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Editor-in-Chief
SAJOLLCOS, HOD's Office,
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
Gombe State University, Gombe
sajollicos@gsu.edu.ng,
Cc: amgombe2@gsu.edu.ng

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**AN ASSESSMENT OF EARLY GRADE READING IN LOWER PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN GOMBE LGEA,
GOMBE STATE**

¹SULAIMAN, Jamila, ²DANGA, Luka Amos PhD, and ³IBRAHIM Adamu Mohammed

¹Department of Modern Languages,
School of Languages

Gombe State College of Education, Billiri,

²Department of Early Childhood Care and Education,
School of Early Childhood Care and Education,
Gombe State College of Education, Billiri, and

³Department of Mathematics and Computer Science,
School of Science Education,
Gombe State College of Education, Billiri

Abstract

This study examined the teaching methods used by teachers in lower primary schools of Gombe Local Education Authority in teaching Early Grade Reading. The study's main research questions were three. The ex-post factor research design was utilised. All teachers in lower basic schools (primary 1 to 3) in Gombe Local Education Authority constituted the study's population, while 305 primary 1 to 3 teachers (50 public and 255 private) from 61 schools who were chosen using the stratified sampling technique made up the sample. The data collection instrument was questionnaire. Utilising descriptive and inferential statistics, particularly the t-test, and the acquired data was analysed. Interestingly, the measurement of various teaching methods currently used by teachers in lower primary schools of Gombe LGEA revealed about eight of them. Correspondingly, this research confirms that there is significant difference between public and private schools in adopting EGR principles in teaching reading at early grade with a p-value of $0.03 < \alpha 0.05$. It was revealed that teachers in public schools are closer to adapting the EGR principles when compared to those in private schools. The researchers recommend that teachers should work with fidelity of implementation on the five components originally introduced under literature review which include phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension added to the 'plus two' components of concepts of print and writing.

Key words: Assessment, Early Grade Reading, Teaching Methods

Introduction

Teachers at various levels use a number of methods in teaching their students. There is neither a single method of teaching that is almost all that is to be learnt, hence the need to introduce it early. Early Grade Reading (EGR) is an attempt at providing basic, valid and reliable skills that will serve as a foundation for reading acquisition among children. This is premised on the fact that, the reading process though a complex activity is crucial for quality learning and education. Learning to read takes efforts and deliberate practice and that is why it must start in early childhood. EGR encourages early learning, use of mother tongue as a transitional language, having teachers that are skilled and passionate, availability of quality materials,

and strong parental and community support.

Introducing children to reading at an early age has a number of advantages which include enabling learners to acquire basic literacy skills early; aiding in the identification of children who may have reading difficulties in the early school years; and information for learning improvement in reading and learning is accessed early. However, upon all the importance attached to the EGR principles, not all teachers adopt it. Though, even without following the laid down rules, teachers may achieve their goal of teaching reading at early stage fairly well but

not fully. Perhaps that is why not all schools in Gombe Local Education Authority (LGEA) were enrolled into the list of beneficiaries of Strengthening Education in North-East Nigeria (SENSE) project. The SENSE project emphasizes on the EGR and has recorded a huge success. However, an independent assessment will reveal its effectiveness and advantage (if) over other methods.

Statement of the Problem

Effective teaching methods in the contemporary educational landscape are crucial for fostering foundational literacy skills among young learners. Early grade reading is particularly significant, as it sets the stage for future academic success and lifelong learning. However, in many regions, including Gombe LGEA in Gombe State, Nigeria, there are concerns about the efficacy of teaching methods employed in lower primary schools. Despite various initiatives aimed at improving education quality, a significant number of students in these early grades still struggle with basic reading skills.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of this research was to find out the methods used by teachers in lower primary schools of Gombe Local Education Authority in teaching Early Grade Reading. The specific objectives were to:

- i. Examine the various teaching methods employed by teachers of Nursery 1,2, Primary 1, 2, and 3 in teaching reading;
- ii. Ascertain whether the teaching methods employed are in line with EGR principles as contained in the USAID guidelines/Global Best Practice;
- iii. Compare between public and private schools as to find out which of them is closer to adopting/adapting the EGR principles.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following questions:

1. What are the various teaching methods currently used by teachers in lower basic primary schools in Gombe LGEA?
2. Are the teaching methods employed in line with EGR principles as contained in the USAID guidelines?
3. Which between the public and private schools is closer to adopting/adapting EGR principles?

