

# Effect of Teachers' Competence in English Phonology on Reading Ability among Pre-School Children in Elgeyo Marakwet County, Kenya

<sup>1</sup>Muthoni Bilhah Kiptoo, <sup>2</sup>Prof. Khaemba Ongeti, <sup>3</sup>Prof. J.K. Too

<sup>1,2,3</sup> Moi University, Department of Curriculum, Instruction and Educational Media

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**Abstract:** Good performance in English opens doors to many lucrative careers locally and internationally. Teaching reading and success in reading ability is therefore important for young learners. However, the ability for teachers to teach reading is not well documented. Little research has been conducted on teachers' competence and attitudes towards reading ability among learners at preschool level. The objective of this study was to determine the effect of teachers' competence on reading ability among pre-school children in Elgeyo Marakwet County, Kenya. The theory of planned behaviour and education production function theory guided the study. The study employed the mixed methods approach. An explanatory research design was used. The target population was all the 1252 pre-school teachers in Elgeyo Marakwet County Kenya. Multistage random sampling technique was used to select the participating schools and individual teachers. A sample size of 294 schools was used. The instruments utilised were questionnaires, and observation schedules. Data was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The study findings revealed that there are more female pre-school teachers than male. It was also found that most of the pre-school teachers were inexperienced. Results indicated that the teachers' competency in English phonology was below average. The study results indicated that the pre-school children reading ability was poor. Teacher competency in English phonology was found to have a positive significant effect on reading ability of pre-school children ( $\beta = .307, p < 0.05$ ). The study concluded that pre-school teaching is a gendered profession characterized by low competency in English phonology. It was also concluded that teacher competency in English phonology has a bearing on the reading ability of pre-school children. The study therefore recommended that pre-school teachers be trained to improve their competency in English phonology as to improve the reading ability of pre-school children.

**Keywords:** English Phonology, Teacher Competency, Reading Ability.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Human language helps in communication because it has sounds which make sense to human beings and which are recognizable by all human beings who share a language. Language such as English has a specific and critical sound system or phonology which speakers use to communicate with one another (Bos *et al.*, 2001). Teachers of English, particularly early-childhood educators, have a responsibility to teach appropriate sound systems to learners under their charge. Phonology is even more critical in a second language learning situation. A good understanding of the speech sounds of English have an important bearing on the learning of reading of the language. To prepare teachers to perform their role better it is crucial that researchers and policy makers understand the competence levels of practicing teachers, the attitude of practicing teachers to phonology and how these variables interact to affect the reading output of early-

childhood pupils. Teacher competence or even awareness of phonology has not received much research attention. Research evidence in this area is required. Moats (1994) focusing on phonological and phonemic awareness and their impacts on learning to read prose and to spell, established that some scholars used the terms 'phonological' and 'phonemic' knowledge synonymously. This in essence tends to add to the confusion that teachers may encounter. Consequently, there is need to distinguish the terms by relating pure phonological knowledge as knowledge of sound patterns and phonemic knowledge as acknowledgement of individual speech sounds.

In her paper entitled, 'Pre-school teachers' beliefs and practices on early literacy instruction'' McCutchen et al. (2002) adds her voice to the discourse of teachers and phonological awareness. Using 96 preschool teachers' drawn from government and private preschool teachers in southern state of Peninsular in Malaysia, the author brought to the fore issues in English phonology of literacy content, instructional strategies, and teachers' perceived opportunities and challenges in literacy instruction in Malaysian pre-schools. Findings revealed that most teachers appeared to hold conventional literacy beliefs and practices, lacked variety of developmentally appropriate instructional strategies and faced challenges of time constraint and inadequate linguistic and pedagogical knowledge and skills. The researcher however failed to bring out the impact of phonological awareness on the conventional beliefs. Pedagogical skills are key components of teaching reading ability. The researcher concluded that the English phonology as a pedagogy for teaching reading ability was not firmly grounded among the teachers.

