

Early Reading Difficulties among Qillisoo Primary School Children in Ethiopia: Reflections from Teachers, Children, and Parents

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Abstract

This study aimed to assess early reading difficulties among Qillisoo primary school children in Chiro Town, Oromia, Ethiopia: reflections from subject teachers, children, and parents. An explanatory mixed research design was used in the study. Using stratified and simple random techniques, the study included 108 children, 101 parents, and three English teachers. Questionnaires, classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis were used to collect the data. As a result, questionnaires were distributed to both parents and children. During a reading lesson, subject teachers were interviewed using semi-structured interview questions, and classroom observation was used to investigate the classroom setting. A document review for attendance and timetable was also performed to assess children who were late or absent from class. The findings of the study revealed that a variety of challenges hampered children's reading ability, including a lack of textbooks and learning facilities (limited chairs and desks, class size, fixed desks), a lack of preschool exposure, a lack of parent awareness about the importance of reading, children's workload at home, textbook variation (coloured vs. no coloured), and parent's residential areas and occupation status. Parents who are educated report using a variety of methods to assist their children, including discussing their children's reading abilities with both their children and their teachers, assessing their children's reading abilities and assisting them in practicing reading, purchasing a variety of supplementary books, designing home reading activities, and checking their children's exercise books to see what they have learned. Based on the findings of this study, parents and schools should make reading materials available to children, and children should be encouraged to develop their ways of practicing reading English on their own.

Keywords: assessment, children related, EFL, parents related, factors, reading difficulties

1. Introduction

Researchers agreed that reading is an important learning tool (Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002; Strom & Viesca, 2021). It is both an information source and a tool for improving one's language skills. Reading can help children achieve academic success and open doors to social, economic, and civic life (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Renandya, 2007; Clark & Akerman, 2006; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Renandya, 2007). Reading English is widely recognized as an important skill at the secondary and tertiary levels in countries where English is taught as a foreign language, such as Ethiopia, where English is used as a medium of instruction. Because so many resources and references are published in English, good reading skills and habits are essential (Mekonnen, 2014; Tulu, 2013). According to Iftanti (2015), Habits in English are established if they live in a good literacy environment with their parents reading aloud to them, have the frequent reading motivation and good reading habits in their home language, and have access to literary works.

Numerous research on EFL children's reading has been undertaken. According to Iftanti (2015), many children are likely to be reluctant EFL readers due to reading difficulties. According to (Kusumarasyati, 2007), the causes for children's lack of interest in reading include their poor background knowledge and inability to comprehend the text's contents. They primarily concentrated on studying reading in classroom settings to better understand the issues that arise in the teaching and learning of reading at the secondary and tertiary levels.

However, because early EFL reading is such an important skill, it makes sense to distinguish the parental and child responsibilities in improving children's EFL reading abilities. According to The World Bank Group (2019), all children should be able to read by the age of ten. Reading opens the door to learning as a child moves through school, and being unable to read closes that access.

As a result, mastery of the language's alphabet and the skills required for learning to read English in formal schooling are essential (Akubuilu et al., 2015; Nag, 2007; Tomas et al., 2021). When children succeed in reading, they acquire a desire to go to school and like reading outside of school in their spare time and personal and social adjustment. Reading assists a child in adjusting to their peers, gaining independence from parents and teachers, deciding on and preparing for a career, and fulfilling societal responsibilities (Deribe, 2019; Smith et al., 2012). Furthermore, according to a study by Gove and Cvelich (2011), failure in entire education systems in less developed countries is related to a lack of attention paid to reading skills in primary school. They claim that teaching children reading skills in the early grades is the best time.

