Kinyarwanda Reading Teaching Techniques in Lower Primary Schools: Enabling and Hindering Factors. A Case of Kirehe and Kicukiro Districts in Rwanda

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Abstract

This study sought to find out the components of early grades literacy emphasized by teachers, the teaching techniques used in reading, draw a comparison in the use of reading teaching techniques between rural and urban schools and the challenges facing the teaching of Kinyarwanda reading. Using cross-sectional design, quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed to gauge the participants' opinions. The study targeted Primary 2 and Primary 3 Kinyarwanda teachers in Kirehe and Kicukiro Districts in Rwanda. It used a sample of 8 schools and 44 teachers purposively selected. A Likert-scale questionnaire and a lesson observation check list were used to collect data. The study revealed that teachers know the essential components of early grade literacy and use appropriate reading teaching techniques. Phonological awareness use is different between rural and urban schools (mean urban=3.733 mean rural=4.0972). Challenges impeding Kinyarwanda reading competency include lack of support, insufficient time for reading and self-efforts. The Ministry of Education should ensure learners get ample time for reading through single shift while the parents should dedicate time to support the children at home.

Keywords: *reading competency; literacy; phonological awareness; phonics and word recognition; use of fluency tips*

1. Introduction

Education has been described as encompassing the teaching and learning of specific skills, imparting knowledge, positive judgement and well-developed wisdom (Yadav, 2016). Amuta and Philomina (2015) are of the view that language is the vehicle for effective communication and therefore learners need to develop the skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing. Of the four basic skills, reading has been qualified as the basic skill and deficiency in it can have adverse effects on a student's scholastic growth and achievement (Pugh, Pawan & Antommarch, 2000). The impact of reading skills on students goes beyond the academic achievement to emotional and social development of their lives (Holden, 2003; Lyons, 2000). Overlooking reading skills for children in their early ages negatively affects their reading habits and motivation in other disciplines (Yadav, 2016).

Reading has been defined as an active process involving the ability to reconstruct meanings from the language represented by graphic symbols known as letters (Acheampong &Acquah, 2015) and reading problems are at the forefront of students' scholastic decline (Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003). Reading is a process that involves word recognition, comprehension, fluency and motivation (Owen, 1994 as cited in Acheampong & Acquah, 2015). Acheampong and Acquah (2015) are also of the view that reading has been recognized as an activity that engages learners in the use of their minds to translate written symbols into meaningful entities without limiting their ability to understand, articulate freely and the intrinsic motivation to continue the reading process. Adewole (as cited in Yadav, 2016) has submitted that reading lays a foundation that can benefit learners in all their academic pursuit.

Yadav (2016) also indicates that writing is a critical aspect of literacy that enables comprehension, critical and innovative thinking over other content areas. Learners' writing skills are the highest language skills that positively correlate with brain development and language involvement. In the view of Warchauer (2010), like reading skills,

writing skills do not only support the evolution of language proficiency but also academic success and help the learners enhance their perception of knowledge gaps. Yadav (2016) describes writing as an active and constructive process of the mind by which the writer establishes the meaning.

The above submissions indicate that reading and writing skills play a very important role not only in learners' academic pursuits but also in their mental and social emotional development (Brown, n.d; United Nations Children's Education Fund, 1990). Indeed, the impact of appropriate teaching techniques to reading in early childhood is of paramount importance to enhance the development of children's reading and writing skills (United Nations Children's Education Fund, 1990).

The introduction of the Rwandan development flagship, Rwanda vision 2020, tackled different areas of economic development, including the education sector. In this area, the literacy rate was expected to rise to 100 percent, and was backed up by the introduction of a new competency-based curriculum in 2016 (Republic of Rwanda, 2017, 2012). This curriculum is in line with the Rwanda Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) 2018-2024 which constitutes a major pillar to the new Rwanda economic development flagship of vision 2050 (Republic of Rwanda, 2018). Such are the major directive measures that show the efforts of the government of Rwanda to transform the economic development by exploiting all sectors including that of education.

