



The efficacy of phonics approaches to enhance the basic reading skills of public primary school children in Hawassa

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Abstract

This study aimed at investigating the efficacy of phonics approaches—synthetic and analytic—to enhance grade one children's basic reading skills in an EFL context. The targeted population for quasi-experimental design consisted of approximately sixty children from a randomly selected government primary school in Hawassa. They took part in the experiments without any special arrangements that disrupted the regular sessions. Accordingly, two randomly selected sections—each of them consisting of thirty students—were assigned to the treatment/synthetic group and the control/analytic group, respectively. A mixed research design that relied more on quantitative data was used. The major instruments employed for data collection included reading tests, observation, and interviews. The reading tests were administered before and after the interventions. The observations were meant to check the implementation of the phonics approaches under study based on the guidelines provided for teachers. The interviews were used to elicit the teachers' reflections on their perceptions and experiences before and after the interventions. The four weeks of training, including the orientation given to teachers and the evaluation sessions that were carried out in the first and fourth weeks of the experiment, The outcomes of the research revealed that the synthetic and analytic phonics approaches had a positive effect on raising the children's basic reading and decoding skills. They were identical in terms of their effect on the basic reading skills of first-grade children. It was also learned from the observations that teachers generally implemented the interventions with slight variations that had little effect on the children's reading attainment. The teachers witnessed that the experiments enhanced the achievement of children in basic reading and decoding skills.

Keywords : Analytic Phonics, Basic Reading Skills, Decoding Phonics, Synthetic Phonics

1. INTRODUCTION

With the intention of laying the necessary foundation for further education, students should be taught English effectively right from the primary level itself. This is due to the vital role the target language plays in the Ethiopian educational system. In response to this precondition, there used to be a well-developed curriculum for the English language during the imperial period (i.e., 1947–48). Accordingly, elementary school students were given the opportunity to practice the language by interacting orally, presenting dramas, and writing journals and letters, despite the prevailing shortcomings like teachers' limited competence in English and a shortage of the necessary facilities.

However, various studies indicated a deterioration of quality in English language education since English was replaced by Amharic as a medium of instruction in 1962. In view of this, the Ministry of Education has taken the initiative to design a special program, the English Language Improvement Program (ELIP), in order to help primary and secondary school teachers raise their competence in English. In fact, the program was launched a decade ago in collaboration with the British Council and the College of St. Mark and St. John.

It is high time to take more appropriate measures that improve the quality of teaching English in general and literacy skills in lower grades in particular, strengthening secondary and higher education.

1.1. Conceptual Framework for Synthetic Phonics and Analytic Phonics

The skill of reading words accurately and fluently is seen by many as a key prerequisite to reading comprehension. Phonics is the practice of reading individual words from the individual sounds of letters or letter clusters. For example, sounds associated with the letters c, 'a, and t can be assembled to use phonics to read the word 'cat'. It also provides students with an awareness of word structure, which allows them to generalize the rules they have mastered to read unfamiliar words. Furthermore, it provides students with an awareness of using letters to represent words in writing, which allows them to recognize that their spoken words can be separated into smaller units of sounds and a visual representation can be assigned. Consequently, students can go a long way to instill in themselves the multitude of letter-sound correspondences that are essential to reading. What is more, the practice of phonics is related to the concept of phonological (phonemic) awareness (being able to identify sound patterns in a new language). However, phonics is conceptually different from it in that it brings speech sounds and print together (Lyster, 1999, pp. 5-7).

As indicated by the National Reading Panel, teaching phonics in the early grades is more effective than teaching it after grade one. This, however, does not mean phonics should be ignored in later grades. It should be taught explicitly in the first and second grades and casually (in combination with other approaches) in the later grades. Despite such consensus, researchers and educators have had hot debates on how to teach basic reading and decoding skills through phonics. Among these, the one that is more relevant to this research is the debate about the most effective form of phonics instruction: whether it should be synthetic phonics, which refers to saying a word sound by sound (i.e., saying the sounds of the word 'cat' as/kuh-a-tuh) and blending them into words (i.e., saying kat) to read fluently, or the analytic phonics approach, which refers to teaching children to read monosyllabic words by combining the phonological

units of onset (the initial letter or letter cluster) and rime (the rest of the syllable). For instance, teaching students to read words like *cat* and *star* as *kat* and *sta**, respectively, by combining the initial letter *c* or letter cluster *st* with the rime *at* or *ar* in each of the words (Torgerson, Brooks, and Hall, 2006)

Accordingly, those who are behind the Rose Report claim synthetic phonics is more effective for teaching basic reading skills (Smith, 2011, p. 2), while those who are behind basal programs claim that analytic phonics is more effective for teaching the same skills (Gunning, 2003, p. 151). Hence, an attempt was made to carry out the research to examine the efficacy of these phonics approaches to teaching the basic reading (decoding) skills in our (an EFL) context.