Hypotheses

1. There is no significant difference between public and private schools in adopting EGR principles in teaching reading at early grade.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it addresses the foundational aspect of education of EGR in lower primary schools within Gombe LGEA, Gombe State. By evaluating the effectiveness of current teaching methods, the research aims to identify successful strategies and areas needing improvement. The findings will provide empirical data to inform educators, policymakers, and stakeholders, enabling them to implement targeted interventions to enhance reading skills among young learners. Improving early grade reading is crucial for students' academic success and long-term educational outcomes, contributing to the overall development and progress of the region

Literature Review

Studies have shown that literacy skills in alphabetic languages develop along predictable patterns (Goikoetxea, 2005, Hachen, 2002). Some people acquire these skills independently, while others require intense interventions. Yet majority of people learn them with instruction. Vellutino et al., (1996), defines effective reading instructions as that which is provided at a reader's developmental level (not too difficult not too easy); is informed and adjusted based on informal classroom-based assessments; includes frequent opportunities to read and write a variety of text types both new to the

child and self-selected.

According to the Northern Education Initiative Plus programme of the United States Agency for International Development (2018), literacy skills that can contribute to reading achievement fall under the following five major domains: phonological awareness, concept of print, phonics, reading fluency, and vocabulary. Within these domains are early skills known to be consistently strong predictors to later reading achievement. Many of these skills are measured in EGRA.

Phonological Awareness:

This is a broad skill that includes hearing, identifying and manipulating words, syllables, and smaller parts of words through word play, rhyming games, and sound/picture matching activities. Before children learn to read print, they need to become aware that spoken language is broken into words, syllables, and sounds. Phonemic awareness is a very specific kind of phonological awareness, which refers to the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate individual phonemes (sounds) in spoken words. Instruction in phonological awareness does not involve print, so it can be said that phonological awareness activities can be taught in the dark. Phonological awareness can also be seen as a collection of skills that contribute to early reading. At the most basic level, it is defined as sensitivity to language at the phonological level. Badian, (2001), Denton et al., (2000), McBride-Chang and Kail, (2002), Muter et al., (2004), Wang et al., (2006) support its role in predicting early reading achievement in both cloudy and transparent languages.

Researchers Stahl and Murray (1994) describe the development of phonological skills by outlining the varying levels of complexity associated with different tasks. According to their findings, phonological awareness tasks can be organised from easier to more difficult. The most basic level involves knowledge of rhymes, which is the ability to recognize and produce words that

sound alike. Following this, oddity tasks, which require sensitivity to similarities and differences between words, represent a slightly more complex skill. As the tasks increase in difficulty, children engage in blending and syllable splitting, where they combine individual sounds to form words or break words down into their syllable components. Segmentation, which involves identifying and separating the individual phonemes that make up a word, is a more advanced task. Finally, the most challenging tasks involve manipulation, which includes deleting or reordering phonemes within words. These levels of complexity highlight the progressive nature of phonological skill development and the increasing cognitive demands each task places on learners.

In the same way that researchers identify a typical trajectory for phonological awareness skills, other researchers (Lomax and McGee, 1987) examine the development of print knowledge, the domain that describes an understanding about orthographic system and written language. Through investigations, print knowledge is understood to advance in a hierarchical, yet recursive way. In other words, each print knowledge component is a prerequisite of another component, but skills are not necessarily mastered before new learning commences.

Concept of Prints:

Young children see print all around them – in books, magazines, newspapers, on billboards, and water bottles, and even on their parents' phones. This is the initial learning about print. Since young children do not automatically understand that print carries meaning and is used to communicate, teachers and parents need to help young children recognize the ways in which print works for the purpose of reading and how books 'work'. Within the **print knowledge** are multiple skills. Concept of prints include a variety of understandings about print, including book orientation (e.g. the cover, where to start reading), directionality (e.g.

left to right; top to bottom), and a purpose for reading (e.g. to inform; to entertain). An understanding of the distinctive features and names of individual alphabet letters also appears under the print knowledge. Besides letter recognition, alphabet knowledge encompasses knowledge of letter names and their corresponding sounds. Letter knowledge has been consistently shown to be a strong predictor of early reading.