Strickland and Riley-Ayers (2006) state that early literacy development in the mother tongue, coupled with early physical, social-emotional and cognitive development, correlates highly with the school achievements in different stages and domains. In view of this, reading and writing skills among primary students are crucial skills for future education outcomes as failing to be successful in those skills at early age might impair children's learning (Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006). Despite the importance of reading and writing skills for future learning outcomes among primary school pupils, evidence shows that there are gaps in reading and writing among pupils in primary schools, with a rate of 86.3 percent (NISR, 2018). In view of the above, this research is undertaken to examine the phenomenon of gaps in reading and writing skills among primary pupils in the lens of the extent to which teachers' language literacy techniques affect the pupils' reading and writing outcomes.

Most studies that have been conducted mainly focus on such techniques as practices techniques used by teachers to enhance reading achievement among learners. Researchers focused on one or the other of print awareness, phonological awareness, phonics and word recognition or use of fluency tips. There is a need to learn more about the enabling and hindering factors of reading teaching factors and draw a comparison between urban and rural schools in the area of study with focus on Kinyarwanda language. This research will provide insights about this phenomenon in Rwanda, and most importantly will inform education stakeholders about the current teachers' practices in relation with techniques used in lower level of primary education to develop reading skill in Kinyarwanda.

Deficiencies in Kinyarwanda reading and writing skills among students have been a repeated concern over the years (Mbayi & Gichuru, 2016; Bahuwiyongera, 2021; Nkusi, 2019; Kamuzinzi, 2018; Nsanzimana, 2017; Gatete, 2019). While other studies gave emphasis to allocated time, in-class time, learning time (United States Agency for International Development, 2020), teachers' practices surrounding literacy instruction (Kang'a Mbayi & Gichuru, 2016), teachers and learners' perceptions on the speaking proficiency (Niyibizi, 2015), schools and classroom environment, home environment and socio-economic status (Education Development Center, 2016), there is a dearth of literature on the techniques used by teachers to teach the mother tongue in early grades and their effect on reading and writing skills among early grade learners. The current study envisions to study why this daunting issue, focusing on teaching techniques used to teach Kinyarwanda and their effect on the reading and writing skills among lower primary pupils in Kirehe and Kicukiro districts of Rwanda. This study sought to find out the components of early grades literacy emphasized by teachers, the techniques they use to teach them as well as the challenges they encounter when teaching Kinyarwanda reading.

2. Research Methods

A cross-sectional survey design was used because the study collected the information at single point in time to generate conclusion. Additionally, the design allows the use of various analytical techniques, including mixed methods for data collection and analysis of relationships between dependent and independent variables (Saunders *et al.,* 2019). The study targeted Primary 2 and Primary 3 Kinyarwanda teachers in two selected districts, namely Kirehe and Kicukiro districts in Rwanda. Census sampling allowed to select a sample of 44 teachers from a population of 44 Kinyarwanda

teachers. A Likert-scale questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data and a lesson observation check list was used to collect qualitative data. Descriptive statistics (means, frequencies and standard deviations) and inferential statistics (Independent Samples T-Test) were used to analyze quantitative data while the qualitative data were analyzed thematically and supported with verbatim patterns. The Levene's Test was the test of the assumption of equality of variance to ensure that the Independent Sample T-Test was fit for the test of the difference between urban and rural schools.

The research generated quantitative and qualitative data using a structured questionnaire with open-ended and closed-ended questions. The combination allowed the triangulation of data to ensure the validity of the findings. Content analysis and NVivo (12.x64 version) were applied to analyse qualitative data whereby the recorded data were transcribed, categorized, coded and grouped into themes and concepts. The descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were also used to analyse the components of early grades literacy emphasized by teachers, the techniques they use to teach them as well as the challenges they encounter when teaching Kinyarwanda reading. Teachers were subjected to questions about teaching techniques and challenges they face. Their responses were analysed and interpreted using Likert scale.

