



TEACHING ENGLISH IN PRE-SCHOOLS: PRACTICES AND CHALLENGES IN DEBRE BIRHAN CITY ADMINISTRATION

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Abstract: *This study was carried out with the purpose of appraising the current practices and challenges of teaching pre-school English in Debre Birhan City Administration. One hundred and twelve facilitators and thirty-three principals selected through comprehensive sampling and teaching materials through available and simple random sampling were involved in the study. The required data were collected using English lessons observations, teaching materials analysis, questionnaire, interview and lessons analysis. Responses obtained from the observation and questionnaires were analyzed quantitatively. Mainly, the results secured from English teaching materials, interviews, and lessons analysis were analyzed qualitatively. In the instruction of ECCE English, contentious points were also identified. The results indicated that about 66.98% of the facilitators were not trained to teach in pre-schools. The schools used unrecognized teaching materials with dissimilar contents and activities. The nature of assessment employed in the schools inclined to be continuous testing than continuous assessment. Oral literacy which promotes authentic communication was found to be minimal. ‘The look say’ method was emphasized when ‘the phonemic awareness’ method was underestimated. Although the children were good at reciting letters, they were in difficulties in blending sounds. The methodologies employed encouraged discrete language use devoid of contexts. Despite these, there were many favorable conditions like using English songs in the classrooms, supplying resources to English classes and reciting English alphabets. The children were also observed being good at forming letters and patterns. Based on the drawbacks identified, recommendations were forwarded.*

Keywords: *Early Childhood English, oral literacy, phonemic awareness, look say method, facilitators*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Early child care and education has become one of the priorities for the education sector as it will be one of the education and reduction of dropout and repetition rates in later stages of formal schooling, Ministry of Education(MOE, 2015)^[11].



The Amhara National Regional State Education Bureau (ARSEB, 2008)^[1] also stresses that Pre-Primary School lays the foundation for the social, emotional and cognitive development of the child and prepares children of ages 4-6 years for the primary education.

The Regional Education Bureau took successive actions to uplift the enrollment of children in pre-primary schools through community based pre-schools or O-Classes and child to child education. While evaluating the first Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP) of the ARSEB (2016)^[4], the bureau reported that it raised the percentage of children in pre-schools from 2.12% in 2010/11 to 20% in 2015/16 E.C at the end of the first GTP year with active engagement of parents and the expansion of pre-schools in the rural areas.

In its Education Sector Development Program Five (ESDP V, 2015)^[11] MOE clearly set an objective of ensuring that all children receive a course of pre-primary education as preparation for schooling and thus Gross Enrollment Rate (GER) achieved during ESDP IV 34% is to be raised to 80% at the end of ESDP V (2019/2020). The 2nd Amhara Region Teacher Education Colleges' Forum held at Debre Birhan CTE (March 10-11/2017) also took a decision to establish model pre-primary classes in selected schools (by CTEs) to strengthen the training offered to pre-school facilitators in the colleges and those who need support in teaching in pre-schools. This implies the timely attention given to pre-primary training in CTEs as all provide the training.

In its standard for ECCE, the ARSEB (2010)^[2] clearly states that English is one of the major subjects offered to children in Pre-schools along with mother tongue, environmental science, basic mathematics, aesthetics and technological and computer skills. Instructing English in the early age of children is widely accepted. Murphy (2014)^[12]

in Robinson et al (2015)^[14] maintains that introducing foreign language (in our context English) learning into early child curriculum is unquestionably a good idea as it enhances high motivation and positive attitudes towards learning together with high quality teaching and leads to enjoyable and beneficial learning experiences.

Cognizant of this situation, it is important to assess the practices and challenges of ECCE in Debre Birhan City Administration focusing on English subject.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

MOE (2015)^[11] recognizes that affordable and reliable early children education provides essential support for working parents, particularly mothers. The ministry further pinpoints



that investment in quality early childhood education yields a high economic return, offsetting disadvantage and inequality, especially for children from poor families.

