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ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF PHONICS-BASED INSTRUCTION ON EARLY GRADE READING SKILLS: A CASE STUDY OF STANDARD 2 LEARNERS AT CHIPALA PRIMARY SCHOOL AND YEPA PRIMARY SCHOOL IN LILONGWE, MALAWI.

Dr. Rightwell K. Gondwe [1], Sphiwe Chide[2], Ellen Gondwe[3]

(PhD in Leadership and Management Administration) kupagondwe@gmail.com

ABSTRACT :

This study investigated the impact of phonics-based instruction on the reading skills of early grade 2 learners, addressing a critical need to identify effective literacy interventions. Using a mixed-methods research design, data were collected from multiple sources to provide a comprehensive assessment. Qualitative insights were gathered through structured interviews and surveys capturing responses from teachers regarding observable improvements in student decoding and fluency, as well as responses from learners detailing their experiences and perceived gains in reading confidence and ability. Quantitatively, an independent sample t-test was employed to compare the reading performance of an experimental group receiving phonics-based instruction with a control group receiving traditional instruction. The subsequent hypothesis test evaluated the statistical significance of any observed differences. Results consistently demonstrated the effectiveness of phonics-based instruction: teacher and learner feedback overwhelmingly indicated positive gains in reading skills and engagement. Critically, the independent sample t-test revealed a statistically significant difference in reading outcomes favoring the phonics-based instruction group, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. These common findings underscore that systematic phonics-based instruction significantly enhances early grade learners' reading skills. This research advocates for the widespread adoption and robust implementation of phonics-based methodologies in early literacy curricula to establish a strong foundation for reading proficiency.

Key words: Phonics-based instruction, early grade reading, literacy development, decoding skills, systematic phonics, Malawi education, ESL learners, reading comprehension

Introduction

Phonics-based instruction is a pedagogical approach to teaching reading that emphasizes the systematic relationship between letters and their corresponding sounds. By explicitly teaching learners how to decode words through sound-letter associations, phonics instruction fosters foundational literacy skills, ultimately leading to enhanced reading fluency and comprehension (Ehri et al., 2001). This approach is particularly effective in equipping learners with the decoding skills necessary for accurate word recognition—an essential component of early reading development.

The present study employed a mixed-methods approach involving classroom observations, teacher and learner participation, systematic data collection, and comprehensive data analysis. The core value of phonics-based instruction lies in its capacity to promote literacy among early learners by making reading more accessible and less reliant on memorization or contextual guessing. It has been shown to be especially beneficial for struggling readers, including learners with dyslexia and those acquiring English as a second language (Torgesen et al., 2001; Snowling & Hulme, 2012).

In the Malawian context, early grade reading skills are critical to long-term academic achievement. However, a significant proportion of learners continue to face challenges in acquiring basic literacy skills. According to the 2019 Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA), only 8.6% of Standard 2 learners in Malawi demonstrated reading comprehension skills (MoEST, 2020). While phonics-based instruction has been widely recognized and adopted in other educational systems, its specific impact in Malawi particularly in rural primary schools remains under-researched.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the impact of phonics-based instruction on early grade reading proficiency in Malawi, using Standard 2 learners at Chipala and Yepa Primary Schools in Lilongwe as a case study. The findings aim to provide empirical insights that can inform instructional practices, curriculum development, and national education policy, particularly in low-resource settings.

Background of Study

Phonics-Based Instruction and Global Literacy Trends

Reading proficiency, supported by phonics-based instruction, is foundational to educational success. However, global literacy rates reveal significant disparities. According to UNESCO (2022), approximately 773 million adults and young people worldwide remain illiterate. In the United States, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2022) reported that only 33% of fourth-grade students demonstrated reading proficiency. These

statistics have intensified the focus on early literacy instruction, with phonics-based instruction increasingly recognized as a vital strategy for improving reading outcomes.

Phonics is an instructional approach that teaches the systematic relationship between letters and sounds, enabling children to decode words effectively. It is grounded in the alphabetic principle the understanding that letters represent sounds, which combine to form words. This method stands in contrast to approaches such as whole language or balanced literacy, which emphasize context and meaning over phonetic decoding. While phonics is often positioned in opposition to these methods, it is widely regarded as a foundational component of early reading development.

Historical and Policy Context

Historically, the mid-20th century saw the rise of the whole language approach, which prioritized the use of context and meaning in reading. However, this method came under criticism when many learners failed to effectively decode unfamiliar words, leading to poor literacy outcomes. In response, systematic phonics instruction gained renewed support through major policy reviews and empirical research.

The U.S. National Reading Panel (2000) concluded that systematic phonics instruction significantly improves reading and spelling abilities, particularly in kindergarten and first grade. Their findings indicated that learners who received phonics instruction outperformed their peers by an average of 0.41 standard deviations in reading achievement. Similarly, England's Rose Review (2006) strongly endorsed phonics-based instruction. Following the introduction of the Phonics Screening Check in 2012, the proportion of students in the UK passing the check increased from 58% in 2012 to 82% in 2019.

The Malawian Context

In Malawi, efforts to expand access to education have been commendable, but learning outcomes remain a persistent challenge. According to the 2019 Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA), only 8.6% of Standard 2 learners demonstrated reading comprehension skills (MoEST, 2020). Despite these low outcomes, phonics-based instruction has shown promise in similar low-resource contexts. Research by the National Reading Panel (2000), Torgesen et al. (2001), Piper et al. (2018), and Cilliers et al. (2020) has demonstrated the effectiveness of phonics in improving early grade reading, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa.

In Malawi, the USAID/Malawi Next Generation Early Grade Reading Activity (USAID, 2022) has implemented phonics-based instructional strategies aimed at improving literacy outcomes in early grades. While initial results are promising, further empirical investigation is necessary to evaluate the specific impact and scalability of phonics instruction in the Malawian educational context.

This study seeks to contribute to the growing body of evidence on effective reading instruction in low-resource settings. By assessing the impact of phonics-based instruction in Malawi, the research aims to inform educational policy and classroom practice, ultimately supporting improved literacy outcomes for early grade learners.