Commeyras and DeGroff (1998) conducted a study involving a meta-analysis of panel data in reading and in mathematics from the SACMEQ database archive collected in the year 2000 in all South African countries except Zimbabwe. The Mozambican sample was drawn from 3,177 pupils in 168 schools, while in the SACMEQ study the sample was composed of 41,686 pupils within 2,305 schools. Kenya is among the SACMEC countries. The purpose of the study was to explore and describe the main factors that have an effect on Grade 6 teacher competence and pupil performance in reading and mathematics. Findings revealed that the relationship between teacher competence and pupil performance in reading and mathematics in upper primary schools in Mozambique, as well as in SACMEQ countries, is influenced by the cognitive domain, the affective domain and the behavioural domain.

In the same context Connor *et al.* (2014).focused on comparative effectiveness of interactive mobiles (clickers) and communicative approach on the learning outcomes of the educationally disadvantaged Nigeria pupils in ESL classroom. The study explored a pedagogical framework for tertiary level learners which took full account of the traditions and context of Chinese English language teaching. It aimed at adapting the western-based communicative language teaching approach and communicative competence model to the Chinese setting at university level so that both learner and teachers can benefit. The research methodology consisted of a mixed method approach which included in-depth interviews and classroom observations. The aim was to compile first-hand information on learner/teacher attitudes towards teacher-centred and student-centred teaching approaches, culture learning in EFL programs, and the major difficulties faced by both students and teachers in the teaching/learning process of English. English phonology is one of the learner centred approaches where the teacher needs to be well grounded in initiating the phonological activities.

Bond and Richmond (2007) examined the effective teaching that promotes learners' active engagement and the development of communicative proficiency. The researcher noted that there has been a challenge to teachers of English as a second language (ESL) on the aspect of reading ability. Despite the importance placed upon the children's reading ability the actual practice in schools leaves gaps in performance. As it is indicated from the above studies carried out in various parts of the world, teachers may contribute to this directly or indirectly. Little research has been done to find the relationship between teacher competence in phonology, their attitudes and the practices they engage in to help learners improve reading ability.

#### **Statement of the Problem:**

Despite massive funding on education extended by government over the years there is evidence of illiteracy among many school leavers. After years of attending school, KCPE graduates are unable to read or write (UWEZO, 2013). Many are unable to speak English in a coherent manner. Critical educational indices of literacy attainment and acceptable performance in English at the KCPE level are low (KNBS, 2014). The Kenya Certificate of Primary Education results of English in Elgeyo Marakwet County have remained relatively low (KNEC, 2015) although ironically, overall, Elgeyo Marakwet was ranked second to Kirinyaga as the best performing County in 2016. The mean mark of 271 attained in all

subjects would be significantly higher if performance in English was raised. The County mean score for English was 51.2%. Given that English phonology is the fulcrum upon which performance in English revolves, there is a strong need to examine in detail the teaching of English phonology at preschool level which is the foundation of various skills of English and improved performance in other subjects (Byrne *et al.*, 2000). Language poorly learnt at lower levels affects performance at the higher levels (Adams, 2010). The static County mean score for English which stood at 51.96% in 2012; 52.9% in 2013; 50.08% in 2014; 50.51% in 2015; and 51.2% in 2016 underscores the urgency with which teaching English phonology should be addressed.

Teachers are responsible for teaching English, a medium of instruction throughout school and a subject in its own right. Phonology is an important ingredient of English Language. Indeed research evidence has shown a strong relationship between overall performance in English examinations and knowledge and awareness of English phonology. Given that all teachers are trained to teach English it is expected that all qualified teachers should be aware of the importance of phonology and hold positive attitudes to the subject.

However, is it true that all teachers have phonological awareness and are able to apply rules while teaching reading? There is need for research evidence on this. An investigation of published literature showed that teachers' knowledge and attitudes towards English phonology had not been sufficiently documented. The extent to which teacher awareness, competence and attitude interacted with learner ability to read was not known either. In this study the researcher set out to understand the relationship between teacher awareness of phonology, their attitudes and the impact on learners' ability to read.

