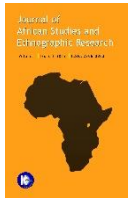


# Early childhood assessment and observation of educators' knowledge of learners in Sissala East Municipal, Ghana



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## Abstract

The aim of the study was to assess the early childhood educators' knowledge of learners. The research employed the mixed methods approach as the research design. The target population for the research included all early childhood educators in the Sissala East Municipal in the Upper West Region of Ghana. The total sample for the study was 164 early childhood educators. The researcher utilized three data collection instruments. The first was a questionnaire, the second instrument was the interview and the third was observation. The quantitative data analysis was done using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software version 20. The descriptive statistics (figures, percentages and frequencies) and percentages were used to analyse the respondents' responses to the questionnaire after they had been coded. The data was presented in tables and percentages. The study revealed that the early childhood educators demonstrated awareness of learners' challenges they bring to class but lack knowledge of how to address these challenges. The study suggests that foundation teachers need to create-literate-rich environments to enhance teaching and learning at the lower level.

**Keywords:** lesson plans, lower level, early childhood educators, instructional materials, child-centred learning activities, literacy skills.

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**Public Interest Statement**

Language and literacy are complex and abstract for beginning learners, therefore an in-depth knowledge and understanding about foundational literacy topics is a must for sound teaching. For example, identifying letters and their corresponding sounds, understanding that books are held in a particular way, that books have covers and authors, understanding that words have boundaries involves intricate principles that beginning learners have to learn one by one. Without sophisticated understanding of these concepts and some other foundational literacy concepts, it is most impossible that early childhood educators will be able to provide rich learning opportunities and boost learner's literacy competencies in their classrooms.

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**Introduction**

Early childhood teachers who have deep knowledge in pedagogy understand how children learn and the way they develop good habits in thinking and learning. Koehler and Mishra (2009) suggested that pedagogical knowledge requires that the teacher has an understanding of social, developmental and cognitive learning theories and the best way to apply them during instructional periods. Language and literacy teachers have the responsibility to support children to understand the content of subjects they learn. On that score, Shulman (1986) advised that teachers make use of pedagogical content knowledge to teach specific content to particular students in a way to promote their understanding. Several researchers in education have established that teachers PCK influences how teaching is carried out in the classroom. (Shulman, 1986; Spear-Swerling & Brucker, 2004; Carlisle, Kelcey, Rowan, & Phelps, 2011; Pihie & Siphon, 2013). Andoh- Mensah (2013) posited that the effectiveness and efficiency of teaching are enriched by the pedagogy and content knowledge, thus integrating teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge will yield a multidimensional and classroom context described as pedagogical content knowledge leading to learners' academic performance. However, evidence from the researcher's observations, interactions and interviews with the early childhood teachers in the Sissala East Municipal which is a precursor to this study have shown that many of the teachers could not identify essential literacy skills children should develop from kindergarten one through to primary three (3). From their responses through the degree in which they articulated them, it was clear most of the teachers do not have in-depth knowledge of how to impart knowledge on the young learners. The level at which they articulated the skills and their role in helping children develop these skills varied. In addition to examining whether teachers possess the right content and pedagogical knowledge, it was also evident that early childhood educators' poor content knowledge and their classroom literacy practices have an effect on children's literacy growth as a good number of learners cannot identify letter-sound relation, sight words, read two to three-letter words which are foundational skills to literacy. These realizations are in congruence with the report presented by the Early Grade Reading Assessment report (2013), The National Education Assessment of Ghana (2016) and more recently, World Vision Ghana (2018) and Ministry of

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Education (2018) which indicated that children from the Upper West Region by the end of primary two could not yet read with comprehension and write either in their Ghanaian language or in English.

## **Literature Review**

### **Early Childhood Educators' Knowledge of the Learner**

Early childhood educators in Sissala East Municipal need to understand learners' characteristics to design and create tailored instructions for a target group. It is with great expectations that by taking account of the characteristics of learners, more efficient, motivated learner, and instructional materials can be developed. In the past teachers and researchers have perceived learners as empty vessels who did not know anything (Faisal, 2015). In recent years that narrative and perception about children learning have changed as teachers have shifted from this old practice to perceiving children to have diverse prior knowledge acquired at home before coming to school (Faisal, 2015). It is necessary teachers get to know their learners and their individual needs so they can address them. It is also vital teachers know and understand their children and are able to differentiate their teaching incorporating new ways to meet their needs. Shulman (1987) argues that teachers need to embrace the child-centred approach since this approach successfully encourages the learners to engage in the learning process actively. In the child-centred learning activities, early childhood educators are required to acknowledge their learner's individual differences.

Shulman (1987) described learner's knowledge to include the understanding of student's personal characteristics, need, learning styles, motivation, social and cultural background. He viewed knowledge of the learner at two different levels. The cognitive knowledge of learners has to do with what pupils know and are able to comprehend, and things they can explore on their own. The second knowledge is empirical knowledge which deals with what knowledge of pupils of different ages is like, their classroom behaviour. It deals with child development theories and how they influence the teaching profession.

