

An Assessment of Reading Ability among Pre-School Children in Elgeyo Marakwet County, Kenya

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Abstract: Teaching reading and success in reading ability is therefore important for young learners. However, the ability for teachers to teach reading is not well documented. Little research has been conducted on teachers' competence and attitudes towards reading ability among learners at preschool level. The objective of this study was to assess reading ability among Pre-School Children in Elgeyo Marakwet County, Kenya. The theory of planned behaviour and education production function theory guided the study. The study employed the mixed methods approach. An explanatory research design was used. The target population was all the 1252 pre-school teachers in Elgeyo Marakwet County Kenya. Multistage random sampling technique was used to select the participating schools and individual teachers. A sample size of 294 schools was used. The instruments utilised were questionnaires, and observation schedules. Data was analysed using descriptive statistics. The study results indicated that the pre-school children reading ability was poor. The study therefore recommended that pre-school teachers be trained to improve their competency in English phonology as to improve the reading ability of pre-school children.

Keywords: English Phonology, Teacher Competency, Reading Ability.

1. INTRODUCTION

Burke and Hagan-Burke (2012) state that reading is essential for children's educational success and that it is low communication in a technologically advancing society which provokes researchers to investigate the process of reading acquisition. Although a number of factors inhibit and facilitate the process of reading ability, many studies in Kenya focus on the schools, classroom and the language of instruction. Consequently, English phonology has been explored as one of the key contexts that might be responsible for influencing the reading ability process among preschool children. To achieve an understanding of English phonology it is core to understand other underlying factors such as teacher competence and attitude towards English phonology.

English is a medium of instruction in Kenyan schools especially from standard four and its acquisition needs a little more effort to attain it. Phonological knowledge and skills have been pointed out as a dynamic process that teachers need to be identifying with as a key reading strategy. According to Good and Kaminski (2012) it is important for teachers and even speech therapists to evaluate learners' ability on phonological awareness and use their professional judgement to decide on the intervention strategy. They need to evaluate efficacy of their intervention and evaluate decisions. She insists on teachers paying attention to individual learners' phonological impairment to device the appropriate strategy for correction. Looking at what Baker has is that teachers should be able to offer phonological awareness lessons according to reading level of learners. This could be based on the diverse and individual ability of learners in the phonological awareness program as Baker notes every child is an individual with different ability from the other. Therefore these individual differences can only be detected if the classroom teacher is well grounded in phonological awareness puts emphasis

(Lyon, 2011). They advocate that the differences be treated as separate entities. The teacher after identifying the challenges should then be able to pick on the intervention strategy accordingly and those who indicate significant improvement modification of the techniques is important to keep them on track (Hintze and Stoner, 2013). Basing on the above it is therefore of great importance for both teacher trainees and those on professional development to have a very firm foundation on phonological awareness.

Further on Foorman and Torgesen (2011) assert that there is now ample evidence of the strong relationship between phonological skills, particularly phonemic awareness skills and early reading. She notes that phonological awareness includes broad spectrum of the sounds of language including awareness of sounds, syllables, onsets and rhymes, rhyme and information. This is distinguishable from phonemic awareness which is seen as a subset of phonological awareness. It is viewed as the particular awareness of the individual sounds with word. Good and Kaminski (2016) point out that this is the most critical component of phonological awareness in the development of reading and so receives most attention. Foorman and Torgesen (2011) undertake lessons with children who speak English as a second language. They acknowledge that teachers' knowledge of phonological awareness is more important and helps them to impart the same to learners (Byrne and Fielding- Barnsley, 1991, Castle 1999, Juel, Griffin & Gough 1986, Topp 1985).

The primary focus of phonemic awareness with young children is not rhyming rather the focus should be on increasing their awareness of the individual sounds in language and how these sounds can later be combined. Learning to manipulate these sounds through blending and segmenting is the most important goal of phonemic awareness and is associated with improved reading ability (Juel and Minden-Cupp, 2010). At this point of phonemic awareness therefore the teachers' goal should be linking sounds to print. Good et al. (2014) advocates for teachers' developmental sequence of teaching reading. For example teach segmenting and blending of words and syllables before teaching segmenting and blending onsets, rimes and phonemes. She insists that learners with poor phonological can benefit from explicit instruction of phonological awareness, particularly blending, segmenting and manipulating sounds (Hanson and Farrell, 2005) and mapping these sounds to sounds letter and words as fast as possible.

