

Instructional Constraints in Teaching of Reading in Early Childhood Classes in Nairobi County, Kenya

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Abstract

Reading has been identified as one of the most reliable indicators of whether a learner will attain the competence needed to achieve academic success and contribute actively to society. Research findings in Kenyan primary and secondary schools reveal inadequate reading skills among the students. The purpose of this study was to identify approaches used in teaching of reading in Early Childhood Education. The objective of the study was to establish teachers' orientation and challenges faced by teachers in the teaching of reading. The study adopted the descriptive research design using the survey method and observation technique and was conducted in twenty schools in Nairobi County. The findings showed that lack of resources was the greatest challenge faced by early learning teachers in the teaching of reading. They also indicated that they were not well equipped with the relevant methods of teaching reading. The study recommends that teachers should be adequately equipped with teaching and learning resources, trained in different approaches and in serviced in the latest approaches. Serving teachers should get refresher courses on teaching of reading methods to improve learning in schools in the country.

Keywords: teaching reading, teaching method, teacher qualification, teaching and Learning resources, early learning

1.0 The Background and Literature Review

Reading is basic and fundamental to acquisition of language and learning which leads to high academic performance. It has been identified as one of the most reliable indicators of whether a learner will attain the competence needed to achieve academic success, and to contribute actively to society. It is therefore a vital skill as access to most information is through reading. This makes it necessary for the teachers in early childhood classes to use methods, techniques and materials that will help develop proficiency in reading (Cummins and Swain, 1986).

According to Chall (1989), learners below nine years;- that is pre-primary to standard three, are in early stages of reading. After nine years which in Kenya places them in standard four, the learners are expected to learn all the subjects in the school curriculum independently. Information about stages of learning to read indicate that learners starting at this level should be reading to learn, where they use reading as a tool for acquiring new knowledge (Kangethe 1988). A large number of children are however going through school without mastery in reading which is a real concern to the nation if we have to achieve our vision 2030 and our sustainable development goals. Reading in early years of schooling should among other things, aim at reading for pleasure through learners' exposure to a variety of reading materials, to help learners develop a word band of vocabulary and expose them to new ideas and sentence structures that are used later to communicate both verbally and in the written form (Gathumbi, 2008).

1.1 Childhood Years

A report from The World Conference on Education for All (EFA) that took place in Jomtien, Thailand (March 1990) articulated the significance of the childhood years as the foundation of an individual. It is the fastest period of growth and development in all aspects which include physical, socio-emotional, language, cognitive, ethical and even brain development. Furthermore, childhood is a critical stage of development that forms the future wellbeing and learning. Studies in Psychology have shown that half of a person's intelligence potential is developed during this period. These years are proven important to the later life of a child. The impact of proper reading approaches in early childhood is therefore well established especially in enhancing literacy development.

1.2 Environmental Components

For a rich conducive literacy environment, instructional resources are necessary. The environmental components have three main categories: books, literacy materials, and writing. This study was designed to examine the

diversity, availability, and content of the reading, writing, and literacy materials available for children's use: in others words, how much exposure children have to different elements of literacy. In particular, the study looked into the accessibility of alphabet and word puzzles, books, templates to form letters, paper to write on, and writing tools. This is because previous research supports the notion that access to these materials provides children with important opportunities to experience reading and writing which helps to promote the language and literacy development that is important for later school success (Morrow & Rand, 1991). In particular, results of previous study indicate that children are likely to engage in reading and writing more frequently in classroom environments with a higher quantity and variety of literacy materials (for example, books, pencils, paper).