#### **Objective of the Study:**

The objective of this study was to determine the effect of teachers' competence in English phonology on reading ability among pre-school children in Elgeyo Marakwet County, Kenya

#### **Hypothesis:**

The study tested the following hypothesis:

**H<sub>01</sub>:** Teacher competence in English phonology has no significant effect on reading ability among pre-school children in Elgeyo Marakwet County, Kenya;

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The study utilized the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) to understand the attitude of teachers in the use of phonological competence and attitude to enhance reading ability. Bond and Richmond (2007) developed this theory recognizing that the extent to which some intentions to act can be carried out depends partially on the levels of control individuals have over behaviors. The TPB theory is consistent with Rouse and Fantuzzo (2006) work on self-efficacy. Albert Bandura argued that it is possible for one to be responsible for one's behaviour with "the conviction that one can successfully execute behaviour". The TPB therefore adds perceived behavioural control (PBC) (i.e. the belief as to how easy or difficult performance of the behaviour is likely to be) as a predictor of intention to act and behaviour. Perceived behavioural control is assumed to reflect the opportunities and resources needed to engage in behaviour. Thus, the path between perceived behavioural control and intention to act reflects individuals' perceived control over the behaviour whereas the path between perceived behavioural control and behaviour reflects actual control over the behaviour (Bond and Richmond, 2007)

In the context of this study the TPB suggests that an attitude develops once a teacher gets the opportunity to teach especially in preschool. Teachers are initially job seekers. Later they find jobs as teachers in early childhood learning institutions. The question then becomes how do they deliver to learners?

The Education Production Function Theory was also used to estimate determinants of learning outcomes. A production function specifies the output of a firm and industry or an entire economy for all combination of inputs (Rouse and Fantuzzo, 2006). Although schools are not profit-maximizing firms, the framework treats them as production units on the supply side. Production function studies have been used extensively to identify factors that produce good learning outcomes.

This framework specifies a level of achievement, usually measured by learners test scores as the typical output and characteristics of the teaching and learning environment as typical inputs (Wren, 2001). Formal education increases individuals well-being primarily through the acquisition of skills both cognitive (e.g. literacy and numeracy) and non-cognitive (e.g. social and organizational skills). In this study the teacher attitude and awareness of phonology were treated as inputs. They are supposed to lead to improved performance by learners of English. The level of performance by learners was taken as outputs of the production function. Thus, a teacher who is in a position to teach reading skills to learners realizes the set objectives of the day.

### 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher competence measured across diverse indicators such as teacher experience, in-service training, cultural background, use of materials, availability of infrastructure and many more have shown significant influence on learner achievement (Troyer and Yopp, 2013). Despite the influence teacher competence has on learner achievement, over recent decades, various studies have decried the rising numbers of non-readers especially in Kenyan classrooms. Torgesen, Morgan, and Davis, (2011) showed that that nearly half of the teachers neither teach reading nor know the methods to use in teaching reading. This then brings into question competence levels among this category of teachers charged with the responsibility of teaching reading to children.

Besides, a third of the teachers (31.9%) reportedly use phonics, while another third favour the whole-word method. The study concludes that lower grade teachers are ill equipped with methods of teaching reading. KCPE English results in the Elgeyo Marakwet County suggest that most preschool teachers lack the competence to teach reading satisfactorily. It would be necessary to introduce reading as a subject at the teacher training level, and designate reading time through the primary and early childhood education course.

Yet Kekokhoni- Mahoney (2015) too explains that the majority of the respondents who were early childhood teachers did not use the methods to teaching reading that they were taught in college. In fact about 21% of the teachers did not recall the teaching methods taught to them at college. Instead, the majority used methods of teaching reading that were adhoc and unsupported by literature. It strongly recommended that the application of appropriate methods of teaching reading especially English phonology is a powerful vehicle that driven appropriately leads to acquisition of reading. This is well wrapped with Kenya *tusome*, government reading programme which needs close monitoring of the outcomes in Elgeyo Marakwet County. And if positive outcomes are experienced, it is cascaded to the preschool teachers to benefit more.

As for Spear-Swerling et al. (2005) proficiency in reading was identified as one of the most reliable indicators of whether a learner will attain the competence needed to achieve academic success and contribute actively to society. Research into the level of English Language proficiency in Kenyan primary schools has revealed significant levels of underperformance. The study examines reading strategies with reference to the teaching of reading to early childhood learners. It revealed that teaching of reading at the early stages is important because the quality of experience children get at this level affect or lay the foundation for reading development. It is therefore imperative to look into the competence of teachers and their attitude towards English phonology as major strategy of reading ability among young children.