Sibuyi (2012), described learners' knowledge as understanding a group of learners' characteristics, creating a conducive learning environment and instructions that meet learners' needs. Early childhood educators who have in-depth knowledge of children find relevant teaching-learning resources, organise adequate practical activities to meet the learning needs of their learners. Faisal (2015) adds that students do not come to class as empty vessels. They come to class with a certain preconception about topics in English. But before all these can be done effectively, they must first know that they must meet the needs of diverse children. According to Short and Echevarria (2005):

"...we do English language learners a disservice if we think of them as one-dimensional on the basis of their limited English proficiency. English Language Learners have diverse backgrounds, languages, and

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education profiles. Some read and write above grade level in their own language; others have had limited schooling. Some enter school highly motivated to learn because of family support or an innate drive to succeed; others have had negative school experiences that squelch their motivation. Many come from middle-class families with high levels of literacy; others live in poverty without books in their homes. Those whose native language is Latin-based can recognize English words with the same Latin derivations; those who have different language backgrounds, such as Mandarin or Arabic, lack that advantage. Some students' native language does not even have a written form." (Short & Echevarria, 2005, p. 8)

Since children come from different backgrounds and exhibit different characteristics, there is no particular technique that is perfect for every learner. Having this knowledge will enable early childhood educators to know reasons for selecting a particular approach in teaching learners from different groups. To help young learners read and acquire other literacy skills, it is better teachers try to link what learners might already know about the subject they are going to learn. McCall (2005) notes that English learners face a lot of challenges when learning new or unfamiliar topics. To assist learners to comprehend what is to be taught, it is important they are taken through scaffolds, spend time accessing their background knowledge to make connections from the known to the new.

### **Today's learner**

Eisner (2005 as cited in Elliot (2014) in a study explored two types of learners. The author refers to them as millennial learner and the generation Z learner. These learners according to Elliot (2014) are the most literate generation of learners due to their exposure to modern technological advances such as the use of cell phones, internet and computers. Sweeny (2006) describe these learners as experiential learners who learn as a result of use of hands -on activities, computer games and simulations. They learn by doing and as such have short memory span. When lower grade teachers understand these characteristic that learner exhibit, they will adopt learner-centred approaches to teaching them. The use of learner centred approach to teaching is different from the teaching where the teacher is considered the only expert, delivers lesson through lecture method and 'talk and chalk technique' or the "poured-in" knowledge for the learner. Tapscott (2009) as cited in (Elliot, 2014), carried out a study involving 1,750 Net generation learners. The results revealed eight characteristics of this generation of learners. One was freedom learner. They choose where to work and when. The others show interest in use of phones, find facts from fiction, some showed honesty etc. The findings suggest that learners want to engage in active and interesting learning experiences where they have a choice in what they learn, how and when they learn it. Shulman, Wilson and

Richert (1887), argued that teachers need an understanding of specific learning challenges within a particular subject area and have knowledge of some misconception of learning.

### Learning styles

Djiwandono (2017) revealed learning styles are of two distinguished categories; a perception which incorporates abstract and concrete ideas and processing, includes reflective observation. Djiwandono (2017) explained that these categories are expanded in four major styles to include converges, diverges, assimilators, and accommodators. Accommodating learners based on perception instead of practical reasoning and so relies on people's analysis. The assimilators make use of a logical approach, whereas convergent learners learn new ideas and concepts through practical application. Lee (2011) identified four different types of learners. The concrete learners as learner who learn by watching videos and games, authority oriented learners are those who think are knowledgeable and provide knowledge for their colleagues and so prefer learning from their teachers; communicative learners by interacting with speaker of English and so they make use of English in daily communication; and the analytical learners who try to find language structures mistake on their own as they learn. In the mind of Loo (2004), effectiveness in the use of each style is on learners urge to respond to different learning situation as against other styles irrespective of the environment. Nidhi and Helena (2017) described learning based on Fleming's learning styles model.

**Table 1: Learning styles**

Visual learners	Kinaesthetic learners	Auditory learners
<b>Learning by seeing things around them. They make use of images and objects around to remember what they learn</b>	They learn by doing. They prefer performing physical activities to watching peoples demonstrate or to listen to others. They easily recollect events by how they performed the task themselves	Learn by listening to their teachers. They understand concepts by hearing and speaking and so rely heavily on hearing as their main source of learning

Source: Nidhi & Helena (2017)

For effective teaching and learning to occur, early childhood teachers in the Sissala East Municipal need knowledge of the different characters and learning styles children exhibit so that they can plan and make an objective decision on the content children learn.

Nidhi and Helena (2017) opine many students need a supportive emotional climate to learn and regular assurance that they valued as pupils regardless of their outputs. Some want to be left alone to learn on their own. Foss (1994) points out that when children are asked to learn in a way that makes them uncomfortable, and feel stressed. She added that in a classroom where

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students' learning style is nerved, that learner is constantly operating under stress and learning is likely to be seriously affected. According to Faisal (2015) English teachers need to understand learners and facilitate their potential in an appropriate and suitable manner that they could achieve learning objectives. Smith et al. (1993) suggest that for classroom instruction to be successful in eliminating misconceptions, early grade teachers must present the correct concepts in clear opposition to the learner's faulty conception. If the teacher has knowledge of the learner's misconception, then the selected instruction should include demonstrations and activities that counter evidence conceptual options to target misconception. The confrontation of ideas through discussions in the classroom is then internalised by students as a psychological process of competition that finally results in the replacement of the misconception. In addition teachers should have knowledge of learner characteristics and be aware of theories that bind second language learners' learning.