According to The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (1994), English should be taught as a subject beginning in grade one and as the medium of instruction for secondary and higher education. Different regions have implemented different policies in their educational systems to achieve the Ministry of Education's (MoE) goal: some regions have made English a medium of instruction from grade seven, while others have made it a medium of instruction from grade eight, and yet others have made it a medium of instruction from grade nine (Amlaku, 2010). English is taught as a subject in grades 1 through 8 in Oromia National Regional State. Nonetheless, other studies suggest that children's English language reading challenges persist in elementary school. For example, the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA), which included students from all nine regions and two city administrations, evaluated children who had finished grades 2, 3, and 4 and showed shockingly weak reading ability or scored below the MoE's standards (Ethiopia Early Grade Reading Assessment, 2010). The data demonstrated that as children go through the grade levels, their mean percentage score rises, but their English language proficiency falls short of what is expected of them according to the MLCs for each grade level (MoE, 2014). Similarly, an American Institute of research study suggests that Ethiopian children's English language competency is very low (Ministry of Education, 2018).

Reading issues in primary schools have been observed by many researchers. Furnes and Samuelsson (2011) researched reading and spelling problems. Snowling et al. (2003) discussed letter knowledge and phonological awareness impairments. In addition, Wolf and Bowers (1999) noted a lack of one-to-one correspondence of letter-sound reading habits, word recognition errors (Meredith, 2016), and comprehension (Miller & Mercer, 1997) common reading problems (Smith et al., 2012); parents' follow-up (Lynch, 2015; Lynch, 2007) are some of the problems related to reading.

Furthermore, Deribe (2019) argued that teaching approach, parental involvement in child education, reading material availability, reading friendly environment, early care and self-contained found to be determinant parents and children related factors influencing reading skill development. Woldehanna and Gebremedhin (2016) discovered a statistically significant link between reading outcomes and the caregiver's education, urban or rural area, region, school type, and wealth in a study. As a result, students from rural areas, government schools, and low-income families were found to have low reading proficiency.

Despite the fact that numerous studies have focused on children's EFL reading difficulties in primary schools around the world, the issues remain significant and dynamic. The involvement of parents and children outside of the classroom is largely ignored in elementary school children's EFL reading. Furthermore, none of the aforementioned investigations on any conceivable concern has been conducted in Oromia Region West Hararge, Chiro Town Qillisoo Primary School. As a result, to fill gaps left by previous research, the current study focuses on determining what parental and child-related factors contribute to EFL children's reading difficulties in English in grades 2-4 and increasing interest in literacy research in literacy research Ethiopia. This study was designed to answer the following questions: (1) What are the major impediments to children's reading learning? (2) To what extent do parents encourage their children to read in English? (3) What strategies do teachers and parents use to help children improve their EFL reading skills?

2. Method and Materials

2.1 Participants

Qillisoo Primary School, which has a total population of 360 children, was divided into three two-four classes, each with 108 students (188 boys and 172 girls). Using stratified and simple random selection techniques, the researchers selected a sample of children from each grade level in their section. To make the study more manageable, the sample size was reduced to 30% of the target population (Cohen et al., 2011). According to

Creswell (2018), a sample is a subset of the target population that the researcher investigates to draw broad generalisations about the complete population. Using the lottery technique, 56 boys and 52 girls were selected from this population. The chosen children's parents were purposely included in the study.

2.2 Design

A mixed explanatory sequential research design was used in this study, in which both parents (n=101) and children (n=108) completed surveys, and three English teachers who taught these grades participated in a face-to-face interview. After consenting to the study, participants were given detailed information about the study and its objective and the fact that it was a voluntary study. In addition, they were informed that the information they provided through the questionnaire and interview would be kept confidential and used solely for the purpose of this study. Those teachers (n=3) who had reported teaching grades 2-4 that year were invited to participate in a thirty-minute face-to-face interview. The purpose of the interviews with teachers was to collect detailed and underlying information on their collaboration with parents to help children develop their reading skills and explore more about the classroom situation.