3. Analysis Results and discussion
Techniques used by teachers in teaching reading in Kinyarwanda
The first objective was to identify the teaching techniques used by teachers in the teaching reading in Kinyarwanda. To achieve this objective, teachers were requested to rate the statements on a Likert scale of 5 while the investigator rated the same statements during the classroom observation. The factors related to the teaching techniques are phonological awareness, phonics and word recognition and use of fluency tips. The related findings are captured in Tables 3, 4 and 5.

Use of phonological awareness
To articulate the magnitude of the use of phonological awareness, teachers were asked to rate the occurrence and frequency of each of the listed suggestions on the phonological awareness questionnaire. The rating used a five-point Likert scale (5= very often, 4= often, 3= Neutral, 2= Rarely and 1= Never), which was triangulated by an observation checklist by the investigator. Table one reports the means, frequencies and standard deviations of the measures used for Phonological awareness.

Table 1: Phonological awareness

Statement	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Observed frequency	Interpretation
Use of blending phonemes like (giving my learners isolated sounds and asking them to make words by putting the sounds together)	44	4.52	0.79	31	Higher
Use of words for the learners to identify single phonemes	44	4.15	0.77	31	High
Use of the technique of sound word discrimination, like asking them to identify which syllable is different in pronunciation	44	4.15	0.74	22	High
Opportunity for the learners to use segmenting phonemes like giving a word and ask my learners to isolate the first and last sound of the word	44	4.04	0.80	35	High
Use of segmentation (like asking learners to identify the number of syllables in a word or number of words in a sentence	44	3.81	0.81	25	High
Use of the technique of sound word discrimination (like asking the learners to tell whether words or sounds are the same or different)	41	3.80	1.07	23	High
Supporting learners to develop alliteration skills (e.g. tongue twisters)	42	3.52	1.19	25	High

Use of the technique of supporting learners to develop rhyming skills (like asking the learners to tell what word rhyme with another)	44	3.20	0.95	27	Neutral

With regard to the constructs investigated under phonological awareness, table three shows that blending phonemes is the most highly used with the mean of 4.52 while supporting learners to develop rhyming skills has the lowest score with the mean of 3.20 which is neutral. Statistical measures portrayed in table three shows that teachers use suitable activities to develop phonological awareness among the learners with the average score of 4. This means that they are used often.

Use of phonics and word recognition
To articulate the magnitude of the use of phonics and word recognition, teachers were asked to rate the occurrence and frequency of each of the listed suggestions on the phonics and word recognition questionnaire. The rating used a five-point Likert scale (5= very often, 4= often, 3= Neutral, 2= Rarely and 1= Never), which was triangulated by an observation checklist by the investigator. Table 4 reports the means, frequencies and standard deviations of the measures used for Phonological awareness.

Table 2. Phonics and word recognition

Statement	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Observed frequency	Interpretation
Opportunities for learners to use decoding on words that contain new-learnt blends	44	4.68	0.60	33	Higher
Opportunity for learners to read sentences that contain newly-learnt letter blends	43	4.65	0.61	24	Higher
Opportunity to learn to order phonemes/syllables to make correct words	44	4.63	0.53	37	Higher
Opportunity to identify written word syllables	44	4.47	0.59	44	Higher
Opportunity to make syllables using newly learnt letters/blend (letter cluster)	44	4.38	0.75	44	Higher
Opportunity to read decodable texts containing newly-learnt letter blends	44	4.27	0.75	40	Higher

As far as phonics and word recognition are concerned, Table 4 shows that teachers allow opportunities to the learners to develop them. All the constructs investigated are either often or very often used. The highest applied is decoding on words that contain new-learnt blends with the mean score of 4.68 while the lowest is read decodable texts containing newly-learnt letter blends with the mean score of 4.27.

Use of fluency tips
To articulate the magnitude of the use of fluency tips, teachers were asked to rate the occurrence and frequency of each of the listed suggestions on the use fluency tips questionnaire. The rating used a five-point Likert scale (5= very often, 4= often, 3= Neutral, 2= Rarely and 1= Never), which was triangulated by an observation checklist by the investigator. Table 5 reports the means, frequencies and standard deviations of the measures used for fluency tips.