Even though ECCE has paramount significance, it is not free from challenges. The MOE (2015)^[11] in its education sector plan (ESDPV) identified some main challenges as: qualification of teachers, the role of government and stake holders in quality assurance of ECCE and insufficient guidance and support from the ministry to the regions and districts.

Animaw, et al(2015)^[5] quoting Orkin, et al (2012)^[13] indicate that even though Ethiopia is working on her homework at the best level of its capacity to scale up the ECCE program, a number of challenges are observed as high fees, lack of standard curriculum, lack of culturally relevant story books, low teacher salaries and thus high turnover.

In analyzing the practices and challenges of pre-primary schools, different research works were carried out in the Amhara Region and other parts of the country. For instance, Sosina (2013)^[15], G/Egziabher (2014)^[8] and more recently Animaw, et al(2015)^[5] and ARSEB(2015)^[3] can be cited. However, none of them focused on the practices and challenges of teaching English in pre- primary schools of the study area. The studies were not able to practically observe classroom instructions and assess the teaching materials employed to teach English in pre-schools.

The personal experience of the researcher as a teacher educator and member of parent teachers' association has given him ample opportunities to observe pre-primary schools with varied inconvenience in Debre Birhan City Administration (DBCA). He had got chances to notice pre-school facilitators during their actual performances. The informal discussions made with some primary school principals enlightened the prevalence of challenges in running ECCE in general and English language in particular. Thus, this study attempts to examine the practices and challenges of ECCE targeting the teaching of English in the study area.

Eventually, the following basic questions were raised to achieve the objectives set for this research work.

1. What curricular materials did schools use in teaching pre-school English?
2. What training experiences did the facilitators have?
3. What resources were available in the classrooms to support children's learning?
4. What were the challenges when teaching English for pre-school children?
5. How did teachers teach English in their respective classrooms?



1.3 Objective of the Study

1.3.1 General Objective

The main objective of the study was to find out the current practices and challenges of teaching pre-school English in Debre Birhan City Administration.

1.3.2 Specific Objectives

1. To examine the curricular materials used to teach pre-school English.
2. To identify the training and qualification of facilitators in pre-primary schools of the study area.
3. To assess the availability of resources against the standard set for pre-primary schools.
4. To sort out the challenges that prevail while teaching English.
5. To find out how the facilitators teach pre-primary English in their respective classrooms.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Introduction

This part is devoted to present the research methodology employed in this study in order to answer the basic questions raised. Thus, it mainly discusses the research design, data sources, sampling techniques, data gathering instruments and their development.

2.2 Research Design

The study employed the cross-sectional survey design which is the most popular form of survey design used in education to collect data at one point in time (Creswell, 2012)^[7]. This design was preferred as it could help to examine the current practices and manifest the actual performance. Moreover, the design is appropriate to assess practices and evaluate programs.

2.3 Data Sources

In order to examine the practices and challenges of teaching English in ECCE in Debre Birhan City Administration, teaching materials, facilitators and principals of ECCE were used as data sources.

2.3.1 Pre- Schools

In DBCA, there were 33 ECCE schools. All the schools were included using comprehensive sampling in order to make the generalization complete.



2.3.2 Facilitators

In the schools selected, there were 112 facilitators and thus all of them were made to be parts of the study.

2.3.3 Principals

There were 33 principals and acting principals in the pre-schools. All the principals were invited to participate in the study using comprehensive sampling.

2.4 Data Gathering Instruments

2.4.1 Observation

Observation data are attractive as they afford the researcher the opportunity to gather live data from live situation (Cohen et al ,2000)^[6]. Therefore, 16 preschools, were selected randomly and observed twice during English lessons that had given ample chances to the researcher to observe about half of the functioning pre- schools.

2.4.2 Document Analysis

The document analysis part focused on assessing lesson plans, assessment documents and the contents of teaching materials utilized in the selected pre-schools. A checklist was developed by the researcher himself to concentrate on specific areas.

The analysis was done in two ways: First, texts developed by the schools themselves were examined. Second, annual and daily lesson plans were assessed in detail for schools which had not their own teaching materials.