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite the recognized importance of reading skills in early childhood education, many learners in Malawi particularly in primary schools continue to struggle with reading proficiency. Foundational reading challenges often begin in the early grades and persist throughout a learner's academic journey, ultimately contributing to poor academic performance and diminished future opportunities (World Bank, 2019). A significant contributing factor is the ineffectiveness of traditional teaching methods, which often lack a structured approach to developing decoding and word recognition skills necessary for reading fluency and comprehension.

Phonics-based instruction, which emphasizes the systematic relationship between letters and sounds, has proven effective in improving reading outcomes in various international contexts (National Reading Panel, 2000; Ehri et al., 2001). Research in low- and middle-income countries, including studies conducted in Kenya and Uganda, also supports the use of structured phonics approaches in enhancing early grade literacy (Piper et al., 2018). However, in the Malawian context especially in rural primary schools such as Chipala Primary School and Yepa Primary School the specific impact of phonics-based instruction remains underexplored.

Therefore, this study aims to assess the effectiveness of phonics-based instruction on early grade reading outcomes among Standard 2 learners at Chipala and Yepa Primary Schools in Lilongwe. By examining instructional practices and literacy development in these settings, the research seeks to generate context-specific insights that can inform national education strategies and classroom practices in Malawi.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to assess the impact of phonics-based instruction on early grade reading skills in Malawian primary schools, with a specific focus on Chipala and Yepa Primary Schools in Lilongwe.

1.4 Objectives of the study

- To assess the effectiveness of phonics-based instruction in improving reading skills among early-grade learners.
- To compare the reading skills of early grade learners taught using phonics-based instruction with those taught using traditional methods.
- To identify challenges faced by teachers and learners in implementing phonics-based instruction.

1.5 Research questions

- What are the effects of phonics-based instruction in improving on early grade reading skills in Malawi primary schools?

- How different are the reading skills of early grade learners taught using phonics-based instruction and those taught using traditional methods?
- What solutions can be employed to overcome challenges faced by teachers and learners in the implementation of phonics-based instruction?

1.6 Research hypothesis

Null Hypothesis (H_o): There is no significant difference in the mean reading skills assessment results between learners who received phonics-based instruction and those who received traditional methods.

H_o: μ_A (phonics) = μ_B (traditional)

Alternative Hypothesis (H_a): There is a significant difference in the mean reading skills assessment results between learners who received phonics-based instruction and those who received traditional methods.

H_a: μ_A (phonics) ≠ μ_B (traditional) (Two-tailed)

H_a: μ_A (phonics) > μ_B (traditional) (One-tailed)

2.0 Literature Review

This chapter provides a comprehensive review of existing literature on phonics-based instruction and its role in early literacy development, with a particular emphasis on its relevance to the Malawian education context. It explores global and regional research on phonics instruction, highlighting key findings on its effectiveness in building foundational reading skills such as decoding, phonemic awareness, fluency, and comprehension. The chapter also examines instructional strategies, implementation challenges, and contextual adaptations necessary to make phonics instruction effective especially in multilingual and resource-limited environments such as Malawi, where learners typically acquire literacy in Chichewa and English.

At the theoretical level, the chapter is anchored in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which frames learning as a socially mediated process. This perspective is particularly relevant to Malawi, where classroom instruction often involves significant interaction between teachers and learners, and where social and cultural factors significantly influence learning outcomes. Vygotsky's concepts of scaffolding, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), and the role of the "more knowledgeable other" provide a useful lens for analyzing how phonics instruction can be effectively delivered in Malawian classrooms especially when guided support is available from trained teachers.

While the global literature, including findings from the National Reading Panel (2000) and the Rose Review (2006), strongly supports systematic phonics instruction, these studies largely reflect experiences in high-income, English-speaking contexts. As such, this review also draws on regional research from sub-Saharan Africa, including Nigeria, Kenya, and Tanzania, to draw parallels with Malawi's educational landscape. These regional studies underscore the effectiveness of phonics in improving reading outcomes even in low-resource, multilingual settings conditions that mirror many Malawian classrooms.

In the Malawian context, early grade literacy levels remain a major concern. According to the Ministry of Education (MoE, 2017) and the National Statistical Office (NSO, 2019), the majority of Grade 2 learners struggle to read at grade level, with national assessments showing low levels of reading fluency and comprehension. In response, the Malawi National Reading Programme (NRP) launched in 2016 with support from USAID and other partners introduced a systematic, phonics-based literacy curriculum for Standards 1–4 in both Chichewa and English. Evaluations of the NRP (RTI International, 2020) have reported modest gains in letter recognition, decoding, and word reading skills, particularly in early grades, though challenges such as large class sizes, limited instructional time, and teacher training gaps persist.

Given that many learners in Malawi acquire literacy in English as a second or even third language, phonics-based instruction if adapted to local linguistic realities and supported by effective teacher training offers a promising pathway for improving literacy outcomes. This literature review therefore seeks to synthesize both global and Malawian evidence on phonics, with the aim of informing practice and policy tailored to Malawi's unique educational context.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction and cultural context in the learning process. According to Gauvain (2008), cognitive development occurs through guided interaction within a sociocultural environment, where learners construct knowledge through dialogue and collaboration with more knowledgeable others.

Key elements of Vygotsky's theory include:

- Social interaction: Learning is viewed as a fundamentally social process, facilitated by interaction with teachers and peers.
- More knowledgeable others: Children acquire new skills by learning from individuals who have a deeper understanding of the subject.
- Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD): This refers to the range of tasks a learner can perform with guidance but not yet independently.
- Scaffolding: Teachers or peers provide structured support that is gradually withdrawn as learners gain independence.

This theory is highly relevant in Malawian early grade classrooms, where learners often rely on teachers for structured guidance due to limited access to print materials and home literacy support. It supports the study's focus on how phonics-based instruction can be effectively delivered in a supportive and engaging classroom environment. It also frames the importance of teacher-learner interaction, which is central to the success of programs like the Malawi NRP that rely on scripted lessons and modelled reading practices.

