Public Secondary School English Language Teachers' Perceived Multi-grade Teaching Strategies

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Abstract

Multi-grade teaching strategies are important to address students having various language proficiency levels within the same grade. To this effect, this study examined public secondary school English language teachers' perceived multi-grade teaching strategies. An analytical survey research design was adopted to test the hypothesis. 65 English language teachers were selected through comprehensive sampling technique from five public secondary schools in Arba Minch Town and Zuria Wereda schools, Ethiopia. To collect data from the teachers on their perceived multi-grade teaching strategies, a questionnaire was used. To analyze the data, a one-sample t-test, a one-way analysis of variance test, and a Tukey Honestly Significant Difference test analyses were used. The study concluded that the English language teachers have had an above-middling understanding of multi-grade teaching strategy although their perceptions varied differentially across the subscales. Based on the findings, the Gamo Zone Education Bureau has been recommended to organize an intervention to build the teachers' multi-grade pedagogical capacity for addressing all students.

Keywords: language proficiency level, multi-grade, multi-grade teaching strategies, perception

1. INTRODUCTION

There are several differences among students of the same grade level. Students of the same grade level vary in their attitude and motivation (Lightbown & Spada, 2006), interests and capacities to learn (Ansari, 2013). Besides, students of the same grade level differ in their personalities, learning styles and paces, skills and learning needs (Ansari, 2003; Bremner, 2008; Gurgenidze, 2012; Tomlinson, 2001; Ur, 2005). Specific to English language teaching, every class consists of learners who do not have the same level of language proficiency (Chen, 2015; Mukhammedov, 2017; Salli-Copur, 2005). Thus, students in English classes have different levels of grammatical skills, fluency, accuracy, vocabulary, and receptive and productive skills (Valentic, 2005). In other words, there are low-proficiency level learners labeled as slow, struggling, or weak as they need more time to understand the English learning materials; meanwhile, there are fast, advanced, or strong learners completing the given tasks (Gustiani, 2018; Salli-Copur, 2005). Therefore, Multi-grade teaching, also known as "multilevel," "multiple class," "composite class," or "vertical group" is the practice of teaching students of different language abilities in the same grade (Little, 1995).

Having students with different levels of English language proficiency in the same grade level, providing equal learning opportunities, and engaging and motivating all students equally would be challenging for teachers (Cheng et al., 2009; Hallam & Deathe, 2002) unless they are trained with multi-grade teaching strategies. Language textbooks are prepared with the thought of a homogeneous classroom (Du Plessis & Subramaniem, 2014). Addressing all levels of students with the same materials prepared to a grade level while the students had varied levels of English language competence could be challenging to teachers (Bennedsen & Caspersen, 2007; Lahtinen et al., 2005). The materials (the activities/tasks) prepared at a grade level may not be sufficient to accommodate students in mixed-ability classrooms (Koutselini, 2006; Valiande & Koutselini, 2009). Tasks of the textbook might be boring and very difficult for struggling students while the same tasks might be interesting and very easy for advanced students of the same grade level (Salli-Copur, 2005; Taole, 2022). Therefore, teachers are expected to assess and modify the one-size-fits-all materials to reach all students, employ varied instructional strategies, assessment and feedback, and increase their students' motivation to learn. To this effect, English language teachers are expected to cope

with the demands of multi-grade teaching (Brown, 2010; Lingam, 2007; Salli-Copur, 2005) to address all levels of the students equally.

Teachers' perception of multi-grade teaching is important in education. Teachers' awareness or understanding and interpretation of multi-grade teaching influence their actual teaching practices (Goodson & Sikes, 2008). Perception is an unobservable mental facet about what teachers know, believe, and think and how they interpret the world (Borg, 2013), multi-grade teaching in this study context, would highly impact their teaching practices (Goodson & Sikes, 2008) including multi-grade classes. In other words, teachers' theoretical and practical knowledge of multi-grade teaching of students with different levels of language competence is highly important.