1.2. Statement of the problem

Ethiopia has boosted primary school enrollment to historically unprecedented rates in order to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), just like many other developing countries with international support. Though a number of children are enrolled in primary schools in almost every corner of the nation, it is questionable—on the part of teachers, parents, and the public at large—whether students are really learning or not. The situation becomes more serious when the early literacy skills of children are measured, for it is absolutely vital to ensure their success throughout their education and beyond.

As reported by the EGRA (Early Grade Reading Assessment) survey at the national level in 2012, almost two-thirds of students tested in reading in English were not able to demonstrate the knowledge and skills expected of the curriculum's MLC (Minimum Learning Competence) for grade two through four students. According to the same study, 24% of grade 4 students could not read a single word when asked to read a single word from the list of familiar words. This implies that English reading literacy is at least as poor as mother-tongue literacy across the country.

Hence, one can learn from such a finding that improvements in student learning are lagging significantly behind improvements in access to schooling, and this implies that what matters more is the quality of education than the accessibility of education (i.e., spending years in school). Perhaps one of the important factors in this failure is that the approach employed to teach basic reading (decoding) does not focus on developing learners' reading skills. With regard to this, Gessese pointed out that students at the primary level pass through several developmental phases in acquiring word analysis and text analysis skills. He also said that children in kindergarten (KG) through grade two learn basic reading in a logographic approach, which uses cues that rely on visual, contextual, or graphic features to read words. (Gessese, 1999, p. 18). These methods have, of course, been practiced for decades, as indicated by the thesis on beginning reading instruction. Besides, a recent study on the practice of early reading instruction revealed that teachers failed to implement the teaching of early reading according to the theories and principles of teaching early reading. Teachers were seen using inappropriate reading techniques and procedures at the mentioned grade level. The study also revealed that teachers are deficiently trained in phonological awareness, phonics instruction, comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary. Most importantly, another recent study on improving the quality of education in Ethiopia underlined that inappropriate pedagogical approaches are one of the underlying factors for low levels of learning in primary education in Ethiopia (Alebel & Tassew, 2018).

Although it is now widely accepted that the knowledge of letter-sound correspondence is very important in learning to decode or know how to say a word, there is no agreement about how to teach this knowledge to children through phonics in the early school years. One aspect of the controversies is the controversy over the superiority of one phonics approach to teaching basic reading (decoding) skills over the other. As a result, we have different phonics approaches to teaching basic reading skills systematically (Aukerman, 1984), among which synthetic phonics and analytic phonics approaches gained prominence. Primarily, the synthetic phonics approach refers to teaching children to say a word sound by sound, as in 'kuh-a-tuh, followed by blending these phonemes or sounds into the word to read it fluently (Chall, 1997; Watson, 1998; Johnston and Watson, 2005). On the other hand, the analytic phonics approach refers to teaching children to read monosyllabic words by combining the phonological units of onset (the initial letter or letter cluster) and rime (the rest of the syllable). For instance, teaching students to read words like cat and star as kat and sta* respectively by combining the initial letter c to be read as k or the letter cluster st to be read as st with the rime at and ar to be read as at and a* in each of the words (Torgerson, Brooks, and Hall, 2006)

So far, there is no statistically significant difference in the efficacy between these phonics approaches to teaching basic reading and decoding skills (Ehri, 2000, p. :1), despite claims by their proponents (Chew, 1997; Miskin, 2003). Hence, it is this controversy over the choice of the appropriate phonics approach to tackle failure in basic reading (decoding) skills that pushed the researcher to investigate the effectiveness of using synthetic phonics and analytic phonics approaches to teaching the basic reading skills mentioned above for children in grades one. The motive behind such concern comes from accepting the idea of the crucial effect of quality instruction in general and the quality of phonics instruction in particular on reading achievement in English in particular (Stahl, 1992, p. 29). As a result, learning to decode words effectively through the aforementioned phonics approaches results in better comprehension on the part of children. Therefore, decoders taught in such a way develop greater automaticity through abilities in rapid word reading and fluent text reading (Adams, 1990), since the ultimate goal of systematic phonics instruction should not be learning rules to read or decode familiar words only. It would rather be improving children's literacy skills in decoding unfamiliar words based on the set of rules taught (Stahl, 1992, p. 28).