### **Theories of second language learning**

Cognitive psychologist's researchers have given us information about learning in general. The cognitive theory led by Piaget believe in the cognitive structures and the child's schemata development. The cognitivists perceive children as active learners and can acquire knowledge effectively if teachers or more experienced peer support those (Lilly & Green, 2004). This theory guides teachers to be responsible for engaging students in practical experiences that will help the students build their schemata and assist them in building new knowledge from the experiences they were exposed to. Children in early childhood periods fall within Piaget's preoperational and concrete operations stages. If early childhood educators in the Sissala East Municipal understand characteristics children at these stages exhibit, then they can plan activities that will tailor their needs. Closely related to the cognitivist theory is the Innatist theory.

The Innatist hold a different view from the cognitivist. According to Norm Chomsky, children are biologically programmed for language, and that language develops in the child just in the same way as his other biological functions like his teeth develop. The Innatist argues there is some in-built mechanism or structures in every human being. He calls the mechanism "the Language Acquisition Device "(LAD), which helps the individual to speak (Lilly & Green, 2004). This device was often described as the imaginary 'black box' which exists somewhere in the brain. For the LAD to work, the child needs only samples or inputs of the natural language. This indicates that teachers in the Sissala East Municipal must not condemn children as not capable of learning the language. It makes teachers reflect that they have a duty to help every through motivation to learn language when they are teaching them. The theory informs early childhood teachers that, if the child has a mechanism in the brain that develops over time, it is good they present language items to the children according to their age or level of development.

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The brain is the only organ that is unfinished at birth, but it continues to develop and evolve throughout life (Daniel, 2017). The primary task of the brain in early childhood years is the connection between brain cells. In education, there have been growing calls to use evidence from the human brain to influence what goes on in the classroom. It has been argued that the study of how the brain develops and acquires new information has the potential to transform education Sigm et al. (2004). As such early childhood educators might benefit from integrating evidence from neuroscience. Neuroscience has the potential to enrich teachers' pedagogical knowledge in teaching at the basic school level. Research finding supports Sigm et al., (2014), that the development of the brain during early years have had an impact on our understanding of how children learn and the best support that can be given to them. Lust (2006) posits that knowledge of the language and general cognitive knowledge, as well as various components of language, become dissociated when the brain is injured. As early childhood educators, this is relevant due to its numerous benefits in the classroom.

Hand and Nourot (1999) note teachers should have knowledge of behaviourist theory to engage learners properly. The behavioural theorists believe that for children, language learning is simply a matter of imitation and habit formation. Learners, observe, listen, and pick the sounds, words, sentence structures, and pattern they hear from adults. Adults encourage young learners through praise, and children learn to imitate these language patterns. As adults encourage learners, they continue to practice and imitate the language structures children hear around them until they form what the behaviourists call 'habits' of correct usage of language. If early childhood teachers in the Sissala East have this knowledge, they will continuously use drills in their teaching of English. This is important because children learn by imitating and therefore need enough learning materials for practice so that they forget language items that they are taught.

### **Methodology**

This research employed multiple sampling techniques, which include: purposive, simple random, criterion sampling and lottery sampling techniques. The researcher selected all early childhood educators using purposive sampling. The purposive sampling was considered suitable for this research because all the teachers teach language and literacy and perform a key role in children literacy development. The 180 participants was considered because Burns and Grove (2009) state that when sampling size is large enough, it will help the researcher identify relationships that exist among variables. Cohen et al. (2007) asserts that the larger the sample size, the greater its reliability and makes a more sophisticated statistics available for the researcher to use. The simple random sampling technique was used to select five circuits out the nine circuits. Names of circuits were written on pieces of papers and put in a container. A pupil was blindfolded to pick five circuits. The researcher utilized three instruments. The first is a questionnaire which sought early childhood educators' views on their educational background, content knowledge, and instructional strategies they use in teaching literacy. The



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second instrument was the interview where the researcher had the privilege to have a face to face interaction with participating teachers on their teaching, and the third was observation. The researcher observed teachers as they taught in the classroom in order to get empirical data about their content knowledge, knowledge of instructional strategies, knowledge of learners, and how these instructional strategies influence children's performance. The target population for the research included all early childhood educators in the Sissala East Municipal in the Upper West Region of Ghana. The target population is the aggregate of cases, about which the researcher would like to make generalizations (Polit & Hungler, 1999). Early childhood here is defined as pupils from Kindergarten one to basic three. The accessible population of the study was, teachers in five selected circuits in the Sissala East Municipal. The five circuits were chosen mainly on two grounds: first, the researcher considers five circuits as the accessible population which comprises 180 early childhood educators (KG- 1 to class 3) out of nine (9) circuits.

