# Challenges Teachers of English Face in Teaching Reading Phonic and Sight Words

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*Abstract: -*The teaching of English in countries where English is not the first language (L1) poses a challengeto both teachers and learners, especially if they are second language (L2) speakers. The matter is further complicated when English is the recognized main official language of the country. This means that at one stage, all learners in the country have tostart learning English at one point to acquire the official language, which ata certainstage of education becomes the official medium of instruction in all learning institutions.

The study investigated and focuses on the challenges teachers faced in the process of teaching reading Phonic and Sight words to fourth grade learners in the selected primary schools of Lusaka district in Zambia. In order to gather reliable information qualitative and quantitative data were collected from teachers and fourthgrade learners through survey, interviews and observation. A questionnaire was administered to 100 learners who had just completed their fourth grade and another questionnaire to 20 fourth grade teachers in five primary schools. Class observations were done and interviews were conducted with the school administrators. Quantitative data was analysedthrough the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), while the thematic approach was used to analyse qualitative data.

The findings of the study indicated that some children absconded themselves in the early days of their first grade (grade one) where early reading was introduced hence failed to cope up with reading Phonic and Sight words. The other challenge was over enrolment of pupils in the schools in the early grades because the government schools were few in the area hence teachers failed to pay attention to learners with learning dificulties due to the highpupil toteacher ratios. The other finding from the study was that there was shortage of appropriate quality teaching and learning materials for early grade reading in the primary schools of Lusaka district.

The study recommended that the Ministry of General Education should provide more school places by building more schools to reduce the high pupil to teacher ratio; and also ensure that adequate appropriate teaching and learning materials are supplied in schools and that the school administrators should engage parents in most of the school activities so that the problem of absenteeism among learners in the early grades can be addressed.

*Key Words:* **Reading Phonic, Sight Words, Teaching English, First Language (L1), Second Language (L2), Received Pronounciation (RP)**

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the Zambian education system one of the fundamental aims for lower and middle basic curriculum is to enable learners to read and write clearly, correctly and confidently in Zambian Languages and in English [1][2].

In today's society, it is important that every child has the fullest opportunities to become an accomplished reader. Anyone unable to read and write proficiently faces enormous social, personal and economic limitations in today's complex, information flooded world [3].

However, low reading levels as indicated by studies[4] [5] [6] may not be the only problem that Zambian children face but also the correct pronunciation of words, especially those in English language where using Received Pronunciation (RP) is the intended goal by any learner of English language may or may not be a challenge to learners in grade four.

It must be mentioned that Lusaka district is a town which has no specific language of play for the children because the occupants of the city have come to work and do business from the ten different provinces of Zambia. The schools are in a multilingual settings and the children use different languages when they are home. Teachers too, come from different backgrounds and trainings, yet they teach the same curriculum which include Phonic and Sight words to all the primary school learners. Their challenges are what this study explored.

This article explored the challenges faced by English teachers in teaching reading Phonic and Sight words to fourth grade learners in Lusaka district in Zambia, with the aim of coming up with findings and recommendations thereof to help in mitigating the problems encountered when teaching English to pupils in the early grades.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A number of studies from different parts of the world and in Zambia were reviewed on the challenges faced by teachers in teaching reading Phonic and Sight words in English. Studies conducted by Nanchengwa and Kamalatafound that Sight word learning needed the schools and teachers to have a lot of teaching and learning materials so that every learner can hold a book or be able to see from the chart what the teachers are talking about [7][8].

Furthermore, a study conducted by Tembo also revealed that teaching materialshelp in providingguidance to teachers on what to teach and consequently learners are able to grasp the concepts easily [9]. It is important for teachers who teach initial skills in reading to follow stipulated guidelines from the teaching and learning materials.

An investigation by Punyapet and Laohawiriyanon on the effects of systematic remedial phonics instruction on the development of pronunciation, spelling and reading comprehension skills showed that there was a significant increase in the post test scores from (16.54% to 56.06%) level of 0.1 with large effect size (3.38). The results of the retention test taken four weeks after the post test revealed that the scores decreased to 49. 11% with small effect size (0.37). The results indicated systematic remedial phonics instruction could help improve the participants' pronunciation, spelling, and reading comprehension skills [10].

A research by Mwambazi sought to explore the causes and the nature of the low reading achievement among grade two pupils and confirmed that grade two pupils were not reading according to their grade level. Few learners were ableto identify letters in terms of initial and ending sounds [11].