Teachers need to have an awareness of multi-grade teaching strategies, materials/tasks and assessment and feedback to handle such classes. Studies suggested that theoretical and procedural knowledge of a wide range of strategies is essential to accommodate the different language proficiency levels of students and apply various teaching and learning methods to assist the students (Blaz, 2016; Lewis et al., 2012). These include mixed-ability/ heterogeneous flexible pairing and grouping, varying the pace of the instruction and employing various strategies (Dimas & Castellanos, 2014). Besides, teachers should have the awareness of selecting and modifying English teaching materials and tasks to accommodate the multi-grade English proficiency levels of students to have equal access and opportunity for learning (Mukhammedov, 2017). Adapting the materials and varying the difficulty level of tasks to the levels of the students will encourage and challenge both less and more able students (Alastair, 2014; Bremner, 2008; Hallam, et al., 2008). Moreover, teachers understanding of the importance and procedures of assessment and feedback are useful (Panadero & Brown, 2017) as perception may enforce its implementation. However, we could not get local studies related to this issue as far as our attempt is concerned. Therefore, it seems that there is a scarcity of studies related to English language teachers' perceived multi-grade teaching strategies in the study area.

English language teachers' perceived multi-grade teaching strategies might impact the teachers' actual teaching of students with different levels of language competence. However, we observed a scarcity of studies on the English language teachers' perceived multi-grade teaching strategies. Therefore, this study investigated English language teachers' perceived multi-grade teaching strategies by selecting teachers from

public secondary schools in Arba Minch Town and Zuriya Wereda Schools of the Gamo Zone, Ethiopia. Specifically, this study tested the following hypotheses:

- Ho_1: There is no statistically significant difference between expected and observed overall mean values of English language teachers perceived multi-grade teaching strategies at a scale level
- Ho_2: The English language teachers perceived multi-grade teaching strategies do not significantly vary across instructional strategies, assessment and feedback, and activities/tasks subscales
- Ho_3: There is no statistically significant difference between expected and observed mean values of each item of instructional strategies, assessment and feedback, and activities/tasks subscales of perceived multi-grade teaching strategies of the English language teachers

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Design

This study was to investigate the English language teachers' perceived multi-grade teaching strategies at selected public secondary schools in Arba Minch Town and Zuriya Wereda of the Gamo Zone, Ethiopia. The study objectives are quantitative hypothesis testing. We collected quantitative data through questionnaires from English language teachers on their perceived multi-grade teaching strategies. An analytical survey research design helps to collect quantitative data, analyze the data quantitatively, and test the formulated hypothesis. Therefore, we adopted an analytical survey research design to guide the study procedures.

2.2. Participants of the Study

The participants of the study were 65 English language teachers selected through a comprehensive sampling technique. The participants were drawn from five secondary schools that were selected purposively. *The five schools* considered for the study were *Lemate, Lantea, Chamo, Shara, and Arba Minch Community Secondary Schools. The sample is representative of secondary school English language teachers of Arba Minch Town and* Zuriya Wereda Schools. *The data was gathered between December 2021 and April 2022 academic year.*

The sample consisted of 18 females and 47 males in terms of sex. Regarding the educational backgrounds of the participants, 20 had first degrees while the rest 45 held master's degrees. 7 teachers had less than

one year of experience; 8 had between three and five years; 18 had between 6 and 10 years; and the remaining 32 had more than 11 years. Every participant in the study has a major in English and has been working as an English teacher.

2.3. Data Collection Tools

A 5-point Likert scale with strongly agree (5), agree (4), undecided (3), disagree (2), and strongly disagree (1) options to generate data about the English language teachers' perceived multi-grade teaching strategies. The items of the questionnaire were adapted to fit the study issues from pieces of literature (Al-Subaiei, 2017; Khan & Sadaf, 2012; Xanthou & Pavlou, 2010) that have conducted studies and/or made reviews on multi-grade teaching strategies. The questionnaire had three subsections which included perceived multi-grade teaching instruction/strategies (6 items), materials/tasks (10 items), and assessment & feedback (5 items).