The teaching materials and lesson plans were evaluated in terms of contents, activities and methodologies employed by the facilitators.

Group One

- Schools which developed their own teaching materials. Three of them were selected using available sampling.

Group Two

- Schools which did not develop their own teaching materials. Three of them were selected using random sampling among fifteen.

2.4.3 Questionnaire

To supplement the data obtained through observation and document analysis, questionnaires were developed for facilitators and pre-school principals.



2.4.4 Interview

To strengthen the results obtained through other instruments, a semi-structured interview questions were presented to facilitators and principals. A semi-structured interview was used as it had formal structure to be pursued and gave some sort of flexibility where more probing was needed. Common questions were presented for both groups. This was because the principals had close follow up of the performances of the facilitators. For this, six randomly selected principals and six facilitators (lottery sampling) were interviewed. The interviews were recorded on a note book for analysis. The medium was Amharic to put the communication at ease.

2.4.5 Lesson Analysis

This was taken as one major data source regarding the actual practice of teaching English in pre-schools. For analysis, six English classes were selected randomly. This was done in addition to the classroom observations conducted earlier.

3. SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 Summary

To achieve the objectives, data were mainly gathered from facilitators, principals and teaching materials through classroom observation, content analysis, questionnaire, interview and lesson analysis. About 33 ECCE schools, 112 facilitators and 33 principals were engaged in the study.

The results obtained are discussed as follows:

The school in DBCA belonged to different parties with different shares. For instance, the government held (45.45%), private owners (24.24%), religious organizations (21.22%) and the community (9.09%). All the pre-schools had classes in which they prepared children for Grade One.

As to the data gathered, 99.17% of the facilitators were females. Among the facilitators, only 36(33.02%) were certified to teach in pre-primary schools. 22(20.19%) were teaching in the schools without any training to teach or facilitate children. Regarding on job or refreshment training, 62(56.88%) had got short term training from different sources. On the other hand, 47(43.12%) had not any kind of refreshment training.

With regard to the availability of English teaching materials, the facilitators were asked different questions. The responses from the questionnaire, document analysis and interview



with the facilitators and school principals proved the reality about the inputs. All the facilitators (100%) reported that they had not teacher's guide to teach English. Likewise, the researcher could not get English teaching texts developed either by the MOE or by the Regional Education Bureau. Despite this, three of the pre-schools developed their own English teaching materials while others used either bought or borrowed materials.

Inconsistencies were also observed in period allotment to teach English which ranged from two periods to more than five per-week to prepare children for Grade One. Creating more exposure to practice English is appreciable.

The assessment approach was found to be continuous test than assessment. The actual classroom observation proved that the facilitators used weekly recorded scores (continuous test) as the basis of their continuous assessment. As most of the facilitators themselves reported, they used at the end of program or semester tests to assess the children. For instance, they recorded scores obtained in speaking, listening, reading and writing on a format developed for this purpose, but there was not any document on children's progress. Portfolios were not developed to show the progress of the children.

The observation results revealed very limited experience in speaking and listening. There were good attempts in responding to greetings like 'Good morning and Good after noon'. None the less, the responses could not go beyond these. The children were not able to respond to instructions given in English and simple questions asked in English. Moreover, the children were not seen making simple sentences of their own in English. The dominance of mother tongue (Amharic) was observed.

Reading was one of the skills frequently observed in the pre-school classes. The children were good at reading letters; half of them were able to recognize their names, match words to pictures and real objects. But most of them, 87.5% were not able to recognize their friends' name, and also were not able to read words. In teaching reading, 'the look says' method was highly dominant. In no school, 'the phonemic method' was seen. This method could raise the phonemic awareness of children to hear and be aware of sounds, use sounds to say words and use the sounds to make new words.

Of the four skills, writing was found to be well practiced. The children were able to write patterns, form letters and write words and phrases as practically observed from their exercise books. They were also seen writing on white or black boards. Facilitators' regular



effort in giving feedbacks on their exercise books was promising. However, problems were observed in handling their pencils, in adjusting their sitting positions and keeping the neatness of their exercise books.