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, there has never been any study at home on the efficacy of the aforementioned phonics approaches to teaching basic reading and decoding skills to first-grade students. Therefore, an attempt is made to investigate whether the practice of synthetic or analytic phonics enhances the basic reading and decoding abilities of government school students in Hawassa or not. Thus, the following null and alternative hypotheses have been formulated:

- H0 There is no difference in basic reading and decoding skills between students taught in synthetic phonics and analytic phonics approaches.
- H1 There is a difference in basic reading and decoding skills between students taught in synthetic phonics and analytic phonics approaches.

1.3. Objectives of the Study

The general objective of the study is to examine if the practice of synthetic phonics and analytic phonics approaches has any contribution to improve the basic reading (decoding) skill of grade

one government school children in Hawassa. In specific terms, therefore, the study will try to do the following:

- examining the impact of using synthetic phonics approaches on enhancing the basic reading/decoding skills of grade one children.
- examining the impact of using analytic phonics approaches on enhancing the basic reading /decoding skills of grade one children..
- eliciting teachers' reflections on their perceptions and impressions of the trainings on the phonics approaches under study and their implementations respectively.

1.4. Significance of the Study

As far as this study is concerned, it might generate some pedagogically relevant ideas about the teaching of basic reading/decoding skills using the above-mentioned phonics approaches in an EFL context. As a result, it is hoped that syllabus designers, material writers, English language educators, students, and parents are potential beneficiaries of the findings of the study, directly or indirectly. In addition, the results of this study could provide an important base for further research in the area of teaching basic reading skills in our context, as the area is seldom investigated.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The main purpose of the study was to examine if the use of synthetic and analytic phonics approaches makes any difference in the basic reading (decoding) ability of first-graders. The study was mainly experimental in design and quantitative in approach. An attempt was made to see if a significant gap in performance could be observed among grade one children as a result of implementing phonics approaches to teach basic reading and decoding skills (Lodico, M. G. et al., 2010, p. 228).

It was also qualitative in approach so as to explore teachers' opinions through interview and observation regarding what their reflections are all about the basic concepts of the new phonics approaches and the challenges they face in employing them for teaching basic reading and decoding skills. Hence, the study employed a mixed method for triangulation, as it called for the use of interviews and observation to complement the data gathered through testing. In relation to this, it is underscored that such a design makes use of a sequential explanatory strategy, which is characterized by the collection and analysis of quantitative data followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data to give a more detailed and comprehensive idea of the subject under investigation. It is also pointed out that the priority is typically given to the quantitative data, and the two methods are integrated during the interpretation phase of the study (Creswell, 2003, p. 210).

2.1. Research Participants and Sampling

Among several primary schools in Hawassa, the data for this study was gathered from one primary school called 'Nigist Furra'. This school was selected by convenience sampling as it is near the researcher's residence for easy access to the participants (Kumar, 1996). Besides, the selection was made in consideration of homogeneity to minimize any intervening variables related to language background and socio-economic status, for most of the students in the government schools are more or less thought to be identical in these regards. As to the sample

size, the relatively best solution suggested is to have a large sample size in mind, tentatively based on the principle that the larger the sample size, the better the accuracy would be (Powell, 1996; Singh, 2006). Accordingly, the researcher randomly selected one section for the experimental group to employ the synthetic phonics approach and another section for the control group to employ the analytic phonics approach from the existing three sections for basic reading (decoding) skills for grade one children in 'Nigist Furra' primary school.