Table 1: Internal consistency reliability of perceived multi-grade teaching strategies

Sub-scales/scale	No of items (N)	Cronbach alpha
Instruction /strategies	6	.71
Materials/tasks	10	.84
Assessment and feedback	5	.75
Scale	21	.89

Table 1 shows the internal consistency reliability values of the perceived multi-grade teaching strategy scale and subscales. The reliability values of the subscales were of ≥.70 cut-off while the scale value was (α= .89). The computed values indicated that the scale and the subscales have been consistent enough to measure the underlined constructs.

2.4. Methods of Data Analysis

We encoded the quantitative data collected through the questionnaire into SPSS version 21 for analysis. Before quantitative data analysis, we checked for data distribution and significant outliers that may affect the results using histograms, normal Q-Q Plots, boxplots, and other descriptive statistics. The shape of histograms and probability plots (Normal Q-Q Plots) showed normal distributions for the subscales and scale. Besides, boxplots and skewness, and kurtosis results disclosed no extreme outlier that may influence the outcomes. The skewness and kurtosis values were between +1.5 and -1.5, revealing normal distribution to use mean scores and inferential statistics for data analysis.

To test the formulated hypotheses, parametric inferential tests which included a one-sample t-test, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) test, and a *Tukey* Honestly Significant Difference (*HSD*) test were applied. Specifically, to test whether there was no overall statistically significant difference between the expected and observed mean value of English language teachers' perceived multi-grade teaching strategies (Ho_1), a one-sample t-test was employed at a scale level of five percent ($\alpha = 0.05$) significance level. To examine whether the English language teachers' perceived multi-grade teaching strategies vary significantly across instructional strategies, activities/tasks, and assessment and feedback subscale (Ho_2), a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) test and *Tukey* Honestly Significant Difference (*HSD*) test were used. We checked the data for the assumptions of ANOVA before running it. Besides, we applied a one-sample t-test to test whether there was no statistically significant difference between expected and observed mean values at each item and subscales levels (Ho_3).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

A one-sample t-test result (Table 4) showed a statistically significant overall mean difference between the observed (M= 3.68) and expected mean value of 3.00 at (t=9.37, df=64, p=.000, where p< .05) for teachers' perceived multi-grade teaching strategies. The result rejected the null hypothesis (Ho_1) that stated no statistically significant overall mean difference between the observed and the expected mean at a scale level. Therefore, teachers needed to employ multi-grade teaching strategies significantly above the moderate.

The second hypothesis was to examine whether the English language teachers perceived multi-grade teaching strategies vary significantly across instructional strategies, activities/tasks, and assessment and feedback subscale (Ho_2). One-way ANOVA was used as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: ANOVA comparisons of perceived teaching strategies

	Sum of squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	13.483	2	6.741	14.98	.000
Within Groups	86.407	192	.450		
Total	99.89	194			

N=65 η^2 = .135

The three subscales of multi-grade teaching strategies had mean scores M = 3.87 (SD = .58), M = 3.85 (SD = .79) and M = 3.30 (SD = .62) for perceived instruction/strategies, assessment and feedback, and activities/tasks, respectively. The ANOVA result (Table 2) showed the three subscales' mean scores differed significantly [F (2, 192) = 16.741, p=.000]. The effect size also indicated (η2 = .135) that the difference is medium (Cohen, 1998) and that the three subscales had a variance effect on the overall to multi-grade teaching strategies. Tukey HSD test for multiple comparisons of the subscales was also conducted to pinpoint the subscales that attributed significant differences to the overall multi-grade teaching strategies as presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Multiple comparisons of perceived multi-grade teaching strategy subscales

Multiple Comparisons						
Dependent Variable		**Scores**			**95% CI**	
Tukey HSD		Mean	Std.	Sig	Lower	
(I)	(J)	Difference (I-J)	error		Bound	
1.00 (instruction/strategies)	2.00	.57011*	.11767	.000	.2922	.8481
	3.00	.02549	.11767	.974	-.2525	.3034
2.00 (Materials/activities)	1.00	-.57011*	.11767	.000	-.8481	-.2922
	3.00	-.54462*	.11767	.000	-.8226	-.2667
3.00 (Assessment & feedback)	1.00	-.02549	.11767	.974	-.3034	.2525
	2.00	.54462*	.11767	.000	.2667	.8226