2.3 Instruments

Questionnaires, classroom observations, and interview questions were employed to collect the necessary data. During an English reading lesson, the researchers utilised a checklist to observe the situations in the classroom. An observation checklist was used in the classroom for three consecutive sessions in each section while teaching and learning were taking place. During the observation, the researchers concentrated on three aspects: the interaction between teachers and children, the interaction between children, and the interaction between children and materials. In consideration of these factors, the researcher has developed a checklist. For parents, open-ended and closed-ended questionnaires were used. They were divided into three sections. These were the profile of respondents, questions on children's reading challenges, and possible solutions for children's English reading issues. The surveys were written in English and then translated into Oromo Language to avoid any potential bias. As the children were young and needed assistance providing information for the study, the researchers provided extensive support through school principals while they completed the questionnaire. Finally, the data was analysed with IBM SPSS 24 and presented in frequency, percentage, and standard deviation using a table and figure before being interpreted.

2.4 Ethical Approval

The study's ethical approval was obtained from the West Hararge Zone Education Office. Participants were recruited in consultation with school principals and learning coordinators as part of approval conditions. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and how to complete the questionnaires. Participants were reassured of confidentiality and anonymity, and interview participants were given pseudonyms.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 The Comparison of Children's Age and Their Grade Levels

Table 1. Age and grade levels of the children

Age interval	Age of grade 2 Children		Age of grade 3 Children		Age of grade 4 Children	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
8-9 years old	4	10.8	1	2.7	0	0
9-10 years old	20	54.1	8	21.6	4	10.8
11-12 years old	6	16.2	22	59.5	24	64.9
Above 12 years	4	10.8	6	16.2	9	24.3
Total	34	91.9	37	100.0	37	100.0

Table 1 indicates the age of the children who responded and their grade levels; 30 (81.1%) were in grade 2, 28 (75.5%) in grade 3, and 33 (89.2%) were in grade 4. That is, they were enrolled in a lower-level class. Guy et al. (1994) noted that language patterns are thoroughly established by the time a child is six years old. This demonstrates that when children's age and grade level are not taken into account, they encounter reading challenges in English classes. As a result, they will seek support from either teachers or their parents in order to enhance their English reading skills. The results of the teacher interview also confirmed the quantitative results. For example, one of the teachers stated that the students might miss school because: *...many of the children were*

from rural areas. This causes different reasons. If they are too young, they could not cope up with the challenges they might face on the way to school as it is far away from our living area. Second, at that age, the children could not ask their parents to send them to school, and the parents did not have awareness to send their children to school early as well (ET4).

Another teacher (AL3) went to say, "... according to this area's culture, the children should serve the parents in looking after goats for some years before they join the school." Moreover, another teacher (MO2) replied, "...parents said to me that children should look after their siblings and take food for shopkeeper before they join the school as they learn to take responsibility in the future..."

3.2 Children's Early Stage of Learning

Table 2. Children attended KG or not

Item		Frequency	Percent
Did you attend preschool (KG) class?	Yes	32	29.6
	No	76	70.4
	Total	108	100.0

Note: KG=Kindergarten

The majority of children were not enrolled in preschool when they should have been, as shown in Table 2. This demonstrates that children begin learning in grade one with no prior knowledge of schooling as the majority of them had no preschool experience. In terms of both L1 and L2 acquisition (Medoukali, 2015) argued that there is a key period during which particular abilities must be acquired or mastered. According to Wiley (2003), their language acquisition abilities decrease as people get older. In addition, Spache (1965) added reading readiness is the earliest stage that comprises the skills that young children typically learn before they may benefit from regular reading instruction.

Furthermore, Pobi (2016) noted that a good reading habit improves academic performance and educational accomplishment. As a result, it is possible to infer that the majority of the children who attended QPS were poor readers of English because they did not understand how to read letters and words at an early age (KG). As a result, children have got difficulty in reading English. Children also mentioned a variety of reasons why they were unable to begin learning at an early age, including a lack of pre-primary schools in their area, their parents' lack of awareness about learning at that age, their parents' unwillingness to send them because they were assisting parents in caring for siblings, and inadequate funding.