Mwanamukubi[12] cited Mando [13] indicating that reading failure was mainly caused by failure to acquire phonological awareness and skills in alphabetic coding. In addition, Kabali[14] analyses factors that influence acquisition of reading skills (orthographic awareness and decoding) in the home environment. The findings were that reading materials predicted orthographic awareness and not decoding. Furthermore, the study showed that children's home environments, absenteeism and late coming significantly impacted on children's reading skills.

This study moved a step further by looking at pronunciation of Phonic and Sight words which were not highlighted in the above cited studies.

The Levin Committee [15] investigated methods for fostering oral and written Language skills in preschool and Kindergarten age children, while the Shimron Committee [16] examined ways to reform reading instruction in the primary school grades. Both committees reported that phonetic awareness and alphabet recognition were key components in literacy acquisition and specifically recommended instruction in both, which was one of the key issues covered in this research. This study focused on grade four learners which the Levin Committee did not investigate, their focus was on preschool and kindergarten age children.

A study was conducted to assess grade three learners preparedness for the Read On Course (ROC) under the Primary Reading Programme (PRP) in reading and writing in Bemba (one of the many local languages spoken in Zambia) as a first Language (L1). The study showed that most learners faced a number of difficulties in reading and writing in Grade three when English and Bemba (a local language) began to be taught simultaneously. Most learners in Grade three were not able to read and write at the desirable level including some that had supposedly broken through by the end of Grade two [17].

A research on young children's vocabulary development found that when children from families with low incomes were 3 years old, they knew 600 fewer words than children of the same age from families with upper incomes[18]. In another study the findings were that by the time learners progressed to the second grade, the gap widened to about 4000 words [19].The above facts heighten the need to purposefully teach vocabulary in early childhood. Because noticing words and being interested in them precedes learning and their meanings.

A study on the nature and prevalence of reading and writing difficulties in English language in grade two, revealed some difficulties in letter-identification from Mbala basic school among grade two learners. Furthermore, it was stated that learners had difficulties in differentiating letters such as 'b' and 'd', 'p' and 'q', 'e' and the digit '6' [20]. On the other hand Swanepoel cited in Mubanga [20] noted that when a phonological awareness deficiency is identified as a major contributor to a child's reading and spelling difficulties, it is, in a way, a relief because it is a trainable system that can be taught and practiced, especially in the early stages of reading development. Training undoubtedly improves reading and spelling systems.

The study findings for the literatutre reviewed on reading Phonic and Sight words and the challenges thereof were based on experiencesfrom different parts of the world and other parts of Zambia and not in Lusaka district. Therefore, it was relevant and imperative that a study was conducted in Lusaka district being a multi-ethnic city to gather empirical evidence pertaining to this study.

## III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK, CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK, AND CONCEPTUAL MODEL

*Theoretical Framework*

The theoretical framework for this study is based on the cognitive learning theory by Jean Piaget. In his theory, he explained that the mental process leads to a particular outcome, either in terms of behavior or attitude change depending on the learner's experience. For instance, based on the work of Jean Piaget,the cognitive theory views children as active explorers and thinkers who are constantly trying to find ways and means of adapting to their environment [21].

It was pointed out that the key insight is that pronunciation is a form of behaviour, which, like all behaviour, is driven by concepts, in this case, concepts of speech. Furthermore, it was revealed that speech in itself is a continuous stream of complex, rapidly varying sounds. However, when we listen to speech, we hear it as a sequence of discrete, meaningful words, each one made up of a sequence of 'sub-lexical' units such as syllables and phonemes (individual units of sound).

These concepts also drive our pronunciation behaviour. Concepts are the ideas in our minds about what sorts of sounds can be words, and what sorts of smaller sound words can be made up of. They form the 'pair of glasses 'through which we view speech, causing us to hear speech as words, phonemes and syllables without even noticing that it is really a continuous stream of sound [22].

It was emphasized further that with the framework in place, the most important thing teachers need to know about pronunciation is that speech is not like what we think it is, and this can be readily taught through demonstrations designed to undermine confidence in the reality of phonemes. It is also very useful to give some understanding of the basics of speech perception, especially the importance of suprasegmentals. It is not necessary to go into technical phonetics or rules of segment or suprasegment phonology, though, of course, this can be done later if relevant to teachers' interests. It is important that they gain a clear and solid idea of the distinction between phonetics (the reality of speech) and phonology (how we think about speech), and of the concepts behind basic metalinguistic terms like syllable, stress, phoneme, linking among others [23]. This is in line with the objective of this study which determined whether or not grade four learners in selected primary schools in Lusaka district in Zambia could identify letters in English alphabet by their sound.