Statement of the Problem:

The Kenya Certificate of Primary Education results of English in Elgeyo Marakwet County have remained relatively low (KNEC, 2015) although ironically, overall, Elgeyo Marakwet was ranked second to Kirinyaga as the best performing County in 2016. The mean mark of 271 attained in all subjects would be significantly higher if performance in English was raised. The County mean score for English was 51.2%. Given that English phonology is the fulcrum upon which performance in English revolves, there is a strong need to examine in detail the teaching of English phonology at preschool level which is the foundation of various skills of English and improved performance in other subjects (Byrne *et al.*, 2000). Language poorly learnt at lower levels affects performance at the higher levels (Adams, 2010). The static County mean score for English which stood at 51.96% in 2012; 52.9% in 2013; 50.08% in 2014; 50.51% in 2015; and 51.2% in 2016 underscores the urgency with which teaching English phonology should be addressed.

Teachers are responsible for teaching English, a medium of instruction throughout school and a subject in its own right. Phonology is an important ingredient of English Language. Indeed research evidence has shown a strong relationship between overall performance in English examinations and knowledge and awareness of English phonology. Given that all teachers are trained to teach English it is expected that all qualified teachers should be aware of the importance of phonology and hold positive attitudes to the subject.

However, is it true that all teachers have phonological awareness and are able to apply rules while teaching reading? There is need for research evidence on this. An investigation of published literature showed that teachers' knowledge and attitudes towards English phonology had not been sufficiently documented. The extent to which teacher awareness, competence and attitude interacted with learner ability to read was not known either. In this study the researcher set out to understand the relationship between teacher awareness of phonology, their attitudes and the impact on learners' ability to read.

Objective of the Study:

The objective of this study was to assess reading ability among Pre-School children in Elgeyo Marakwet County, Kenya

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study utilized the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) to understand the attitude of teachers in the use of phonological competence and attitude to enhance reading ability. Bond and Richmond (2007) developed this theory recognizing that the extent to which some intentions to act can be carried out depends partially on the levels of control individuals have over behaviors. The TPB theory is consistent with Rouse and Fantuzzo (2006) work on self-efficacy. Albert Bandura argued that it is possible for one to be responsible for one's behaviour with "the conviction that one can successfully execute behaviour". The TPB therefore adds perceived behavioural control (PBC) (i.e. the belief as to how easy or difficult performance of the behaviour is likely to be) as a predictor of intention to act and behaviour. Perceived behavioural control is assumed to reflect the opportunities and resources needed to engage in behaviour. Thus, the path between perceived behavioural control and intention to act reflects individuals' perceived control over the behaviour whereas the path between perceived behavioural control and behaviour reflects actual control over the behaviour (Bond and Richmond, 2007)

In the context of this study the TPB suggests that an attitude develops once a teacher gets the opportunity to teach especially in preschool. Teachers are initially job seekers. Later they find jobs as teachers in early childhood learning institutions. The question then becomes how do they deliver to learners?

The Education Production Function Theory was also used to estimate determinants of learning outcomes. A production function specifies the output of a firm and industry or an entire economy for all combination of inputs (Rouse and Fantuzzo, 2006). Although schools are not profit-maximizing firms, the framework treats them as production units on the supply side. Production function studies have been used extensively to identify factors that produce good learning outcomes.