2.2. The Foundational Role of Phonics in Early Literacy Development

The National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000) identified five key components of effective reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Systematic phonics instruction, especially in early grades, is widely recognized as effective in improving decoding, spelling, and reading comprehension. The Rose Review (2006) in the UK further emphasized the use of synthetic phonics, showing positive literacy outcomes.

In Malawi, the NRP curriculum incorporates these elements, providing scripted phonics instruction in both Chichewa (as the language of instruction in lower grades) and English (as a subject). RTI International (2018) reported that learners in NRP-supported schools demonstrated improvements in letter-sound knowledge and oral reading fluency, although outcomes were inconsistent across districts largely due to implementation quality and resource constraints.

2.3 Impact on Foundational Reading Skills

Phonics-based instruction is key in developing decoding, word recognition, phonemic awareness, and fluency. Ehri (2014) and Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) emphasize these as foundational for lifelong literacy. In Malawi, NRP's emphasis on systematic letter-sound instruction and decoding practice has shown improvements in decoding skills, but reading comprehension remains low, highlighting the need for more balanced literacy instruction.

2.4 Effectiveness for Diverse Learners

Phonics has shown positive effects for learners at risk of reading failure, including ESL learners and those in under-resourced settings. This is critical in Malawi, where many learners speak local languages at home and face transition challenges to English literacy in upper grades. A study by Kanjee & Chimombo (2021) found that learners who received systematic phonics instruction in their local language performed better in reading English words than those taught with whole-word or unsystematic approaches.

2.5 Implementation Strategies

The quality of implementation is crucial. Adams (1990) and Moats (1999) stress the importance of teacher expertise in delivering systematic phonics. In Malawi, teacher preparation remains a key bottleneck. Reports from the Education Sector Implementation Plan II (MoE, 2020) highlight gaps in initial teacher education and in-service training, particularly in teaching reading using structured methods. Even though the NRP has delivered teacher guides and scripted lessons, many teachers still struggle with instructional pacing and assessment due to limited pedagogical knowledge (Chimombo et al., 2019).

2.6 Effects of Phonics-Based Instruction on Reading and Writing Skills

While global research shows phonics boosts literacy, Malawi-specific evaluations reveal mixed but promising outcomes. An independent review by USAID (2020) found that learners in NRP schools outperformed their counterparts in control schools in decoding and word reading. However, spelling and writing skills remained weak, suggesting the need for integration with broader literacy components. These findings are consistent with studies from Kenya (Piper et al., 2018) and Tanzania (Kananzi et al., 2024), indicating that phonics works best when supported by sufficient teacher training and regular classroom monitoring.

2.3 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework guiding this study is informed by Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which views learning as a socially mediated and scaffolded process. The framework illustrates the relationship between phonics-based instruction (independent variable) and reading skill development (dependent variable), influenced by mediating variables such as:

- The quality of teacher support,
- Classroom interaction and scaffolding,
- The availability of phonics resources and instructional materials.

In the Malawian setting, these factors are directly shaped by the NRP structure, teacher capacity, and resource distribution across schools. When phonics is taught in supportive, interactive environments with adequate training and materials, learners are more likely to operate within their Zone of Proximal Development, thereby achieving meaningful gains in early literacy.

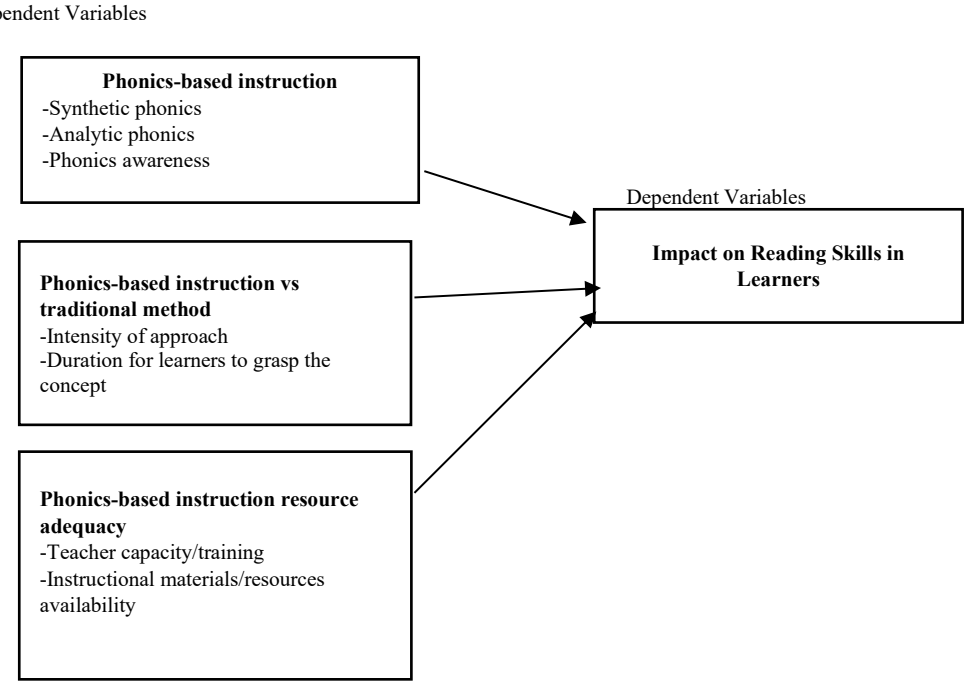

Figure 1*: Conceptual framework*

3.0. Research Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology employed in the study, including the research design, study setting, research strategy, target and sample population, sampling techniques, data collection methods, data analysis procedures, and ethical considerations. The methodology was carefully selected to ensure validity, reliability, and relevance in addressing the research objectives.

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to comprehensively assess the impact of phonics-based instruction on early grade reading skills. The design allowed for triangulation of data, thereby enhancing the credibility of the findings. Quantitative data were obtained through standardized reading assessments, while qualitative data were gathered via classroom observations and interviews.

An experimental component was embedded within the design, involving the comparison of outcomes between a treatment group (learners exposed to phonics-based instruction) and a control group (learners receiving traditional instruction). Standardized instruments were used to measure key reading outcomes, including word recognition, decoding, phonemic awareness, and reading comprehension.

