

Research Article

Early-Grade Reading: The Challenges That Affect Teachers' Practice of Phonological Awareness: The Case of Koorete Language

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This study aimed to identify the challenges affecting teacher practice of phonological awareness (PA) in the first-grade classrooms of the teaching of the Koorete language. The study adopted the descriptive research design using the survey method and exploratory case study technique, and it was conducted in selected schools in Amaro in the Southern part of Ethiopia. The qualitative method was used to observe and interview the selected participating teachers, and questionnaires were used with the thirty native-language teachers selected. Thirty participating schools were selected through stratified sampling, and 30 native-language teachers were selected through targeted sampling from the selected schools based on their qualifications, experience, and recommendations for merit. Classroom observations, in-depth semistructured interviews, and questionnaires were used to collect data. The recorded data was then transcribed, translated, analyzed, and then it was thematically discussed. The results of the study showed that a lack of subject content and pedagogical knowledge, inadequate teaching materials, inadequate teacher-training programs, a lack of an enabling, literacy-rich environment, and a lack of in-service training in the first grades pose major challenges. The study recommends that teachers need to be adequately equipped with content and pedagogical awareness, to be provided with phonological awareness resources, and they require support by way of in-service training to enhance the teaching of native-language reading skills in early grades. Finally, all stakeholders need to work on the access and quality of textbooks and supplementary reading materials, adopt explicit and systematic teaching practices, organize in-service training, and create a literacy-rich environment for the teacher education program.

1. Introduction

Reading is a component of literacy that would develop if children were actively guided and involved in their development. It is more complex because children need to be aware of the phonetic structure of spoken language and then decode the alphabetic code to acquire the letter–phone connections. It is the most basic skill in modern societies, and acquiring literacy is one of the most important goals of early school years [1]. The National Institute for Literacy [2] defines reading as a complex system of deriving meaning from print that requires the ability and knowledge to understand how phonemes or sounds of speech relate to print, the ability to decipher unfamiliar words, the ability to read

fluently, sufficient background information and vocabulary to promote reading comprehension, and the ability to construct meaning from prints and the development of maintaining reading motivation. Children must use this skill in early grades (1–4) to understand the meaning of written and printed material and facilitate language acquisition, communication, and the exchange of ideas and information [3]. Reading difficulties can create challenges in school and can also result in learners being stigmatized in the classroom.

Based on various reading tests conducted at primary schools over a few years in developing countries, Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and Ethiopia, many students cannot read with reading comprehension [4]. Furthermore, children in low- and middle-income countries do not develop basic

reading skills even after years of schooling [5, 6]. In these countries, elementary school children have difficulty reading even simple words. According to the United Nations (UN), 9 out of 10 children in sub-Saharan Africa lack basic reading skills. According to the latest UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report, only 18% of all primary school-age children in sub-Saharan Africa achieve a minimum level of reading skills, many of whom attend school. Children reach fourth grade without learning the basics of reading, and 40% of adolescents could not read a sentence [5]. Similarly, in Central and South Asia, about 81% of children cannot read at a minimum level [7]. Poor countries generally have low literacy levels as compared with developed countries.

In Ethiopia, the new education and training policy changed the centralized education system, only Amharic as the language of instruction and emphasis on linguistic diversity, taking into account, among other things, the mother tongue of instruction [8], stating that instruction is mainly in the languages of the nation and the granting nationalities. As a result, many languages in Ethiopia have been used as the language of instruction in primary and secondary schools. Nevertheless, the quality of mother tongue teaching in elementary school is not sufficiently discussed. Several challenges persist and affect literacy skills in early grades. Most of the factors are language-specific since the development of each mother tongue varies from language to language.

The study in Ethiopia focused on an assessment of the reading skills of Grades 2 and 3 students and calibrated them with the Ministry of Education (MoE) minimum learning competencies of seven Ethiopian native languages, namely Afan Oromo, Amharic, Sidaamu Afoo, Haddiyissa, Somali, Tigrinya, and Wolaita [9]. The tests aimed to assess phonological and phonemic awareness, phonetics, vocabulary, word decoding skills, reading fluency, reading comprehension, and listening comprehension questions with background questions on individual, family, and school variables. The results showed that the children's early reading performance was low in all languages tested. Many children in Grades 2 and 3 fail to meet the grade standard set by the MoE. A study of Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) revealed that 34% of the second-grade students could not read even a single word and 48% of the children could not understand a single question in their mother tongue, especially in the Sidama region, 69.2% of the children could not identify even single sounds or letters in words [9]. This is a related finding that many students in low-income countries fail to master basic early-grade reading skills [10].

The assessment results [11, 12] showed that students in Ethiopia were making progress in acquiring prior knowledge, albeit slowly. The percentage of students performing at the upper benchmark levels over the years was 31.3% in 2014, 34.2% in 2016, and 32.4% in 2018. It can be observed that the reading performance of the students in the three EGRA studies in Ethiopia hardly differs. As can be seen, the most recent study by EGRA Ethiopia [12] showed that the results have fallen back to 32.4%, with differences too small to be considered practically significant. The report also showed that only 6.2% of Ethiopian students in Grades 2 and 3

and all languages combined achieved the target reading benchmark fluently with complete or near-complete comprehension. Results from studies in Ethiopia show that the average percentage correctness of overall reading comprehension questions is very low (20%). Children's inability to read a particular text limits the amount of information acquired. As a result, the children have to process and understand less information. Overall reading performance has changed little across the three EGRA administrations at the aggregated national level. This result suggests that reading achievement in elementary school classes in Ethiopia does not show the progress one would hope for, considering several years of reading intervention [12].

Ensuring that children become competent readers through effective reading instruction in the classroom is a critical issue in reading education. Even experienced kindergarten teachers, special education teachers, reading specialists, and first graders did not master the refined skills needed to provide students with appropriate instruction [13]. Students benefit from quality early reading and writing instruction by educators who have a deep understanding of early-grade instructions [14]. For this reason, first-grade teachers should be offered a step-by-step training program in the various aspects of literacy acquisition, including academic training in phonological awareness [15].