The cognitive theory can be applied in the initial teaching of literacy at lower grades. Learning to read is not a naturally developing skill, it requires an adaptation of the brain to be able to recognise letters, sounds and words [24].

Learners are introduced to new ideas, vocabulary and new structures in the reading materials. For instance, naming and sounding of the alphabetical order and pronunciation of words in English Language. However, these are not totally new because the learner or reader has grammar and the language deeply established and well organised in the cognitive structures that already exist. The learner then, draws upon prior knowledge to read and organise the new knowledge to be added onto the existing knowledge. In this study cognitive learning theory provides the basis upon which learners draw on prior knowledge to read and organise the new knowledge to be added onto existing knowledge, in this case, which is naming and sounding of the alphabetical order and reading of Phonic and Sight words in English Language appropriately.

*Conceptual Framework*

The search for theoretical understanding and its translation into meaningful practice is what is done when developing a conceptual research framework [25]. The conceptual framework must have a clear practical outcome, if it is to be of any use and relevance. The theoretical foundation for this study is based on cognitive learning theory of Jean Piaget and some of its variables were used to develop the conceptual framework.

The conceptual framework for this study was a blend of the various variables illustrated in figure1 below. The independent variables are English curriculum, teachers and school administrators, learning conditions, school environment, teaching methodologies, teaching and learning materials. The intermediate variables are cognitive stages, mother tongue interference or first language (L1) influences and learner support systems. The dependent variable is reading proficiency (reading skills).

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Model
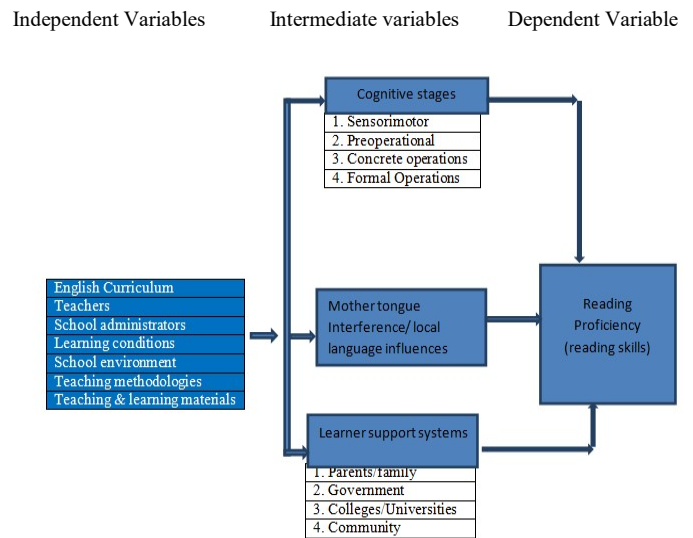


Source: Author's own design

## IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the results of two research questionsfor the study are presented. The following were the research questionswhich read as follows:

1. What is the ability of the Fouth grade learner to identify the English alphabet by their Phonics (sounds) in the selected primary schools of Lusaka district in Zambia?

2. What is the ability of the Fouth grade learner in the reading Sight words in English Language in selected primary schools of Lusaka district in Zambia?

The questionnaires administered to the learners and teachers, in addition to classroom observations and interviews with school administrators yielded vitalinformation for the research findings. The findings based on qualitative data were also presented according to the emerging themes in relation to the research questions.

*Letter naming and sounding in Einglish:Reading test*

In order to obtain a deep understanding of the data from the learners'survey, statistical analysis was performed using SPSS in order to enablegauge the actual performance of the learners in the sample from the selected five primary schools inLusaka

districts in Zambia. The survey questions are shown in Appendix 1.

The researchers observed whether learners from the sampled schools were able to identify letters by their sounds or not, the test which was given to learners involved sixteen letters. These were; a,b,h,e,n,r,o,l, t, I,d,g,f,p,c,ands. Learners were asked to identify the letters and relate them to their sounds( Appendix 1).

The findings revealed that learners were able to match the letters to their exact sounds of the English alphabet. Figure 2 below shows that 92 respondents obtained 16 marks, 6 obtained 14 marks while 2 obtained 12marks. One learner managed to identify all the letters allocated to the children without failing to pronounce any of the letters. This is in line with the findings from teachers at Chibolya primary school who indicated that learners were taught the sounds of the alphabet using the local language in the early grade and that was the basis of teaching the English sounds since few letters were different in sounds.