This framework specifies a level of achievement, usually measured by learners test scores as the typical output and characteristics of the teaching and learning environment as typical inputs (Wren, 2001). Formal education increases individuals well-being primarily through the acquisition of skills both cognitive (e.g. literacy and numeracy) and non-cognitive (e.g. social and organizational skills). In this study the teacher attitude and awareness of phonology were treated as inputs. They are supposed to lead to improved performance by learners of English. The level of performance by learners was taken as outputs of the production function. Thus, a teacher who is in a position to teach reading skills to learners realizes the set objectives of the day.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Paaso & Korento (2010) after their study of the competent teacher point out that the factors behind the success of Finnish education and training are the solid teaching profession and confidence in the competence of teaching staff. Ensuring the availability of skilled labour requires competent teaching staff and continuous renewal of competences. Tools for competence development include teacher training and staff development training for education personnel. In order to ensure up-to-date initial and continuing teacher training, it is crucial to anticipate competence needs among teaching staff. This will aid in acquisition of correct skills and knowledge required in the various areas of teaching literacy by use of phonics. Despite the efforts and huge budget in the Kenya's Ministry of education there is need to look into the quality of teacher in terms of their preparedness in teaching reading.

Further on Fernandez (2014) noted that recent trends in education in the Philippines pose new challenges in the academic for the improvement of literacy rate among Filipinos. In response to one of the challenges of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) on Millennium Development Goal (MDG) which is to achieve universal primary education, the current status in the Philippine education as revealed by the Department of education shows that only 6 out of 10 students who entered grade 1 are able to finish Grade 6. This is a worrying trend of low educational attainment this may result to limited comprehension leading to unemployment. It can only be construed that low educational attainment propagates poverty in the Philippines" (UNESCO, 2008a: 24). If the students are not able to read they therefore cannot comprehend what has been written down.

Consequently, teachers' perceptions of students' enjoyment of reading in class correlated significantly with students' own perceived level of reading achievement. Teachers perceive that as students' level of reading enjoyment increases, their

level of academic reading achievement also increases as discussed by Black (2006) in the study of attitudes to reading; an investigation across the primary years.

Lawal (1982) describes reading problems as omission, substitution, reversal, mispronunciation, sight vocabulary, not up to grade level, nervousness, slow reading and lack of comprehension. Oyetunde & Uno (1986) list impediments to positive reading habits as attitude. They include lack of materials, poor preparation of teachers, lack of interest, poor libraries or none at all, home background and lack of adult readers as models. Ojo (1993) conquers with these impediments and notes that the major causes of poor performance in English and other subjects is their inability to read effectively which in turn, is largely due to attitude of learners towards reading. These three authors address challenges of the learners' that are more glaring and hits the news headlines every now then. The researchers have not specifically given attention to teachers who deliver this instruction and therefore a missing link between the learners and the other surrounding factors that impede their reading. The current study was able to establish the classroom teachers' English phonology skill and knowledge (competence) and attitude under a wider area of study to give a viable generalization. Teachers' competence in English phonology is critical in the teaching of reading ability. Reading ability is a product likened to the functioning of a car. This clever analogy provides insight into the need for all aspects of the reading process to work together in harmony in order for a child to be a competent reader Madelaine & Wheldall (2011). The consequences of poor achievement in reading ability in the early years are pervasive, having detrimental effects on school performance. Lawal (1996) declares that readers use symbols to guide the recovery of information from their repertoires and subsequently use this information to construct interpretations of the message. Torgesen & Mathes (1998) indicate that phonological skills are important in learning to read for three main reasons which he identifies as helps children to understand the alphabetic principle, showing how words in oral language are represented in print. It also helps children notice the regular ways letters represent sounds in words, which is correlated to fluent reading. Finally, it makes it possible for words in a context to be only partially sounded out. Torgesen points out that although some children may acquire some rudimentary phonological awareness skills as early as two and half to three years of age, more advanced skills are not mastered until the end of class one. He notes research that deals with genetic endowment and preschool linguistic experiences as critical factors in the differences among children acquiring phonological awareness skills. Even after entering school, the growth of these skills is dependent not only what they are taught but also on the child's response to that instruction. Children who enter first grade with weak phonological skills do not respond well to early reading. The study recommended further studies on how to improve children's reading ability but there is need to look at the classroom teacher's ability to teach reading using the phonic method and his competence in the same.