Phonics:

This is a method of teaching pupils to match letters in the alphabet to the sounds they hear in a language (building on their phonological awareness skills). In order to learn how to read words, pupils must learn that letters represent sounds. Phonics instruction begins with correlating the letter names and letter sounds, and then teaching pupils to decode (blend sounds to read words) and encode (write the letters that represent each sound) based on the sounds each letter represents. This is an understanding about words in their written form. This is the third domain relevant to early reading acquisition. It includes the knowledge that certain sequences of letters compose words that represent spoken sounds. Applying this knowledge helps to identify familiar and decode unfamiliar words in isolation and in connected texts.

There are three important facts about how children learn to read. First, children begin to learn how to read very early in life, starting from infancy (Snow et al., 1998). Even though young children may not be able to read print and may not be considered “ready” to learn how to read, they are still developing skills that will prepare them to read in the future. These are called emergent literacy skills, formally defined as the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that are developed before conventional forms of reading (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Emergent literacy skills include an interest in reading, learning about print concepts such as reading text from left to right, top to bottom, and acquiring book-

handling skills (Tompkins, 2011). A second fact about how children learn to read is that there are many different skills working together to read a text. Many teachers believe that learning to read consists of only one basic skill: the ability to pronounce words in a text (Korb, 2010). The third fact about learning to read is that it does not happen naturally, but requires high quality, focused instruction (Dodge Heroman, Colker, & Bickart, 2010). Teachers often times think that children learn to read simply by attending school. However, this is not true as evidenced by many children who have completed primary school but still cannot read a simple text (Adekola, 2007).

In reality, strong readers are developed through good instruction by teachers on the specific skills that are necessary for reading (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). A considerable amount of planning and action by the teacher is needed to develop fluent readers (Roskos et al., 2009). Learning to read is a complicated task that requires integration of many skills. “Language rich” environment is as well needed to help the children develop each of these skills.

The Northern Education Initiative Plus programme of the United States Agency for International Development (2018), look at **Reading Fluency** as the ability to read words first, and then later on connected text, with speed, accuracy, expression, and comprehension. When pupils memorize the sounds that the letters represent and spend time practicing decoding, they eventually begin to build reading fluency. In order to understand what they read, pupils must be able to read fluently and whether aloud or silently. Pupils who are not fluent readers spend their time trying to read the words and are unable to grasp the meaning of the text. Pre-teaching key vocabulary words helps build fluency because the pupil already knows how to read the word and what it means.

Vocabulary:

Vocabulary plays a crucial role in learning to read, serving as the foundation upon which reading comprehension is built. When young children begin to read, they rely heavily on their oral vocabulary—the words they encounter and use daily in speaking and listening. This oral vocabulary helps them make sense of the texts they encounter. As from beginning readers, children draw on the words they have heard in their everyday conversations to decode and comprehend written texts. This connection between spoken language and reading is essential, as it allows children to use their existing knowledge of words to interpret new information.

Over time, as children are exposed to more written texts, they begin to develop a reading vocabulary. This reading vocabulary consists of words that they recognize and understand in print. It grows as children encounter new words in their reading materials and as they learn to decode and comprehend these words. The expansion of reading vocabulary is a continuous process, influenced by the frequency and variety of reading experiences a child has. The more children read, the more words they are exposed to, and the more their vocabulary grows.

Additionally, vocabulary development is not only about recognizing words but also understanding their meanings and how they are used in different contexts. This deeper understanding of vocabulary enhances reading comprehension, as children can better grasp the nuances and subtleties of the texts they read. Therefore, fostering a rich and diverse vocabulary from an early age is critical in supporting children's overall reading development and helping them become proficient and confident readers. Additionally, there are two last skills of writing and comprehension.

Writing:

The ability to put ideas into written form plays a significant role in the process of learning to read, as reading and writing are deeply interrelated processes. Writing requires children to think about how words are structured and how sentences are formed, which in turn reinforces their understanding of language and its conventions. When learners receive explicit writing instruction, it not only improves their ability to express themselves but also enhances their reading fluency and comprehension. Research indicates that the act of writing helps solidify the relationship between letters and sounds, words and meanings, and the overall structure of language, thereby supporting the development of reading skills. Thus, integrating writing activities into early literacy education can lead to more robust reading abilities.