### **Validity and Reliability**

According to Polit and Hungler (2013), validity is when a set of the test measures the instruments that it is supposed to measure. Creswell (2005) stated that, for any instruments for data collection to be viewed as useful, the instrument should produce data that are meaningful and worthy in order that the results collected could be generalized in other settings. This implies that to check the authenticity of an instrument to be used for data collection in a study, it should go through a validation process. According to Creswell (2005), validation is a process of assessing the authenticity and dependability of the means used to collect data. For the researcher to ensure and enhance the validity of the study, she presented copies of the questionnaire to two lecturers in the department to check whether each item in the questionnaire was related to what it was meant to measure. These specialists checked and commented on early childhood educators' background information, content knowledge, and teachers' knowledge of instructional strategies and the impact of the strategies on learners' performance. They also checked the following: whether the questions were in line with the three components of pedagogical content knowledge the researcher adopted from Andrews (2001) domains of PCK, whether the questions were well-framed in terms of wording and structure and without any form of ambiguity to prevent respondents from misinterpreting questions and whether the questions were relevant to the study. After all, these were done, and the researcher then presented the instruments to the supervisor to scrutinize by checking the language, form, content validity and clarity of questions in all the instruments. After all the expert's suggestions, slight changes were made in the items of the instruments.



**Findings/Results****What knowledge do early childhood educators' have about their learners?**

Early childhood educators' conception of learners in general, their understanding of the learners in their particular classes, how learners require differentiated instructions and materials are relevant to the component of teachers' knowledge of the learners. Early childhood educators' knowledge of subject matter alone is not adequate enough to develop their pedagogical content knowledge. They equally need to have an adequate understanding of the characteristics, interest, challenges, abilities of their learners in order to plan appropriate learning activities to tailor their needs. The researcher was interested in finding out from the respondents their perceptions of knowledge of learners. The result is illustrated in Table 2 below.

**Table 2: Knowledge of Learners**

Statements	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree		N	Mean	Standard Deviation
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%			
I can deal with almost any learning problems of the students.	5	3.1	22	13.7	106	65.8	28	17.4	161	2.98	0.661
I have knowledge of how learners develop and learn			1	0.6	101	64.4	55	35	157	3.34	0.49
I'm aware of the students' learning styles			4	2.5	80	50	76	47.5	160	3.45	0.547
I know the strategies to use in reviewing learners' background knowledge			6	3.8	112	70	42	26.2	160	3.23	0.501
I can deal with almost all learners with different learning abilities	2	1.2	20	12.4	96	59.6	43	26.7	161	3.12	0.656
I can keep the learners' motivation and interest active.			1	0.6	75	46.6	85	52.8	161	3.52	0.513
I can explain the topics my students have difficulty in understanding			3	1.9	105	65.2	53	32.9	161	3.31	0.503

Note: The mean values, Strongly agrees (SA) =3.5 - 4.0, Agree (A)= 2.5 - 3.4, Disagreed(D) = 1.5 – 2.4, Strongly disagreed (DA)=1-1.4,

From Table 2 above, 134 (82.2%) respondents show that they can deal with almost any learning problems of the students. Considering the mean score of 2.98, it implies that early childhood educators in the Sissala East Municipal agreed that they can manage any learning challenges learners may encounter in their learning. Also, out of the total of 160 respondents who answered this questionnaire, 156 (97.5%) respondents with a mean score of 3.45 agreed that they are aware of the students' learning styles exhibited during instructional hours. It means that the majority of early childhood educators in the Sissala East Municipal are aware of the learning styles learners bring to class and therefore will find the plausible intervention to cater for them. The reason teachers' factor in learners learning style according to Loo (2004) is that effectiveness in the use of each style is on the learners urge to respond to different learning situations as against other styles irrespective of the environment. In addition, 139(86.3%) representing the majority of respondents agreed that they can deal with almost all learners with different learning abilities while 22(13.6%) disagreed with the given items. Given that the mean score is 3.12, which implies agreed, it is that respondents have agreed that they can deal with all learners with different abilities. The findings are in line with Daniel (2017), Short and Echevarria (2005), (Hand & Nourot 1999). Hand and Nourot (1999), notes that when early grade teachers apply the principles of the behavioural theories which believe that children's language learning is simply a matter of imitation and habit formation. Thus learners, observe, listen and pick the sounds, words, sentence structures and patterns they hear from adult, then teachers can find activities that will tailor the needs of the learners

## Discussion

In this study, the researcher used questions to gather evidence of early childhood teachers' knowledge of learners. The questions were specifically related to what it meant to use learners prior knowledge, understand Language and literacy, what barriers hinder learners understanding of Language and literacy. The responses of the participants contributed to an indication of their knowledge of learners and what Shulman (1987) described as learners conception and misconception. The researcher asked about the learning difficulties learners encounter during their teaching and what they do to overcome the challenges. They were also asked what makes those areas difficult for the learners and how they explain those concepts or topics that their learners have difficulties in comprehending. When the respondents' views on their knowledge of learners were analysed, the core issues that emerged included: Learners' prior knowledge, motivation, barriers learners face in understanding and how to help learners understand Language and literacy. (See below in Figure 1)