3.3 Student Textbook Distribution

Table 3. Children get enough English textbooks or not

Item	Response	Frequency	Percent
Access to individual English textbooks	Yes	74	68.5
	No	34	31.5
	Total	108	100.0

Table 3 shows that 74 (69 percent) of the 108 children replied yes, and 34 (31 percent) said no with regard to having textbooks from school. From the finding of the study, almost one-fourth of the children did not receive an English textbook individually. During classroom observation, however, it was noticed that the quality of the student textbooks was not similar. Some were multicoloured, while others were copies of the original textbook, but the book's instructions only apply to the coloured ones. Besides, the books were distributed in an uneven manner. This caused children to be perplexed when performing activities in textbooks, mainly when pictures supported the activities.

Teachers' interview data also indicated a shortage of textbooks as one of the challenges that affected children reading. For instance, one of the teachers (ET4) said, "...there is a *shortage of student textbook as we have a large class size. Therefore, we distribute 1:2 ratio or sometimes 1:≥3 ratio... that is, one book for two or more children...*" Another teacher (MO2) added that *...my class children did not get a single book. When I ask the school management to provide the books, they answered it is on being copied as they faced deficiency...*"

3.4 Classroom Environment

Table 4. Classroom facilities

Item	Response	Frequency	Percent
conducive classroom setting (flexible chairs, desk, desk, learning reading English?)	Yes	85	78.7
	No	23	21.3
	Total	108	100.0

As shown in Table 4, the majority of the children responded that their classroom environment was conducive. However, according to the researchers' observations, the classroom environments were not conducive to capturing children's attention to learning reading because the chairs were fixed and difficult for children to move. Teachers' interview also confirmed that the classroom setting was not conducive to learnin to read English. The interviewee expressed his view as:

...the classroom has no door and windows. As a result, children inside the classroom simply watching outside and others could directly watching the situations in the classroom. Some children simply run out and enter the classroom. Sunlight enters and wind blows the dust into the classroom and disturbs the children... (AL3)

Another teacher (MO2) explained in detail as: "...Some children are sitting on the floor. The wall and floor of classroom is dirty. The classroom has no enough light. Some tables are broken and children sit in crowded and on the floor..."

Children were learning in inconvenient environments, as evidenced by the teacher's interview extract. These findings are consistent with Fisher's (2008) research report, which stated that reading books should be done in a pleasant environment if we think rationally. When children are seated in an uncomfortable chair, desk, or on the floor, they are not expected to perform well in reading. Children who sit for six hours at an uncomfortable desk or on the floor are unable to encourage others to read books or participate in other activities, making learning to read difficult for them. Classrooms are essential for maintaining children' attention. The unfavourable school environment diverts the attention of both children and teachers. Therefore, those circumstances need due attention in order to stimulate children to learn to read through appropriate and engaging lessons. Classroom setup, airflow, lighting, class size, classroom decoration, table size, and class size all have an impact on children's reading and learning of English. The status children's English reading performance in the classroom was extremely concerning. Although the responses they provided for the study questionnaire were encouraging, the results on the ground were not. In addition, the researchers investigated the assistance that parents give to their children.