3. THE RESEARCH METHODS

3.1. The Experiment

As a major tool, the experiment was conducted during the first two weeks of March, excluding the two weeks devoted to the training and evaluation sessions in the above-mentioned primary school. For this purpose, two sections were randomly selected to administer a pre-test session and to give short training for teachers on how to implement synthetic and analytic phonics approaches to teach basic reading (decoding) skills using the lessons from the text books at hand. This is followed by conducting the lessons and the post-test session. With the intention of quantifying the independent variables (the teaching of basic reading and decoding skills in synthetic and analytic phonics approaches) and the dependent variables (the students' basic reading and decoding performance in English), the researcher has, therefore, planned to conduct the measurement mainly using modified forms of standard tests. Such tests are preferred because it is thought that the original standard tests might be highly demanding due to the language difficulty faced by foreign language learners like ours and may not correspond to the purposes and contents of the syllabus the children are familiar with. Therefore, they may have an adverse effect on the learning outcomes and the teaching practices (Cohen et al., 2007). Accordingly, reading tests were carefully adapted by the researcher from the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) tests developed by RTI (Research Triangle Institute) International with support from USAID and the World Bank.

This is because such tests are designed as system-level diagnostic tools for evaluating a given intervention and are exploitable for such purposes with possible modification in accordance with the situation of a particular country (RTI International, 2009, p. 10). The necessary care was, therefore, taken by the researcher and testing experts to cross-check the tests with the objectives and contents of the curriculum in use (Heaton, 1990). These tests were, therefore, meant to measure the basic reading skills of the students related to identifying letter-sound correspondence and reading high-frequency words. These are focused because they cover most of the literacy skills the current curriculum aims to develop (FDRE, MOE, 2017).

3.2. Classroom observation

With the intention of supplementing the data to be collected through the experiment, the observation was conducted after the training session on how to use synthetic and analytic phonics approaches to teach basic reading (decoding) skills. Accordingly, a standard observation protocol or checklist was designed to evaluate the way teachers are implementing the types of phonics approaches they are supposed to implement. To sum up, the observation was used to investigate the extent to which synthetic and analytic phonics approaches are used properly and to give immediate corrective feedback in cases of malpractice.

3.3. Interview for teachers

Among the different types of interviews, the researcher has decided to employ a semi-structured interview, which is flexible enough to allow depth to be achieved by providing opportunities for the interviewer to probe and expand the responses. It involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents so as to explore their perceptions of a certain idea, program, or situation. Hence, the semi-structured interview was used with 'Nigist Furra' primary school teachers in order to explore their views about the basic concept of the phonics approaches under investigation, the challenges faced during their practice to teach basic reading skills for grade one children, and the possible remedies to tackle them.

3.4. Data Collection Procedures and Data Analyses

Being the most prominent criteria for research, especially in the social sciences and humanities, reliability and validity are usually associated with tests in general (Bryan, 2005). Furthermore, it is confirmed that they can be used to examine the appropriateness of instruments other than tests—observations and interviews—for data gathering (Markzyk et al., 2005, p. 112). Thus, the following is a brief description of the concepts and their use to measure data collection techniques such as tests, classroom observations, and interviews as well.

3.5. Reliability and Validity of the Reading Test

The researcher considered reliability during the pre- and post-test sessions in the research carried out to check the stability of the score obtained over time and across settings (Markzyk, 2005, p. 105). In addition, there is a need for validity to check what the instrument measures and how well it does so (Anastasi and Urbina, 1997). To this effect, an attempt was made to prepare a reading test while maintaining content and face validity. In relation to this, for instance, the test was prepared on the basis of the curriculum so as to measure students' performance in the basic reading and decoding skills that are familiar to them. To put it another way, appropriate care was taken to ensure that each test was relevant and comprehensive by the researcher, testing experts, and school teachers (Heaton, 1990).

3.6. Reliability and Validity of Classroom Observation

As a research instrument commonly used in qualitative studies, observation demands a systematic and careful examination of the phenomena being studied. Particularly, it is imperative for researchers who use direct observation to conduct their research in a valid and reliable manner by taking care of each and every step in the observation (Lodico et al., 2010, pp. 114–115). Accordingly, an attempt was made to conduct the observation as naturally as possible by allotting a time frame relatively long enough to make the participants less conscious of what is going on through time and to elicit in-depth information for the research to be carried out. Besides, the researcher designed an observation checklist in the form of field notes that includes a list of items to be observed and provides spaces to be filled in for recording any reaction or feeling (Kumar, 1991).