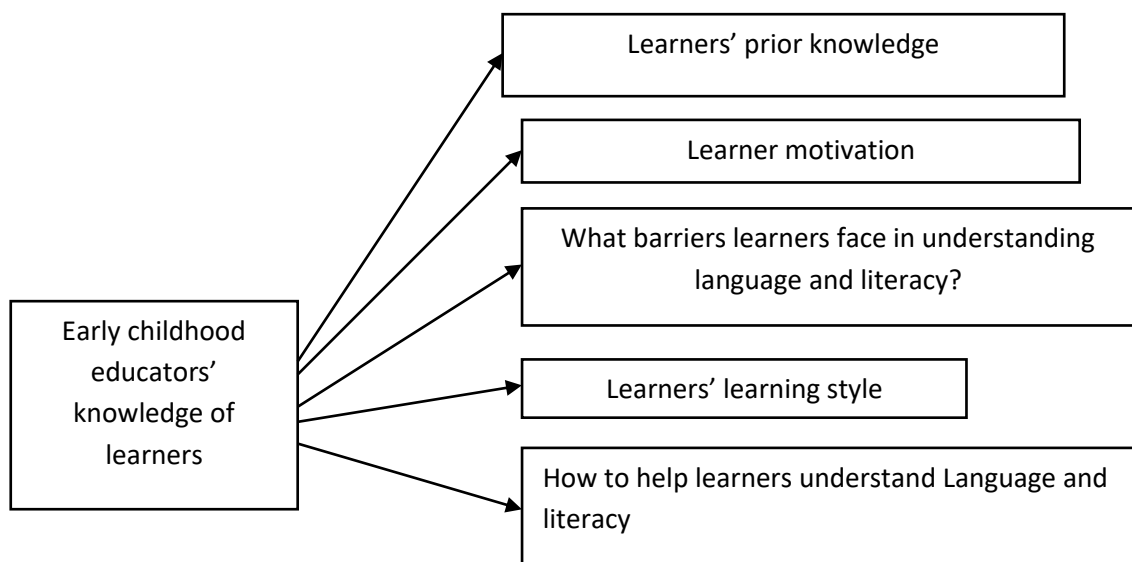


Figure 1: Summary of teachers' knowledge of learner

### Use of learners' prior knowledge

The teachers' interview transcripts and their observation have shown that they are very much aware of learners' previous knowledge and its importance in lesson delivery. Therefore, they use questions, songs, rhymes to review pupil's previous knowledge. This was reported by some of the teachers:

T1 "I use question and answer to review my lesson on what I taught the previous day. When I seek their views, they sometimes come with ideas I least expected."

T1 and T8, a primary two(2) and a KG two teacher both think, it is necessary pupils prior knowledge is explored as that serves as a foundation for the learner to start the lesson and serves as a motivating tool for the learner to get interested in the lesson. According to them, because the children are still young and beginning to acclimatize with the school environment if such activities are not put in place to begin the lessons, the pupils get bored and misbehave in class.

T8: *Sometimes, we could have a picture talk. Sometimes I could just have a character up, and then we could talk about that...we do lots of predicting...really getting their prior knowledge of things...we do a lot of talks, a lot of predicting...Sometimes I do,*

R: *"what sort of language do you think we would expect to see in there?"*

T8: *"So I might preview some vocabulary that might be in there."*

During the observation, the respondents were seen relating the pupils' previous knowledge to the topics they taught. T5 sharing a story asked some questions to relate the new topic to

pupils prior knowledge and also to arouse their interest. Instances such as “*what do you do when your mother sends you to the market? When you visit the market, what do you see people do? How will you demonstrate buying oranges?*”

T7 who taught letter-sound identification linked it with pupils’ previous knowledge by taking the pupils through a song that mentions all the letters of the alphabet and the sounds they make. The interview results complemented what the respondents indicated in the questionnaire that it is important to use learner’s prior knowledge in teaching language and literacy in the Sissala East Municipal. Though the early childhood educators have demonstrated knowledge of the use learner’s prior knowledge in connecting it to new knowledge, some of them were of the view that some of the misconceptions learners have on some topics be overlooked to enable the systematic presentation of lessons. They were also of the view that sometimes in reviewing prior knowledge, the learners provide responses that make the teacher switch off the main lesson.

### Learner motivation

Early childhood educators were asked on their perception of how they motivate their learners. The participant's responses showed that a fairly large number of them believed the learners were motivated by extrinsic motivation, learning environment and intrinsic (see below in Figure 2)