Phonological awareness is the ability to manipulate language at phonic level that is to reflect on the component sounds of spoken words, rather than their meaning (Goswami 2000). This study informed fully of the value of English phonology among learners. It placed emphasis on the pupils and how to improve their phonological skills but did not mention the teachers' knowledge and skills as they take the learners through reading using the strategies. The study was adequate in establishing the effectiveness of phonological awareness in initiating early reading. Amuththeasi (2000) notes that there is urgent need to investigate the causes of poor reading comprehension among pupils with a view of finding a lasting solution in primary schools.

Adewole (2001) describes critical reading skill, which students need to read, explore and appreciate a literary text effectively. In this study the sample population appears very small of 18 learners in grade twelve with results indicating the difficult of teaching older learners reading. This study dealt with older learners who could not read and therefore seen to be educational risk. There was no information provided on the teachers' status in reading instruction.

Karem (2005) notes that alphabetic knowledge and phonological skills are strong predictors of successful literacy development. In processing both spoken and written language, the human brain employs a phonological code to represent linguistic information. This code is unique for each individual language, as each language has its own distinct set of sounds, with very specific rules that govern how those sounds can be combined into syllables and words.

The ability to read is a crucial skill for retrieval of information Dike (2006). There are various factors that work against effective teaching and learning comprehension in our primary schools. Most of the factors are aforementioned but with little reference to the teachers' knowledge and skills in English phonology. Rvachew (2006) makes it clearer that emergent literacy skills in general, and phonological skills in particular, form a bridge between child's development of oral language skills and the eventual acquisition of written language competence. These skills emerge in the preschool

period from the interaction of the child's teachers, parents and caregivers. The author also notes that the results of 30 years of research worldwide have shown phonological skills and awareness is perhaps the best predictor of reading ability we have today. Moreover, poor knowledge of sound structure of spoken language is considered to be the core deficit that underlies reading disability. Therefore it is important kindergarten aged children be able to identify words that rhyme or share the same beginning sound.

Folarrani (2007) believes that the government should involve teachers in working out effective ways of making the teaching profession viable for serving teachers and attractive to incoming ones so as to address the problem of student poor reading culture. In conclusion of the study it was noted that reading is indispensable to primary school pupils. With appropriate reading materials, conducive environment and teachers with adequate educational qualifications good reading skills will help produce pupils who perform well in other subjects. Further, recommended that teachers must acknowledge the importance of reading skills and must plan an effective plan of reading instruction with focus on promoting a reading culture. That school authorities should introduce informal education on readiness for reading. Non-structured reading instruction should be introduced and the child's ability to respond to the reading materials observed. Parents should also provide stimulating reading environment for their children. They should encourage children to read at home. Books should be provided for them to improve their reading. They should encourage children to watch children's educational programmes. This would go a long way in improving their phonetic and vocabulary development. They should cultivate the habit of using their leisure to read for pleasure. It was also recommended that government should provide appropriate materials for teaching reading skills. Libraries should also be provided for primary children as their absence is a deficiency in reading skills. There was also need to resuscitate the mobile library in schools and make it compulsory for all pupils to register with a token fee to have access to services provided by this modern library.

Majzub (2010), notes that reading readiness is an important aspect formal schooling. Preschool graduates need to compete with other children in year one of elementary school. The aspects examined were reading readiness among others. It emerged that there were no significant difference in reading readiness according to gender but there were significant differences according to the type of kindergarten and parents educational background. Phonological knowledge refers to general appreciation of sounds of speech as distinct from their meaning; the realization that a continuous stream of speech can be broken into separate words, those words can be broken further into one or more syllables which are made up of a sequence of separated single words also called phonemes (Tafo & Manolis 2008). If children are not able to hear the separate words, they can hardly relate these sounds to the letters of the alphabet and so cannot use decoding skills to attack unknown words more so none words. Hatcher J.P., et al (2008) in their study ameliorating early reading failure by integrating the teaching of reading and phonological skills found out that although the phonology group showed most marked improvement on phonological tasks, the group in reading with phonology made most progress in reading. These results show that interventions to boost phonological skills need to be integrated with the teaching of reading if they are to maximally be effective in improving the literacy skills. Abedi, J., et al (2009) in research study on comprehension discovered that most children who learnt English as a second language had more challenges in comprehension of passages than those who spoke English as a first language. They concluded their study that reading is the foundation underlying instruction and assessment in all other content areas. Students with difficulty in reading may have problems understanding instructional and assessment materials across all content areas. This study was more focused on the learners place in reading. The current study intends to focus the classroom teachers who actually deliver the instructions to the learners.