3.7. Reliability and Validity of the Interviews

As a mixed-methods design, it is imperative to consider interviews for strengthening the data gathered through classroom basic reading skill tests and observation. In relation to this,

Kelinger (1970), cited in Cohen (2005), said that the interview may be used in conjunction with other methods for triangulation purposes in order to follow up on unexpected results or to validate other methods. A semi-structured interview was, therefore, conducted using a set of predetermined questions for better reliability and validity (De Vos et al., 2002). As a result, there were long interview sessions with 'Nigist Furra' primary school teachers so as to give them a better opportunity of expressing their opinions exhaustively, as indicated earlier (Cohen, 2005). Besides, all that is required is to refrain from paraphrasing what was said or making judgmental comments such as "good or that's interesting" to minimize personal bias (Mack et al., 2005). At last, the whole process of administering the interviews, classroom observation, and basic reading test took place after a brief and vivid explanation of the objectives and significance of the research for the participants in particular and the public in general.

3.8. Methods of Data Analyses

The concept of data analysis is a complex process that involves moving back and forth between concrete bits of data and abstract concepts, between deductive and inductive reasoning, and between description and interpretation (Meriam, 2001). This is to mean that data analysis is an effort to make a swing between quantitative and qualitative data in accordance with the situation as far as a mixed research approach is concerned. To this effect, there was an attempt to follow a sequential explanatory procedure, which implies that priority was given to the collection and analysis of quantitative data. Accordingly, first came the systematic organization of the test scores through coding, categorization, and tabulation. Next came analyses of the same data through charting and comparing the scores of the two groups using SPSS 26 to examine if there was a statistically significant mean difference. Accordingly, the comparison was done by looking at the scores of children taught synthetic phonics and analytic phonics in each group to see the impact of each of the interventions using a paired sample t test. Then came the comparison of the means of the two groups, which was done using an independent sample t-test. These computations were done because the t test is considered the most powerful test of mean equality for two groups with broadly normal distributions. Above all, eta was used to measure the effect size, or the extent to which the finding comes as a result of the interventions mentioned above.

After that, the data obtained from the direct observation and the semi-structured interview were thematically outlined, interpreted, and presented in text form to supplement the findings obtained from the test scores in the process of proving the hypotheses. By implication, maximum effort was exerted to enhance the reliability and validity of the research by drawing conclusions supported by data gathered from a variety of instruments, which include testing, observation, and interviews.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section deals with the presentation, analysis, and discussion of the quantitative and qualitative data respectively in accordance with the hypotheses and research questions in the first part.

4.1. Analysis and Discussion of the Quantitative Data

Analysis and Discussion of the Pre- and Post-Test Results of the Experimental Group (EG) and the Control Group (CG) in the Basic Reading Skills using the T-Test.

Table 3.1: The Paired-Samples T Test Results of Students who were taught in Synthetic Phonics Approach in decoding (40%)

Pre test			Post test				DF	T-value	P-value	Sig.
N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	Mean Df				
30	10.70	8.90		21.30	7.40	10.60	29	6.986	.000	Significant

As indicated in Table 3.1, paired-samples t-test results of the data were gathered for a pre-post test comparison of the treatment group in the main component of basic reading skill decoding. Hence, the mean and standard deviation of the group's performance during pre- and post-sessions were calculated to be approximately 10.70, 8.90, and 21.30, 7.40, respectively. This implies that there was a statistically significant difference in mean of -10.60 between the sessions at a t-value of 6.99 and a p-value of 0.00, favoring the post-session, for research carried out with the assumption of a p-value of 0.05. To sum up, the result confirms that the synthetic phonics approach was effective in developing the students' ability to recognize words since the eta squared statistic (0.63) indicated a large effect size of such an approach (Cohen, 1988).

Table 3.2: The Paired-Samples T Test Results of Students who were taught in Analytic Phonics Approach in decoding (40%)

Pre test			Post test				DF	T-value	P-value	Sig.
N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	Mean Df				
30	7.683	7.9313	30	13.783	8.1861	6.10	29	3.704	.001	Significant

In table 3.2, paired-samples t-test results of the data were presented for pre-post test comparison of the control group in the main component of basic reading skill decoding. Consequently, the mean and standard deviation of the group's performance during pre- and post-sessions were calculated to be approximately 7.73, 7.93, 13.83, and 8.21, respectively. This is to mean that there was a statistically significant difference in mean of -6.10 between the sessions at a t-value of 3.70 and a p-value of 0.01, favoring the post-session, for research carried out with the assumption of a p-value of 0.05. To sum up, the result confirms that the analytic phonics approach was effective in developing the students' ability to recognize words since the eta squared statistic (0.32) indicated a large effect size of such an approach (Cohen, 1988).