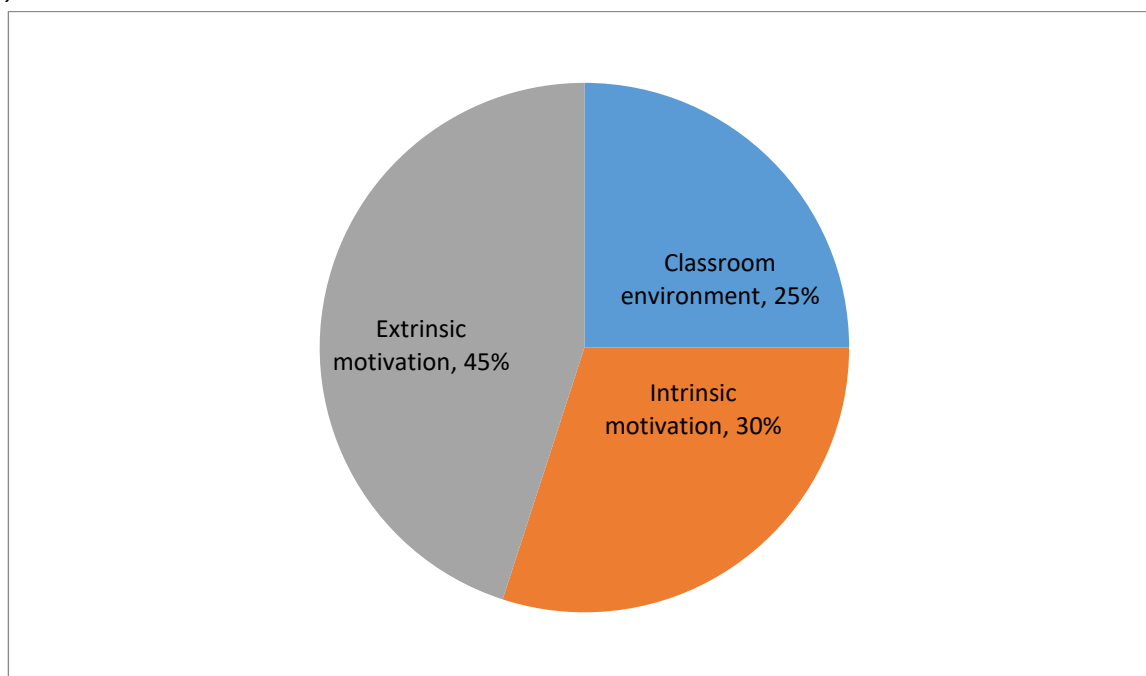


Figure 2:

Ways of motivating learners

Three participants’ believed that the classroom environment serves as a motivating factor. This includes creating of learning corners, display of charts, conversational posters fliers, flashcards,

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and lesson delivery. They believed that when learners are exposed to a literate- rich environment, it improves pupils reading and vocabulary.

T10: *"When the children come to class and see these materials at the learning corners and those you see displayed on the wall, they stay and play with the material. Sometimes when I am not around the children have something to play with."*

For extrinsic motivation, they indicated that they give learners some gifts as rewards when they answer questions right and sometimes when the children behave well too; they give them gifts.

### **Challenges learners face in learning language and literacy**

McNaughton (2002) has indicated that it is well known that young learners enter early childhood centers and primary schools with very different language and literacy experiences, some of which map well to the school and others do not. From the responses of the open question "What learning difficulties do your learners experience in learning language and literacy?" Teachers' responses were coded and categorised under three broad sub-themes: linguistic problems, learning environments and learner attributes.

#### **Linguistics problems**

About 50% of all the problems reported were associated with poor language knowledge and skills. A general problem noted was a weak foundation in English that hindered the learning of language and literacy at school. But the question that was raised was the curriculum stipulates L1 should be used as a medium of instructions for lower primary. Some of the concerns were that some of them do not understand English. Others were of the view that dialectical differences make them use English language. The early childhood educators who teach in primary one to three reported that their pupils do not have adequate language development during kindergarten while the kindergarten teachers feel their pupils have not mastered even the first language adequately in understanding and speaking by the time, they get to KG one. Some teachers also pointed out that some pupils were not ready for the English syllabus in primary one because of poor foundation and so found the learning of English to be a struggle, thus leading to other problems of learning. The following responses were made by two kindergarten and primary two teachers.

T2: *"Understanding the English language is their main problem. I use English because not all the children in my class understand sissali. We have kassenas, dagabas, and the sissali dialects too are not the same"*

*R: what is the language policy for lower primary? Are they not supposed to be taught in the L1?*

*T10: I speak 'paasal'. There are a lot of words in my dialect when I say them the children here don't understand so I prefer English"*

*T4: "language is one problem they face. There are certain things that getting an understanding in L1 is better.*

This confirms what Blease and Condy (2014) that teachers who speak languages different from what learners speak may create problems in learners' understanding their teacher. In the case of teachers in the Sissala East Municipality, not all teachers in the early grades speak the local language. Translators are not also available to communicate teachers' ideas to the children. Hence, creating a barrier between teachers and learners during instructional periods. Similarly, Bell and Bogan (2013) indicated that when young children are learning a new language, being placed in a program that speaks only one language creates a problem for teachers. Often the children cannot receive individual attention and interactions they need in the primary language. This is exactly the situation with the Ghanaian educational system. Children are offered only English as a medium of instruction. Where teachers cannot communicate in the mother tongue, problems arise in giving instructions. In addition, what account for learners' language problems according to Freeberg (2016) is learners in any classroom may have widely different levels of proficiency in both English and their mother tongue. So whatever instruction or support that is provided must take into account these differences. In the situation where teachers even try to mimic the language of the community in giving instruction during lessons, learner language diversity serve as a barrier as teachers would not know which language to adopt. Sissala East Municipality is multilingual hence the language barrier for the teachers. Children come to school speaking different languages and this creates problems for teachers in using a common language.

### **Phonological problems**

The early childhood educators have also noted learners have phonological and phonics problems resulting in inaccurate pronunciation difficulties. Phonological awareness is about recognizing the different sound units in speech. For example, Karim loves the word 'polysyllabic.' It just sounds so cool! When he breaks the word down into its parts, he can see that it has 5 syllables and many different sounds, like the '**p**' sound at the beginning of the word. He is using his phonological awareness. Recognizing syllables, including segmenting words into syllables and chunking letters into syllables, is a big part of phonological awareness. Phonics is the system of relationships between written and spoken language. For example, knowing that '**ph**' makes the '**f**' sound in English is part of phonics. Some of the teachers believe that phonological awareness difficulties are as a result of many sounds, and some of



the letters have many representations. Some teachers really admitted the teaching phonics is difficult because they find it challenging themselves to teach the sounds. The following were some responses by the teachers.

