

Underachievement in Reading and Writing Skills and the Implications in Promoting Life-Long Learning

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Abstract

The ability to read and write has been regularly identified as key variables that impact education quality and relevance. It is predicated that in addition to being important learning competences, reading and writing are essential tools as they are the main gateway to accessing and disseminating knowledge and skills in and out of school. When children are unable to read efficiently, the path to gathering printed information is blocked. In Kenya, English is inter alia, the language of examinations, textbooks and the medium of instruction from primary class four upwards. Recognition of the importance of English language mastery notwithstanding, there is evidence that the reality in the school system is far below the ideal. This Paper reports the findings of a research done to establish the English reading and writing literacy levels of primary school learners in Kenya. Criterion-referenced tests based on developed English literacy benchmarks were administered nationally to a representative sample of learners in primary class six. The results showed that the majority of learners had not attained the desirable English literacy competence levels to be able to access curricula of subjects taught in English or express their ideas in writing. This paper will discuss the impact of reading and writing underachievement on provision of quality education in the Free Primary Education (FPE) era. The research project was supported by the Rockefeller Foundation.

Key Words: Benchmarks, Attainment targets, Quality, Fundamental skills, Competences.

Introduction

Reading and writing are important literacy skills and are both receptive and productive skills respectively. The two are fundamental skills in and out of school. Reading has been defined variously. For example, the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, Pearson Educational Ltd, (2003) defines reading as the ability to: look at written words and understand what they say; find out information from books, newspaper etc; say words in a book so people can hear them. Writing is defined as the ability to: form letters, words or numbers with a pen or pencil; to state something in a book, newspaper, letter etc. For UNESCO (1996), literacy takes many forms such as: ability to read printed materials, retrieve information from computers and access information on posters and signs. It transcends mere reading, writing and numeric skills, and focuses on what people do with these skills. These two skills are part of the four basic language skills that are required in development of literacy in school. The other two basic skills are listening and speaking. The above definitions imply it is imperative that learners leave school literate in order to be productive, both as individuals and in the society.

Reading and writing are abilities mainly used to retrieve and disseminate information from printed and electronic sources, so as to function effectively in society, achieve one's goals and develop knowledge and nurture potential for further learning. Development of reading and writing skills is part of literacy development, which is a tool for every form of learning, in and out of school. It is a prerequisite for participation in social, political and economic activities, as well as learning throughout life. Literacy also enables learners to gain access to subjects studied in school, read for information and pleasure, and communicate effectively.

The importance of literacy in the language of instruction is not debatable. Brumfit (1985) says that the language of instruction is ultimately bound up with the process of education at all levels. However, language is much more than education and education is much more than language, yet neither can be extricated from the other; each entails the other. Language is the vehicle through which knowledge is transmitted.

In order for literacy skills to have any substantial effect on development of education, the issue of quality has to be in the forefront. The quality of education in a developing country like Kenya is negatively affected by a combination of factors. For example, the announcement of FPE was a significant step towards upholding the global millennium goal of achieving Education for All (EFA) by 2015. The basic aim was to ensure equitable access and improvement in providing quality and efficiency in education (Kenya Government, 2003). The pronouncement saw an influx of 1.5 million extra children (in some cases adults) into the primary schools (Kenya Government 2004). Some of these had dropped out of school due to lack of tuition fees while others had not joined school previously due to the same reason. The large numbers were not anticipated and the education sector was overwhelmed. This influx of students has persisted and it has caused classrooms to be congested. Classrooms that were built to hold 40 students comfortably were now expected to hold more than twice that number in some schools. There is hardly any space to provide individual attention.

Another problem faced by students is lack of access to sufficient educational and reading materials that would

enhance development of literacy. Lack of exposure to reading materials would ultimately mean poor performance in other language skills. Prior arrangements to cater for the influx of new students had not been made and both educational materials and facilities were lacking. Without interventions, this scenario was bound to affect education quality negatively (ADEA 2003).

Teachers were and still are in a dilemma, as they were not prepared or trained to handle such large numbers. They also do not use literacy practices that are sufficiently effective in ensuring that each child learns and masters basic reading and writing skills, as well as other language skills. English, although a foreign language, is the language of instruction (LOI) in Kenya from primary class four upwards. According to Gathumbi and Ssebbuga (2005) the quality of the teacher determines success or failure of learners. Again, assessment at the school level and in the wider education system shows an absence of will and commitment to use assessment and testing practices to ensure that each child becomes fully literate in English, (Groenewegen, 2008).

Looking at Kenya's language policy (Mackay Report, 1981), it is clear that students have to grapple with literacy in English right from entry into the education system because the language policy encompasses a bilingual approach. The child's mother tongue (MT), or the relevant local language, is used as the language of instruction (LOI) in lower primary classes (1-3) while English is taught as a subject. The contradiction is that even though learners are supposed to learn in MT, subject materials are written in English not MT. In the upper primary classes (4-8), English takes over as the language of instruction. It is imperative that learners master adequate basic competencies in English in the lower classes, to be able to use it as the LOI for all subjects, (except other languages) in upper primary. Unfortunately, as has been stated, previous and current research on the status of learners' competencies on various English language skills tell a worrisome story, as will be seen below.