Table 3: Fluency tips

Statement	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Observed frequency	Interpretation
In my class, I model reading to the students	42	4.69	0.46	32	Higher
In my class, I ask learners to use a ruler or finger to follow a long while reading	44	4.54	0.81	28	Higher
In my class, I pre-teach vocabulary that will appear in the text	44	4.45	0.66	28	Higher
In my class, I give learners an opportunity to answer the comprehension questions	44	4.43	0.69	30	Higher

In my class, I give learners an opportunity to read aloud on their own	44	4.38	0.81	26	Higher
In my class, I monitor reading and provide support to the struggling learners	44	4.36	0.68	23	Higher
In my class, I give learners an opportunity to practice choral reading	43	4.34	0.71	34	Higher
I my class, I give learners an opportunity to predict what the story will talk about	42	4.11	0.91	32	High
In my class, I guide students to read on adequate pace	44	4.11	0.84	26	High
In my class, I ensure there is print rich environment	42	3.97	0.84	33	High
In my class, I give learners an opportunity to practice paired reading	43	3.97	1.01	33	High
In my class, I ensure conducive learning environment	44	3.93	0.97	37	High
After reading the story, I give learners an opportunity to compare their predictions and the content of the story	44	3.84	0.98	37	High
In my class, I give learners an opportunity to read the same passage several times	44	3.75	0.96	37	High
In my class, I give learners an opportunity to use a variety of books and other reading materials to practice reading	44	3.72	0.87	30	High
In my class, I give learners an opportunity to read the text with different font and text size	44	3.29	1.06	27	Neutral

Table five indicates that teachers frequently use fluency tips to support the learners build reading competency. The most highly used fluency tip is modelling reading to the students. It has scored the mean of 4.69. on the other hand, the fluency, which is used less is reading the texts with different font and text size with the mean score of 3.29.

Comparison of the use of teaching reading techniques between teachers in rural and urban schools
The second objective sought to draw the comparison in the use of reading teaching techniques between teachers in rural and urban schools. The Independent Samples T-Test was used to establish the differences and the related statistics were recorded in Tables 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9.

Test of the difference in phonological awareness between urban and rural area schools
Independent samples T-test was the inferential statistic used to test whether there is a significant difference in phonological awareness between urban and rural schools. The statistics were recorded in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4: Group statistics

	School location	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error Mean
PA	Urban	22	3.733	0.58794	0.12535
	Rural	18	4.0972	0.41024	0.0967

Table 5: Independent Samples T-test for the difference between urban and rural schools

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances	t-test for Equality of Means

		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
PA	Equal variances assumed	3.912	0.055	-2.221	38	0.032	-0.36427	0.16402	-0.6963	-0.03223
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.301	37.17	0.027	-0.36427	0.15831	-0.68499	-0.04355

Levene's Test
H_0: The variances of the groups are not significantly different in the total population.
H_1: The variances of the groups are significantly different in the total population.

T-test
H_0: There is no difference between the means of two groups in the total population
H_1: There is difference between the means of two groups in the total population.

We reject the H_0 if the p-value is lower than 0.05.
The test statistic, F, has a value of 3.912 and a *p*-value (Significance) of .055. Since the *p*-value (.055) of Levene's Test is higher than .05, we accept H_0, so this means that the equality of variances is met. In this case, we report the first row, that is t-test value= -2.221, degree of freedom = 38, implying that 38 items can be selected before constraints can be put in place, and p-value is .032. Since the p-value is less than 0.05, we reject our t-test H_0. Therefore, there is a significant difference between the means in phonological awareness between urban and rural schools. Table 5 shows that the mean of phonological awareness in urban schools (n= 22, Mean= 3.733) is higher than the mean in phonological awareness in rural schools (n= 18, Mean= 4.0972) and the means difference between urban and rural schools in terms of phonological awareness is -0.36427.