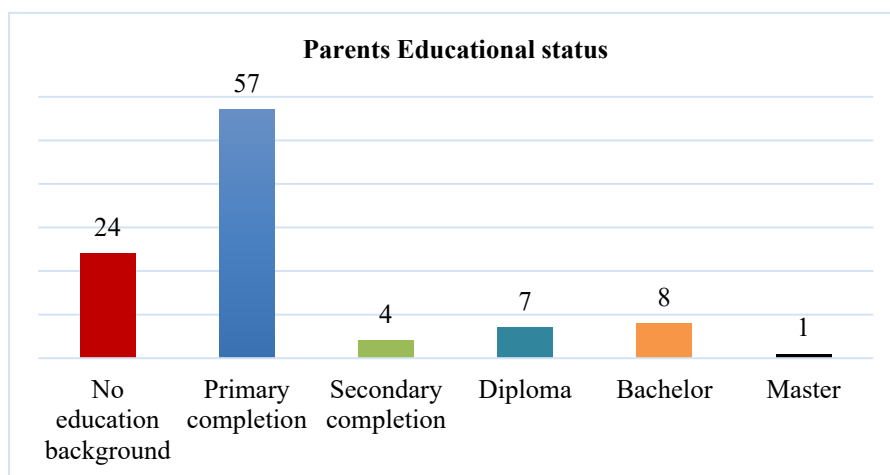


Figure 1. Children's parents educational level

Figure 1 shows that the majority of the children's parents are educated and could understand the importance of education. According to Egalite (2016), educated parents are more likely to read to their children than their less-educated counterparts. The parents' lack of education has an impact on their understanding of children's needs. As a result, children of educated parents usually perform better in school than children of uneducated parents since educated parents' children generally receive more support. Moreover, educated parents are more

likely to participate in their children's education at home. For example, they frequently assist their children with homework and participate in family reading sessions. From the findings of the study, it appears that most the parents assist their children in reading English at home, send them to school on time, and inquire about what they learned during the English period.

Table 5. Family supports

Item	Response	Frequency	Percent
From whom children get support when facing reading difficulties	fathers	43	43
	brothers	23	23
	sisters	17	17
	mothers	13	13
	others	4	4
	no one	1	1
	Total	101	100

Table 5 shows children predominantly got support from fathers, brothers and sisters when they have difficulty reading English. According to Pobi (2016), educated families encourage and support their children to read. Nonetheless, the outcome of classroom observation seems to contradict Pobi (2016) conclusion and assumption. When the researchers observed English lessons, the majority of the children were unable to read English and would not even attempt to read when the English teachers asked them to read. From the findings of this study, it could be concluded that if parents support their children in reading English at home, they would not have such difficulty in reading English that they might be encouraged to participate in the classroom.

Table 6. Children's residential area

Item	Response	Children	
		Frequency	Percent
Residence area	Rural	70	65
	Urban	38	35.
	Total	108	100.0

As shown in Table 6, out of 108 respondents, 70 (65%) said they lived in an urban and 38 (35%) said they lived in a rural area. The results show that the majority of the children that attended QPS originate from Chiro Town. The researcher interviewed teachers to find out if the location of a child's home had an impact on their ability to read English. Teacher one (MO2), for example, described as follows: "...This year I have more than 110 children in my class. Many of them are from rural. With this large number of children in the classroom, it is difficult to take attendance daily. It can take more than 15mins. In addition, as most of them come late most of the time, they miss 1st period of any subject..."

Another teacher (ET4) goes on explaining as:

...I cannot support my children this year for many reasons. Some of this are: 1) parents and school follow up is very low; 2) the children are coming from far away to school; 3) the children do not respect the rules and regulations of the school... And these caused children's misbehave in the classroom during teaching reading....

As stated by Balfanz and Byrnes (2012), lateness is caused by a variety of variables affecting both parents and children, including the home environment, transfer, temporary separation from the area, school distance, climatic change, job conditions, and so on. Children who have missed class have difficulty reading English. Those variables relating to parents and children are intertwined and have a detrimental impact on a child's ability to read. Therefore, in order to be good at reading English, children must attend school on a regular basis. During lesson observation, an average of ten children were late or absent from class.

Table 7. Parents' occupations

Response	Parents (What is your work?)	
	Frequency	Percent
Farmer	43	42.6
Merchant	24	23.8
Office worker	14	13.9
Teacher	8	7.9
Daily worker	6	5.9
Other	4	4
Religious leader	2	2
Total	101	100

The finding revealed that the majority of the children's parents are a farmer with 42.1%. As Duke (2000) pointed out, occupational parents whose work does not give time to their children have a negative effect on children's academic performance of learning. This implies that children whose parents do not have enough time because of workload could not assist their children well in better reading English. As Ogboru (2017) states, a parent's socioeconomic status goes a long way to moulding a child's personal, moral, academic, economic, social, and spiritual life of the child. This implies a child usually consciously or unconsciously learns from the parents by imitation or role-playing. Therefore, children who do not receive adequate support from their parents must be provided with remedial actions at school in order to excel at English reading abilities.