The methodologies observed helped to examine the actual teaching performances in the class. With this, the children were found to be good at reciting songs. In most of the schools (87.5%) children could sing songs before or in the middle of the lessons provided. As a method of teaching, the facilitators regularly employed the 'Look say method' in which the facilitators read and pre-read until the children mastered the words. The method encourages chorus teaching, repetitions, memorizations and receiving. In contrast, the phonic method was totally ignored. Language games were not practiced sufficiently. Playing games were observed in only one of the schools. From the contents analysis, games were not planned when children could do a lot with this language input.

The classroom observation result proved the availability of resources in classrooms. In most of the schools observed, real objects, pictures, puzzles, colors, flash cards and letter cards were reachable. The schools had good practice to organize English media corners and to decorate walls with pictures and English words. In four of the schools, children movies were presented to children. Even though the resources were not scarce, the problem was in using them to promote classroom interactions. The resources were not used to promote oral interaction and authentic use of the target language.

Since the schools provided English lesson for a whole year, it was crucial to scrutinize the contents, and activities presented in the classes. Thus the content analysis result shows emphasis on reading and writing small and capital letters. The contents inclined to teach grammatical rules out of context. For instance, punctuation marks, pronouns, vowels and consonants, singular and plural, and etc. The analysis proves imbalance in the number of contents, for instance, one having 21 contents for a year and the other only 6.

The analysis on the activities also shows the dominance of writing activities. As clearly observed in the materials and lesson plans, many of the activities promoted writing. There was imbalance in practicing language skills. Oral literacy was underestimated. The activities encouraged repetition and memorization. Games were not planned and included in the contents.



The lesson analysis also helped in observing the actual practice of teaching pre-primary English. From the analysis made, the children practiced greetings which could be taken as a good start for a lesson. In spite of this, the greetings were not context based. Children greeted anyone who came to their class as a teacher “Good morning teacher.”

Lessons were revised and introduced in their mother tongue. Mother tongue was over used. The facilitators made the children expect translation for every word they taught in the class when they could use real objects, pictures, actions and other alternatives instead of simple translations.

The lessons were full of activities which promote repetitions, memorizations and recalls. This was well manifested in reading words. The facilitators wrote five to six words on the boards and asked the children to read them. Chorus repetitions were observed.

Words were taught in discrete way out of contexts. The children called out the words in turn and returned to their seats. Contexts were not observed to make use of the words they learnt.

The lessons were devoid of games even though there were varied resources to supplement the contents selected. However, songs were used to motivate the children and create variety. Unlike greetings, partings were not observed in the lessons.

Some contentious issues were identified in relation to the teaching of pre-primary English. Even though English subject is taught in pre-primary schools, MOE (1994)^[9] in its Education and Training Policy launched that the teaching of English as a subject to begin from Grade One. Due to this, the latest syllabuses of the MOE (2010)^[10] and ARSEB(2010)^[2] evacuated the English subject from the contents.

The other argumentative issue with regard to the teaching of pre-primary English is the absence of officially developed teaching materials in spite of the fact that weekly periods are allotted. This exposed the schools to use materials which were devoid of the principles of teaching English in pre-primary schools.

The teaching of English in pre-schools was also encircled with a number of challenges. As reported by the facilitators and principals and even observed in the schools, there were inaccessibility of children’s texts, teacher’s guide and syllabuses. Moreover, there were challenges regarding the quality of the facilitators in teaching English, the mixture of different age groups in the same class (for government schools), uncomfortable classrooms



and lack of experience sharing among pre-schools (most did not know what contents were taught in other schools) and fear towards English language.

3.2 Conclusions

The results obtained from interviews, questionnaire, observation, contents and lesson analysis have helped to come to the following conclusions.

The pre-schools in DBCA were categorized as '0' classes (of mixed age groups practiced in government schools) and regular kindergarten ranging from nursery to level three. In these pre-schools, most of the facilitators (66.98%) were not trained to teach in pre-schools. Refreshment trainings were inadequate for most of untrained teachers. This helps to conclude that the pre-schools were run by facilitators not trained for pre-schools. The pre-schools were also dominated by male principals. This is against the standard set for pre-primary schools.