1.3 Problems in School Performance

In Kenya after the release of KCPE results each year, candidates are reported to have taken their own lives for failing to perform as expected, the more reason to ensure that children are able to read at the right time, that is, in early childhood stages to enhance academic performance and avoid shocking news reported across the country. Runo ascertains that studies conducted in Kenya: (Chege, 1999, Kirigia, 1991, and Njoroge, 2000) are all in agreement that learners with problems in reading English, have problems in school performance in general. English performance continues to decline due to inadequacy of basic resources used for teaching and learning English (Njoroge, 2000). Recent research done in Kenya found that inadequacy in English literacy at primary school, left learners ill-prepared to face life outside the classroom (Gathumbi, 2008). Factors such as school absenteeism or lack of encouragement and interest in the child's academic work by parents, poor reading facilities both at home and school are among the main causes of reading difficulties in the learners (Runo, 2010)

1.4 Assessment for Teaching and Learning.

Uwezo (2011) an organization that promotes learning in East Africa, has released an assessment for teaching and learning in the region indicating low level of learning in the institutions. The children, the report says, are not reading and 1 out of 3 lacks basic literacy and numeracy skill while 2 out of 10 class 7 pupils do not have class 2 competencies. Studies have indicated that teachers lack adequate skills to transfer knowledge to learners and teacher training colleges need to do more. Are they aware and do they have the resources? Could this be the reason why some children cannot read, leading to low levels of learning hence poor KCPE performance and subsequent poor general academic achievement? The latter further jeopardizes the country's social and economic growth.

2.0 Importance of Reading

Reading is a very important skill as it is recognized as a necessary part of obtaining a better job and access to literature and knowledge. However, reading in a foreign language such as English might be a problem for some people. Snow, Burns and Griffin (2006) claim that there are three potential stumbling blocks in reading, namely, the difficulty in understanding and using the alphabetic principle, the failure to transfer comprehension skills of spoken language to reading and the lack of motivation and appreciation for reading. They further add that children who face early reading problem lack prior knowledge and relevant skills such as the ability to distinguish sounds, the ability to master the mechanics of reading and the ability to identify letters. Runo (2010) explains that reading is an activity which involves the comprehension and interpretation of ideas symbolized by written or printed language. It is a complex process that places demands on the individuals (i) perceptual, (ii) linguistic, (iii) cognitive and (iv) effective systems (Adams, 2002).

2.1 Challenges of Teaching Reading

There are a number of factors that affect teaching of reading in early childhood settings especially in the English language. This is because irregular spelling of English words prevents one to one relationship between letters seen and the sounds heard as opposed to other languages like Kiswahili. The reason for this is that many English words are borrowed from other languages such as Latin, Greek, French and German. The rules for letter sound-correspondence do not always provide the means to accurate decoding. The use of phonics is therefore aimed at reducing confusion and memory load on children by elimination options of guessing hence creating confident readers. A good phonic program builds a strong foundation for most children. It is important to note that there are approximately 44 speech sounds in English and that children learn to pronounce these sounds as they learn to talk and they learn to associate the sounds with letters as they learn to read and write. Sounds (phonemes) are represented in print with diagonal lines to differentiate them from letters or letter combination (Adams, 1990).

2.2 Instructional Resources

Scholars have tried valiantly, inventing many teaching methods, in the hope that all children could be taught to read. In Kenya the primary school English syllabus spells out the objectives of teaching English in primary school but remains silent about the competences in each language skill that should be developed in learners

including reading. Methodology on how to teach the content is not suggested in the syllabus which becomes a problem for the language teacher whose level of English language might also be low (Gathumbi, 2005). Teachers have however observed that whatever methods have been used to teach English reading, a few children always struggle, never achieving literacy. Some of the methods used besides Phonics and whole word include the Alphabetic Letter Method and Emergent Reading. Considering children's access to the language and literacy materials, this study examined availability and accessibility of variety of items in the child's environment. In keeping with the Piagetian perspective that children are natural explorers who construct knowledge and meaning from hands-on learning experiences, it is important that children are in environments where they are surrounded by opportunities to write and to see concepts of print (Miller, 2002). Therefore, language and literacy materials should be available in multiple areas of the room rather than just in one or two. This allows children to encounter literacy in all domains of their play.