First-grade teachers certified in teaching native languages participated in this qualitative and quantitative study. It is believed that exploring, describing, and understanding the challenges teachers face in the classroom practice of teaching reading will help provide students with an appropriate intervention to acquire reading skills. Accordingly, it is very important to examine the current challenges in teachers' classroom practice related to early-grade reading skills, and possible interventions for effective reading instruction are suggested. If the challenges could be met, the students in the first grades could successfully acquire the required reading skills. Therefore, one rationale for teaching phonological awareness is that children in first grade receive more meaning from teachers when they participate in quality teacher education programs and use appropriate supplemental reading materials in early grades.

Koorete is spoken in the Amaro district of southern Ethiopia, about 478 km from Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. Since 2000, language has been taught as a subject in the first grade of primary school (1–4) [16]. Additionally, the language was a subject of study for prospective and working teachers at Hawassa College of Teachers Education from 2010 to 2013 and has started as a department at Dilla College of Teachers Education since 2014. Therefore, by exploring the challenges that hamper teachers' classroom practice early on, grade helps the teacher revise their teaching methodology and improve learners' reading performance.

2. Statement of the Problem

The main aim of the study was to find out the challenges that affect teachers' classroom practice of phonological awareness through Koorete language learning. The study indicated that effective use of phonological awareness in the classroom

setting increases reading achievement in the early grade [17]. To make reading skills successful in early grade, the curriculum should also support reading instruction and learners should also be provided with relevant reading materials [18].

Ethiopia is a multiethnic country where more than 80 languages are spoken by more than 100 million people of different ethnic groups. Since 1994, Ethiopian education and training policies have marked a turning point in the way over 50 languages are used as the language of instruction or taught as a subject in primary schools [19]. Therefore, the implementation of a multilingual language policy has created a great opportunity for different colloquial languages or less advantageous languages and linguistic diversity in such a multilingual country. In this way, many native or less-advantaged language groups have attempted to establish their mother tongue as the language of instruction and as a subject in primary (first and second cycle) schools. However, early research practice is not common in Ethiopian education in general and in the native-language subject, in particular. Hence the local literature in the area is so limited as to provide a basis for such studies. The development of languages like Koorete is not supported by scientific research and their status is not clearly stated for further research.

Reading achievement in Ethiopia often suffers from various challenges in early-grade classroom instruction. The EGRA by Anteneh et al. [20] showed that the majority of students had serious problems with letter identification, understanding phonological patterns, dealing with new words in the text, and understanding longer texts. However, the mother tongue language curriculum of [21, 22] shows that first-grade students are expected to develop strong oral skills, with an emphasis on phonological awareness, mastery of the most common sound-symbol combinations in language, and reading more easily lyrics. If children do not learn to read in their early years, they may fall further behind in later years because they cannot read printed information, follow written instructions, or communicate in writing [10]. Understanding why some children lag in learning to read in the early-grade class is a very important point to take appropriate action. Therefore, instructions that focus on phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, fluency, and comprehension can be successful in learning to read [23]. To this end, the ultimate aim of this study is to find out the challenges affecting the practice of phonological awareness teachers in using the Koorete language as a subject in Ethiopia's early grades. The study attempted to answer the following research questions:

- (i) What are the challenges that teachers face in teaching phonological awareness in the early grade in the Koorete language?
- (ii) What are the possible solutions that improve teachers' practice of phonological awareness in early grades?

The study by EGRA [11, 12] and its intervention were limited to these seven Ethiopian languages. The status of other languages, such as the Koorete language, is not evaluated and considered in previous studies and interventions.

Most of the time, language development depends on the background of each language, so examining factors related to teachers' teaching practice helps in the development of that specific language like Koorete and less favored languages elsewhere. Therefore, the present study attempts to examine the challenges affecting teacher practice of phonological awareness in the first grades of the Koorete language.

3. Literature Review

In literature, early childhood reading literacy consists of five basic components, namely: phonological awareness, basic phonics (letter-to-sound correspondence), vocabulary, fluency, and reading comprehension [4, 24, 25] of the five components, phonological awareness is a very important skill for children's sound identification of speech, especially in early grades. Teachers in early grades need to become proficient in teaching the key components of reading skills to help children learn to read. This can only be achieved if teachers can get enough support from teacher training programs by being exposed to the reading strategies, programs, instructions, literacy-rich environment, and frequent preservice and in-service training. The stakeholders should be properly implemented according to the literature to achieve early-grade grading skills. In this line, READ M&E [26] states that there are numerous challenges in Ethiopia as a developing country that affect teachers' practice of the key components of reading skills and delay the development of learners' literacy due to inadequate awareness and practice of teaching reading.

Thus, phonological awareness is an important component in reading development, which focuses on children's ability to identify and manipulate sound units and is considered a key skill in learning to read, as well as being an important predictor of later reading [25, 27–29]. This activity focuses on teaching children to understand segments of the spoken word and the syllable level (rhyme, syllables, and alliteration) down to the most discrete level of individual sounds or phonemes (onset-rime, segmentation, blending, manipulation, and deletion) as it can be seen in *Supplementary 1* adapted from [22, 25]. In addition, it can also include speaking rhyming words, clapping the syllables in a word, or recognizing the initial sound of a word [30]. In early Grades 1 and 2, teachers should focus on sound identification particularly teaching phonological awareness activities (i.e., listening, rhyming, blending, and deleting/segmenting), the size of the intended unit (i.e., sound, word, syllable, and phoneme) [31].

Teaching early childhood reading skills through phonological awareness is crucial. To improve children's literacy skills, teachers should use explicit and systematic instruction in the early grades [5]. Teachers' overall reading instructional abilities are strongly related to students' reading achievements. In many countries, subject area teachers may lack important teaching reading strategies and skills. Preservice programs of teacher preparation may fail to teach the techniques for literacy instruction and assessment. More importantly, they may fail to provide the key components of reading skills to integrate into their subjects and instructions.

As a result, many early-grade children are not achieving the expected minimum learning competencies at the level [32]. Therefore, reading instruction in early grade must include reading pillars: phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, word decoding awareness, reading comprehension, and practices along with reading components. These components are fundamental in teaching reading across early grades [33]. To this end, assisting a child in developing skills in phonological awareness will provide them with the tools to be successful readers [34].