3.2 Justification of the Research Design

The mixed-methods design was deemed appropriate due to its ability to provide both breadth and depth of analysis. The quantitative component enabled the researcher to measure the magnitude and statistical significance of the phonics-based instruction's effects, while the qualitative component allowed for deeper exploration of contextual factors, learner engagement, and pedagogical dynamics. Together, these methods enriched the overall interpretation of findings and offered practical insights for educational practice and policy.

3.3 Study Setting

The study was conducted at Chipala Primary School and Yepa Primary School, both located in Lilongwe District, Central Region of Malawi. Chipala Primary School is situated in Mgona Village (T/A Chitukula) with an enrollment of approximately 3,540 pupils, while Yepa Primary School is located in Yepa Village (T/A Chitukula) with a student population of 2,350 pupils. The coordinates for Chipala and Yepa are -13.87389, 33.76295 and -13.9027, 33.7789, respectively. Both schools were purposefully selected due to their consistent implementation of phonics-based instruction in Standards 1 and 2 over the past six years.

3.4 Research Strategy

A case study strategy was employed to allow for an in-depth, contextual exploration of the relationship between phonics-based instruction and early literacy outcomes. The case study approach was suitable for this research as it enabled a holistic analysis of phonics implementation in real-life classroom settings, while facilitating the use of multiple data sources including test scores, observations, and teacher and learner interviews.

3.5 Sampling Methods and Techniques

Purposive sampling was used to select the two schools based on accessibility and their active use of phonics-based instruction. Standard 2 learners were also purposively selected as they had received at least two years of phonics instruction, ensuring they were appropriately positioned to reflect on its effectiveness.

Within each school, learners were grouped by gender, and simple random sampling was employed to select a balanced sample of 50 learners per school. Each group of 50 was further divided into:

- **Experimental group** (n = 25): Received systematic phonics-based instruction.
- **Control group** (n = 25): Received traditional reading instruction.

In total, the study involved **100 learners** (50 experimental, 50 control) across the two schools. Additionally, **teachers** were selected purposively based on their **minimum of three years of experience** with phonics instruction, ensuring the sample comprised knowledgeable and experienced practitioners.

3.6 Target Population

The target population consisted of:

- All **Standard 2 learners** at Chipala and Yepa Primary Schools.
- **Teachers** involved in the delivery of phonics-based instruction within these schools.

The population was chosen to ensure alignment with the research focus on early grade reading and to draw insights from individuals with direct experience of phonics instruction.

3.7 Sample Size

A total of 100 learners (50 from each school) were included in the final sample, equally split between experimental and control groups. The learner sample was stratified by gender to ensure representativeness. Additionally, a sample of 4–6 teachers (2–3 per school) with relevant phonics training and classroom experience participated in the study to provide qualitative insights.

3.8 Data Collection Methods

Primary data were collected using the following instruments:

- **Standardized reading tests** to measure decoding, phonemic awareness, and comprehension.
- **Learner interviews** to assess engagement and perception of instruction.
- **Teacher interviews** to understand instructional approaches and implementation challenges.
- **Classroom observations** to examine instructional delivery, learner participation, and classroom dynamics.
- **Questionnaires** (open and closed-ended) to capture additional insights from teachers and learners.

Secondary data included review of school records such as learner performance reports, lesson plans, and phonics training materials.

3.9 Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted involving approximately 5% of the total sample to test the validity and reliability of research instruments. Feedback from the pilot informed revisions to the questionnaires, interview guides, and assessment tools. This process helped ensure clarity, appropriateness, and consistency in the main data collection phase.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical research standards by obtaining:

- **Informed consent** from school authorities, teachers, and guardians of participating learners.

- **Assent** from learners.
- **Confidentiality and anonymity** were maintained for all participants.
- Participants were informed of their **right to withdraw** from the study at any stage without penalty.

Approval for the study was obtained from the **relevant educational authorities**, and all data collection was conducted in a respectful and non-intrusive manner.

3.11 Data Analysis

This study employed both quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques to comprehensively assess the impact of phonics-based instruction on early grade reading skills.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using Microsoft Excel, which facilitated the computation of descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics, including means, variances, and standard deviations, were calculated to summarize learners' performance in reading assessments.

To test the study's hypotheses and determine whether the difference in reading outcomes between the experimental group (phonics-based instruction) and the control group (traditional instruction) was statistically significant, an independent samples t-test was conducted. The test compared the mean reading scores of the two groups at a significance level of $\boldsymbol{\alpha = 0.05}$. This method was appropriate for assessing whether the observed differences could be attributed to the instructional approach rather than random variation.

The formula for the independent samples t-test is as follows:

$$t = \frac{(\bar{X}_1 - \bar{X}_2)}{\sqrt{\frac{s_1^2}{n_1} + \frac{s_2^2}{n_2}}}$$

Where: $\bar{X}_1$ = mean of group 1 (phonics)

$\bar{X}_2$ = mean of group 2 (traditional)

S_1^2 = variance of group 1

S_2^2 = variance of group 2

n_1 = sample of group 1

n_2 = sample of group 2

The t-test allowed the researchers to infer whether phonics-based instruction had a statistically significant effect on learners' reading performance compared to traditional methods.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative data collected through interviews and classroom observations were analyzed using thematic analysis. This involved identifying, coding, and categorizing patterns or themes that emerged from the data. The process followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report.

The qualitative analysis aimed to complement the quantitative findings by providing insights into how and why phonics instruction influenced learners' reading development, the experiences of teachers, and the engagement of learners in the classroom context.

3.12 Role of the Researcher

The researchers played a central role in all phases of the study, including conceptualization, instrument design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation. During data collection, the researchers maintained a non-intrusive and ethically responsible presence in the classroom to minimize the Hawthorne effect and ensure the authenticity of participants' responses and behaviors.

To uphold research integrity and objectivity, the researchers applied the following principles:

- Maintained neutrality and non-bias during interviews and observations.
- Ensured that ethical protocols were followed throughout the study, including obtaining informed consent and preserving participant confidentiality.
- Applied methodological rigor in data analysis by using systematic coding procedures and statistical tools.
- Engaged in reflexivity, acknowledging and minimizing personal biases or preconceptions that could influence the interpretation of results.