Earlier Research: The SACMEQ Studies

In 1998, the Ministry of Education Science and Technology (MoEST), in collaboration with the Southern African Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality (SACMEQ) conducted studies to assess class 6 learners' competencies in reading in English. In 2000 the Rockefeller Foundation set up a program known as Quality Education for Social Transformation (QUEST) designed to support research and interventions in improving the quality of primary education in Africa. Armed with the results from the SACMEQ, reported in IIEP and MoEST (2001) studies, Kenyan researchers undertook a number of short-term research projects during the year 2000 concerning two issues related to the excellence of education and English language teaching and learning, namely: [a] the nature and mastery of the basic competencies valued by parents (Muthwii 2002); and [b] children's knowledge about sexual and reproductive health, issues that might precipitate learners absenteeism and drop out, and thus curtail their chances of consistent attendance in order to master literacy skills (Mutunga 2003; Stewart 2004). Two main findings with regard to the basic competences were confirmed.

Firstly, parents in both urban and rural settings, considered mastery of the English language to be the critical competency required to be acquired and mastered at the primary school level. They did not think learning of mother tongues or Kiswahili which is also spoken by the majority of Kenyans as a second language would help to improve their children's livelihoods. Parents believed that mastery of English in primary school would propel their children into secondary and further education. To them, this would mean their children had a better chance of getting well paying office employment. Most higher education institutions and employers require a pass in English to join or get employment. It is, therefore, imperative that English language is taught well.

Secondly, although the policy statement on language may seem plausible in theory, in practice it is inundated with many problems. Teachers and learners carry the tremendous burden of sorting out the dilemmas and contradictions of language in education. Some schools, by opting for English as the LOI from primary class one, appeared to have significantly resolved some of the problems. However, the majority of teachers especially in rural areas, motivated by the future utility of English as the language of examinations and employment, use code switching between mother tongue, Kiswahili and English as languages of instruction from primary class one. This scenario creates a confused instructional and learning environment for the learners, who in most cases are learning English for the first time.

Assessing Mastery of Language Skills

One of the objectives of the study was to assess learner's proficiency in English. There was a need, therefore, to develop systematic interventions (Gathumbi 2005). The first and major one to be developed was a set of levels of attainment targets, referred to as norms or benchmarks. To arrive at these, many activities were carried out like: extensive literature review, administering of questionnaires and interview schedules to education stakeholders of every calibre, conducting focus group discussions with parents, teachers and students, analysing educational materials like the English language syllabus, English language textbooks and those of other subjects in the curriculum, and Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) examination papers taken for the previous three years. This is the terminal examination taken after 8 years of primary schooling. Analysis of the examination

papers was meant to establish the skills mainly tested. Attainment targets were developed for classes three and six (Kenyatta University, 2004). This paper discusses how the targets were used to develop assessment tools, administer them and analyse the collected data, with the aim of establishing learners' reading and writing skills at class six. This is the level at which teachers start preparing learners for the primary school terminal KCPE examination, which is administered nationally after eight years of schooling.

Two books with the expected attainment targets for classes 3 and 6 were published (Gathumbi, Vikiru and Bwire, 2007). These were used in the development of a number of Criterion-referenced tests (CRTs) to assess various language skills. The main objective of developing and administering the test discussed in this paper was to find out the extent to which class six learners were able to read with understanding, respond to questions based on the read material, and express their ideas, as well as perform other tasks in writing. Another purpose of assessing learners was to find out how well the defined attainment targets approximated the overall hypothesis, which was based on the earlier reported findings from SACMEQ. The findings were that the levels of English language competencies in the four basic language skills were still quite low, five years down the line. This paper discusses the findings of tests that assessed proficiency in reading and writing skills.

Rationale

The rationale for deciding to write a paper based on the performance in these two areas of language learning was strengthened by the words of Mayor, the Director General UNESCO, (2001) who said, If you cannot read and write, you may be counted, you may be covered in some statistical account, but definitely, you do not count.

As stated earlier, reading and writing are the two crucial skills mostly used to retrieve information from various sources, and to pass the same to others. They are also the skills used to assess learners in examinations. The examinee has to read with understanding to be able to respond to questions in writing. Failure to attain proficiency in these two skills would mean failure to pass examinations, and consequently failure to advance to higher levels of education.

Methodology

Prior to conducting the main study, a pilot study was done in 8 schools, one in each province, to establish the validity and reliability of the research instruments. During the main study, testing was carried out throughout the country in the eight provinces (administrative regions) of Kenya. A class six-student population of 7,253 in 185 schools was sampled using random and purposeful sampling methods. Examination statistics from Kenya National Examinations Council (KNEC) for the previous three years were used to provide sampling data. The main criteria used to select the sample were whether: the school was public or private, learners' previous performance at KCPE examinations and the number of students in the classroom.