Comprehension:

This is the ability to read a text and understand its meaning. It is a complex skill that is dependent upon the other six components. Comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading; as without comprehension, the act of reading is incomplete. To truly comprehend a text, a reader must be able to decode the words accurately, understand the vocabulary, read fluently, and use background knowledge and contextual clues to derive meaning. All of these components work together to enable a reader to grasp the main ideas, infer meanings, and make connections within and beyond the text. Therefore, fostering strong comprehension skills is essential, as it ensures that reading is a meaningful and productive activity.

The Concept of Teaching Methods

The term teaching method refers to the general principles, pedagogy and management strategies used for classroom instruction. One's choice of teaching methods depends on what fits one's educational philosophy, classroom demographics, subject

area(s), and school mission statement.

Teaching theories can be organized into four categories based on two major parameters: a teacher-centred versus a student-centred approach, and high-tech material use versus low-tech material use.

If teacher-centred is taken to its most extreme interpretation - the teachers are the main authoritative figures; Students are viewed as empty vessels who passively receive knowledge from their teachers through lectures and direct instruction, with an end goal of positive results from testing and assessment. In this style, teaching and assessment are viewed as two separate entities; student learning is measured through objectively scored tests and assessments.

While the teachers are still authoritative figures in student-centred teaching model, they and their students play an equally active role in the learning process. The teacher's primary role is to coach and facilitate students' learning and overall comprehension of material, and to measure student learning through both formal and informal forms of assessment, like group projects, student portfolios, and class participation. In this type of class, teaching and assessment are connected because student learning is continuously measured during teacher instruction. (teach.com/what do teachers do? Teachers Know/Teaching Methods. Last updated 2020)

Best Practices for Early Grade Reading in Multilingual Contexts

With mother tongue or national language reading instruction at the forefront of funders' goals (such as USAID), practitioners and governments alike are striving to create curriculum, materials and learning environments that are responsive and sensitive to the complex multilingual we serve.

A multitude of organisations have made valiant efforts in the past decades to learn from their contexts and many have been quite successful. Below is a curation of eight best practices identified by FHI 360 and derived from experts and experiences worldwide. FHI 360 strives to apply these practices in all of its literacy work in DR Congo ACCELERE!, Ghana Learning, Nigeria RANA, and Haiti Ann-ALE.

The Global Reading Method includes the presentation of the whole word to children and it relies on their visual perception and the ability to remember visual information. Thus, the child does not read the word letter by letter, but remembers it as a picture, which consists of letters. However, unlike the ordinary picture which depicts a particular object, it denotes a generalized idea about the object or event i.e. has certain meaning (ekidz.eu/the-global-reading-method).

Research Methodology

The design for this study is ex-post factor in which investigation starts after the fact has occurred without interference from the researcher (Salkind, 2010). The population of the study comprises all 306 Gombe Local Education Authority lower basic, both (48) public and (258) private schools (ECCE & Primary 1 to 3), while the sample was made up of 305 primary 1 to 3 teachers (50 public and 255 private) from 61 schools chosen through the stratified sampling technique. The stratified random sampling technique suggests that a population be divided into two or more strata (groups). Lunch (2012) state that, "with the stratified random sample, there is an equal chance (probability) of selecting each unit from within a particular stratum (group)". The choice of the technique is because there are different kinds of schools in Gombe LGEA. The sample size was obtained using Cochran's formula as stated by Anika (2019). Data collection instrument is questionnaire, and both descriptive (frequency counts, percentages, means and standard deviation) and

inferential statistics, particularly the t-test, are used to analyse the data collected.

Research Questions

RQ 1: What are the various teaching methods currently used by teachers in lower basic primary schools in Gombe LGEA?

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Various Teaching Methods used by Teachers in Lower Basic

S/N	Methods	Yes	%	No	%
1	Scaffolding	160	52	129	42
2	Teacher centred	122	40	183	60
3	Learner centred	175	57	130	47
4	Phonics based	97	32	208	68
5	Whole Language Approach	31	10	274	90
6	Sight Word Instruction	15	5	290	95
7	Decoding Strategies	47	15	258	85
8	Combination of Methods	94	31	211	69