By adopting these measures, the researchers ensured the credibility, dependability, and validity of the findings while contributing meaningfully to the discourse on phonics instruction in the Malawian educational context.

4.0. Study Findings and Discussions

This chapter presents the findings of the study guide on the effects of phonics-based instruction on learners' performance at Yepa Primary School and Chipala Primary School in Malawi. The chapter begins with an overview of the demographic characteristics of the participants. Then it proceeds to present the quantitative and qualitative findings related to academic performance, implementation practices, challenges, and facilitators of phonics-based instruction.

4.2 Demographic characteristics of participants

Key participants in this study included 50 Primary School learners (25 from each school), 10 teachers (6 from Chipala and 4 from Yepa). The demographic characteristics of the participants are summarized in Figure 2. However, fifty other learners were used as a control sample for traditional methods teaching.

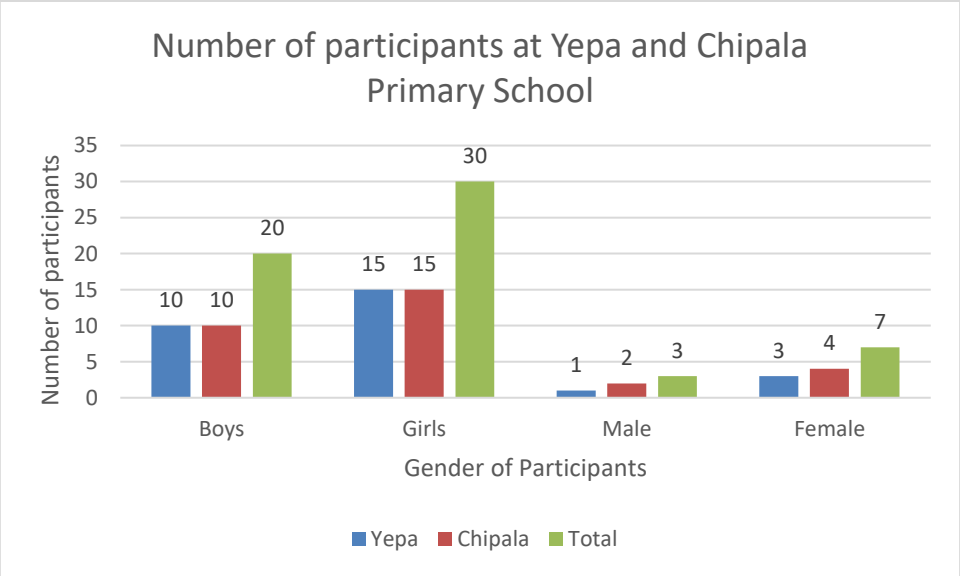

Figure 2: Graph showing gender distribution of the participants

4.3 Perceived Effectiveness of Phonics-Based Instruction

As shown in Figure 3 below, the responses overwhelmingly suggest that teachers, especially those with dedicated phonics training and higher engagement, perceive phonics-based instruction as highly effective in improving early grade reading skills. This is in agreement with Ramos (2019), who reported that phonics-based strategies were perceived to benefit students' extrinsic motivation and fluency in reading skills.

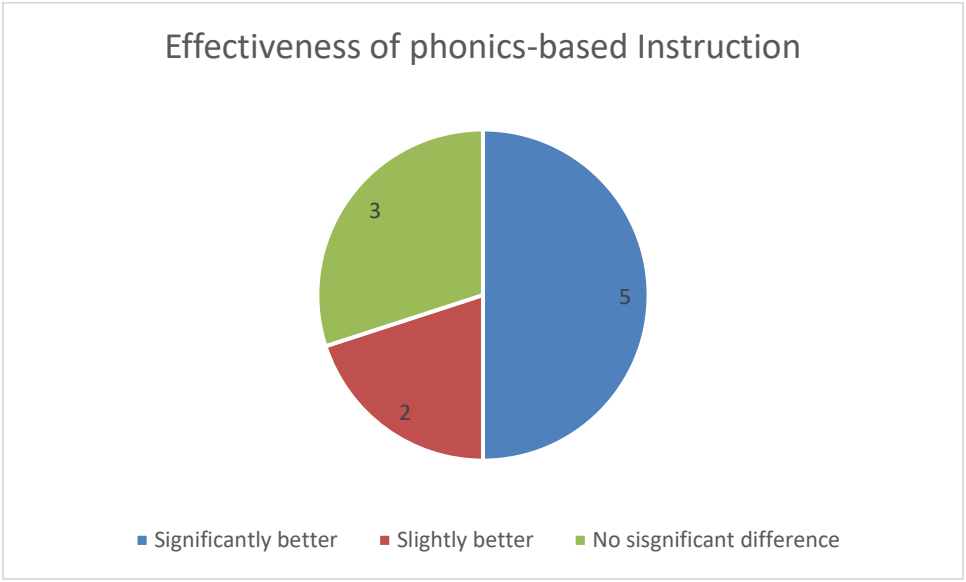

Figure 3: Teacher responses on the effectiveness of Phonics-Based Instructions

Seven teachers either strongly agree or agree that phonics enhances reading skills. Notably, these include teachers with extensive experience in phonics-

based instruction who reported receiving specific phonics training and applying it frequently, often daily, with a high percentage of their reading instruction time (51-100%). They also observed improvements across various areas such as word recognition, decoding unfamiliar words, reading fluency, reading comprehension, spelling, vocabulary, confidence in reading, and motivation to read. Additionally, they provided examples where struggling readers gained confidence, read short stories, and showed significant spelling improvements. However, three teachers are neutral or disagree about phonics' effectiveness. This was attributed to their lack of sufficient phonics training and limited time dedicated to phonics. Their lack of observable improvement or disagreement directly correlates with their limited implementation and familiarity. This data suggests a strong positive correlation between a teacher's training in phonics, their frequency of implementation, and their perception of its effectiveness. Teachers who actively and systematically incorporate phonics report substantial positive outcomes for their students.