*The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level

Tukey's HSD Test for multiple comparisons indicated statistically significant differences between perceived instruction/strategies and materials/activities subscales (p = 0.000, 95% C.I. = [.292, .848]) and between perceived assessment and feedback and materials/activities subscales (p = 0.000, 95% C.I. = [.266, .882]) of perceived multi-grade teaching strategies. Nevertheless, there was no statistically significant difference between perceived instruction /strategies and assessment and feedback (p=.974, where p>.05, C.I.=[-.303, .252]) of perceived multi-grade teaching strategies subscales. Therefore, perceived instruction/strategies and assessment and feedback subscales had been perceived with an equal weight of higher impact on the overall multi-grade teaching strategies while the perceived materials/activities subscale had been perceived less hierarchically to the overall multi-grade teaching strategies.

The issue of the third hypothesis (Ho$_3$) was to examine whether there was no statistically significant difference between expected and observed mean values of perceived multi-grade teaching strategies at each item and subscale level. To test this hypothesis, a one-sample t-test was employed as indicated in Table 4.

Table 4: One-sample t-test results on perceived multi-grade teaching strategies

Test value=3			
Items			
Instruction /strategies (Sub-scale 1)	**X**	**t**	**p**
1 I vary the pace and level of instructions	3.98	9.26	.000
2 I use individual, pair, or group work activities	4.20	10.06	.000
3 I change pairs/groups from time to time	3.71	4.82	.000
4 I employ mixed-ability grouping	4.06	10.12	.000
7 I use different strategies to cater to differences	4.36	22.69	
			.000
8 My teaching strategies focus on middle-level students	3.26	1.75	.084
Sub-scale 1	**3.87**	**12.09**	**.000**
Materials/tasks (Sub-scale 2)			
5 I give extra activities to those who finish earlier	3.66	5.08	.000
9 I use open-ended tasks	3.46	4.58	.000
10 I offer more communicative activities	3.37	2.58	.012
11 I give cooperative tasks	3.43	4.51	.000
12 I provide word games and guessing games	3.11	1.07	.289
13 I give role plays in which each student takes a part	3.20	1.36	.180
14 I offer Jigsaw activities	3.11	.806	.423
15 I include information gap activities in tasks	3.49	4.09	.000
16 I provide a menu of works for the students to choose	2.69	-2.25	.025
17 I mix compulsory with optional tasks	3.52	6.86	.000
Sub-scale 2	**3.30**	**3.94**	**.000**
Assessment and Feedback (Sub-scale 3)			
6 I provide immediate, relevant, and explicit feedback	4.15	13.06	.000
18 I use peer assessment	3.41	2.44	.017
19 I use formative assessment	4.38	13.25	.000
20 I make use of student self-assessment	3.51	3.34	.001
21 I give various regular progress tests/assessments	3.77	4.97	.000
Sub-scale 3	**3.85**	**8.69**	**.000**
Scale	**3.68**	**9.37**	**.000**

As shown in Table 4, a one-sample t-test result indicated statistically significant higher observed mean values from the expected mean of 3.00 (at p=.000) for the three sub-scales of perceived multi-grade teaching

strategies. Besides, statistically significant higher observed mean values from the expected mean of 3.00 (at p=.000) were observed for five items (1, 2, 3, 4, & 7) of teachers' perceived multi-grade the teaching instruction /strategies subscale and statistically non-significant difference for one item (item 8) at (t=1.75, df=64, p=.084, where p > 0.05). Thus, the results disclosed that teachers have the thought to vary the pace and level of instructions (item 1), use individual, pair, or group work activities (item 2), change pairs/groups from time to time (item 3), engage mixed ability grouping (item 4), and apply different strategies to cater for differences (item 7). Nonetheless, teachers have been found indecisive on whether their perceived multi-grade teaching strategies focus on middle-level students or not (item 8).