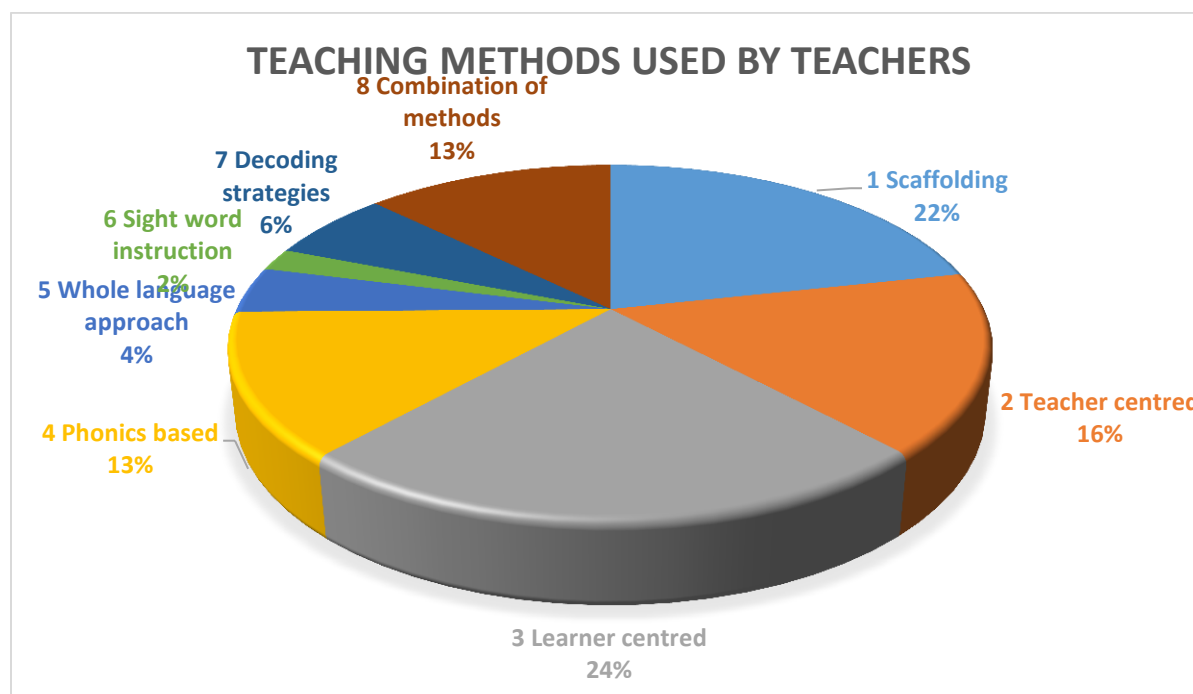


Figure 1: Pie Chart of Various Teaching Methods Used by Teachers

From the chart above, it can be seen that by far, the learner centred method leads all the other methods but specifically whole language approach, sight word instruction, and decoding strategies.

Looking at the first research question which intends to find out the various teaching methods used by teachers at the lower basic

education level in Gombe LGEA, it is apparent from the above display of percentages as shown on the chart that 52 % of the teachers use scaffolding method, 40 % use teacher-centred method, 57 % use learner centred method, 32 % use phonics-based instruction, 10 % use whole language approach, 5 % use sight word instruction, 15 % use decoding

strategies, while 31 % use a combination of methods.

RQ2: Are the teaching methods employed are in line with EGR principles as contained in the USAID guidelines?

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Various Teaching Methods Used vis-à-vis the EGR Principles

S/N	Activities	Yes	%	No	%
Interactive Activities					
1	Group Discussion	91	30	214	70
2	Read Aloud	147	48	158	52
3	Shared Reading	37	12	268	88
4	Independent Reading	12	4	293	96
Explicit Instruction					
5	Predicting	84	28	221	72
6	Summarizing	119	39	186	61
7	Making connections	42	14	263	86
Mean Total		76	25	229	75

The second question seeks to find out whether the various teaching methods used by teachers at the lower basic education level in Gombe metropolis are in line with the EGR principles. The responses on Table 2 indicate that 76 teachers representing 25 % use

various methods that are in line with EGR principles, while 229 teachers representing 75 % do not.

RQ3: Which among the public and private schools is closer to adopting/adapting EGR principles?

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Various Teaching Methods Used vis-à-vis the EGR Principles by Type of School

S/N	Group	EGR Principles			
		Yes	%	No	%
1	Public Schools	13	28	37	73
2	Private Schools	63	25	192	75

The third question seeks to find out which between public and private school teachers at the lower basic education level in Gombe metropolis are closer in adopting/ adapting EGR principles. The responses on Table 3 indicate that the percentage of teachers who adopt and adapt various teaching methods in line with EGR principles is 28 % for public

school teachers and 25% for private school teachers.