Gorman (2012) in the study found out that although there had been extensive documentary on the role of phonological knowledge and skill in literacy acquisition, the basis for individual differences in, and mechanisms underlying phonology are poorly understood. This study identified other potential contributors of phonological skills and knowledge including verbal working memory, letter knowledge, literacy experiences and speech perception. However, little or no potential factors were considered on teacher's knowledge and skills English phonology. The conclusion of the study that phonological skills instruction and strong vocabulary in an individual's first language benefits the English phonology skills development in both the L1 and L2. Results indicated dynamic relationships exist between vocabulary size, storage and processing components of working memory, and phonological awareness development. This was a comparative study looking at the relationship between vocabulary size, working memory and phonological awareness in Spanish-Speaking English learners. This can be viewed from a Kenyan perspective where English is not L1. Despite the learner's under study being Spanish-speakers the study focused more on the above factors holding other key players constant, the teachers' knowledge and skills. This study further highlights the need for instruction in decoding skills which makes

teachers aware that a child will struggle to become a skilled reader if he or she has limited vocabulary and insufficient world knowledge. Albeit this, interventions that are provided in the first two years of schooling are more effective than those implemented in later years. This study hardly observed the place of the teacher who instructs the same.

Further on (Jennifer 2012) while studying factors that influence children's reading skills found out that children start learning language from birth. As they grow and develop, language becomes more important. By the time they reach preschool age, children should be learning the letters of the alphabet, as well as the letter sounds. Learning to sound out words is the foundation of reading. This study focused on language acquisition which too plays a major role in acquisition of reading ability but it emphasised children with speech difficult notwithstanding the autism issue. Many factors came into play such as disabilities; most common is the attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Amount of instruction and practice is another factor that influences reading among children. The amount of reading practice children get influences their reading skill level. The more one-on-one instruction students receive the better their reading skills are. Instruction should consist of teaching phonic, sight words and fluency practice. As teachers focus on reading skills every school day, students learn new vocabulary words and get better at reading comprehension. Students should also practice reading. Daily reading will greatly improve their skills. Answering questions about the subject matter tests to see if they are listening and comprehending what they have read. In so doing students realise that reading is something that holds meaning and knowledge, not just a cluster of sounds that need to be sounded out. Age-appropriate books at home are another of the factors that influence reading among children. The number of age-appropriate books in a child's home can influence his reading skills. Access to books that interests him helps develop a sense of reading appreciation. Books should be seen as something enjoyable and fun. When children have books at their home, they are more likely to sit down and read them. Parents can and should encourage appreciation for reading. Reading a book to the child before bedtime is a great way to share the love of reading. The objectives of the study was on factors that influence children's' reading skills in which most of them were found and noted strategies for improving on. Quite a number of strategies were recommended but focus on teacher's knowledge and skills did not come out clearly hence the study that is underway which will attempt to find the teachers knowledge and skills in English phonology.

Alghazo *et al* (2013) in studying competence, and practices concerning phonological awareness among early childhood education teachers where they sampled 83 kindergarten teachers revealed that research into various aspects of phonological skills and knowledge was available only in English language and in English speaking countries, such as united states of America. This kind of research however is lacking in Arabic and Arabic speaking- countries, particularly the United Arab Emirate (UAE), even with the knowledge that skills and knowledge of phonology influences children's reading performance. There were no studies conducted with kindergarten level schoolteachers, and it also reported that teachers in the first, second and third grades had low levels of phonological knowledge and skills and were not prepared to teach this important subject matter (Tibbi 2005). The current study intends to give a detailed account of teachers' knowledge and skills in English phonology as recommended by Tibbi (2005).

Adeniji (2010) discovered that some English teachers are lagging behind in their approach to teaching reading comprehension. The effect is poor performance among students. He further noted that these teacher lack methods of imparting reading skills to pupils. The condition is so bad that some pupils find it difficult to read and understand a simple sentence.