4.4 Comparison with Traditional Methods

4.4.1 Teachers' assessment of learners through observations

There is a clear consensus among phonics-implementing teachers that phonics-based instruction yields superior or at least better reading skills compared to traditional methods.

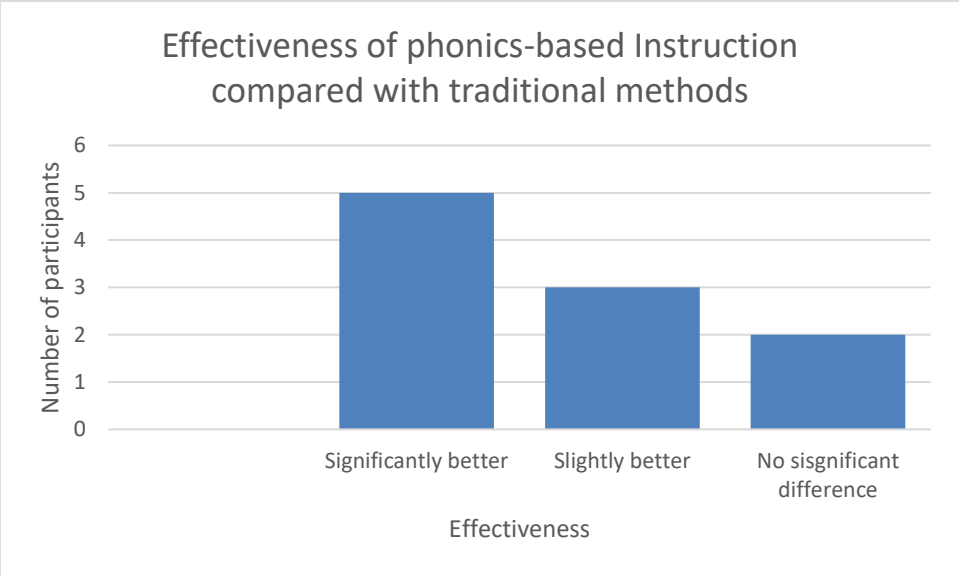

Figure 4: Effectiveness of phonics-based instruction against traditional methods

Teachers who strongly agree on phonics' effectiveness also consistently stated that learners taught with phonics have significantly better reading skills. They emphasize that phonics offers a systematic approach that enables learners to decode independently, decreasing reliance on memorization and building stronger foundational skills. For struggling readers or those with learning difficulties, phonics is viewed as transformative, targeting the root cause of challenges. However, the two teachers with minimal phonics exposure and a traditional focus perceive no significant difference. Their perspective is likely influenced by limited experience or belief in the overall effectiveness of traditional methods.

4.4.2. Reading liking/preference

On reading activities, the fifty learners who were taught using phonics-based instruction reported slight differences in their reading liking as shown in Figure 5 below.

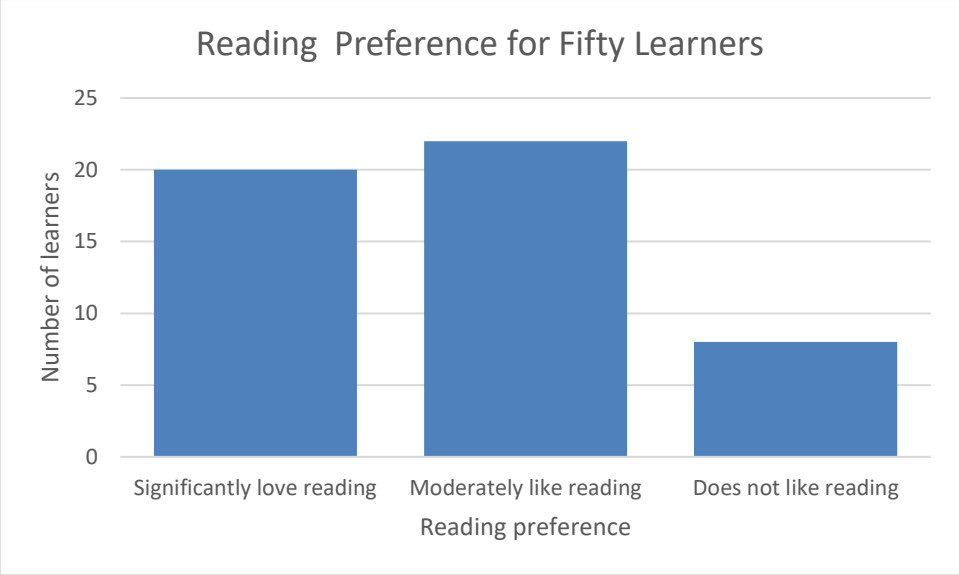

Figure 5: Learners' reading preference

According to their reading preferences, 84% of the students said they enjoy reading with phonics-based instruction because it made it easier to decode new words. Only sixteen percent dislike reading words through phonics-based instruction, which is negligible.

4.4.2.1 Variety of reading activities

The data on various reading activities among learners reveal that different methods are used to improve word understanding through phonics-based instruction. Mostly, 92% of learners indicated that they learn letter sounds like ‘a’ to say /a/, blend sounds to form words such as /c/ /a/ /t/ to make 'cat', and learn blends like ‘bl’. Furthermore, 74% highlighted that reading stories from big books, teacher read-alouds, and reading in small groups are common practices. 63% stated that practicing words on flashcards, reading words off the board, and finding words in the classroom are also used. This is in agreement with Wahyuni and Fauziati (n.d), who reported that students are keen to participate more in classroom activities, especially in certain activities such as phonics instruction, which includes the use of sound sheets, sound book, flash card sheets, word box sheets, song, games, and storybooks. Lastly, 51% mentioned that singing songs with letters and words is employed.