Hypotheses

H01: There is no significant difference between public and private schools in adopting EGR principles in teaching reading at the early grade.

Table 4: Result of t-test between Public and Private Schools in Adopting EGR Principles in Teaching Reading at the Early Grade

Group	N	\bar{x}	SD	T	df	p-value	Decision
Public Schools	50	2.23	0.67	2.78	298	0.03	Significant
Private Schools	250	1.98	0.72				

To test for significant difference between public and private schools in adopting EGR

principles in teaching reading at early grade, a t-test statistic was computed. From the

result on Table 4, the computed p-value is 0.03. In addition, the mean for public school is 2.23, while that of private is 1.98. This provides sufficient evidence against the null hypothesis, hence it is rejected. Therefore, this study establishes that there is significant difference between public and private schools in adopting the EGR principles in teaching reading at the early grade.

Findings

The findings of the study are summarised below:

- i. The measurement of various teaching methods currently used by teachers in lower primary schools of Gombe LGEA revealed about eight of them. This is found in the responses which show that 52 % of teachers practice scaffolding method, 40 % use teacher-centred method, 57 % use learner centred method, phonics-based instruction is used by 32%, 10 % the whole language approach, sight word instruction is used by 5%, 15 % of the teachers use decoding strategies, while 31 % use a combination of methods during teaching reading at the early grade.
- ii. The research found out that 76 (25%) teachers use various methods that are in line with EGR principles, while 229 teachers representing 75 % do not.
- iii. Finally, it was revealed that teachers in public schools are closer to adapting the EGR principles when compared with their counterparts in private schools. Consequently, this research work unambiguously confirms that there is significant difference between public and private schools in adapting EGR principles in teaching reading at the early grade.

Conclusion

This work has demonstrated the significance of Early Grade Reading by revealing about eight methods that are

captured in its principles. These findings provide valuable insights into the teaching of EGR at the lower level of primary school and offer suggestions for teachers, administrators, proprietors, and curriculum developers. Moving forward, further exploration into Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) could enhance our understanding of the rudiments of EGR and inform future interventions or policies.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are drawn from the study:

1. To keep pace with the global best practice and to step effectively into the next generation of fluent young readers, teachers are expected to work with fidelity of implementation on the five components originally introduced under literature review which include phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension added to the 'plus two' components of concepts of print and writing. Doing this, tremendously assist in enhancing pupils' learning outcome and the success of any teacher at the lower basic level.
2. Teachers should implement systematic phonics instruction to teach children how to decode words by associating letters with their corresponding sounds.
3. Also, there should be provision of scaffolded support by gradually releasing responsibility to students as they become more proficient readers. Starting with guided reading activities and gradually transiting to independent reading tasks can actively engage the learner and make them participatory.
4. Utilise multisensory approaches-engage students in multisensory activities that appeal to different learning styles. This could involve using manipulative, incorporating

music and movement into lessons, and providing hands-on experiences with reading materials.

5. Foster vocabulary development: integrate vocabulary instruction into reading lessons to enhance students' comprehension skills. Teach vocabulary words in context, provide opportunities for meaningful practice, and encourage students to use new words in their own writing and discussions.
6. Both in the classroom and at home, reading aloud helps develop fluency, comprehension, and love for reading. Hence, teachers should provide opportunities for students to read aloud to peers, teachers, and family members. Encourage parents to read with their children at home, involve community volunteers as reading buddies or mentors, and organise literacy events and activities in the community.
7. Education Secretaries, Head-Teachers, and Class Teachers should promote Literacy-Rich Environment. This can be done both inside and outside the classroom. It includes having a variety of age-appropriate books available, displaying print-rich materials on walls, and integrating literacy into different subject areas.
8. Proprietors should provide ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers to enhance their knowledge and skills in teaching EGR. They should also organise workshops, coaching, and collaborative learning experiences focused on evidence-based practices and effective instructional strategies.

These recommendations are aimed at creating a supportive learning environment that fosters EGR skills and sets students on the path of becoming proficient readers. From the researchers' point of view, EGR learning, through the new combinations of

instructional delivery as stated in this work yielded a successful outcome in teaching reading at the early grade. This is because teaching is no longer bound to the tradition of one-way linear method.

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