It is apparent that across the SACMEQ countries, on average one out of five pupils in reading and one out of two pupils in mathematics have not attained the minimum basic requirements in these subjects by the end of Grade 6. Kenya is one of the SACMEC countries where this study was conducted within the National Assessment and Monitoring was carried out. It was found out that most of our pupils, especially Standard Three were below the reading mark. They had not acquired the reading basics.

In addition, the SACMEQ countries, 22% of the Grade 6 pupils performed at Levels 1 (pre-reading) and 2 (emergent reading), and 40% of the pupils performed at Levels 1 (pre-numeracy) and 2 (emergent numeracy) in mathematics. These percentages imply that those pupils cannot read at all. In countries like Zambia (47.7% in reading and 71.2% in mathematics), Malawi (45.5% in reading and 74.3% in mathematics), Namibia (43.4% in reading and 76.6% in mathematics), South Africa (in 31% reading and 52.2% in mathematics) and Lesotho (24.4% in reading and 65.9% in mathematics), where pupils performed at Levels 1 and 2 in reading and mathematics, which is extremely low for Grade 6,

special attention from key stakeholders including the Ministry of Education is necessary. The high percentage of pupils at those two levels has far-reaching implications in terms of the internal and external efficiency of the education system. The quality is low, and the pupils who performed at this level cannot proceed to higher levels of schooling. The teaching of reading and writing skills begins at Grade 1 and 2 levels in the case of Mozambique. Recommendations were, the Ministries of Education in SACMEQ countries and in particular the countries with a high percentage of pupils who cannot read need to carry extensive work on teaching reading. On this recommendation the Kenyan government under the ministry of education rolled out a reading programme that can assist lower primary children to read through phonics the *Tusome* initiative. This aims at equipping teachers with prerequisite skills of teaching literacy through the phonic method.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out in Elgeyo Marakwet County within the former Rift Valley province. The choice of this county for this study was informed by its relatively poor and almost static performance in English at KCPE level compared to some counties within the region. The study used pragmatist paradigm since it combines the qualitative and quantitative approaches within different phases of the research process (Morgan and Fuchs, 2007).). Since this research used quantitative and qualitative approaches, this paradigm is deemed appropriate for this study. This study adopted concurrent triangulation mixed methods using pragmatist paradigm for it is useful in helping researchers meet the criteria for evaluating the “goodness” of their answers better than do the single approach designs.

This study targeted pre-school teachers drawn from three sub counties in Elgeyo Marakwet County. Records from the County Education Office indicate that there is a total of 1252 public preschools teachers in 441 centres. The sample size of this study was based on Morgan and Fuchs (2007) statistical table for determining sample size from a population. The sample size was 294. Sample size was then be proportionately distributed by applying proportional simple random sampling to pick respondents from each sub-county.

Reading test tool was used to record pupil performance on reading. The test tool in appendix two is one that applies to and learners. As the teacher administers this test, the researcher was interested in the teacher and the scores of learners in each item. It contained scores of [very good] which had a score of 3 points, [good] 2 points,[fair] 1 point and [poor] 0 points. In this tool the teacher was to follow the instructions of the test. Thus, asks the learners to sound the letter sounds after her and then individually as she awards one point for each correct sound. Zero points are awarded to poor sounds. As this happened the researcher observed how the teacher was taking learners through the test. Then the scores for each item were summed and compared with results of objective one and two to evaluate objective three of the study about relationship between teacher English phonological skills and knowledge and pupil reading performance. To establish the main characteristics of the study variables, descriptive statistics was employed.

5. RESULTS

A total of 294 out of 221 teachers fully filled and returned the research questionnaires. The return rate for questionnaires used for data analysis in this study was 75%. The response rate is considered adequate given the recommendations by Morgan and Fuchs (2007). Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents. Analysis of teachers’ background characteristics focused on teachers’ sex and experience in teaching. This was informed by studies which reveal that years of teaching experience and gender account for close to 17% of the variance in teacher’s knowledge of language form and close to 19% of the variance in teacher’s knowledge in language content (Bond and Dykstra, 2013). It was therefore necessary to examine these characteristics among respondents so that they could be held constant across the teachers.