Table 3.3: The Independent-Samples T Test Results (Pre-test)

Pretest mean comparison	Experimental Group (taught in synthetic app)		Control Group (taught in analytic app.)				DF	T-value	p-value	Sig.	
	N	Mean	N	Mean	SD	MD					
	N	Mean	SD								
Decoding	30	10.667	8.8759	30	7.683	7.9313	2.9833	58	1.373	.175	Not Significant

As can be seen from the table 3.3, the independent-samples t-test analysis compares the children's decoding skills before they were taught in synthetic and analytic phonics approaches. Hence, their mean and standard deviation were computed approximately as 7.68, 7.93, and 10.67, 8.87, respectively. By implication, there was no significant difference in scores between the groups in word recognition, as the difference in their mean was only 2.98, which was significant at a t-value of 1.43 and a p-value of 0.18 for research carried out assuming a p-value of 0.05. In sum, one can deduce that students engaged in both synthetic and analytic phonics approaches to instruction do not have a visible gap in recognizing words.

Table 3.4: The Independent-Samples T-Test Results (Post-test)

Post test mean comparison	Experimental Group (taught in synthetic app)		Control Group (taught in analytic app.)				DF	T-value	p-value	Sign.	
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD					MD
	Decoding	30	18.633	9.6257	30	13.783					8.1861

As shown in the table, the independent-samples t-test analysis compares the children's decoding skills after they were taught in synthetic and analytic phonics approaches. Hence, the mean and standard deviation of the students taught in the approaches mentioned above were computed approximately as 18.63, 9.63, and 13.93, 8.21, respectively. By implication, there was a significant difference in scores between the groups in word recognition, as the difference in their mean was 4.90, which was remarkable at a t-value of 2.10 and a p-value of 0.04 for research carried out assuming a p-value of 0.05. In sum, one can deduce that students engaged in synthetic phonics instruction outperformed those engaged in analytic phonics approach instruction in recognizing words, although the average result was less than the pass mark and the eta squared statistic (0.07) indicated a moderate effect size of the intervention (Cohen, 1988).

4.2. Analysis and Discussion of the Qualitative Data

4.2.1. Classroom Observations

During the observation, the researcher noticed that both teachers in 'Nigst Furra' Primary School familiarized the children with the graphemes on the pictures, focusing on, for instance, the graphemes 'ow' and 'ox' and their and ok as witnessed in the sample observations, respectively. The children were familiar with the pictures and the sounds associated with the phoneme, as a child recalls the words 'snow' and 'fox' in the case of the synthetic and the analytic lessons, respectively. This is because the scheme has been designed to teach children phonemes and the corresponding graphemes or groups of graphemes using picture prompts (Miskin, 2005). Through the course of the lessons, they learned that the sound can be graphically represented in at least two different ways.

The teachers helped the children generate words by describing something and encouraging them to say what it was, as witnessed frequently in the lessons. Developing children's metalanguage, or knowledge about language, is thus a principle of the scheme, and the students' explanation demonstrates that the student has understood this phoneme-grapheme relationship. During the lesson observations, the researcher noticed that children were working with their peers on synthetic and analytic phonics activities in groups of about five to six in their break time

as well. Lesson contents, therefore, were matched to the children's reading levels. More over, the teachers involved in both experiments used the detailed lesson plans provided, and the attempts to fulfill resources for the children during the interventions were successful. This ensured the quality of the lessons was consistent throughout the sections selected to carry out the experiments.

Another important issue during the observations was exploring the variations observed during the implementations under investigation. As a result, it was found that the teachers showed slight variations in practice. For example, the teacher assigned to employ synthetic phonics instruction used flash cards for revising the letters and sounds taught, while the other teacher assigned to employ analytic phonics instruction used the blackboard or the text book itself for the same purpose.