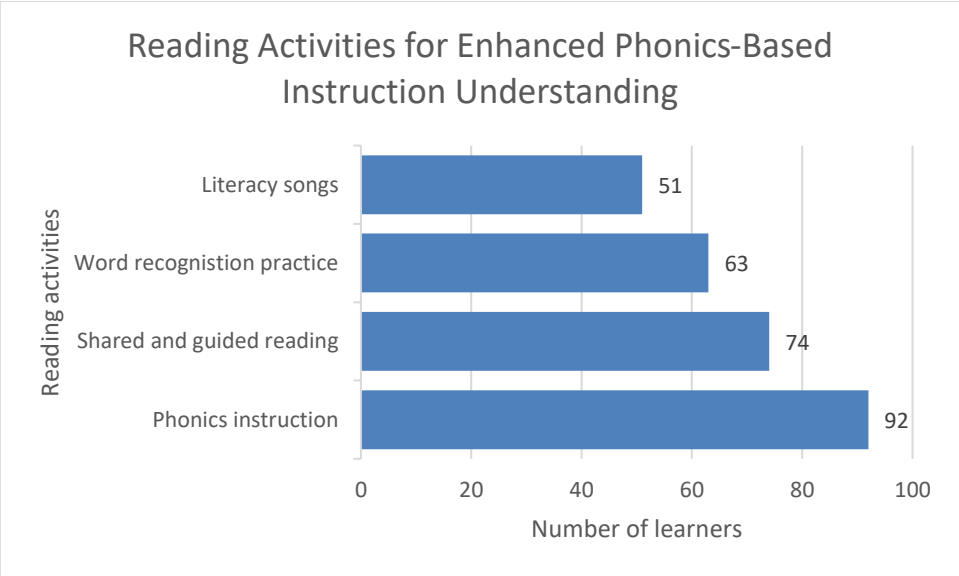

Figure 6: Reading activities for enhanced phonics-based understanding

4.4.2.1.3 Strategies for understanding unfamiliar words

From the Likert scale questions, it is shown in Figure 7 that several strategies are used by learners to understand most unfamiliar words. Of the fifty learners, 88% said that when they hear an unfamiliar word, they try to sound it out, while 94% said they ask teachers or friends for help. Additionally, 68% said they look for contextual clues like examining pictures, guessing from stories, or looking at the first letter to understand new words. However, 83% stated that they break the unfamiliar word into smaller parts for easier reading and understanding, while 42% noted that once they encounter unfamiliar words, they skip them. This concurs with Adewale (2025) findings, which stated that the use of effective and efficient phonics-based

instructional strategies improves reading performance for pupils with learning difficulties.

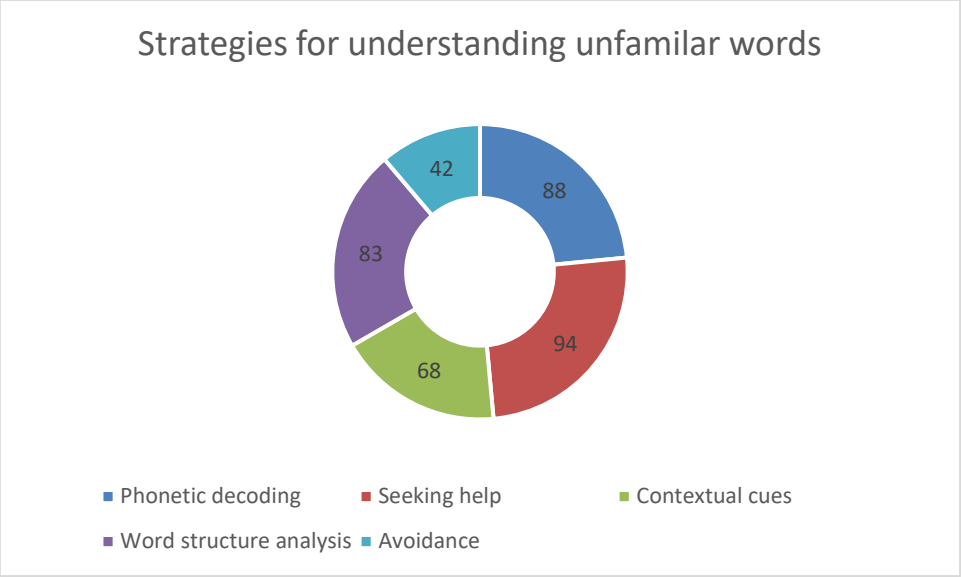

Figure 7: Strategies for understanding unfamiliar words

4.4.2.2 Post-assessment results based on a comprehension test

Following the grouping of learners into two groups, fifty were taught using phonics-based instruction while the other fifty were taught using traditional methods. A post-assessment test was administered on both sets using standardized comprehension, and the results are as indicated in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of mean difference of learners' performance taught using phonics-based instruction versus traditional methods at Yepa Primary School.

	Comprehension Reading Skills Results for Learners Taught Using Phonics-Based Instruction from Both Schools	Comprehension Reading Skills Results for Learners Taught Using Traditional Methods from Both Schools
Learners' scores	78, 82, 75, 70, 85, 79, 73, 80, 76, 71, 88, 72, 81, 74, 83, 77, 86, 69, 90, 75, 79, 81, 70, 74, 82, 77, 68, 84, 73, 80, 75, 87, 71, 76, 82, 79, 70, 85, 73, 78, 67, 80, 74, 83, 76, 72, 89, 71, 77, 81	65, 60, 68, 55, 70, 62, 67, 58, 63, 66, 59, 71, 64, 57, 69, 61, 72, 56, 65, 60, 68, 55, 70, 62, 67, 58, 63, 66, 59, 71, 64, 57, 69, 61, 72, 56, 65, 60, 68, 55, 70, 62, 67, 58, 63, 66, 59, 71, 64, 57
Sum	3878	3171
Mean	77.56	63.42
Variance	33.72	26.29
Standard Deviation	5.81	5.13

4.4.3 Independent Sample T-test

The independent sample t-test results offer valuable insights into the potential effect of phonics-based instruction on early-grade learners' reading skills in this study, with a focus on the statistical significance indicated by the p-values. Notably, learners taught using phonics-based instruction show a significant difference, with a p-value of 0.001 and a calculated t-statistic of 12.68, which is greater than the critical t-value of 1.66. This finding underscores the influence of phonics-based instruction on improving the reading skills of early grade learners and highlights the importance of adopting this teaching method in all primary schools in Malawi. These findings are supported by the research done by Jamaludin et.al. (2015), which indicated that the performance of students in the experimental group in decoding was significantly higher in the post-test than the control group. Likewise, in comprehension, the experimental group achieved significantly higher scores in the post test, justifying that synthetic phonics could be effective in developing early reading skills for struggling readers.