Results presented in Table 1 revealed that 70.9% of the teaching workforce were female while 29.1% were male. The distribution of teaching experience on the other hand revealed that 35.4% of the teachers had a 1-5 year experience in teaching; 25.3% had an experience of between 5–10 years; 23.4% had an experience of 10–15 years while 15.8% had an experience of above 15 years.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Background Characteristic	Category	Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	46	29.1
	Female	112	70.9
	Total	158	100.0
Teaching experience	1-5yrs	56	35.4
	5-10yrs	40	25.3
	10-15yrs	37	23.4
	15 and above	25	15.8
	Total	158	100.0

These results point to pre-school teaching in Elgeyo Marakwet County as a gendered profession that is predominantly female. These findings support the views by Blanchman et al. (1999) that teaching in early childhood education is an example of a gendered profession where women are encouraged to become teachers and are viewed as the nurturing mothers. This could have an impact on the findings of the current study. The implication then is that interpretation of the results in this study should be made disregarding gender and experience of the teachers.

Pre-School Children's Reading Ability:

Children's reading ability was conceptualized as an indicator of teachers' competence in English phonology. The researcher made and scored observations on children's awareness and ability of (1) alphabetic letter sound and alphabetic letter names (auditory skills), (2) level 1 phonics, (3) level 2 phonics, and (4) level 3 and 4 phonics. In assessing children's ability of alphabetic letter sound and alphabetic letter names, the teacher sounded out letters and asked the children to imitate. Next the teacher asked individual children to sound each letter. The observer awarded 1 point for each correct sound and 0 point for any wrong sound. A total of 25 letters were sounded.

Level 1 phonics was assessed using 11 items. The teacher sounded a phonic which the child was required to repeat. The observer awarded a score of 1 for every correct response and a score of 0 for a wrong response. This procedure was repeated for level 2 phonics (15 items) and level 3&4 phonics (15 items). Descriptive statistics of aggregate children scores presented in Table 4.6 revealed that children tended to score below average in all the phonic knowledge awareness items. The results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Phonic Knowledge Awareness

	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Auditory Skills	25	11.79	5.505
2. Level1 Phonics	11	5.20	2.643
3. Level2 Phonics	15	7.39	3.685
4. Level3&4 Phonics	15	7.14	3.349
Mean	15	7.88	

As captured in Table 2, the phonic awareness level was slightly above average (mean =7.88 of the maximum possible of 15). Auditoria skills were scored the highest with a mean of 11.79 while Level 1 phonics had the least mean score of 5.20. Specific results indicate that out of a possible score of 25 points in auditory skills, children obtained a mean score of 11.79 with a standard deviation of 5.505; Out of a possible score of 11 points in level 1 phonics, children obtained a mean score of 5.20 points with a standard deviation of 2.643; out of a maximum possible score of 15 points in level 2 phonics, children obtained a mean score of 7.39 points with a standard deviation of 3.685; similarly out of a maximum possible score of 15 points in level 3 and 4 phonics children obtained a mean score of 7.14 points with a standard deviation of 3.349. These results reflect negatively on the teaching of phonics in pre-schools in the County. This then tends to confirm the teacher competence results which tended to suggest a lack of competence among pre-school teachers in the County to teach English phonology skills. Children's reading ability was also assessed through investigation of their phonemic awareness. In this regard, children were examined on their blending and segmentation skills. Blending skills focused on their ability in onset rimes in CVC; consonants and vowels blending in CVC, CCVC, CVCC, and CCVCC words.

Segmentation skills on the other hand focused on segmenting CVC, CCV, CVCC and CCVCC-CCCVCC words respectively.

Results of children's aggregate scores reported in Table 3 show that pre-school children scored poorly in both blending and segmentation tasks. Under blending children obtained a mean score of 3.44 points out of a possible 5 points in ONSETS and RYMES; they obtained a mean score of 7.44 points out of a possible 15 points in consonant and vowel blending in CVC words; a mean score of 7.43 points out of a possible 15 points in consonants and vowel blending in CCVC words; a mean score of 5.89 points out of a possible 15 points in consonants and vowel blending in CVCC words; and a mean score of 5.87 points out of a possible 15 points in consonants and vowel blending in CCVCC words.