4.2.2. Interviews

Qualitative data was gathered through interviews with two female teachers (the first is more experienced in teaching, with more than half a decade of teaching experience, though she studied English as a minor subject at Hawassa Teachers Training College, and the second is a novice teacher, though she studied English as a major subject at the same college) who were involved in the experiments in order to supplement the quantitative data obtained through pre- and post-test results. Accordingly, the responses of the teachers were transcribed and synthesized as follows:

In relation to the first question that deals with the availability of any on-the-job training opportunity on teaching basic reading/decoding in an EFL context for first-cycle primary school teachers, including themselves so far, both teachers responded that they have never been exposed to such training up to now; therefore, they are forced to stick to the approaches taught in teacher training colleges.

With regard to the second question that refers to the approaches they have been employing to teach basic reading and decoding, especially for grade one instead, the first teacher said she usually teaches basic reading using a look-and-say approach with the help of picture cards and objects in and around the school. For instance, she told the researcher that she shows 'Apple' to teach letter 'A', 'Ball' to teach letter 'B', etc. The novice teacher, however, said she usually teaches word reading using the aforementioned approach after taking much time to teach the alphabets using the alphabetic method, which requires her to teach the names of the letters of the alphabet, saying "ay", "bee", "see", etc. to teach letters A/a, B/b, C/c, etc. This is because, according to her, most of the students do not even identify alphabets, even though they have come across them at the kindergarten (KG) level.

When the teachers were asked about the effectiveness of what they are doing to teach basic reading and decoding and their reasons for their comments, both of them said that they do not think it is effective since the aforementioned approaches and methods being employed are not helpful enough to deal with students who are joining grade one without getting appropriate lessons in learning to read at KG level and who are suffering from an acute shortage of text books.

Concerning their impressions about the use of synthetic and analytic phonics approaches for the experiment to alleviate the students' problems in basic reading/decoding, both teachers

indicated that they hope these approaches can bring significant change in this regard, provided that there is a conducive environment to employ them for quite sufficient periods of time. However, they gave different responses to the question based on their observations of the improvements the students have shown. Accordingly, the first teacher who taught the students using an analytic phonics approach commented that she observed a significant change in identifying letters and sounds, while the second teacher who taught the students using a synthetic phonics approach commented that she observed a significant change in attempting to read words using letter-sound correspondence, as opposed to the evidence from the t test results that show no significant difference between the two groups in word reading.

In response to the question on the students' reaction to learning to read using the new approaches mentioned above, both teachers confirmed that they found their students very interested and highly motivated, contrary to their expectations. For example, the first teacher said she observed her students practicing continuants such as /f/, /m/, /s/, etc. during their free time as part of their game after learning them analytically. The second teacher also told the researcher that she saw her students attempting to read words from their note book even outside the classroom individually and in groups, particularly those words that have a C-V-C pattern, e.g., leg, sun, etc., by counting each sound after learning to read words with similar patterns synthetically.

According to these teachers, this happened because they began to recognize better ways of identifying the already learned letters and the corresponding sounds. Above all, they managed to make use of such knowledge to improve their word-reading abilities. The researcher also witnessed the same thing during his attempt to look at the students' exercise books every day in order to check whether the teachers are doing their job in accordance with the training offered.

In response to the question on the challenges faced while the experiment is going on, the first teacher disclosed that it was not easy to get the concept of the analytic phonics approach at the beginning, for she was not clear on what makes it different from the existing look-and-say approach. But, she added, the difference became clear after realizing that words are selected carefully based on their pattern (CV, VC, or CVC) and are grouped under selected sounds to be taught. On the other hand, the second teacher said she was comfortable with the concept of the synthetic phonics approach right from the start, for the training was supported with an audio CD.

Moreover, both teachers stressed time as a serious factor in doing the experiments in terms of duration and scheduling. Accordingly, they underscored the need to extend the duration to more than two weeks to get sufficient time to teach the topics effectively. At last, the teachers were asked about the coping mechanisms they used to handle the situation smoothly. In relation to this, both of them indicated that they were forced to use extra periods to cover the topics since the school principals and most of their colleagues were cooperative enough to facilitate such an opportunity.

5. CONCLUSION

Since the purpose of the study, as stated in the opening part, was to investigate the impact of synthetic and analytic phonics approaches on the basic reading and decoding attainment of grade one children in government schools in Hawassa, the following conclusions and suggestions can be made: The first thing is to declare the results of the paired sample t test so

as to check the impact of each of the interventions on the basic reading and decoding skills of the children in each group. It is indicated in the reports that significant differences between the pre- and post-test outcomes of the two groups in word reading were observed. This implies that both the synthetic and analytic phonics approaches have a similar impact on enhancing the children's performance in word reading.