Hypothesis Test on Phonics-Based Instruction

Quantitative analysis of standardized test scores in literacy has revealed notable differences between learners taught using phonics-based instruction settings with those who have been taught by using the traditional method. Considering the combined results of fifty grade 2 learners from both schools

taught using phonics-based instruction and that of fifty grade 2 learners taught using traditional methods at both schools, it shows that there is statistically significant difference in reading skills assessment results which are attributed to improvement in word recognition, comprehension, interpretation, and guessing compared to those taught using the traditional method. The learners who received phonics-based instruction scored significantly higher (mean = 77.56) than those who received traditional methods (mean = 63.42).

4.5 Challenges Faced in Implementation

Despite the perceived benefits, teachers identified several consistent challenges in implementing phonics-based instruction.

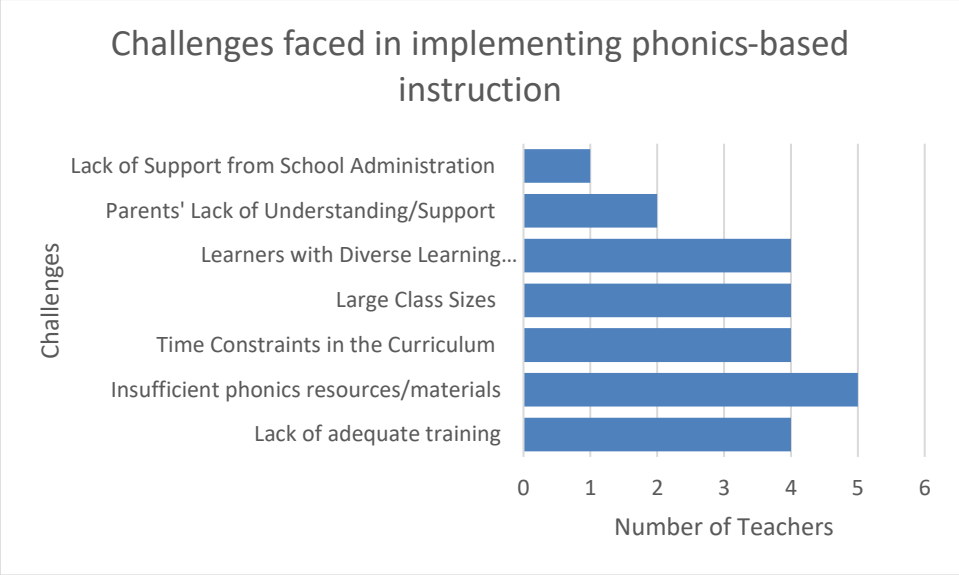

Figure 8: Challenges faced in phonics-based implementation

Figure 8 shows that the major challenge for teachers with limited or no prior phonics training is often addressed by some experienced teachers seeking improvement. This highlights a significant need for comprehensive, practical professional development. Additionally, 50% of teachers emphasized the need for more engaging, diverse, and readily available phonics materials, including decodable readers, games, and digital resources. While 40% indicated that curriculum demands and busy schedules limit the time available for effective phonics instruction, they also explained that large class sizes hinder the ability to provide individualized attention, which is vital for phonics mastery, especially for diverse learners. Moreover, they noted that implementing phonics-based instruction for learners with learning disabilities becomes challenging, requiring differentiated strategies within phonics. Furthermore, 20% of teachers pointed out that parents' unfamiliarity with phonics hampers home support, suggesting a need for community engagement and education, while 10% indicated that support from school administration is essential for prioritizing and allocating resources for phonics.

5.0. Conclusion

This research aimed to assess the impact of phonics-based instruction on the reading skills of early Grade 2 learners by employing a mixed-methods approach, incorporating qualitative data from teacher and learner responses and quantitative analysis through independent sample t-tests and hypothesis testing.

Findings across all data sources consistently demonstrate that phonics-based instruction significantly enhances early reading skills. Qualitative data from teacher responses highlighted clear improvements in students' decoding skills, phonemic awareness, and overall reading fluency. Teachers noted increased learner confidence in decoding unfamiliar words and a reduction in common reading errors. Similarly, learner responses reflected a greater sense of mastery and enjoyment, with many reporting that phonics instruction made reading easier and more accessible.

Quantitative analysis reinforced these findings. The independent sample t-test revealed a statistically significant improvement in reading performance among students in the experimental group (who received phonics-based instruction) compared to the control group (who received traditional instruction). The experimental group consistently outperformed the control group in key areas such as word recognition, phoneme segmentation, and reading comprehension. The results of the hypothesis test supported the rejection of the null hypothesis, further confirming the positive and measurable impact of phonics-based instruction on reading development.

In conclusion, phonics-based instruction proves to be a highly effective teaching strategy for improving early grade reading outcomes. The alignment of qualitative insights and quantitative data strongly supports its integration into early childhood education. These findings advocate for the broad adoption of systematic phonics approaches to lay a strong foundation for lifelong literacy development.

6.0. Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, which underscore the significant impact of phonics-based instruction on young learners' reading skills, the following recommendations are proposed:

6.1. For Curriculum Developers and Policymakers

- **Allocate Dedicated Time for Phonics Instruction:** Curriculum frameworks should include specific daily time blocks for phonics instruction, recognizing its foundational role in early literacy.
- **Develop High-Quality Instructional Materials:** Invest in the development and distribution of culturally relevant, engaging, and age-appropriate phonics resources—such as textbooks, decodable readers, and digital tools—to support effective classroom implementation.

6.2. For Educators and School Administrators

- **Provide Professional Development:** Implement ongoing training programs for early grade teachers, focusing on phonics teaching strategies, assessment tools, and methods for addressing diverse learning needs.
- **Ensure Consistent Implementation:** Encourage and monitor the systematic use of phonics instruction across all early grade classrooms, providing necessary support and materials.
- **Use Data-Driven Instruction:** Conduct regular phonics assessments to track learners' progress and inform targeted interventions for students who require additional support.

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