In a developing country like Ethiopia, several factors influence the teaching of reading in early childhood classrooms. The most common factors are lack of teaching and reading materials, the qualifications of the teachers, the availability of supplementary materials, and the availability of a library are the most common problems in the classroom [12]. The majority of teachers observed indicated that there were challenges in teaching reading, particularly in providing reading materials and training teachers on suitability and use. Other problems included inadequate teaching materials, the number of students in a classroom, and a lack of in-service training [35].

Also, in the effective teaching practice of phonological awareness, the curriculum should support the explicit teaching of reading instructions and relevant reading materials in the actual classroom to achieve early literacy [17, 18, 36]. However, various practical obstacles in the classroom can interfere with sustained phonological awareness as part of the literacy curriculum. These barriers include the availability of time, teachers' knowledge of phonological awareness, difficulties in accessing resources, and the lack of material and lack of using systemic reading instructions. Additionally, teachers are uncomfortable using phonics-based instruction that emphasizes the relationships between letters and sounds [37]. A study assessing the phonological awareness of teachers in early primary schools in Australia found that there is a need for teachers across the Australian education sector to improve their actual PA skills, especially in phonemic awareness [38].

In literature, a rich literacy environment has a great impact on the development of children's literacy skills and teachers' teaching practices. In South Africa, preprimary literacy is poor; the following factors have been identified as causes of poor literacy and numeracy skills: underfunded schools, child labor, legal income in households, lack of reading and reading materials at home, poor teaching methods, and poor subject knowledge of teachers [39, 40]. Likewise, in Ethiopia, READ M&E [26] reported quality of learning materials and reference materials were cited as factors affecting student reading outcomes. Therefore, it would be useful to review existing curriculum materials (textbooks and teacher guides, including reference materials), fill in gaps, and ensure that teachers are provided with appropriate materials. Wambiri [41] found that children have a major impact on their attitudes and interest in reading in relation to reading literacy development, the social skills environment, and the physical environment. In this row, the environmental components have the following main categories: books, reading and writing

materials, and writing. Children in the first grade are more likely to engage in classroom reading. Therefore, language and reading materials should be available in several areas of the room and not just one or two. This allows children to encounter literacy in all areas of their play. This section examines how the classroom environment in which teachers practice phonological awareness and phonics affects children's reading development. Therefore, the classroom environment is a key factor affecting teachers' competencies and students' reading outcomes. The teacher would be well advised to develop a contextual learning system rather than relying entirely on a mainstream approach [26].

4. Methods

This study used a mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative) data analysis design. The use of mixed-methods research allows researchers to answer research questions with sufficient depth and breadth [42] and helps to generalize the findings and implications of the subjects studied for the entire population. It also provides a logical basis, methodological flexibility, and a deep understanding of smaller cases [43]. A mixed methods design can integrate and synergize multiple data sources, which can be useful when investigating complex problems [44]. In a mixed-methods research design, qualitative research approaches help to understand the situation through indicative results by examining tools like participant observation and interviews, while quantitative approaches help to derive objective results by using tools like a survey.

4.1. Research Design. The study used the exploratory sequential design, which helps researchers begin to examine the data qualitatively and follow up the design quantitatively [45]. In the qualitative part, a descriptive research design inspired by a case study was used. A qualitative approach was chosen as the study required in-depth answers to the research questions and helps researchers to interpret what is seen, heard, and understood [46]. Accordingly, qualitative research is relevant to understand the phenomenon from the respondents' perspective [47]. Also, case study research builds a deep, contextual understanding of the case, drawing on multiple data sources [48]. The main purpose of descriptive research is to describe the situation as it is in the actual classroom. Therefore, this design helps researchers to observe, describe, and explore a natural situation as it occurs in the classroom.

In the quantitative part, a descriptive survey design was used to describe the challenges teachers face in teaching phonological awareness in the first grade of the Koorete language in Amaro District, Ethiopia. Survey research provides a quantitative or numerical description of a population's trends, attitudes, or opinions by examining a sample of that population [49]. Quantitative data analysis helps researchers to trivialize findings from qualitative data analysis. Data triangulation in a mixed-methods study is widely accepted as a strategy for validating results obtained with a single method [50].

4.2. Participants. The population of this study included 74 public elementary schools in the Amaro Woreda of Ethiopia. The target group of this study was first-grade Koorete language

teachers who are certified in teaching the mother tongue. Accordingly, the study focused on four first-grade Koorete language teachers for observations and interviews and thirty native-language teachers for questionnaire participation.

4.3. Sampling Techniques and Samples Size. The sample size and sampling method are applied based on the research methods. The sampling method takes into account the selection of teachers and schools. Accordingly, school selection for qualitative research is based on access to instructional materials, native-language teaching experience, and access to certified native-language teachers. Therefore, based on the above criteria, four schools were specifically selected. Similarly, with respect to the teachers, four first-grade teachers were specifically selected based on their experience, qualifications, and recommendations from the principal of these selected schools for classroom observation and one-to-one interviews from selected schools.

On the other hand, there are 74 primary schools and 74 first-grade Koorete language teachers in Amaro Woreda of Ethiopia. Therefore, researchers used a stratified sampling technique to select 30 schools out of 74 public elementary schools for teacher questionnaires in quantitative research. Next, 30 teachers, of 40% of the total population of first-grade teachers, were intentionally selected in the availability sampling method from the selected schools.

4.4. Data Collection Tools. Classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and questionnaires were used to collect data for this research. The data collection tool was tested prior to the main data collection session. A pilot study was carried out and the result of the analysis was presented at a seminar prepared by Addis Ababa University and the NORAD project. Constructive comments were made by the panelists, participants, and advisors. Then the tools were revised accordingly before the main data collection session.

Therefore, video-enhanced classroom observation was used to capture and examine the challenges affecting the practice of phonological awareness by first-grade teachers of Koorete language instruction. For example, video recording can capture the complexity of a classroom and allow for a detailed view of teaching and learning from multiple perspectives [51]. The use of video material can stimulate discussion between teachers and researchers after a lesson and consequently generate a deeper understanding of teaching practice [52].