Parents mentioned the strategies they used to help their children in education by teaching their children how to learn to read, assessing understanding, helping them practice reading, buying different supplementary books for them to read, and re-explaining for children at home what they could not understand, checking their exercise book what they have learned. Moreover, they follow their children's attendance, testing them by giving different activities, teaching their children at home by posting English alphabet on the wall, following their schooling time daily, scheduling playing and reading time separately, paying school fees, and fulfilling education materials for their children.

Teachers also mentioned how they supported children in the classroom. One of the participants (participant-ET4) expressed his view as:

... I am working with parents to encourage the children to read English. I have a discussion with parents weekly about children's learning reading English issues. We discuss the reasons why children are absent from class; misbehave during learning reading lessons...

Another participant teacher (AL3) added:

I have a discussion program with parents at the end of the semester. The base agenda of our discussion is the result of the children's scores in English in general, not reading English in particular. She adds that I cannot assess the children's reading progress in English as I have an unmanageable number of children in my classroom...

The third teacher (MO2) answered in quite different from the others as:

I call parents when the children misbehave during the teaching-learning process or when the children are extremely absent from the class. I have no regular program with parents to discuss how to encourage the children to read English..."

From the teachers' interview, they were working on classroom discipline rather than identifying the level of children's reading progress and finding a solution with the parents. According to Tulu and Tolosa (2018), the assessment for learning is the more teacher-driven notion of evaluations and checks on how to improve student learning, engagement, and performance. This explains that the teachers should assess or identify the children's learning situations to adjust the teaching-learning behavior. This also helps the teachers with the points on which they will work with the parents. The researcher's classroom observation confirmed that both teachers and parents did not work on children to improve their reading in English. The children learning situations during the reading lesson were chatting to one another, refusing to read, doing other subject's activities (doing other subjects' homework), entering the classroom and going out without permission, moving from seat to seat, shouting at each

other, sleeping on tables, and beating one another...etc. Harji et al. (2016) explored parental involvement and found that parent-to-teacher interactions are an effective way to assist children in improving their reading skills. Flores (2018) added that teachers should encourage parents to participate in school activities.

4. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

The main objective of this study was to investigate the ways in which parental and child-related factors contribute to the reading difficulties experienced by children attending Qillisoo Primary School. From the findings of the study, children's reading difficulties were caused by a lack of reading materials at home, parents' lack of awareness to support children at home, socioeconomic status of parents, the nature of parents' livelihood, children's lack of interest to practise reading in out of the classroom, and uneven distribution of textbooks. Another factor contributing to children's reading difficulties was an uneven distribution of textbooks. The unequal distribution of textbooks was shown to be a contributing factor in the study's finding that this factor influenced children's lack of interest in reading practice outside of the classroom. Because of this, parents should make sure that their children have access to supplemental English books at home, and children should be encouraged to engage in independent reading opportunities in English both inside and outside of the classroom. In order to develop a conducive atmosphere for school performance, the school and the parents need to work closely. In addition, parents who have completed some level of education have a responsibility to offer their children continuous support in reading, listen to their children read at home, and monitor their performance in class.

While this study only involved a small number of teachers, schoolchildren, and parents, it suggests that more research is needed to examine the various barriers to reading across schools. In addition, similar studies on children's reading difficulties could be conducted in other regions of the country in the future to build a more coherent picture of the problems. Finally, since this study only looked at challenges to children's English reading, there is room for future research into issues such as parental involvement in their children's learning and strategies to improve children's English language skills.

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