As to perceived materials/tasks teachers use in teaching multi-grade classes, statistically significant higher observed mean values from the expected mean of 3.00 (at p=.000) were observed for six items (5, 9, 10, 11, 15 & 17) of the subscale at (p < .05) and statistically non-significant difference for three items (12, 13, & 14) at (p > 0.05). Besides, a statistically significant, and yet lower observed mean value from the expected mean of 3.00 was observed for item 16 at (p=.025, where p < .05). Explicitly explaining, teachers perceived giving extra activities to those who finish earlier (item 5), using open-ended tasks (item 9), offering more communicative activities (item 10), giving cooperative tasks (11) and information gap activities (items 15) and using compulsory tasks with optional tasks (item 17) meaningfully above the middling; whereas, teachers perceived to use a menu of works for the students to choose significantly below the moderate. Nonetheless, teachers have ambivalent perceptions on whether they have to provide word games and guessing games (item 12), give role plays (item 13), and offer Jigsaw activities (item 14) or not.

Concerning teachers' perceived use of assessment and feedback in multi-grade classes, statistically significant higher observed mean values from the expected mean of 3.00 were observed for all items of the subscale (at p<. 05). To this effect, teachers believe in using varied forms of formative assessment (item 19) including peer and self-assessments (18 & 20), and various regular formative tests/assessments (item 21) meaningfully above the middling. Also, teachers have perceived to provide students with immediate, relevant, and explicit feedback (item 6) profoundly.

3.2. Discussion

Concerning the English language teachers' perceived overall multi-grade teaching strategy, the result indicated that teachers had an above-middling understanding of multi-grade teaching strategy in general at

the scale level. Early studies also corroborated the current study results that English language teachers had perceived to apply multi-grade teaching strategies to cope with the varied proficiency levels of students and address all levels of the students equally (Brown, 2010; Lingam, 2007 Salli-Copur, 2005).

As to whether the English language teachers' perceived multi-grade teaching strategies vary or not significantly across instructional strategy, assessment and feedback, and activities/tasks subscales, the result disclosed that perceived instruction/strategy and assessment and feedback subscales had been perceived with an equal weight of higher impact on the overall multi-grade teaching strategies while the materials/activities subscale had been perceived less hierarchically to the overall multi-grade teaching strategies. The three subscales had a variance effect of 13.5% on the overall multi-grade teaching strategies. Early studies did not compare the scale dimensions as done in the current study. Hence, it seems rare to find related studies to corroborate and/ or refute the current findings dimension-wise with the early works.

The third hypothesis was to test whether there was no statistically significant difference or not between expected and observed mean values of each item of instructional strategies, assessment and feedback, and activities/tasks subscales of perceived multi-grade teaching strategies of the English language teachers. Concerning items of teachers' perceived multi-grade teaching instruction /strategies subscale, the results divulged that teachers have the thought to vary the pace and level of instructions, use individual, pair, or group work activities, change pairs/groups from time to time, engage mixed ability grouping, and apply different strategies to cater for differences. Nonetheless, teachers have been found indecisive on whether their perceived multi-grade teaching strategies focus on middle-level students or not. In line with the current findings, studies also confirmed that teachers had the intention to use heterogeneous flexible pairing and grouping, vary the pace of the instruction, and employ various strategies (Dimas & Castellanos, 2014) in multi-grade classes to accommodate the different language proficiency levels of students (Blaz, 2016; Lewis et al., 2012).

Regarding items of perceived materials/tasks teachers use to teaching multi-grade classes, the results revealed that teachers perceived giving extra activities to those who finish earlier, using open-ended tasks, offering more communicative activities, giving cooperative tasks and information gap activities and using compulsory tasks with optional tasks meaningfully above the average; whereas, teachers perceived using a menu of works for the students to choose significantly below the moderate. Nonetheless, teachers have

undecided stances on whether they have to provide word games and guessing games, give role plays and offer Jigsaw activities or not. Studies also suggest that modifying the materials and varying the difficulty level of tasks to the levels of the students will encourage and challenge both less and more able students (Alastair, 2014; Bremner, 2008; Hallam, et al., 2008) since grade-level materials, including textbooks, may not be sufficient to accommodate the multi-grade English proficiency levels of students (Koutselini, 2006; Salli-Copur, 2005; Taole, 2022; Valiande & Koutselini, 2009) to create equal access and opportunity for learning (Mukhammedov, 2017).