In addition, semistructured interviews were used to triangulate instructional observation data to examine the challenges of teaching phonological awareness with selected teachers. This helps to get detailed information about their teaching practice and challenges affecting their presentation. It provides a clear set of information for interviewers and can provide reliable, comparable qualitative data. Therefore, interviews are interactive and interviewers can provide full, clear answers and explore any issues that arise [53, 54].

On the other hand, questionnaires were used to triangulate the data from the qualitative research. The intention in using this design is to bring together the distinct strengths and nonoverlapping weaknesses of quantitative methods

(large sample size, trends, generalization) with those of qualitative methods. It also offers a fast, efficient, and inexpensive way to collect large amounts of information from significant sample volumes. These tools are particularly effective for measuring subjects' behavior, preferences, intentions, attitudes, and opinions.

4.5. Research Procedure. The researcher received a letter of approval from Addis Ababa University to collect data in the research area. After receiving the letter, the researcher went to the district education office to submit a letter explaining the purpose of the research. Next, the researcher visited schools and distributed the letter. He discussed the purpose of the study with the school principals and they made an appointment to discuss it with the teachers. Consequently, the researcher discussed the purpose of the study and signed an informed consent form with the teachers. Then, study participants were asked to suggest two lessons related to teaching PA to be observed during a classroom presentation. Then the selected teachers observed two lessons of PA with the support of video recordings. After the final observation, teachers were asked about their teaching practice of phonological awareness and the challenges related to teaching practice. On the other hand, thirty teachers filled in the questionnaires of the selected schools. Finally, the observation and interview data from the four teachers' lessons were organized, categorized, and analyzed into themes that emerged in this study.

4.6. Data Analysis. This study used a descriptive design analysis inspired by a thematic approach. The results of the qualitative data analysis were grouped into three thematic areas: content and pedagogical knowledge of teachers related to phonological awareness, problems related to reading materials, and the classroom environment for the literacy exercises. In addition, data from questionnaires were categorized into four themes, namely teacher education program, teacher readiness, teacher practice, and school-related factors affecting teacher practice of phonological awareness. All video and audio-recorded lessons from observations, interviews, and questionnaires were transcribed into text along with the researchers' notes, reduced by coding methods, categorized into themes emerging from empirical data, and then analyzed to generate meanings and recommendations. In order to ensure the reliability of the data, a data source triangulation from observation, interview, and questionnaires was carried out.

5. Results

In this section, qualitative data collected through classroom observation, interviews, and questionnaires with first-graders in the Koorete language were analyzed. The qualitative and quantitative data were triangulated to ensure the validity and reliability of data from classroom observation, individual interviews, and questionnaires. In order to understand each teacher's situation, it was necessary to learn about their experiences of teaching phonological awareness in their particular setting. The results of the lesson observation, the interviews and the questionnaires were presented thematically.

5.1. Classroom Observation

5.1.1. Teachers' Classroom Practice of Phonological Awareness.

Several gaps have been identified in relation to the practice of the key components of phonological awareness in first grade. The researcher observed challenges associated with teachers teaching the practice of phonological awareness. Observing Teacher T1's classroom, the teacher presented the lesson by writing the given words in syllables. The Teacher T1 taught phoneme identification activities through word-reading activities from the textbook on page 53 [55]. For example, the teacher taught the word *eqo* string by writing it on the board and reading and repeating it to the whole class. The sounds in the words /e/, /q/, and /o/ are not practiced separately, which means that phoneme identification and phoneme isolation activities are not included in the classroom practice. In addition, teachers' lesson presentations indicated that classroom presentations did not include alliteration (initial and final sounds), rhyme, and initial and final activities. Phoneme manipulation: blending, addition, substitution, and deletion are also not mentioned in teacher practice. This shows how the teacher lacks awareness of phonological awareness.

In another case observed during classroom observation, Teacher T2 taught the sound /p/ in different words such as *piire* flower from the textbook on page 54 [55]. For example, the teacher wrote on the board activities such as the sound /p/, the syllable *pii*, the word *piire* flower, and the picture of the flower. He reads it to the whole class and the children follow him. He further demonstrated by connecting sounds and letters to pictures and labeling those sounds, and then she allowed the students to practice accordingly. T2 also taught students by providing the syllable with the given sound to practice syllable segmentation in words orally. In teaching sounds, letters, and words, T2 encouraged students to practice independently, in pairs, and in small groups. However, the sounds in the words /p/, /ii/, /r/, and /e/ are not practiced separately. The syllable in the word is not presented and practiced separately in the lesson. There are also practical limitations in phoneme manipulation: identification, isolation, segmentation, blending, addition, substitution, and deletion. Instructional presentation is not supported by textbooks and additional reading in the classroom.

Teacher T3 also taught the sound /p/ in the word *piire* flower from the students' textbooks on page 54 [55]. She wrote the word *piire* flower and the sound /p/ on the blackboard. After writing something on the board, she reads it out loud and repeats it to the whole class. The sounds in the word are /p/, /ii/, /r/, and /e/; however, the teacher does not practice every sound in the word. Rhyming and alliteration exercises (beginning and ending exercises) in the given words will not be presented during the lesson presentation. Phoneme manipulation: identification, isolation segmentation, blending, addition, substitution, and deletion are also not integrated into teacher instruction. There is an awareness gap among teachers about the key components of phonological awareness activities.

In addition, Teacher T4 taught the given sound /q/ in the word *miiqe* hoe from students' textbook on page 52 [55].

He wrote *miiqe*, /qe/, and /q/ on the board and after a while he asked the children to say after him. The syllable and the sound in the word are not presented separately and manipulating the phonemes in the word is practiced. In doing so, he attempts to explain the meaning of the word rather than manipulating the sound into different beginning and ending positions of words. The sounds in the word are /m/, /ii/, /q/, and /e/; however, the teacher does not mention every sound in the word. As has been shown, teacher instruction cannot integrate phoneme manipulation activities: identification, isolation segmentation, blending, addition, substitution, and deletion are not integrated into teacher instruction.