3.0 Study methodology

This study employed a descriptive survey design to observe, describe and document aspects of a target population that comprised the teachers in the 20 schools in Dagoreti division and 26 schools in Westlands Division and their pupils in early childhood grades which are from pre-unit to Class 3. They were chosen because they are in direct contact with the pupils at this level and are well versed with teaching methods and strategies in reading in early childhood. School heads of English Department from each school were also included because they were the ones in charge of their respective schools as the main curriculum implementation agents through the class 3 teacher. They provided the required guidance to the teachers and could therefore enhance or be a hindrance to effective implementation of the curriculum. The study used teacher questionnaire as the main tool and class observation for reading problems and resources available inside the classrooms.

4.0 Results

4.1 Challenges faced by teachers in teaching of Reading

The study obtained data on challenges faced by teachers in teaching Reading both in Early Childhood Classes and in class three. The results are submitted below.

4.1.1 Challenges faced by teachers in teaching of Reading in Early Childhood Classes

In order to find out the kind of challenges teachers faced in the teaching of reading among pre-unit teachers, data was collected on whether teachers faced challenges in the teaching of reading, the results are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Types of Challenges Faced Teachers in Pre-Unit

Response	Frequency	Percent
Low absorption capacity for children	2	10
Confusion because parents sometimes teach children different languages compared to school	2	10
Children not going through nursery school preparation	2	10
Lack of teaching or reading materials in the homes	10	50
Lack of systematic techniques of reading	4	20
Total	20	100

Table 1 shows types of challenges faced by teachers in pre unit classes. Lack of reading materials in the homes was the most common challenge faced, at 10 (50%), followed by lack of systematic techniques of reading at 4 (20%), low absorption capacity for children and failure to take children through nursery school but instead taking them straight to pre-unit, each at 2(10%) with a similar number of teachers indicating confusion in teaching approaches both from parents and teachers. They were of the opinion that parents sometimes taught children different languages from those taught at school, making children confused.

4.1.2 Challenges faced by Class Three teachers in Teaching Reading

The study sought to find out if the class three teachers had challenges in teaching of reading. The results are presented in Table 2

Table 2: Types of Challenges Faced by Class Three Teachers in Teaching of Reading

	Frequency	Percent
Lack of resources	8	40
Mother tongue interference	2	10
Pupils forgetting easily	2	10
The workload is a lot	2	10
Lack of a strong pre-school foundation	4	20
Inadequate exposure	2	10
Total	20	100

Table 2: shows challenges faced by teachers in class 3. Lack of resources was the most common challenge cited at 8 (40%), followed by failure to take children through pre-school curriculum at 5(20%), then mother tongue interference, forgetfulness, heavy workload for pupils and inadequate exposure, at 2 (10%) each.

4.2 Overcoming Challenges in Pre-Unit and Class Three

The study obtained data on ways of overcoming challenges in teaching of reading at both pre-unit and class three. The results are presented in the section below.

4.2.1 How Teachers Try to Overcome Challenge in Pre-unit

In order to obtain the needed data on how teachers try to overcome challenges in teaching of reading, teachers were asked to indicate how they thought the challenges they faced could be overcome. The results are presented on Table 3 below

Table 3: How Teachers Try to Overcome Challenge in Pre unit

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Use of cards and story books	2	10
Parents should stop tutoring pupils	2	10
Taking children to nursery	4	20
Providing teaching/reading materials	8	40
Training teachers to improve their skills	4	20
Total	20	100

Table 3 presents the strategies used by teachers to try to overcome challenges in Pre-Unit. Providing teaching/reading materials was largely cited as a solution to challenges faced in pre-unit at 8(40%), followed by taking children through nursery education and more training for teachers, each at 4 (20%), use of cards and story books, and stopping interference from tutoring by parents, all at 2(10%).

4.2.2 How Teachers Try to Overcome Challenge in Pre-unit

To understand how teachers tried to mitigate the challenges faced by teachers in teaching of reading in class three, data was collected from teachers and presented in Table 4.