In the case of segmenting words, children obtained a mean score of 6.06 points out of a possible 15 points in segmenting CVC words; a mean score of 5.90 points out of a possible 15 points in segmenting CCVC words; a mean score of 5.78 points out of a possible 15 points in segmenting CVCC words; and a mean score of 5.73 points out of a possible 15 points in segmenting CCVCC-CCCVCC words. These results imply that pre-school children in the County lack the foundation skills of decoding and spelling. This could be attributed to incompetent teachers who may be lacking relevant skills to teach English phonology at this level. The below average outcomes of reading ability among pre-school children vindicate earlier results from teacher competence assessment and support the case for incompetence among pre-school teachers in handling English phonology.

Table 3: Phonemics Awareness

A. Blending	Max	Mean	SD
1. Onset and Rimes in CVC	5	3.44	1.512
2. Consonants and Vowel blending in CVC words	15	7.44	2.874
3. Consonants and Vowel blending in CCVC words	15	7.43	2.719
4. Consonants and Vowel blending in CVCC words	15	5.89	2.262
5. Consonants and Vowel blending in CCVCC words	15	5.87	2.349
Mean	15	6.01	
B. Segmenting			
1. Segmenting CVC words	15	6.06	3.028
2. Segmenting CCVC words	15	5.90	2.344
3. Segmenting CVCC words	15	5.78	2.352
4. Segmenting CCVCC-CCCVCC words	15	5.73	2.383
Mean	15	5.87	
Overall Mean for Phonemic	15	5.94	

Results in Table 4.4 indicates that the Pre-School Children's Reading Ability was slightly below average (mean =6.91 of the maximum possible of 15).

Pre-School Children's Reading Ability

The Pre-School Children's Reading Ability was then obtained by considering the summated means of phonics and phonemic. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Pre-School Children's Reading Ability

Reading Ability	Max	Mean
Phonics	15	7.88
Phonemics	15	5.94
Mean	15	6.91

6. DISCUSSION

The finding that lack of competence in phonology among teachers tends to affect children's phonological awareness paints a worrying picture concerning children's ability to read and spell. This is so because phonological awareness has been noted in literature to be important for reading and spelling. Studies show that phonological awareness is critical for learning to read any alphabetic writing system (Ehri, 2004; Rath, 2001; Troia, 2004).

It was found that phonemic awareness among pre-school children in the county was below average. This essentially implies that, a child's learning and using of the alphabetic code has suffered greatly in the event that teachers have had no capability to guide them through phonemes. Research shows that people who can take a part words into sounds, recognize their identity, and put them together again have the foundation skill for using the alphabetic principle (Troia, 2004). Consequently, the lack of phonemic awareness among children in Elgeyo Marakwet County implies that they often get mystified by the point system and how it represents spoken words. The consequence is that they may not even know what words such as sound mean.

The findings showing lack of reading ability among children can mainly be attributed to lack of competence in pre-school teachers to teach phonics which has translated to children's lack of awareness in phonics. The importance of phonics in students reading outcomes cannot be overstated. Research reveals that first grade students who received instruction in letter-sound correspondence improved their word reading and spelling accuracy at a faster rate than students who did not receive such instruction (Cassar, Treiman, Moats Pollo, & Kessler, 2005). Besides, phonics instruction has been found to be beneficial to students at-risk for reading failure.

According to Gillon (2004), phonics instruction in first grade helps most at-risk students meet grade level expectations for first and second grades on reading and spelling words. These views reflect the findings by Juel & Minden-Cupp (2000) that with an effective initial focus on phonics, students who enter first grade with low literacy skills can be successful in literature-rich activities.

The bottom line is that the trend observed in the county where children lack a ability in reading could be reversed if teachers aim to be competent in English Phonology. Phonological awareness interacts with and facilitates the development of vocabulary and word consciousness.

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