On the other hand, classroom presentations by teachers were observed to find out what challenges teachers face when teaching phonological awareness in the first grade of the Koorete language. As observed, the teacher spent a lot of time inappropriately. For example, Teacher T1 used 20 : 10, Teacher T2 20 : 42, Teacher T3 27 : 45, and Teacher T4 21 : 14 of the given 40 min by being late and leaving the class early. They spent most of the minutes writing the lesson on the board. This shows how the teachers are not planned and manage their lessons for better practice. In addition, it was also revealed that the teacher did not guide the children's reading practice and provided scaffolding and using reading resources in their classroom.

5.1.2. Literacy-Rich Environment. As already mentioned, there are no textbooks, libraries, or other play materials in the school to support reading practice. In addition, there were picture cards or flashcards on the walls of the classrooms, and therefore no pictures that could be accidentally read. The classroom is overcrowded and not conducive to reading practice, and teachers did not support students' reading practice. This causes inappropriate teaching and learning environment in the classroom.

5.1.3. Availability of Supplementary Reading Materials. It has been shown that both teachers and students suffer from a lack of textbooks, teacher guides, and supplemental reading materials in the classroom. There is a single textbook for teachers and students. Children could not follow reading activities from textbooks. According to the researchers' observations, the schools are neglected and do not have sufficient resources. Another general observation made by the researcher was that there were no resources in classrooms other than blackboard and chalk. The teachers had to write everything on the blackboard. There were no reading books and/or library corners in these classrooms. This section presents the data resulting from the observation as it emerged from the research conducted in the sample schools that participated in the study. The data analysis, presented as a narrative in this section, underlies the researchers' attempt to walk in the participants' shoes.

5.2. Interview of Teachers. Question 1: How would you describe the classroom environment with rich literacy materials: What type of supplemental reading materials are there to support reading instruction?

Teacher T1: There are no additional materials in our school; unfortunately, we have a single textbook for teachers and students in the classroom. Other supplementary reading materials such as pictures, flashcards, and reading texts are not presented in our classroom.

Teacher T2: There is no textbook for the Koorete language in our school, children learn from their teacher, and the teacher is the only textbook for the whole classroom. The school has a single textbook for the first grade, borrowed from another school. Even some pages are not included in the textbook.

Teacher T3: The teaching practice is full of challenges, currently we do not have a textbook in the classroom, so we write the daily lesson on the blackboard and it takes time, the given 40 min can end, and we could not teach the sound system to do the reading aloud the teaching practice.

Teacher T4: All native teachers in our district suffer from the lack of textbooks, reading materials, and an organized library in the school. In the absence of these reading resources, teachers' reading practice is very difficult. There are several books in the store donated by world vision, but there is not a single native-language textbook.

Question 2: How do you feel about your preparedness to teach phonological awareness and do you take the time to plan your daily classes?

Teacher T1: Our college education was insufficient because we were the first group and there were no reference materials to support our education. In addition, we did not receive any in-service training from the start. As a result, we do not have sufficient awareness of the components of phonological awareness and support our children in learning to read. Elementary school teachers are unable to support our children's phonological awareness practice.

Teacher T2: In my opinion my preparation for the daily lesson presentation is enough; I try to present the given lessons accordingly. However, some factors affect our instruction preparation and delivery of quality instruction; among them, the lack of positions responsible for language development is the most important. For example, the Woreda Education and Regional Education Offices are not willing to prepare in-service training courses and provide appropriate supplementary reading. Therefore we are not as encouraged and have prepared our classes as expected.

Teacher T3: The allotted time ends while we are writing on the board and it takes too much time, so we cannot manage our daily schedule in the allotted time. I guess we do not help our kids either, even in the classroom we spent our time getting by at the blackboard instead of teaching reading.

Teacher T4: I do not use any additional reading material; in fact, I am not adequately prepared for my daily classroom presentation. We are also not trained in college what to teach and how to teach the components of phonological awareness in the language.

Question 3: What are the challenges in teaching phonological awareness in first grade?

Teacher T1: At our school, there are no supplementary reading materials to improve reading instruction. As previously mentioned, the lack of textbooks, lack of support from stakeholders, lack of on-the-job training, and overcrowding of classrooms with children are the main challenges at our school. All of these challenges make teaching reading difficult.

Teacher T2: Classroom mother tongue language reading practice is influenced by: lack of textbooks, lack of a literature-rich environment, lack of library and reference work in the native language, lack of family support, preschool organization, lack of motivation toward teachers, lack of a responsible body for mother tongue language development, and lack of exposure of the language among researchers.

Teacher T3: Our school does not have resources such as textbooks and other relevant materials for classroom teaching. In addition, stakeholders like the district administration and education officers do not take care of language promotion. The children enter the first grade without realizing the sound system of the language as there is no strong preschool system in the district. The teacher does not receive any additional reading material to help the children learn to read. This lack of appropriate references makes lesson preparation too difficult for teachers.

Teacher T4: Several challenges hinder the practice of phonological awareness in the early grades. The main challenges include the lack of textbooks and other lack of access to supplementary reading material, nonprovision of the language as a medium of instruction, poor teaching environment, and ignorance of the language by stakeholders.

5.3. Teachers' Questionnaires

5.3.1. *Challenges Faced by Teachers in Teaching Phonological Awareness in First Grade.* The results showed that teachers faced various challenges in the practice of teaching phonological awareness in the first grade of the Koorete language. The results of the questionnaires are presented in the following section.

(1) *Challenges Related to Teacher Training Programs for Teaching Phonological Awareness.* Questionnaires for elementary school teachers were used to identify the challenges of preservice teacher training programs to teach phonological awareness. The results of the questionnaires are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 presents the challenges resulting from teachers' training programs in relation to the practice of phonological awareness in the first grade. The lack of literature-based quality training materials and reference mother tongue materials was the most common challenge faced, at 25 (83.3%), followed by weak preservice mother tongue training at 22 (73.3%), and lack of mother tongue-based trained instructors at 17 (56.6%) challenges mentioned by the teachers.

TABLE 1: The challenges experienced by teachers related to teachers training programs.