Table 4: How Class 3 Teachers Try to Overcome Challenges

Responses	Frequency	Percent
More training for teachers	2	10
Improving resources	8	40
Reading widely	2	10
Improving Teacher/Pupil ratio or having assistants	4	10
Emphasizing on early childhood education	6	30
Total	20	100

Table 4 presents the responses on how to overcome challenges in class 3 in which 8 (40%) indicated Improving resources as the most common solution of overcoming challenges, followed by emphasis on early childhood education at 6 (30%); increased teacher training and increased number of teachers and assistants and reading widely was cited by 2(10%) of class 3 teachers as a way of overcoming the challenges. From the findings resources were cited as the greatest challenge by both pre-unit and class 3 teachers. In the reviewed literature studies indicate that children are likely to engage in reading and writing more frequently in a classroom environment with a higher quantity and variety of literacy materials.

4.3 Factors Affecting Reading in Early Childhood Classes

The study sought to establish what teachers felt was the problem in teaching of reading in both Pre-unit and Class three. The responses are presented in Figure 1: below

Figure 1: Factors that affect Reading in Early Childhood Classes

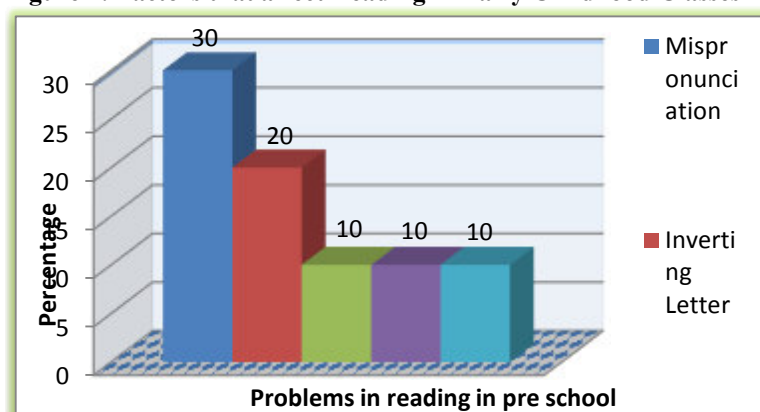


Figure 1: Factors that affect Reading at Pre School Level

Figure 1 shows main problems according to the teachers in reading at Pre-school level. Mispronunciation was the most common problem, at 30%, followed by inverting of letters at 20%, and then dyslexia, slow learning and lack of reading materials, each factor at 10%.

5.0 Conclusion

The study concludes that provision and availability of reading/learning materials is the most recognized solution to the reading problems. Majority of pre-unit and class 3 teachers indicated that they face challenges in the teaching of reading. Lack of reading materials is the most common challenge faced by pre-unit and class 3 teachers. Inadequate training and inability of students to comprehend easily are major reasons why teaching of reading was problematic. Mother tongue interference is the most common factor affecting teaching of reading, followed by inadequate materials, age, lack of adequate time and teacher-pupil ratio, and lastly disability especially dyslexia which affects the ability to read. Majority of teachers rarely attended training. The minority who attend training do not consider the training as adequate. Mispronunciation is the most common problem, followed by inverting of letters and dyslexia.

6.0 Recommendations

There is need for the Ministry of Education and other stakeholders to ensure that reading/learning materials are adequately provided and are available in pre-unit and lower primary class three levels. Awareness should be created to sensitize parents on the need to work closely with the teachers especially during the early years of learning when children are introduced to this crucial lifelong skill of reading. Pre-school teachers as role models for children should play their role to influence the learners positively. They should be creative in using various instructional strategies available as they teach reading. It is important that teachers appreciate children's first language or the language of their catchment area to enable the learning of both the first language and English. Trainers of teachers in Early Childhood Education Colleges should make a deliberate effort to ensure that the teacher trainees are aware of the approved and age appropriate instructional strategies. They should make sure that teachers have adequate knowledge on language development and teaching methods in early childhood. The effect of the first language in learning English should be addressed during training and continuous refresher courses provided where teachers can update and keep abreast on the appropriate teaching strategies as well as emerging issues in education. In-service training may not provide time to acquire the relevant skills and it is therefore necessary to strengthen the training program by increasing the training period. Materials for play and learning should be developed to be used both in school and at home to enhance reading and at this time and age it is necessary to integrate ICT in early childhood learning institutions to enhance learning.

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