Fernandez (2013) reveals that a thorough knowledge of the subject matter in English phonology is of core value to the teacher; that formulation of questions to clarify concepts of English phonemes, usage of various aids and activities to make the subject matter in the activities related to phonology more interesting to learners and provision of challenging tasks applicable to real life. The use of cheaply available materials to make appropriate learning aids related to English phonology is likely to impact positively in acquisition of basic concepts of English phonology among learners.

Moats and Foorman (2003) explains that in order to succeed, teacher competence is of great value as there exists relationship between teacher competence and pupil performance in reading and which is influenced by a cognitive, affective and behavioural domain. In addition, teacher competence and pupil performance are affected by many constructs. Other findings from the reading test indicated that students who had less problems with word substitution, omission, mispronunciation and addition scored highly. It was established that ninety percent of the teachers of English experienced problems in teaching reading.

#### 4. METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out in Elgeyo Marakwet County within the former Rift Valley province. The choice of this county for this study was informed by its relatively poor and almost static performance in English at KCPE level compared to some counties within the region. The study used pragmatist paradigm since it combines the qualitative and quantitative approaches within different phases of the research process (Morgan and Fuchs, 2007).). Since this research used quantitative and qualitative approaches, this paradigm is deemed appropriate for this study. This study adopted concurrent triangulation mixed methods using pragmatist paradigm for it is useful in helping researchers meet the criteria for evaluating the “goodness” of their answers better than do the single approach designs.

This study targeted pre-school teachers drawn from three sub counties in Elgeyo Marakwet County. Records from the County Education Office indicate that there is a total of 1252 public preschools teachers in 441 centres. The sample size of this study was based on Morgan and Fuchs (2007) statistical table for determining sample size from a population. The sample size was 294. Sample size was then be proportionately distributed by applying proportional simple random sampling to pick respondents from each sub-county.

A questionnaire was used to determine the level of English phonology among preschool teachers in public early childhood centres. It was completed by the teachers engaged for this study. The questionnaires were divided into several parts. The first part requested for bio data. Second part: the Survey and Knowledge Assessment was administered to teacher. The survey had items assessing knowledge of English phonology, with an internal with an internal consistency (as measured by Cronbach’s coefficient alpha) of .83.

Reading test tool was used to record pupil performance on reading. The test tool in appendix two is one that applies to and learners. As the teacher administers this test, the researcher was interested in the teacher and the scores of learners in each item. It contained scores of [very good] which had a score of 3 points, [good] 2 points, [fair] 1 point and [poor] 0 points. In this tool the teacher was to follow the instructions of the test. Thus, asks the learners to sound the letter sounds after her and then individually as she awards one point for each correct sound. Zero points are awarded to poor sounds. As this happened the researcher observed how the teacher was taking learners through the test. Then the scores for each item were summed and compared with results of objective one and two to evaluate objective three of the study about relationship between teacher English phonological skills and knowledge and pupil reading performance.

To establish the main characteristics of the study variables, descriptive statistics was employed. The distribution shape of the variables using skewness and kurtosis was also undertaken in order to find out the deviation from the normality. Thereafter, the data was summarized visually using frequency distributions, percentages, tables, and standard errors (Haier *et al.*, 2011). Regression analysis was used to find the relationship between variables.

#### 5. RESULTS

A total of 294 out of 221 teachers fully filled and returned the research questionnaires. The return rate for questionnaires used for data analysis in this study was 75%. The response rate is considered adequate given the recommendations by Morgan and Fuchs (2007). Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents. Analysis of teachers’ background characteristics focused on teachers’ sex and experience in teaching. This was informed by studies which reveal that years of teaching experience and gender account for close to 17% of the variance in teacher’s knowledge of language form and close to 19% of the variance in teacher’s knowledge in language content (Bond and Dykstra, 2013). It was therefore necessary to examine these characteristics among respondents so that they could be held constant across the teachers.

Results presented in Table 1 revealed that 70.9% of the teaching workforce were female while 29.1% were male. The distribution of teaching experience on the other hand revealed that 35.4% of the teachers had a 1-5 year experience in teaching; 25.3% had an experience of between 5–10 years; 23.4% had an experience of 10–15 years while 15.8% had an experience of above 15 years.

**Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents**

Background Characteristic	Category	Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	46	29.1
	Female	112	70.9

	<b>Total</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Teaching experience	1-5yrs	56	35.4
	5-10yrs	40	25.3
	10-15yrs	37	23.4
	15 and above	25	15.8
	<b>Total</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Survey Data (2016), N=294

These results point to pre-school teaching in Elgeyo Marakwet County as a gendered profession that is predominantly female. These findings support the views by Blanchman et al. (1999) that teaching in early childhood education is an example of a gendered profession where women are encouraged to become teachers and are viewed as the nurturing mothers. This could have an impact on the findings of the current study. The implication then is that interpretation of the results in this study should be made disregarding gender and experience of the teachers.

### Teacher Competence in English Phonology.

Results presented in Table 2 showed that use of phonology skills was quite a challenge to most of the preschool teachers in the County. Whilst almost all the teachers used the listed skills, a greater proportion reported that they taught alliteration with difficult (68.4%); that they were able to teach segmenting to learners but with difficult (72.8%); that learners were not able to recognize and reproduce rhyming patterns (40.5%); and that learners were not at all able to detect sound in words (44.3%).

**Table 2: Range of English Phonology Skills**

<b>Phonology Skill</b>		<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1. Do you teach alliteration	yes	47	29.7%
	no	3	1.9%
	with difficult	108	68.4%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
2. Are you able to teach segmenting to learners	yes	41	25.9%
	no	2	1.3%
	with difficult	115	72.8%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
3. Do you teach isolation of sounds	with ease	52	32.9%
	with difficulty	102	64.6%
	not at all	4	2.5%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
4. Do you take learners through blending activities	yes	66	41.8%
	no	2	1.3%
	with difficult	90	57.0%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
5. Are learners able to recognize and produce rhyming patterns	with ease	53	33.5%
	no	64	40.5%
	with difficult	41	25.9%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
6. Are learners able to detect separate sounds in words	yes	40	25.3%
	partially	48	30.4%
	not at all	70	44.3%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

The implication of these results is that pre-school teachers in the County do not perceive themselves competent enough to apply English phonology skills in their teaching. Despite the fact that they attempt to use a wide array of phonology skills

available to them, they do so with a lot of difficulty and this tends to impact negatively on learner outcomes such as recognition and production of rhyming patterns and detection of separate sounds in words.

Assessment of teacher competence in blending to form words was conducted using 25 items on the knowledge assessment survey. Five items assessed teachers' competence in onsets and rimes while 20 items assessed teachers' competence in consonants and vowels blending. Descriptive statistics of teacher scores on blending tasks are displayed in Table 4.3. Means and standard deviations were used to show teachers' competence in onset and rimes, as well as, teachers' competence in consonants and vowel blending. Teachers obtained a mean competence score of 3.44 points out of a possible score of 5 points in onset rimes in CVC. Similarly, teachers obtained a mean competence score of 7.44 points out of a possible 15 points in consonants and vowels blending in CVC words; a mean competence score of 7.43 points out of a possible 15 points in consonants and vowels blending in CCVC words; a mean competence score of 5.89 points out of a possible 15 points in consonants and vowel blending in CVCC words, and a mean competence score of 5.87 points out of a possible 15 points in consonants and vowel blending in CCVCC words.

**Table 3: Teacher Competence in Blending to Form Words.**

Competence Criteria	Max	Mean	Std. Dev
1. Onset and Rimes in CVC	5	3.44	1.512
2. Consonants and Vowel blending in CVC words	15	7.44	2.874
3. Consonants and Vowel blending in CCVC words	15	7.43	2.719
4. Consonants and Vowel blending in CVCC words	15	5.89	2.262
5. Consonants and Vowel blending in CCVCC words	15	5.87	2.349
<b>Mean for Competence in Blending to Form Words.</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>6.01</b>	

The results confirm that teachers in the County lack the competence to effectively teach the blending skills necessary for pre-school children. This brings into question children's level of phonological awareness and more importantly their future reading success. Teachers are expected to use a range of strategies with individual children, small groups and large groups. Rhyming and blending of sounds have been noted in literature to be crucial to the development of later reading skills (Anderson, 2015). It is therefore a worrying trend if teachers lack the requisite competence to handle these key skills and points to the caliber of teachers hired to teach in pre-schools in the County. The need for teachers to understand onset and rimes is crucial if children are to acquire word families that lay foundations for future spelling strategies and literacy (Desay) skills.