Responses	Participants no.	Frequency	(%)
Lack of quality modules and reference materials	30	25	83.3
Weak preservice mother tongue training programs	30	22	73.3
Lack of mother tongue-based trained instructors in teachers' training college	30	17	56.6

TABLE 2: Challenges related to teacher preparedness in teaching phonological awareness.

Responses	Participant no.	Frequency	(%)
Lack of in-service training about MT reading instruction	30	26	86.6
Lack of motivation	30	22	73.3
Insufficient subject content and pedagogical awareness	30	20	66.6

TABLE 3: Challenges teachers face in the practice of phonological awareness.

Responses	Participant no.	Frequency	(%)
Lack of textbook, teachers' guide, and reading materials	30	28	93.3
Overcrowded in the classroom	30	20	66.6
Lack of daily lesson plan	30	16	53.3

TABLE 4: School related challenges faced by teachers in teaching phonological awareness.

Responses	Participant no.	Frequency	(%)
Lack of support from stakeholders	30	25	83.3
Lack of conducive literacy-rich environment	30	22	73.3
Lack of library and mother tongue-reference books	30	21	70

There was a tendency toward the teacher to externalize the challenges with the external factors.

(2) *Challenges Related to Preparing Teachers to Teach Phonological Awareness.* The study aimed to find out how prepared teachers are to teach phonological awareness. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 shows that the lack of in-service training in teaching phonological awareness in the mother tongue was the largest factor affecting teachers' preparation for teaching phonological awareness at 26 (86.6%), followed by a lack of motivation to use 22 (73.3%), then insufficient subject content and pedagogical knowledge at 20 (66.6%).

(3) *The Challenges Associated with Teachers' Practice of Phonological Awareness.* In order to obtain the necessary data on the challenges teachers face in the practice of phonological awareness teaching, teachers were asked to describe their experiences of teaching. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3 shows that the lack of textbooks, teacher guides, and supplemental reading materials when teaching phonological awareness in the native language was the largest factor influencing teachers' phonological awareness teaching practice at 28 (93.3%), followed by classroom overcrowding at 20 (66.6%), and the lack of a daily lesson plan at 16 (53.3%)

was challenged when teachers practice phonological awareness in the classroom.

(4) *School Related Challenges That Affect Teachers' Practice of Phonological Awareness.* The study finds that when teaching phonological awareness in first grade, teachers faced several challenges related to school characters. The results are provided in Table 4.

Table 4 shows that lack of adequate support from the district, regional education office, and stakeholders at 25 (83.3%), lack of an enabling environment with many literacy programs at 22 (73.3%), and lack of literary and mother tongue reading material at 21 (70%) faced teachers teaching phonological awareness.

5.4. *The Teachers' Proposed Solutions to the Existing Challenges Related to Teachers Teaching Phonological Awareness in the First Grade of the Koorete Language.* To understand how teachers attempted to mitigate the challenges teachers faced when teaching phonological awareness in the first grade, data used by teachers were collected and are presented in Table 5.

Table 5 shows that the solutions teachers offered to the problems they encountered when teaching phonological awareness included 28 (93.3%) that improved access to appropriate textbooks, teacher guides, and reading materials

TABLE 5: Possible intervention suggested by the teachers to alleviate the challenges.

Responses	Participant no.	Frequency	(%)
Access of textbook, teacher's guide, and reading materials	30	28	93.3
Preparing capacity building in-service training	30	26	86.6
Support mother tongue education	30	23	76.6
Strengthening teachers' training programs	30	21	70
Creating literacy-rich environment	30	19	63.3
Strengthening libraries	30	18	60

as the most common solution overcoming challenges, followed by emphasis on preparing in-service training for capacity building at 26 (86.6%), support for native-language instruction at 23 (76.6%), strengthening teacher training programs at 21 (70%), creating a literate environment at 19 (63.3%), and strengthening libraries at 18 (60%). From these findings, access to textbooks, teacher's manuals, and mother tongue reading materials are considered the most appropriate for teaching phonological awareness. The literature studies reviewed indicate that children are likely to read and write more often in a classroom setting with a greater volume and variety of reading materials.

6. Discussion

The results of this study showed that teachers who practice phonological awareness in the early grades of the Koorete language in Ethiopian public schools do not achieve expected early-grade reading performance due to several challenges. Among these, a lack of awareness of the components of phonological awareness, inadequate facilities for teaching reading skills, and a lack of a literature-rich environment are the major challenges faced by teachers in the first grade of Koorete language reading.

Accordingly, teachers lack substantive and pedagogical knowledge of the key components of phonological awareness activities, as evidenced by teacher observations in the classroom. A lack of phoneme identification, phoneme segmentation, blending, adding, deleting, and replacing was observed in Teacher T1's lesson presentation. This shows how incomplete and inadequate the teaching is. Similarly, in the results of the questionnaires, about 66.6% of the teachers indicated that they did not have sufficient professional and pedagogical knowledge. However, the study found that primary school teachers should show a greater understanding of implementing an effective reading program that includes explicit instructions on phonological awareness [56]. It is necessary for teachers teaching beginning readers to have sufficient knowledge and skills in phonological awareness instruction [57, 58].

In teaching sounds, letters, syllables, and words, teachers are expected to encourage students to practice phoneme manipulation activities, syllable activities, and word-level activities for phonological awareness skills independently, in pairs, or in groups. However, as shown in teacher T2, according to the literature phoneme segmentation in the words *piire*, /p/, /ii/, /r/, and /e/ is not practiced as it can be

seen on page 54 [55]. The syllable blending and segmentation activities in the word are also not presented and practiced separately in class. There are also practical limitations to phoneme manipulation: identification, isolation, segmentation, blending, addition, substitution, and deletion. This gap shows that teachers do not have an adequate understanding of the key components of phonological awareness. This result also confirms that teachers lack sufficient awareness [12].