The facilitators teach English without officially recognized materials which were either developed by the schools themselves or borrowed from other schools or may be purchased from the market. The contents and activities varied in number. Moreover, there was not consistency in period allotment of English subject.

The nature of assessment was more of scoring and recording results than witnessing progress in English language competence. The continuous assessment was nominal. The facilitators tended to use end of program or semester results (tests) to assess the performance of children. No recorded portfolios on the progress of the children were observed.

In terms of language skills, oral literacy which promotes speaking and listening was underestimated. Most of the children were not able to make simple sentences. They were not able to follow instructions. Activities which promote authentic oral listening were very limited.

The children were good at reciting and reading individual letters in spite of the fact that they were found to be poor at blending and reading new letters which highly exemplifies deficiency in phonemic awareness.

Most of the contents and activities selected encouraged practice in writing which should have followed ample exercise in oral language development. Writing can be said as a dominant skill in language practice.



Songs were found to be the sole representatives of games played in English classrooms. And thus severe scarcity of games in English was observed. The 'Look say method' was the dominant approach in teaching reading. The 'phonic method' was totally ignored and thus the children were exposed to repetitions and memorizations.

There was not serious problem in resources to teach English. In contrast, the problem was in using the resources to promote authentic language use.

Contents and lessons analyses proved the discrete presentation of language items out of contexts. Contents were intended to teach language rules than practicing language as a whole for communication purpose.

Lessons were highly mother tongue dominated. The facilitators regularly used translations when it could have been the last option. In one school, a lesson plan prepared in Amharic for English subject was observed.

The policy statement that English teaching begins from Grade One has aggravated the problem in teaching English as the facilitators used unrecognized and disorganized materials to teach English.

Schools had no common understanding on for how long they should teach their children. Some had two levels and the others three. This had a direct impact on the exposure the children should have in learning English and other subjects.

Manageable class size (number of children), protected classrooms, the availability of commercial materials to supplement English, the attainability of locally produced or commercially purchased resources were good opportunities in DBCA.

3.4 Recommendations

In order to assess the current practices and challenges of teaching pre-schools English in DBCA, data were gathered, analyzed, summarized and concluded. Based on the summary and conclusions, suggestions were forwarded to those who have direct concern with ECCE in the study area.

The teaching of English is at risk along with the quality of the facilitators unless professionally developed materials are used. Therefore, the Ethiopian Ministry of Education should take immediate measure to narrow down the policy gap and include English in the ECCE syllabus so that standardized materials can be produced. The time when the policy was developed (1994) and the current practices in ECCE are quite different.



Most of the facilitators teaching in the pre-primary schools were found to be untrained. And thus, short term trainings should be offered regularly in general and to overcome the deficiency in teaching English language in particular. The City Administration Education Office Should also monitor the trainings offered by governmental and non-governmental organizations to maintain balance and the inclusion of English subject.

The schools should work closely to share experience among themselves as they were found to have experiences ranging from two years to thirty-eight years. The schools should also organize trainings on developing oral literacy, balancing language skills, authentic language use, assessing language skills, using language games to promote classroom interactions vis-a-vis the level of the children to their facilitators in collaboration with organization working on ECCES.

The skill in teaching pre-primary English needs its own scientific knowledge. Therefore, the facilitators should always be aware to update themselves and get acquainted with the principles of teaching English in their schools. The facilitators give more emphasis for practicing writing skill in comparison to other skills. This needs to be improved by balancing the skills. The practice in oral literacy was not satisfactory. This should also be given due attention. The teaching of early reading was highly dominated by one method, 'Look say method'. This method does not give attention to phonemic awareness and promotes repetitions and memorizations. And thus, they should supplement it with 'The phonic method'. Plays and games play very significant role in language learning. Therefore, the facilitators should use language games along with the songs in teaching English. The assessments they use inclined to testing rather than assessing children's progress based on regular performance. Therefore, they need to improve their assessment skill working with the college and other benefactors.

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