Figure 2: Distribution of the number of grade four learners' ability in identifying English alphabet by their sounds
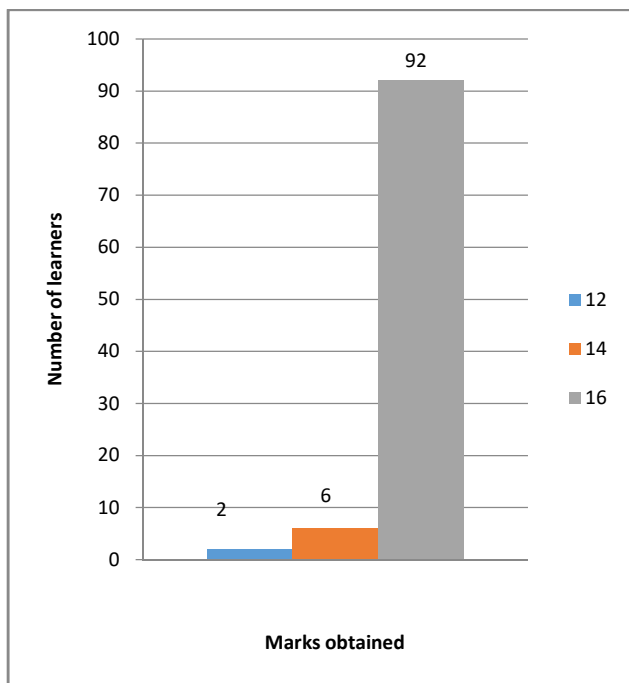


Teachers and administrators were asked whether learners were able to identify letters by their sounds.

A teacher from Jacaranda primary school said that:

> It is not difficult for grade four learners to identify sounds of the alphabet. This is because children learn sounds of the alphabet from the pre-school.

She went on to say:

Teaching which starts with a Zambian language (L1) has helped much in the teaching of sounds in English language. The learners first use the sounds which they know in their language and then later apply the same sound knowledge into English. So, it is difficult for learners to fail to sound an English alphabet.

In addition, the senior teacher at Jacaranda primary school indicated that teachers taught sounds of the English alphabet in the earlier grades like 1 and 2. They added that it was very easy for the learners to identify the sound of the English alphabet and read the preceding English words.

A teacher from Mambilima primary school said:

> Grade 4 learners are able to identify the sounds of the English alphabet correctly even without seeing the letter. They have done this several times.

The response of the deputy head teacher of Lotus primary school was as follows:

> Teachers teach word identification in grade 1 in the local language (L1). When children enter grade three, they already know the letters sounds at heart and it is easy to transfer the sounds into the English alphabet.

The deputy head teacher at Chibolya primary school noted that:

> Teachers teach sound identification as part of revision and introduction to Sight words. This is the more reason that learners are performing very well with Phonic word reading because they know the letter sounds of English.

The study revealed that the learners were taught letter sounds in English hence they performed very well in the exercise. On the other hand, it was established that some learners had challenges in pronouncing /u/ and /y/ because these are voiceless or silent sounds in English.

The study further revealed that learners managed to identify the sounds of the English alphabet correctly except sounds for /h/, /l/, /r/ and /y/. In other words, at least every respondent had a challenge in pronouncing one sound of the English alphabet amongst the words given.

With regards to reading the words which matched the sounds of the letters, learners read the words without much difficulty. The learners were able to use the sounds effectively in their reading of the allocated English words.

Regarding reading of the associated words that are in line with the sounds of the words, a teacher at Kamwala primary school revealed that grade four learners could not have failed to read words from the sound that they pronounced.

The reading of sounds starts in grade one. It was then very impossible that a grade four learner could fail to read a sound and consequently a word at this level. Even if the words are jumbled, the children would still read.

Another teacher from Kamwala primary school added that:

> Learners will always associate a sound to a word hence the learners read the words and sounds perfectly.

The teachers were then teaching the learners according to the required material and content which the learners were supposed to grasp in a required grade. The researchers noted that this was the reason that the children were able to identify the sounds of the English alphabet and read the English words perfectly.

The head teacher from Mambilima primary school said:

> Teachers teach word identification in about grade 1 in the local language (L1). When children enter grade 3, they already know the letters sounds at heart and it is easy to transfer the sounds into the English alphabet.