*T9: "Sometimes identifying the sounds. You teach a sound continuously, but then the next day they will say a different sound. The sounds confuse them as to which sound is for which letter and that is because the sounds are many".*

*T8: Most students often reversed in writing between the letters **b** and **d**; **p**, **m**, **n**, **u** and **v** and they are also unable to distinguish the letters that look almost alike **b** and **d**; **m** and **n**."*

In light of this, Crim et al. (2008), concluded that difficulties with phonological awareness tasks could lead to difficulties in other task involving linguistics abilities.

Whereas some of the respondents feel the sounds are many and confuse the learner's others think that teaching phonics is quite challenging for them.

*T7 "I myself find it difficult to identify and pronounce some of the sounds, for example, /s/ and the various realization of the letter c in words beginning sound are difficult".*

*T5 " Some of the phonetics sound like /o/, /ε/, /ɔ/ and the rest are difficult to be pronounced by the children. I have that problem myself. I cannot pronounce some of the vowels. Phonics is difficult to teach because some of these letters have more than one sound."*

93 per cent of the teachers interviewed actually admitted the learners find it difficult to learn the phonics because they do not find teaching it easy. The reason teachers have this difficulty according to Mather, Dickson, Podhajski and Chard, (2001) is that teachers themselves could not produce the sounds correctly and therefore usually skip it. Again, Al-Hazza et al. (2008) believe that teachers have shown weak knowledge in phonics, and so have not mastered the related terms and principles to help children learn to read effectively.

### **Lack of conducive environment**

Another learning problem the teachers reported on (70% of responses) was lack of conducive classroom and home environment and teaching-learning materials for learning Language and literacy. The respondents revealed that the people learners interact with on a daily basis used the mother (Sissali and Dagari since they are the main local languages spoken in the municipality). A high percentage of the responses from the primary two and three teachers indicated that pupils did not have enough exposure to the English Language at home or that they have learnt a non-standard form. This hampered them from developing standard

structures and other more advanced forms of literacy. Some also felt that the syllabus required a great deal more than some pupils could realistically learn in the short time frame because of their poor English language foundation from home. Curriculum analysis is a very important component the researcher has not really paid attention to in this study. This is what a teacher has reflected on her weak primary three class:

*T10 " Most of the children are from illiterate home and have difficulties in understanding English, so language is one major barrier."*

*T1 : The kindergarten curriculum requires the child ..... and most of the children at the time the enter KG 1 are not exposed to the language and some of the topics indicated.*

Besides the above problems learners encounter in learning language and literacy, the respondents also reported that learners feel shy and sometimes afraid to speak English and even the L1. This sometimes happens because they lack confidence. This is mostly due to lack of exposure to the English language early.

*T2 "There is a lot in the syllabus to be covered. But I think that with the kind children we have I may not be able to teach all the topics. This is because the children are not smart and are actually slow in learning".*

Most of the reasons the respondents outlined are external to the teacher. Early childhood educators in the Sissala East Municipal have attributed learners' problems with other reasons other than the teachers themselves. Also, the responses did not include fluency, word recognition phonological awareness and comprehension which are relevant components of teaching reading proposed by the National Reading Panel (2008) and the National Early Literacy Panel Report (2000) (see below Figure 3).

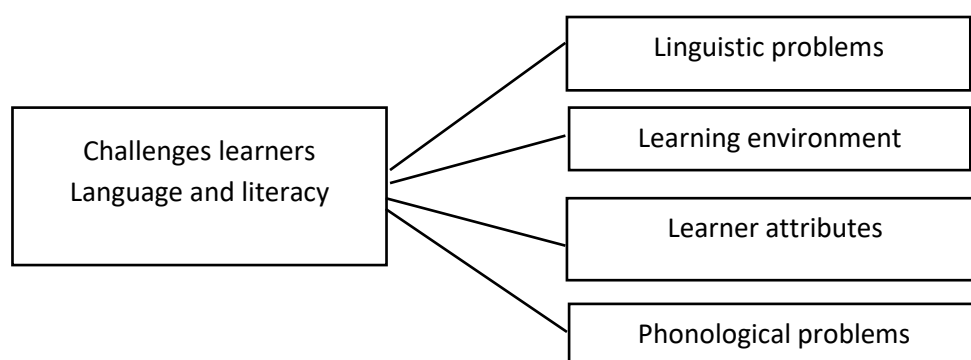


Figure 3: Summary of challenges in teaching Language and literacy

### **Learner' learning style**

Similarly, early childhood educators' 3 of the 10 teachers agreed they are aware of the learning styles (visual, verbal, auditory, kinaesthetic,) that students exhibit during lesson delivery. During the interview, respondents expressed concerns about how well they aware of learners' individual learning styles and measures they put in place in assisting them in meeting their individual learning needs. Though majority of the respondents said they are not of aware learning styles children exhibit.

