. The direction therefore should be moving our pre-service teachers towards more practically focused, outcome-based teacher training.

With this in mind, the participants of this study are pre-service teachers in the Teachers Certificate programme at the School of Education, Njala University, Bo Campus. The Teachers Certificate is a three-year programme geared towards training teachers to teach in classes 1, 2, and 3. This crop of pre-service teachers is expected to have a solid foundation

in the teaching of reading as they will eventually graduate to teach in the early grades of the primary school. A total of thirty pre-service teachers were targeted for this study, i.e., ten participants each from TC1, TC2 and TC3. These three groups of pre-service teachers were taught over a period of four weeks by the researchers in order to enable them teach reading at their appropriate level. They were engaged in reading tasks and strategies that they could use in teaching reading at the early grade level.

### Gathering background information before the action and data analysis

Firstly, participants were given a passage to read. They were timed to see how many words they could read fluently per minute and whether they could pronounce words correctly. We also paid attention to their observance of punctuation marks while reading. They were also observed to see how many words they could read correctly per minute. The activity was recorded using an audio recorder. By this action the researchers wanted to measure the pre-service teachers' reading skills. These skills reflect their ability to teach reading effectively to early grade learners.

Secondly, the participants were asked the following questions:

1. Why do you think it is important to read fluently?
2. Can you explain to me why some of your colleagues do not read fluently?
3. What are some of the effects of not being able to read fluently?
4. Do you read short stories, novels or newspapers during your leisure hours?
5. Can you explain to me why it is important to read short stories, novels or newspapers?

In analysing the data, we carefully listened to the audio recordings and discovered that some of the pre-service teachers could not read the passage fluently. They found difficulty in pronouncing some words and also could not

observe some of the punctuation marks correctly. This means they could not read the passage with fluency. A thematic analysis of the responses obtained from the pre-service teachers was done and summarised in this section.

In order to find out if the students understood the importance of reading fluency, we asked them the following question; 'Why do you think it is important to read fluently?' In their responses, the majority of the participants stated that being able to read fluently 'helps you to be bold' and makes your 'listeners understand you better'. Some also indicated that it helps you understand what you read and makes you know more words. Some also stated that being able to read fluently means one must know how to pronounce words correctly and also get used to words according to their meanings. This indicates that the majority of the participants interviewed understood the importance of oral reading fluency.

Additionally, we asked our participants to explain to us why some of their colleagues cannot read fluently. Most of them attributed the cause to 'poor foundation in both the primary and secondary schools' with specific reference to poor teaching of the alphabet and spelling skills. According to the pre-service teachers interviewed, their poor pronunciation and poor reading habits play a major role in their inability to read fluently. The negative 'effects of the mobile phones' on the participants was also identified as one of the causes. According to them, some of them prefer to abbreviate words on social media than spell them in full. Most of the pre-service teachers interviewed are aware of some of the reasons why some students cannot read fluently.

To know more about the issue, the researchers asked the pre-service teachers to indicate some of the effects of not being able to read fluently. Some of them stated that people who cannot read fluently will find it difficult to understand what they read and 'cannot be bold

to stand in public and read'. Majority of the participants stated that not being able to read fluently would lead to poor understanding of whatever you read 'especially examination questions which could lead to failure', and consequently dropout of school. They further stated that such pre-service teachers cannot become good teachers. From their responses it is very evident that majority of the pre-service teachers clearly understand the consequences of not being able to read fluently.

In order to find out what extra curricula activities the pre-service teachers engage in that could possibly have an impact on their ability to read fluently, the researchers asked the participants if they do read short stories, novels and newspapers during their leisure time. Some of them were honest enough and clearly stated that they do not engage in any reading activities during their leisure time, while few others indicated that they sometimes do read either short stories, novels or newspapers during their leisure time as "it helps them to be informed".