Word segmenting is theorized to be a key element of phonological (Anderson, 2015). Teacher competence in English phonology was therefore assessed through teachers' ability to segment words into syllables as well their ability to segment short words into individual phonemes. A total of 20 items were used to assess teacher's competence in segmenting CVC, CCVC, CVCC and CCVCC – CCCVCC words. Results of the descriptive statistics of the teacher scores on segmenting tasks displayed in Table 4 indicate that the mean scores in segmenting words were largely below the average of expected scores.

Teachers scored a mean competence score of 6.06 points out of a possible 15 points in segmenting CVC words; a mean competence score of 5.90 out of a possible 15 points in segmenting CCV words; a mean response score of 5.78 points out of a possible 15 in segmenting CVCC words; and a mean score of 5.73 points out of a possible 15 in segmenting CCVCC–CCCVCC words. These results reflect the results of teacher competence in onsets and rimes as well as those of competence in blending and further show that teachers handling pre-school children in Elgeyo Marakwet County are devoid of the requisite skills to competently handle English phonology.

**Table 4: Competence in Segmenting Words**

	Max	Mean	Std Dev
1. Segmenting CVC words	15	6.06	3.028
2. Segmenting CCVC words	15	5.90	2.344
3. Segmenting CVCC words	15	5.78	2.352
4. Segmenting CCVCC-CCCVCC words	15	5.73	2.383
<b>Mean for Competence in Segmenting Words</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>5.95</b>	

The overall competency of the teachers in English phonology was then calculated by averaging the means obtained in competency in segmenting words and competency in blending to form words. The results are as given in Table 5.

**Table 5: Teachers' Competency in English Phonology**

	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Auditory Skills	25	11.79	5.505
2. Level1 Phonics	11	5.20	2.643
3. Level2 Phonics	15	7.39	3.685
4. Level3&4 Phonics	15	7.14	3.349
<b>Mean</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>7.88</b>	

Results in Table 5 indicates that teacher competency in English phonology was below average (mean of 5.98 with the expected maximum being 15). This is an indication that the pre-school teachers in the County were poor in the English phonology of blending to form words and segmenting words.

#### **Pre-School Children's Reading Ability:**

Children's reading ability was conceptualized as an indicator of teachers' competence in English phonology. The researcher made and scored observations on children's awareness and ability of (1) alphabetic letter sound and alphabetic letter names (auditory skills), (2) level 1 phonics, (3) level 2 phonics, and (4) level 3 and 4 phonics. In assessing children's ability of alphabetic letter sound and alphabetic letter names, the teacher sounded out letters and asked the children to imitate. Next the teacher asked individual children to sound each letter. The observer awarded 1 point for each correct sound and 0 point for any wrong sound. A total of 25 letters were sounded.

Level 1 phonics was assessed using 11 items. The teacher sounded a phonic which the child was required to repeat. The observer awarded a score of 1 for every correct response and a score of 0 for a wrong response. This procedure was repeated for level 2 phonics (15 items) and level 3&4 phonics (15 items). Descriptive statistics of aggregate children scores presented in Table 4.6 revealed that children tended to score below average in all the phonic knowledge awareness items. The results are summarized in Table 4.6.

**Table 6: Phonic Knowledge Awareness**

Competency	Max	Mean
Blending to form Words	15	5.95
Segmenting Words	15	6.01
<b>Mean</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>5.98</b>