Understanding the teacher-related factors that contribute to the adoption of more effective teaching methods can inform researchers and practitioners in their efforts to improve teacher education and professional development so that teachers are better prepared to meet the educational needs of all children in learning to read [59]. However, classroom observation showed that teachers' practice of teaching phonological awareness and scaffolding children's reading skills was limited to some aspects of ability. For this poor performance during the interviews, they stated that lack of further education (86.6%), lack of motivation (73.3%), and insufficient technical and pedagogical knowledge (66.6%) were the reason for their academic inability to teach reading effectively. If teachers have good reading lesson planning, children will also have good reading skills. Teachers with phonological awareness skills help their learners understand the reading process better than those who do not. Such teachers will also initiate appropriate intervention programs to help their learners based on the feedback they receive from their reading [18].

Teacher T3 was taught about the phoneme /p/ in the Koorete language, and the sound is represented within the word *piire* flower in the textbook on page 54 [55]. The sounds in the word are /p/, /ii/, /r/, and /e/, and the teacher must practice each phoneme in the given word. However, the teacher does not practice every sound in the word. Rhyme and alliteration exercises (beginning and closing exercises) in the given words could not be presented during the lesson presentation. One study found that rhyme identity tasks were most appropriate, while phoneme identity, phoneme mixing, and phoneme segmentation became more appropriate in early grades [17]. Phoneme manipulation: identification, isolation segmentation, blending, addition, substitution, and deletion are also not integrated into teacher instruction. The components of phonological conscientious knowledge are critical to the development of reading skills through fourth grade or beyond [25]. There is an awareness gap among teachers about the key components of phonological

awareness activities. This is similar to the findings that poor implementation of phonological awareness by teachers is a critical factor affecting students' reading literacy [60]. The teaching practices and/or the use of teachers with poor phonological awareness further result in poor reading ability in children [40].

In addition, Teacher T4 taught the given sound /q/ in the word *miiqe* hoe in the textbook on page 52 [55]. He wrote the word *miiqe* hoe, the syllable *qe*, and the sound /q/ on the blackboard. The other syllables and sounds of the word are not shown separately, and in order to practice syllable and sound recognition in the word. In doing so, he attempts to explain the meaning of the word rather than manipulating the sound into the different beginning and ending positions of a word. The sounds in the word are /m/, /ii/, /q/, and /e/. However, the teacher does not mention every sound in the word. As shown, teacher lessons do not integrate phoneme manipulation activities: identification, isolation segmentation, blending, adding, replacing, and deleting into the lessons. In the literature, phoneme manipulation activities include phonemes (identifying, isolating, categorizing, blending, segmenting, deleting, adding, and replacing) [21, 25, 31]. In addition, Wyse and Goswami [61] suggest examples that any teacher could use for phoneme identification in any daily classroom presentation in first grade.

As it turned out, the teachers spent the given time inappropriately, as it turned out during classroom observation. All teachers have gaps in using the allotted time. As the findings showed, Teacher T1 used 20 : 10, Teacher T2 20 : 42, Teacher T3 27 : 45, and Teacher T4 21 : 14 of the specified 40 min by being late and leaving the class early. The recorded time was not used for reading practice; most minutes were wasted copying the lesson on the blackboard. They spent most of their time writing the lesson on the board, were late for class, and left class early. This was a clear indication that the teacher was not well prepared and organized for the daily lessons according to the literature. This lack of daily lesson plans was reported in a questionnaire at 53.3%. This lack of commitment on the part of teachers has resulted in ineffective reading practices and therefore they are unable to do what they should be doing, which is teaching these learners how to read efficiently. To be effective, reading instruction, particularly phonological awareness activities, must be systematically planned and taught in a specific order [62, 63].

As reported in teacher interviews and questionnaires, the teacher training program was not able to train qualified teachers. As indicated in Table 1, 83.3% of teachers reported that there was a lack of quality modules and reference materials, 73.3% reported that there were weak native-language training programs for professional preparation, and 56.6% of teachers reported that there was a shortage of quality trained teachers in mother tongue language were some of the challenges of teaching phonological awareness in the first grades. Likewise, the low percentage of qualified teachers in the first cycle of primary education and the existence of some unqualified teachers in the second cycle of primary education imply that improvements are still needed [64]. Similarly, various scholars have argued that teacher education programs do not provide the depth of training needed to prepare prospective teachers to

teach reading effectively at an early stage [65–67]. One of the major challenges related to teacher education and professional development is that education (both professional and professional) has not given due emphasis to substantive knowledge and modern pedagogical styles. Furthermore, overcrowding was observed during a classroom observation, and Teacher T1 also reported that the number of students is one of the challenging factors in teaching phonological awareness in the classroom. Similarly, 66.6% of teachers indicated that overcrowding is one of the challenging factors in teaching phonological awareness in early grades.

The study also discussed that lack of access to textbooks, teacher manuals, and supplementary reading materials is the most common challenge in early grades for both teachers and students. As observed, there was a single textbook and no teacher guide and other supplemental materials were used during classroom observation in all classes. In the interview, all teachers mentioned that the lack of textbooks, teacher guides, and other supplemental materials is the biggest challenge in teaching reading. In addition, 93.3% of teachers indicated that the lack of textbooks, teacher guides, and supplementary reading materials is the biggest challenge that hinders teachers from practicing phonological awareness in the early-grade classroom. According to the researchers' observations, the schools are neglected and do not provide enough resources. This finding is consistent with the [12] view that most Ethiopian primary schools lack facilities to promote reading, particularly in textbooks, libraries, and supportive classrooms.

Furthermore, as the observation shows, the classroom environment is not a literacy-rich environment for teachers to practice reading in early grades. There were no aids such as alphabet charts, flashcards, word charts, and pictures that could be accidentally read, so teachers forced everything to be written on the blackboard. For example, 73.3% of teachers stated that the lack of a conducive environment that promotes literacy, the lack of adequate support from the Woreda Education Office and the regional education office (83.3%), and the lack of a library (70%) are some of the challenges that hamper their teaching practice of phonological awareness. Also, EGRA [12] came to the same conclusion that the school environment in Ethiopia is not rich in supplementary reading material and this is affecting the teaching in teachers' reading classes. Similarly, EGRA found that several practical obstacles in the classroom can hinder sustained phonological awareness as part of the literacy curriculum. These barriers include time availability, teachers' phonological awareness, difficulties in accessing resources, and lack of materials [12].