As to teachers' perceived use of assessment and feedback in multi-grade classes, the results have shown that teachers have had the opinion to use varied forms of formative assessment including peer and self-assessments, and various regular formative tests/assessments overwhelmingly above the middling. Besides, the result indicated teachers have viewed the need to provide students with immediate, relevant, and explicit feedback profoundly. Teachers understanding of the importance and procedures of assessment and feedback are useful (Panadero & Brown, 2017) as perception may enforce its implementation. Therefore, teachers need to assess and modify the one-size-fits-all materials to reach all students and employ varied instructional strategies, assessment and feedback to increase their students' motivation to learn.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This section introduces the conclusions and recommendations of the study briefly. Besides, it highlights the implications, areas of concern for future studies, and potential study limitations.

4.1. Conclusions

This study investigated the English language teachers' perceived multi-grade teaching strategies at selected public secondary schools in Arba Minch Town and Zuriya Wereda schools, Ethiopia. The study concluded that the English language teachers at the study site had an above-middling understanding of multi-grade teaching strategy in general at the scale level. In other words, the English language teachers have had the disposition to apply multi-grade teaching strategies by 13.5% to cope with the varied proficiency levels of students. Although the English language teachers have had the intention to apply multi-grade teaching strategies as a whole, the study concluded teachers' perceived multi-grade teaching strategies varied differentially across the subscales. Accordingly, the English language teachers have shown higher perceptions of instruction/strategies and assessment and feedback subscales with an equal weight while the

materials/activities subscale has been perceived lower hierarchically to the overall multi-grade teaching strategies.

Specific to an item-level analysis of multi-grade instruction/strategy subscale, the study concluded that the teachers have the thought to vary the pace and level of instructions, use individual, pair, or group work activities, change pairs/groups from time to time, engage mixed ability grouping, and apply different strategies to cater for differences as long as the multi-grade teaching instruction /strategies are concerned. Nonetheless, the study also has revealed that teachers have shown indecisiveness on whether they should deliver their instruction to middle-level learners or not in teaching multi-grade classes. As to item level analysis of the multi-grade materials/tasks subscale, the study concluded that teachers perceived giving extra activities to those who finish earlier, using open-ended tasks, offering more communicative activities, giving cooperative tasks and information gap activities and using compulsory tasks with optional tasks meaningfully above the average; whereas, teachers perceived using a menu of works for the students to choose significantly below the moderate. However, the study has also come up with undecided stances of teachers on whether they have to provide word games and guessing games, give role plays and offer Jigsaw activities or not. As to teachers' perceived use of assessment and feedback in multi-grade classes, teachers have had the outlook to use varied forms of formative assessment including peer and self-assessments, and various regular formative tests/assessments overwhelmingly above the middling. Moreover, it was also concluded that teachers have the insight into the need to provide students with immediate, relevant, and explicit feedback.

4.2. Recommendations

Based on the conclusions drawn, we made the following recommendations:
Although English language teachers have had an above-middling understanding of multi-grade teaching strategy in general at the scale level, their disposition to apply the teaching strategies has not been found proportional across the dimensions. Therefore, the local education bureau, the Gamo Zone, has been recommended to organize on-the-job training for the English language teachers to develop their overall and balanced disposition to use a multi-grade teaching strategy across the dimensions. Besides, the study showed teachers used to apply some specific multi-grade instructions/strategies and materials/tasks while they have shown ambivalent stances on some and significantly below the moderate on some others. Consequently, the

Gamo Zone Education Bureau is suggested to prepare an intervention to build the English language pedagogical capacity to address all students in multi-grade classes.

- No conflict of interest

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