As captured in Table 6, the phonic awareness level was slightly above average (mean =7.88 of the maximum possible of 15). Auditoria skills were scored the highest with a mean of 11.79 while Level 1 phonics had the least mean score of 5.20. Specific results indicate that out of a possible score of 25 points in auditory skills, children obtained a mean score of 11.79 with a standard deviation of 5.505; Out of a possible score of 11 points in level 1 phonics, children obtained a mean score of 5.20 points with a standard deviation of 2.643; out of a maximum possible score of 15 points in level 2 phonics, children obtained a mean score of 7.39 points with a standard deviation of 3.685; similarly out of a maximum possible score of 15 points in level 3 and 4 phonics children obtained a mean score of 7.14 points with a standard deviation of 3.349. These results reflect negatively on the teaching of phonics in pre-schools in the County. This then tends to confirm the teacher competence results which tended to suggest a lack of competence among pre-school teachers in the County to teach English phonology skills. Children's reading ability was also assessed through investigation of their phonemic awareness. In this regard, children were examined on their blending and segmentation skills. Blending skills focused on their ability in onset rimes in CVC; consonants and vowels blending in CVC, CCVC, CVCC, and CCVCC words. Segmentation skills on the other hand focused on segmenting CVC, CCV, CVCC and CCVCC-CCVCC words respectively.

Results of children's aggregate scores reported in Table 7 show that pre-school children scored poorly in both blending and segmentation tasks. Under blending children obtained a mean score of 3.44 points out of a possible 5 points in



ONSETS and RYMES; they obtained a mean score of 7.44 points out of a possible 15 points in consonant and vowel blending in CVC words; a mean score of 7.43 points out of a possible 15 points in consonants and vowel blending in CCVC words; a mean score of 5.89 points out of a possible 15 points in consonants and vowel blending in CVCC words; and a mean score of 5.87 points out of a possible 15 points in consonants and vowel blending in CCVCC words.

In the case of segmenting words, children obtained a mean score of 6.06 points out of a possible 15 points in segmenting CVC words; a mean score of 5.90 points out of a possible 15 points in segmenting CCVC words; a mean score of 5.78 points out of a possible 15 points in segmenting CVCC words; and a mean score of 5.73 points out of a possible 15 points in segmenting CCVCC-CCCVCC words. These results imply that pre-school children in the County lack the foundation skills of decoding and spelling. This could be attributed to incompetent teachers who may be lacking relevant skills to teach English phonology at this level. The below average outcomes of reading ability among pre-school children vindicate earlier results from teacher competence assessment and support the case for incompetence among pre-school teachers in handling English phonology.

**Table 7: Phonemics Awareness**

<b>A. Blending</b>	Max	Mean	SD
1. Onset and Rimes in CVC	5	3.44	1.512
2. Consonants and Vowel blending in CVC words	15	7.44	2.874
3. Consonants and Vowel blending in CCVC words	15	7.43	2.719
4. Consonants and Vowel blending in CVCC words	15	5.89	2.262
5. Consonants and Vowel blending in CCVCC words	15	5.87	2.349
<b>Mean</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>6.01</b>	
<b>B. Segmenting</b>			
1. Segmenting CVC words	15	6.06	3.028
2. Segmenting CCVC words	15	5.90	2.344
3. Segmenting CVCC words	15	5.78	2.352
4. Segmenting CCVCC-CCCVCC words	15	5.73	2.383
<b>Mean</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>5.87</b>	
<b>Overall Mean for Phonemic</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>5.94</b>	

### Pre-School Children's Reading Ability

The Pre-School Children's Reading Ability was then obtained by considering the summated means of phonics and phonemic. The results are presented in Table 8.

**Table 8: Pre-School Children's Reading Ability**

Reading Ability	Max	Mean
Phonics	15	7.88
Phonemics	15	5.94
<b>Mean</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>6.91</b>

Results in Table 4.8 indicates that the Pre-School Children's Reading Ability was slightly below average (mean =6.91 of the maximum possible of 15).

### Correlation Results

The results as presented in table 9 showed a significant strong positive correlation between teacher competency in English phonology and reading ability of pre-school children ( $r = .617, p=0.000$ ).

**Table 9: Correlation Results**

	1	2
1. Reading Ability	1	
2. Teacher Competency in English Phonology	.617**	1

The implication of these results is that teacher competence in English phonology and their attitude towards it are important indicators of children's reading ability. Furthermore, teacher attitude greatly compliments teacher competence in English phonology. In essence therefore, the results showing a largely negative attitude towards English phonology among the pre-school teachers in the County could be held responsible for the lack of competence among the teachers to handle the subject.

### Regression Results:

Multiple linear regression was carried out to determine the effect of the teacher competency in English phonology and on reading ability of pre-school children. This was done to test the set direct effects hypothesis  $H_{01}$ . The results are summarized in Table 10.