In general, teachers suggested the following solution to reduce the challenges that hinder teachers in practicing phonological awareness: participating teachers were suggested access to textbooks, teacher guides, and reading materials at 93.3%, preparation of in-service training courses on capacity building at 86.6%, supporting native-language instruction at 76.6%, strengthening teacher training programs at 70%, creating a literate and literate environment at 63.3%, and strengthening libraries at 60% in first-grade public school in Ethiopia. Similarly, the literature also suggests that raising

teachers' awareness of phonological awareness and providing appropriate supplemental reading material help children improve reading achievement in the early grades [56].

7. Conclusion

The teaching of phonological awareness in the early-grade class is a crucial prerequisite for learning to read and subsequent school success. However, the results of the study showed that the teachers in the selected first-grade Koorete language schools were not able to teach phonological awareness effectively, due to a lack of adequate subject content pedagogical knowledge, planning, and preparation, and a rich reading and writing environment and inadequate provision of reading materials (textbooks, teacher guides, flashcards, picture cards) by the school and the district education department. The study concludes that effective teacher education programs, appropriate subject content, and teacher pedagogical knowledge, teacher lesson planning and preparation, a reading literacy-rich environment, and the provision and availability of textbooks, teacher guides, and reading materials are the most recognized solutions to phonological awareness classroom problems. Therefore, teachers can effectively teach these skills through appropriate teaching tools, with a manageable number of children in the classroom, in a relevant reading environment, and with a basic understanding of the instructions and the components of phonological awareness that improve reading performance.

The results of this study indicated that the first-grade Koorete language classroom in the Amaro district was underfunded in terms of the supply and provision of textbooks and supplemental reading materials. The School and Education Department did not help with access and availability of textbooks and other related reading materials in this regard. Against this background, Harmon [68] believes that the availability of reading material is the first step toward literacy. It was further emphasized that there were no libraries or other reading materials. This affects reading classes to a greater extent, as teachers would not have a document to help them read or roughly prepare their work. The study also found that schools and education officials at the school or district level do not provide any in-service training in reading instruction. On the other hand, the study made it clear that effective reading instruction is not possible in crowded classrooms. For this reason, Koorete language teachers do not scaffold their children when learning to read, so the number of students must be manageable to support their reading practice.

Based on the results of the study, the teachers did not use explicit and systematic lesson planning and presentation. As a result, some aspects of the phonological awareness activities were not included in the daily classroom presentations of the first-grade teachers. One study suggested that explicit and systematic instruction in the critical areas of literacy includes phonological awareness, phonemic decoding, and text reading [26]. In addition, instructional sequencing requires the teacher to plan what will be taught (e.g., phonological awareness skills), the order in which it will be taught (e.g., syllables,

onset and rime, phoneme), the pace of instruction, and how it is taught [63]. Therefore, teacher education programs should teach the basic concepts of early literacy and how these skills can be practiced in pre- and in-service training programs to improve children's reading performance.

8. Recommendations

The following recommendations can be made, based on the data collected and the literature consulted, to improve the practice of phonological awareness in the early classes of the Koorete language in the Amaro Woreda. Accordingly, this study recommends the following solution to the challenges:

- (i) The study found that the lack of subject content and pedagogical knowledge among Koorete language teachers is one of the challenges affecting the practice of phonological awareness teachers. The classroom observations indicated that the teacher did not teach reading due to a lack of phonological awareness activities in daily classroom practice and a lack of awareness of classroom strategies. Therefore, teacher education programs need to provide effective reading instruction for student teachers and develop and provide instruction in phonological awareness in mother tongue teaching.
- (ii) The study also found that teachers' lack of planning and preparedness to teach phonological awareness posed the greatest challenge. None of the participating teachers used lesson planning (daily lesson plan, weekly plan) and supplemental reading materials. This therefore results from a lack of appropriate content and pedagogical awareness on the part of the teachers and a lack of motivation. Therefore, the Ministry of Culture, the state education authority and the district administration authority, the district education authority, and other academic institutions should prepare in-service training courses for native-speaking early school teachers.
- (iii) As can be seen from the above results, the lack of student textbooks, teacher guides, supplemental reading materials, a library, and a rich reading environment are the main challenges teachers faced in teaching phonological awareness in the first grade of the Koorete language. Improving the school and the quality of education requires the active participation of all stakeholders and they should play their part in solving the problems. Therefore, in order to equip the school with these teaching tools, all stakeholders (Ministry of Education, Regional Education Office, Woreda Administration, Woreda Education Office, school community, parents, teachers, and NGOs) should work together to provide appropriate materials and create a conducive classroom reading environment.

In general, based on the findings of the study, this study recommends the need for in-service training that focuses on the teaching method of early-grade reading literacy and

raises awareness of the key components of phonological awareness, access, and the quality of textbooks and supplemental reading materials for creating an environment that encourages reading and strengthening the preschool structure in public schools in Ethiopia.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Additional Points

Limitations. This study was limited to 30 primary schools and 30 first-grade Koorete language teachers in public schools in Amaro Woreda, Ethiopia. Since the research design is a mixed-method approach, the result can be generalized to other certified Koorete language teachers in Amaro District, Ethiopia. The results can be useful to learn lessons and intervene in similar cases in Ethiopia or elsewhere.

Also, this study is limited to the first component of reading literacy, namely phonological awareness, other components such as vocabulary, fluency, and reading comprehension are not included. Factors such as learning outcomes, motivation to learn, family income, and home literacy were not considered due to time constraints. Further research needs to focus on other components of reading literacy, children's learning outcomes, the background to home literacy, and a more diverse and larger number of native speakers in Ethiopia.

Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Disclosure

The research has been developed within the framework of the work as a part of Samuel Zinabu Haile's Ph.D. thesis at Addis Ababa University.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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Supplementary Materials

Supplementary 1. Components of phonological awareness.

Supplementary 2. Extract from grade one textbook pages 52, 53, and 54.

Supplementary 3. Classroom observation protocol.

Supplementary 4. Teachers' interview protocol.

Supplementary 5. Teachers' questionnaires.

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