Despite the similarity mentioned above, there are still some gaps to mention in their outcomes. The children in the analytic group displayed more significant progress in their basic reading and decoding performance than their counterparts in the synthetic group since the former scored a far higher effect size (0.43) than the effect size (0.16) of the latter. The reason for the unsatisfactory performance of the synthetic group might be the requirement to learn relatively more phonics rules than their counterparts in the analytic group. In relation to this, there is a research finding that reported that learning the rules of phonics for better decoding skills might bother and confuse the children if it is not carried out selectively and appropriately for primary school children who get bored and distracted easily due to their short memory and attention span (Wu, 2005). On the other hand, children in the synthetic group were not learning such rules explicitly. So, they were favored in getting more time to practice the blending and segmentation of words through various activities provided in the experiments and in their text books as well.

Later comes the outcome of the independent sample t test analysis of the children's performance in the basic reading and decoding skills after the interventions. Consequently, the t-test results proved that the synthetic and analytic phonics approaches had the same impact on the reading test scores of the children in an EFL context. This happened because the P value of the result in the reading skill was insignificant since the instructions were conducted under the same teaching variables like target words, instructional materials, duration of the instruction, and the experiments. As a result of this finding, the alternative hypothesis that was meant to investigate the significant difference in the children's scores of word reading between the synthetic and the analytic groups after the interventions is rejected. Thus, the finding seems to confirm the idea of a third position that dictates both approaches — synthetic phonics and analytic phonics — are necessary, as each of them has its own contribution to make to helping children improve their reading performance in English (Torgerson et al., 2006).

However, the children who were taught in the synthetic phonics approach managed to attain a slightly higher mean result in word reading skills than those who were taught in the analytic phonics approach. Such an achievement of the synthetic group in the skill mentioned above is consistent with the findings of Kan (2009), Watson & Johnson (2009) and Yen (2004). This happened because of the explicit and systematic nature of the synthetic phonics instruction. In addition, the letter-sound correspondence the children are taught were organized from simple to complex (Belvins, 2006; Chard & Osborn, 1999). As a result, children could learn to read quickly by applying the simple letter-sound relationship to simple words with the CVC pattern first so as to conceptualize the alphabetic principle. Besides, its explicitness might help to tell children directly the grapheme-phoneme correspondence and the related rules rather than rely on their own discovery of them (Wu, 2005).

As learned from the interview and observation sessions, the teachers understood that the primary focus of phonics is to help the children build the relationship between sounds and letters systematically. Besides, they recognized that systematic and explicit phonics instruction would assist the students word reading skills, as confirmed by the fact that phonics yields a

better result when systematically and explicitly introduced in an EFL context such as ours where limited English exposures exist (NRP, 2000).

In addition, it is learned from the responses of interviewees and the observations made that there was some flexibility on the part of the teachers in understanding and implementing the phonics approaches under study without violating the basic guidelines. Besides, the teachers said they found the method interesting to use and were willing to make personal sacrifices, such as devoting their regular periods to imparting their lessons through the interventions understudy for better mastery, as witnessed by the children when they were asked informally by the researcher during the observation sessions. Most importantly, the researcher himself often witnessed that they were enthusiastically teaching the lessons using phonics songs and word flash cards in extra periods as well. At last, the teachers said they were grateful for the opportunity to take part in the experiment as it helped them to be more clear with the what and how of the phonics approaches under investigation than the training opportunities offered to them previously.

6. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The following pedagogical implications have been forwarded based on the research findings for those interested in employing synthetic and analytic phonics instructions in an EFL context.

- Teachers are advised to make use of these phonics approaches alternatively, for the findings of the study proved that they have a similar impact on the children's performance in basic reading and decoding skills.
- Instruction in phonemic awareness is vital for employing the phonics approaches under study smoothly since such awareness helps children acquire how letters and sounds are blended to form words and segmented to break them in their efforts to learn to read.
- The researcher would like to advise on the need to avoid teaching complicated phonics rules so as to get rid of confusion for the children and to focus on those rules with the most utility and at a point when children can best understand how to apply them for basic reading and decoding skills.

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8. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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