The results of the regression analysis suggested that Teacher competence in English phonology had a significant positive effect on reading ability among pre-school children ( $\beta = .307$ ). Hence the hypothesis was not supported. The implication of this is that teacher competency in English positively impacted on the level of reading ability for the pre-school children. High teacher competence in English phonology is associated with better the pre-school children reading ability, and vice versa.

**Table 10: Multiple Regression Results**

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	0.548	.183		8.458	.000
Teacher Competency	.307	.047	.537	1.323	.000

## 7. DISCUSSION

The finding that lack of competence among teachers impacts negatively on children's outcomes is consistent with findings which show that teachers who do not possess adequate knowledge of phonemic and phonic concepts cannot effectively teach them to their students (Kozminsky & Kozmmisky, 1995). Research further shows that classroom teachers can only identify individual abilities of children in phonological awareness if they are themselves grounded in phonological awareness (Mcleod, 2003; Viliman & and Green Lee, 2007). Indeed, Rvachew (2006) makes it clear that emergent literacy skills in general, and phonological skills in particular, form a bridge between child's development of oral language skills and the eventual acquisition of written language competence. This then portrays worrying trends particularly in the study area with regards to the type of bridge pre-school teachers in the county offer to children towards acquisition of language competence.

These findings corroborate the concerns by Sanderson (2015) who believes that the government should involve teachers in working out effective ways of making the teaching profession viable for serving teachers and attractive to incoming ones so as to address the problem of student poor reading culture. It is worth to note that skills emerge in the preschool period from the interaction of the child's teachers, parents and caregivers. The researcher chooses to concur with the views by Folarrani by asserting that knowledge of sound structure of spoken language is the core deficit that underlies reading disability and can be improved with strengthened interaction among the stake holders.

The finding that lack of competence in phonology among teachers tends to affect children's phonological awareness paints a worrying picture concerning children's ability to read and spell. This is so because phonological awareness has been noted in literature to be important for reading and spelling. Studies show that phonological awareness is critical for learning to read any alphabetic writing system (Ehri, 2004; Rath, 2001; Troia, 2004).

The findings showing lack of reading ability among children can mainly be attributed to lack of competence in pre-school teachers to teach phonics which has translated to children's lack of awareness in phonics. The importance of phonics in students reading outcomes cannot be overstated. Research reveals that first grade students who received instruction in letter-sound correspondence improved their word reading and spelling accuracy at a faster rate than students who did not receive such instruction (Agumba et al., 2014). Besides, phonics instruction has been found to be beneficial to students at-risk for reading failure.

According to O'Connor et al. (2010) phonics instruction in first grade helps most at-risk students meet grade level expectations for first and second grades on reading and spelling words. These views reflect the findings by Adams (2010) that with an effective initial focus on phonics, students who enter first grade with low literacy skills can be successful in literature-rich activities.

The bottom line is that the trend observed in the county where children lack a ability in reading could be reversed if teachers aim to be competent in English Phonology. Phonological awareness interacts with and facilitates the development of vocabulary and word consciousness.

## 8. CONCLUSION

The demographic characteristics of the respondents indicated that majority of the pre-school teachers were female. It can therefore be concluded that this is a gendered profession. The motherly approach that female teachers espouse makes them be more predisposed to teach at this level where tender care is key in handling the pre-school children. For work experience distribution, the results had indicated that most of the pre-school teachers are inexperienced. They have less than 5 years work experience. The conclusion drawn from this is that the teachers have not accumulated the requisite experience to effectively teach English phonology. This could be the possible reason as to why the reading ability in Elgeyo Marakwet County is poor.

The study found that the level of teacher competency in English phonology is wanting. The conclusion from this is that the teachers are not adept at handling English phonology at pre-school level in Elgeyo Marakwet County. Thus results confirmed that teachers in the County lack the competence to effectively teach the blending skills necessary for pre-school children. Further, the results did indicate that teacher competency in English phonology positively and significantly affects reading ability of pre-school children in Elgeyo Marakwet County. It can therefore be concluded that as the level of teacher competency in English phonology increases, the reading ability of pre-school children also increases in tandem. Thus the results support the assertion that to improve the reading ability of pre-school children is hinged on the teachers' knowledge or competency of English phonology.

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