Test of the difference in phonics and word recognition between urban and rural area schools
Independent samples T-test was the inferential statistic used to test whether there is a significant difference in phonics and word recognition between urban and rural area schools. The statistics were recorded in Tables 6 and 7.

Table 6: Group statistics

School location	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error Mean
Urban	24	4.5	0.47903	0.09778
Rural	19	4.5175	0.42271	0.09698

Table 7: Independent sample T-test between urban and rural schools

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
PWR	Equal variances assumed	0.305	0.583	-0.126	41	0.901	-0.01754	0.13977	-0.29982	0.26473
	Equal variances not assumed			-0.127	40.469	0.899	-0.01754	0.13772	-0.29578	0.26069

Levene's Test
H_0: The variances of the groups are not significantly different in the total population.
H_1: The variances of the groups are significantly different in the total population.

T-test
H_0: There is no difference between the means of two groups in the total population
H_1: There is difference between the means of two groups in the total population.
We reject the H_0 if the p-value is lower than 0.05.

Test of the difference in phonics and word recognition between rural and urban school
The test statistic, F, has a value of .305 and a p-value of .583. Since the *p*-value (.0583) of Levene's Test is higher than .05, we accept H_0, so this means that the equality of variances is met. In this case, we report the first row, that is t-test value= -0126, degree of freedom = 41, implying that 41 items can be selected before constraints can be put in place, and p-value is .0901. Since the p-value is higher than 0.05, we accept our t-test H_0. Therefore, there is no significant difference between the means in phonics and word recognition between urban and rural schools. The table 7 shows that the mean of phonics and word recognition in urban schools (n= 24, Mean= 4.5) is not higher than the mean of phonics and word recognition in rural schools (n= 19, Mean= 4.5175) and the means difference between urban and rural schools in terms of phonics and word recognition is -0.01754.

Table 8: Group statistics

	School location	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error Mean
UFT	Urban	21	4.0119	0.60648	0.13235
	Rural	15	4.2917	0.45786	0.11822

Table 9: Independent samples T-test between urban and rural schools

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
	F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
								Lower	Upper	
Equal variances assumed	1.649	0.208	-1.504	34	0.142	-0.27976	0.18599	-0.65774	0.09822	
Equal variances not assumed			-1.577	33.857	0.124	-0.27976	0.17746	-0.64045	0.08093	

H_0: The variances of the groups are not significantly different in the total population.
H_1: The variances of the groups are significantly different in the total population.

T-test
H_0: There is no difference between the means of two groups in the total population
H_1: There is difference between the means of two groups in the total population.
We reject the H_0 if the p-value is lower than 0.05.

The test statistic, F, has a value of .1.649 and a *p*-value of .208. Since the *p*-value (.208) of Levene's Test is higher than .05, we accept H_0, so this means that the equality of variances is met. In this case, we report the first row, that is t-test value= -1.504, degree of freedom = 34, implying that 34 items can be selected before constraints can be put in place, and *p*-value is .142. Since the *p*-value is higher than 0.05, we accept our t-test H_0. Therefore, there is no significant difference between the means in the use of fluency tips between urban and rural schools. The table 10 shows that the mean of the use of fluency tips in urban schools (n= 21, Mean= 4.0119) is not higher than the mean of the use of fluency tips in rural schools (n= 15, Mean= 4.2917) and the means difference between urban and rural schools in terms of the use of fluency tips is .60648.

Challenges related to the use of teaching reading techniques

The third objective was to explore the challenges faced by teachers in using the reading teaching techniques. A thematic analysis across the answers to open-ended questions in the questionnaire generated the themes that included the scarcity of reading material such as textbooks, supplementary readers and story books, Kinyarwanda being taught as a subject rather than a medium of instruction, irregularity of the learners in school attendance, insufficiency of time to read due to the tight timetable and big number of students, lack of prerequisites due to automatic promotion, lack of parental support to children at home to revise what was learnt at school and parents' inability to provide the required materials. lack of the provision of the required materials by the parents.