The deputy head teacher from Lotus noted that:

> Teachers teach sound identification as part of revision and introduction to sight words. This is the more reason that learners are performing very well with Phonic word reading because they know the letter sounds of English.

The findings revealed that the learners were taught letter sounds in English hence they performed very well in the exercise.

*Reading Sight words andReading of Phonic words*

Figure 3: Distribution of the number of grade four learners' ability in reading sight words in English
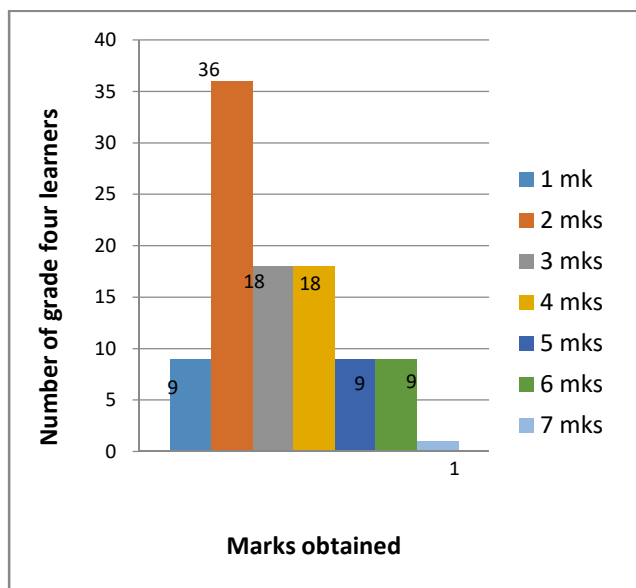


The findings showed that learners were able to read Sight words at a slow pace and the pronunciation was not consistent in most readers. Figure 3aboveindicates that 9 respondents got 1 mark,36 got 2marks,18 got 3 marks, another 18 got 4 marks,9 got 5 marks, another 9 got 6 marks and 1 got 7marks.

Learners were also given ten Phonic words to read (Appendix 2). Later learners were asked to read the passage and the researchers' main interest was to observe how learners were reading and pronunciation Sight words from the passage. (Appendix3).

It was revealed that learners from different schools had different reading and pronunciation abilities of the different words of emphasis in the text.

Learning of Sight word mostlytakes place in early elementary classrooms. Some kindergarten learnershave the potential of learning a maximum of 100 Sight words, and many teachers take up the responsibility to ensure that pupils know lists of words by the end of the year [26].

New research has indicated that learning to read by sounding out words (a teaching method known as phonics) has great impact on the accuracy of reading aloud and understanding. Researchers examined whether learning to read by sounding out words is more effective than concentrating on whole-word meanings [27].

## V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

*Conclusions*

The research questionselicited for information to provide empirical evidence on the ability of the Fouth grade learner to identify the English alphabet by their Phonics (sounds)and the ability in the reading and pronunciation of Sight Words in English Language in primary schools of Lusaka district in Zambia.

Data were collected from teachers and grade four pupils through questionnaires, interviews and observation. A questionnaire was administered to pupils who had just completed their fourth grade and another questionnaire to fourth grade teachers in five primary schools. Class observations were done and interviews were conducted with the school administrators. Data were analysed and graphs were generatedusing SPSS.Equally many themes emerged from the qualitative data.

The cognitive learning theory has been discussed, and many areas pertaining to reading and pronunciation of words in English Language for beginners are covered. Studies reviewed showed that Phonemic awareness, alphabet recognition and phonetic sounds are among the first fundamental skills that all children need to master for successful reading as they progress through school. In general, the research had been guided concerning the study on establishing the ability of the Grade four learners in reading Phonic and Sight words appropriately in English Language.

The study revealed that learners were able to identify the English alphabet by their sounds. It was concluded that learners were taught the sounds of the alphabet using the local language (L1) in the early grades and that was the basis of teaching the English sounds since few letters were different in sound. This made learners to match the letter to its exact sound of the English alphabet. In this study the researchers concluded that grade four learners were able to identify letters by their sounds without difficulties.

The findings showed that learners were able to read Sight words at a slow pace compared to Phonic words. This affected the pronunciation of Sight words in English Language (L2). The grade four learners read the words using the local language phonemic structure. Therefore, itwas concluded that learners had challenges in reading Sight words.

Furthermore, the findings showed that teachers faced several challenges in teaching reading Phonic and Sight words in English language. For instance, some learners absconded themselves in the early days of their grade one when early reading was introduced. Abscodingclasses affected their reading of words in English language.