The researchers were also interested in finding out whether the pre-service teachers actually understood why it is good for them to engage in some reading activities during their leisure time. We asked them to explain to us why it is important to read short stories, novels or newspapers. Majority of those who said they sometimes read short stories, novels or newspapers during their leisure time stated that it helps improve reading, pronunciation and other skills. They also indicated that it will help improve one's ability to construct good sentences. Most of the participants even including those who said they do not engage in any reading activity during their leisure time said one would gain new ideas and learn a lot about human life by reading short stories, novels and newspapers. From the responses of most of the students it was quite clear that they understood the importance of engaging in some form of reading activity during their leisure time.

### Actions Taken

As a way of improving the situation, we planned two activities in reading fluency. These activities were repeated reading and choral reading which are mentioned in the syllabus as well. Level two TC pre-service teachers were selected for the activities. Due to time constraint, we decided to use only two pre-service teachers, one from each group. We did not have time to observe all the thirty teachers.

Two passages were selected for the activities; one was used for repeated reading and the other for choral reading. These passages were selected from one of the prescribed texts for TC pre-service teachers. Copies of the two passages were distributed to the pre-service teachers. Two pre-service teachers (one male and one female) were chosen at random and asked to read the passage aloud one at a time. We decided to select at random because we wanted to avoid fluent readers to volunteer to read. Whilst they were reading, we listened attentively to see whether they read fluently, pronounced words correctly and at the same observed the punctuation marks.

At the end of the reading, the researchers asked the pre-service teachers to listen attentively while one of the researchers read the passage for them. After this the pre-service teachers were asked to read the passage together a number of times. After this repeated reading exercise, the two pre-service teachers who were selected to read at the beginning were then asked to read it again one at a time.

The second passage was used for the choral reading. The same procedure of selecting two participants to read the passage at different times at the beginning was also adopted. They were also asked to read after the choral reading exercise.

In order to find out whether the pre-service teachers benefited from the activities (repeated reading and choral reading), two

volunteers were asked to prepare a lesson each one on repeated reading and the other on choral reading and teach their colleagues the other day. The plan was for the pre-service teachers to prepare lessons on oral reading which they were required to practise the skills they learned from the activities by teaching primary school pupils. In each group, one pre-service teacher was required to prepare a lesson based on the format presented by the researchers. The pre-service teachers were assigned to specific classes from class one to class three at the University Experimental Primary School. Each of the pre-service teachers were given the opportunity to teach three different lessons, and they were observed by the researchers.

### Reflection

In our demonstration lesson, it was observed that the three pre-service teachers who were selected at the start did not read fluently. They did not observe punctuation marks well; some words were not pronounced correctly and they were not audible enough either. In some cases, they counted the words while reading. However, after our demonstration activity, some improvements were observed. We observed that the pre-service teachers selected initially read the passages fluently with confidence after the activities. They made great improvements as compared to their first attempts. This shows that with adequate demonstration, pre-service teachers will be able to improve on their ability to read and thus be able to teach oral reading effectively.

During the pre-service teachers practical teaching session, we observed that they were able to follow the steps the researchers used in the demonstration lesson. This means that they could teach repeated reading and choral reading to primary school pupils following the steps demonstrated. Immediately schools resumed, we organised a session where the two pre-service teachers were asked to teach oral reading. We observed them teach a 40 minutes lesson each. Different streams of Classes 1, 2 and

3 were selected at the University Experimental Primary School in Bo. Based on our observation, we discovered that the three pre-service teachers selected for this study were able to teach their learners oral reading and the pupils demonstrated some confidence in reading the passage on their own.

During this project we learned that pre-service teachers were not ready to volunteer to read because they did not have confidence initially to read well. However, after our intervention, they were able to read the passage well and also used the strategies we used to teach the pupils using other passages. We observed that our interaction with the pre-service teachers improved greatly as they came to consult us whilst preparing their lessons to teach the pupils. As a team, we feel fulfilled as the pre-service teachers demonstrated some anxiety in trying out the new strategy and promised to use this strategy in their classrooms when they graduate.

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