One of the teachers made the following statement:

> There *are continuous shortages of teaching and learning materials such as visual aids, textbooks, and supplementary readers in general, including for Kinyarwanda learning, in lower primary learner' books deteriorate over time and are not replaced, such that three to four students are sharing one book.*

There is a concern that Kinyarwanda is not well supported during the early grade of schooling. It is taught as a subject instead of using it as a medium of instruction. One of the teachers made this submission:

> *Kinyarwanda is not the main language of learning. It is taught as a subject, like other subjects, while the main language of learning is English. This system is not complementary, and it will not improve the students' Kinyarwanda literacy and the fluency that would otherwise result from the contribution from other subjects.* one teacher in Kicukiro district said during the interview.

Irregularities of school attendance; be it coming late to school or absenteeism and lack of school materials are also issues that impede students from achieving learning outcomes. This can be substantiated by the submission from one of the teachers:

> *We always observe a considerable number of students who absent themselves or come to school very late for different reasons. The causes may be related to family problems, weather condition or lack of scholastic materials. In most cases, such students have difficulties in reading because when they have missed some lessons, it becomes difficulty for them to catch up.*

Teacher-student ratio has also been pointed out as a barrier to reading proficiency of the learners. When the teacher-student ratio is high, it becomes difficult to the teacher to provide appropriate learner support. One of the teachers reveled that:

> *We still have many students in one class. Because students attend classes in different shifts, I have to teacher over a hundred students. One shift in the morning another one in the afternoon. Compared to students who study in a single shift, the time that is dedicated to teaching is very little and consequently affects learner performance in general and learners reading in particular.*

Some students are promoted without reading prerequisites to build on the reading skill learnt in the year to which they are promoted, it is usually referred to as automatic promotion. One of the teachers highlighted:

> *Automatic promotion is also a hindrance to student's ability to read at their grade level. when a student is promoted to the next level before mastering what is taught in the previous level, they are much likely to fail because learning is continuous and builds on prior knowledge. The reality on the ground is that in our schools, some students are promoted without the required prerequisites from lower levels in writing and reading vowels and consonants and the teacher is not able to support them because of limited time.*

Parents do not support their children to revise and practice reading at home nor provide to their children the required materials to enable them fulfill their learning duties. One of the teachers disclosed.

> *Some parents don't mind whether their children did their homework or revised their lessons to practice what was taught at school. Others send their children to school without school material, such as pens, exercise books, etc. such parent's attitude is that they have done their duty of sending the children to school, the rest is the teacher's responsibility.*

4. Conclusion

The research has shown that lower primary teachers in Kicukiro and Kirehe districts are aware of essential components of early grade literacy such as phonological awareness, phonics and phonemic awareness, word recognition and use of fluency tips. Research has also proved that lower primary Kinyarwanda teachers in Kirehe and Kicukiro districts, to a great extent, use appropriate teaching reading techniques. They mainly use gradual release techniques, commonly called "I do, we do, you do" method. The research has also shown that there is a significant difference between urban and rural areas in the application of Kinyarwanda reading teaching techniques (Phonological awareness, p-value= .032). In spite of the above, a number of challenges that impede reading competency among lower primary students were also disclosed. The main challenges highlighted include, lack of reading materials, irregularity of the learners in school attendance, insufficiency of time to read, Lack of reading prerequisites, and lack of parent support.

5. Recommendations

To deal with the confronts disclosed by the study, concerned stakeholders have to take required actions for the adequate Kinyarwanda reading competence among the lower primary students.

1. The Ministry of education should ensure all lower primary students have easy access to adequate grade level reading materials. These should include but not limited to grade level text books, supplementary readers and illustrations.
2. The Ministry of Education should ensure that in lower primary, learning takes place in Kinyarwanda and English is taught as a subject to facilitate smooth transition and allow the opportunity to the learners to acquire Kinyarwanda literacy in other subjects during class time.
3. The Ministry of Education should ensure classes are not overcrowded and all the students are studying in a single shift in order to dedicate enough time to reading activities at school.
4. Parents should be mobilized to support their children in revising their lessons at home and provide them with required materials.

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