It was observed that there was over enrolment of learners in some schools in the early grades because the government schools were few in the area, this was coupled with shortage of appropriate teaching and learning materials for early grade reading in the selected primary schools of Lusaka district. Therefore, researchers concluded that teachers faced a number ofdifficulties in teaching Phonic and Sight words owing to some of these challenges.

*Recommendations*

Phonemic awareness, alphabet recognition and phonetic sounds are among the first fundamental skills that all pupilsshould master for successful reading as they progress through school. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers should intensify the oral language activities for learners as early as grade one in order to practice the articulations of correct English sounds.

School administrators should continue monitoring the teaching of initial reading skills to learners in the early grades so that teachers are not reluctant in teaching letters and sounds.

The Ministry of General Education should ensure that adequate and appropriate teaching and learning materials are supplied in schools.

It is recommended that absenteeism among learners in the early grades should be addressed. School administrators should engage parents in most of the school activities so that the issue of absenteeismamong learners in the earlyearly grades can be brought to the attention of parents and mitigated because ascounding classes according to the research findings and conclusion of this study caused learners to lag behind in

reading Phonic and Sight words compared to those that consistently attended classes.

This study highlighted several challenges that teachers of English facedin teaching reading Phonic and Sight words as revealed in the findings, conclusions and the recommendations thereof.

Future research on this topic is necessary hence the proposal to undertake research on the upper primary school grade learners such as grade to gauge their ability in reading Phonic and Sight words at that level of primary school level.

The scope of this study was confined to selected primary schools in Lusaka districtin Zambia. However, the challengesobserved may cut across the country and the global divide.

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**APPENDIX 1: Reading test 1**

**Part A**

There are sixteen (16) letters in part A, two marks should be given: one mark for naming and one mark for the sound of the letter.

| Letter naming | Score | Letter sound | Score | Total score |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| A | | /a/ | | |
| B | | /b/ | | |
| H | | /h/ | | |
| U | | /u/ | | |
| N | | /n/ | | |
| R | | /r/ | | |
| O | | /o/ | | |
| L | | /l/ | | |
| T | | /t/ | | |
| I | | /i/ | | |
| D | | /d/ | | |
| Y | | /y/ | | |
| F | | /f/ | | |
| P | | /p/ | | |
| C | | /c/ | | |
| S | | /s/ | | |
| Total | | | | |

**Part B**

There are ten words created from the letters given above. One mark should be given for each word a learner pronounces correctly.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Polite | |
| 2 | Elephant | |
| 3 | Report | |
| 4 | Puppy | |
| 5 | Choir | |
| 6 | Shape | |
| 7 | Loose | |

| 8 | Shook | |
|---|---|---|
| 9 | Burn | |
| 10 | Tools | |
| | Total | |

**APPENDIX 2: Reading test 2**

**Reading list of phonic words**

One mark should be given for each word a learner pronounces correctly

| 1 | Dig | |
|---|---|---|
| 2 | Fat | |
| 3 | Eye | |
| 4 | Sweeping | |
| 5 | Chewing | |
| 6 | Meat | |
| 7 | Dog | |
| 8 | Door | |
| 9 | Cane | |
| 10 | Coming | |
| | Total | |

**APPENDIX 3: Reading test 3**

**Reading Text**

One night, Sarah **woke** up. Sarah **peered and peeped** outside her **bedroomwindow**. She **looked** at with stars. She **rushed** outside and was **sweating**.one star **shone** much **brighter** than the others. "I **wonder** what it is…" thought Sarah as she **climbed** back into **bed**. "Tomorrow I shall ask grandfather. He knows about the sky. "The next morning, she was **wearing** a blue dress. She rushed to the breakfast table, hoping to find her grandfather, but he was not there. She **quicklyate** her breakfast and then went into the **field** to look for him. He was busy **weeding** the maize. The grandfather picked a **wheelbarrow** and put some maize to **weighs** it. She **laughed** at him. Sarah went over to him **argued** with him. Sarah went away and **boarded** a bus.

The researcher selected some sight words from the passage. One mark should be given for each selected sight word a learner pronounces correctly.

| 1 | Peered | |
|---|---|---|
| 2 | Bedroom | |
| 3 | Looked | |
| 4 | Shone | |
| 5 | Wonder | |
| 6 | Ate | |
| 7 | Field | |
| 8 | Weeding | |
| 9 | Bed | |
| 10 | Window | |
| | Total | |