*T3 said: "I speak aloud for the auditory learners when I am teaching, I write on the board for visual learners to see and those who learn by seeing are given more activities to practice."*

*T4: "There are individual differences in learners, some learn when they touch, some learn when they see and others learn when they hear. For those who learn by hearing, you say it loudly and repeat it. Those who learn by seeing you display a lot of TLMS in the class or during lessons for the children to interact with."*

Those few teachers who are aware of learning styles explained that they, try to figure out the kind of learners they have in their class and try to provide scaffolding for the students. They also provide sentences with cards that promote high order thinking. Most of the early childhood educators mentioned that they use group work, especially those in the AFRIKIDS schools according to individual classroom topics. Pupils at each 'table activity' are given a specific task to perform differently from the others and then later they change roles. This in consonance with Loo (2004) who believes that effectiveness in the use of each style is on learners urge to respond to different learning situation as against other styles irrespective of the environment.

### **How to help learners understand concepts**

The researcher sought participants' opinion on how they help learners understand concepts in Language and literacy. The interview response of participants revealed that to get the learner to understand the subject, learners prior knowledge, use of examples, teachers teaching strategies, simplifying language and the use of pictures will perform the magic. The participating teachers believe that when they engage learners properly by making use of learners' previous knowledge, which serves as a spring board to learning the new topic, the children understand the new topic. The teachers also believe simplifying the language to meet the needs and understanding of the learner facilitate their understanding. The category of teachers' teaching strategies included making use a lot of examples in the mother tongue and

pictures. According to the teachers, colourful pictures attract children's attention and enhance their learning.

**T5:** *"When I make my lesson conversational and demonstrate a lot they understand."*

**T3:** *"I encourage them to talk about themselves and the things they see."*

**T9:** *"I read aloud to them always."*

The respondents in this study seem focused on the use of reading aloud as a way of engaging and interacting with learners to understand reading and develop the necessary skills. This attempt to use read-aloud is important when considering earlier research findings report that, the greater reading aloud the teachers engage with learners, the more the learners improve their comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. Wasik (2006) pointed out that shared book reading provides a context support dialogue and contributes to vocabulary development. Similarly, Lonigan et al. (2009) argued that it provides opportunities in children's reading development in the areas of phonemic awareness, builds the concept of print, letter identification and helps in improving children comprehension skills. Teachers were also observed on competences that indicate they have knowledge of learners and if they factor that in their teaching, (See table 3 below for results of the observation).

### Observation results of teachers knowledge of learners

**Table 3: Results of observation**

Knowledge of learners	Competence	Not very well	Not well	Well	Very well
	Does the teacher make use of pupils' prior knowledge			20	
	The teacher engages the students in activities that develop their understanding of the connection between reading and writing	5	12	3	2
	Do the learners exhibit learning difficulties?			20	
	Use positive, encouraging and inviting classroom discourse to motivate learners	3	2	14	3

From the results in Table 2, all the early childhood educators lessons observed showed that they all make use of learners' previous knowledge when teaching their lessons. This is an

indication that the teachers believe that it is important they know the learners' prior knowledge and connect it to the new knowledge. The results are confirmed by Svinick (1994) who argued that it is helpful to know what knowledge learners bring to the classroom as this knowledge enables early childhood teachers to guide learners unlearn their misconception which interferes with the new knowledge to be learnt. Svinick (1994) said that when the teachers are not able to connect a bit of prior knowledge, it could lead to the learners not understanding an entire lesson. There is an indication from these findings early childhood teachers in the Sissala East Municipal make use of learners' prior knowledge.

During the observation in all the classrooms, learners exhibited varied learning challenges. Difficulties ranged from learners not prepared to talk, language barriers, letter-sound identification, reading simple words and sentences, and problems with comprehension. They were seen writing **b** and **d, p, f,** and **e** in a reversed form. The uppercase E is written as 3 in the reversed and they also mixed upper with lower case letters in writing. They also had difficulties in responding to question even in the L1. Learners could not read and spell four to five-letter words. From the observation result, it can be concluded that early childhood educator's inadequate knowledge of subject matter and pedagogy has an influence on the learners' performance. As Cirino et al (2007) posited in a study of early childhood educators' characteristics and language and literacy of bilingual early grade learners' that teacher content knowledge did not relate to learners outcomes. This is evident content and pedagogy alone do not predict learner outcome. These with other components work together to bring about effective lesson presentation, which leads to learners outcomes.

Many of these barriers learners face have serious implications for their academic success. The effects of these challenges can influence their learning through elementary, secondary and tertiary education. If learners are successful in acquiring the basic skills of reading and writing in the KG and elementary levels, that success lays the foundation for high levels Wray et al (2004). Also, during the observation participants motivated learners by praising them for correct response provided. The learners were also acknowledged by repeating the correct answers they provided. In some cases, the acknowledgement was accompanied with a comment and a smile. An interesting observation the researcher made was teachers' use of a slogan that serves as a motivating tool. When a child is not able to respond to an answer the teachers tell them "I am a learner, you are a learner and we are all learners" as a way of safeguarding the image of the child from feeling bad for not answering a question well However, learners' oral mistakes were ignored. No attempt was made to correct learners' errors.

**Conclusion**

It can be concluded from the findings of the study that the teachers have also demonstrated adequate knowledge of the assessment techniques in assessing their learners. They agreed informal assessment through observation and portfolios are best in assessing the kindergartener whereas summative is use for the primary one to three learners as stipulated in the curriculum. The results of this research suggest that deep knowledge in learners and understanding of content knowledge are relevant but of more relevance is the teachers' ability to transfer the content in a meaningful form to the learner. This echoes the point made by Shulman (1986/7) that "mere content knowledge is likely to be useless pedagogically as content free skills".

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