One of the ultimate goals of the study was to institutionalize the research process and findings in the mainstream education system. To accomplish this goal, all the Provincial Directors of Education (PDE) who were the highest education administrators in various Provinces (regions) were involved right from the word go. Taking them on board also ensured that outcomes from the research were ploughed back into the system to improve the quality of education. Other senior education officials were also involved to ensure interventions were successfully institutionalized. At the beginning, they assisted in identifying teachers to be involved in the administration of the tests, using the set criteria.

English Language Skills Tested

As the test was meant to reflect learners' mastery levels of reading and writing, an integrative approach was used in testing some items. This approach facilitated testing of various reading and writing sub-skills using single test items. Learners were required to exhibit comprehension and skimming skills, factual recall, application of knowledge and drawing of inferences, among other things. The test specifically assessed proficiency in the following skills and sub-skills.

As can be seen in the table below, the reading skills required a testee to read, understand the instructions, questions and passages, before answering the questions. Other areas tested were: reading and analyzing a map, interpreting signs and symbols, reading and deducing information from a picture, reading words and arranging them in alphabetical order, generating information from tables and also using given information to fill tables.

Writing skills were assessed through answering questions in writing. Other aspects assessed were handwriting, rewriting mathematical statements in number form and vice versa, filling in blank spaces with the correct form of the given word, as well as using words from lists to fill blank spaces in a passage. In integrating the skills, punctuation, grammar, spelling and use of appropriate vocabulary were also assessed.

The table below shows the skills and sub-skills tested in different questions.

Table 1: SKILLS AND SUB-SKILLS TESTED BY VARIOUS QUESTIONS

Question	Skills	Sub-skills	Activities
1 a-b	Reading, Writing	Fast reading: Skimming	Timed reading: Read passage and answer questions in writing
2 a-e	Reading, Writing	Comprehension; Recall	Read passage and answer questions in writing.
3 a-e	Map Reading, Writing	Observation, Interpretation of features.	Study the map and find locations of features from descriptions. Write down.
4 a-e	Map Reading, Writing	Meanings of Signs: Deduction	Getting meanings of signs & symbols in a map
5	Reading, Writing	Alphabetical Order	Reading & arranging words in Alphabetical order
6	Reading, Writing	Reading and interpreting tables	Using information in a table to show distance in kilometers between locations
7	Reading, Writing	Synthesizing: relating pieces of information	Using information in table to show cost of sending letters by inland and overseas mail
8	Reading, Writing	Reading & Writing numbers	Read & write numbers in word form
9	Reading, Writing	Reading & Writing numbers	Read & write words in number form
10	Reading, Writing	Interpretation of information	Read a sum written in word form & rewrite in number form
11	Reading, Writing & Grammar	Filling in gaps with correct words/tenses	Filling blank spaces in a passage with suitable words from a given list.
12	Reading, Writing	Read & Fill a form	Filling in a short form with necessary information

Data Analyses Procedure

Analysis of scores was based on determining: frequency of scores, central tendencies such as means and modes, and proportions in terms of percentages. The highest score a learner could get was 36 while the lowest was 0.

The test scores were placed in four intervals then graded according to three basic levels of competency. Interval 4 was the Desired Competence Level (DCL) which meant that a learner who attained a score within this interval (27 – 36 marks) had attained the DCL required for learning at the next level - class 7. Such a candidate was deemed able to benefit adequately in a lesson where the medium of instruction (English) required demonstration of the tested competencies. Interval 3 was the Minimum Competence Level (MCL). Those who fell within this category had scores between 18 –26. This meant that s/he was able to get by, at the next level (class 7), albeit with difficulty, in a lesson where the medium of instruction was English. This would happen where demonstration of the tested competencies was required. Learners who fell under intervals 1 and 2 (0-17 marks) had failed to attain MCL. This meant they would be highly handicapped by the language of instruction as they would be effectively excluded from grasping new information in any subject where English was the LOI. Such a learner would also find difficulties in benefiting from the curriculum materials that are written and taught in English, if s/he were to proceed to the next level.

Data analyses were also based on different regions of the country. Until recently, Kenya had eight administrative regional boundaries referred to as provinces. There are educational and physical disparities in these regions. Since this study was national, it was important to also compare learners' performance between the various regions.

Kenya also has both private and public schools. Although the majority of private schools are found in urban areas, there are some rural private schools. A comparison of performance in reading and writing was also carried out between public and private schools.

Overall Performance

The total number of learners who took the test (Test Paper 3) was 7253. The best performance was observed in 22 learners: 7 girls and 15 boys who scored the total mark of 36. On the other hand, 3 learners: 1 girl and 2 boys got zero. Out of the total number, 2727 (37.60%) attained the DCL. This meant that they were competent in the use of English as a medium of instruction and capable of benefiting from the curriculum materials and

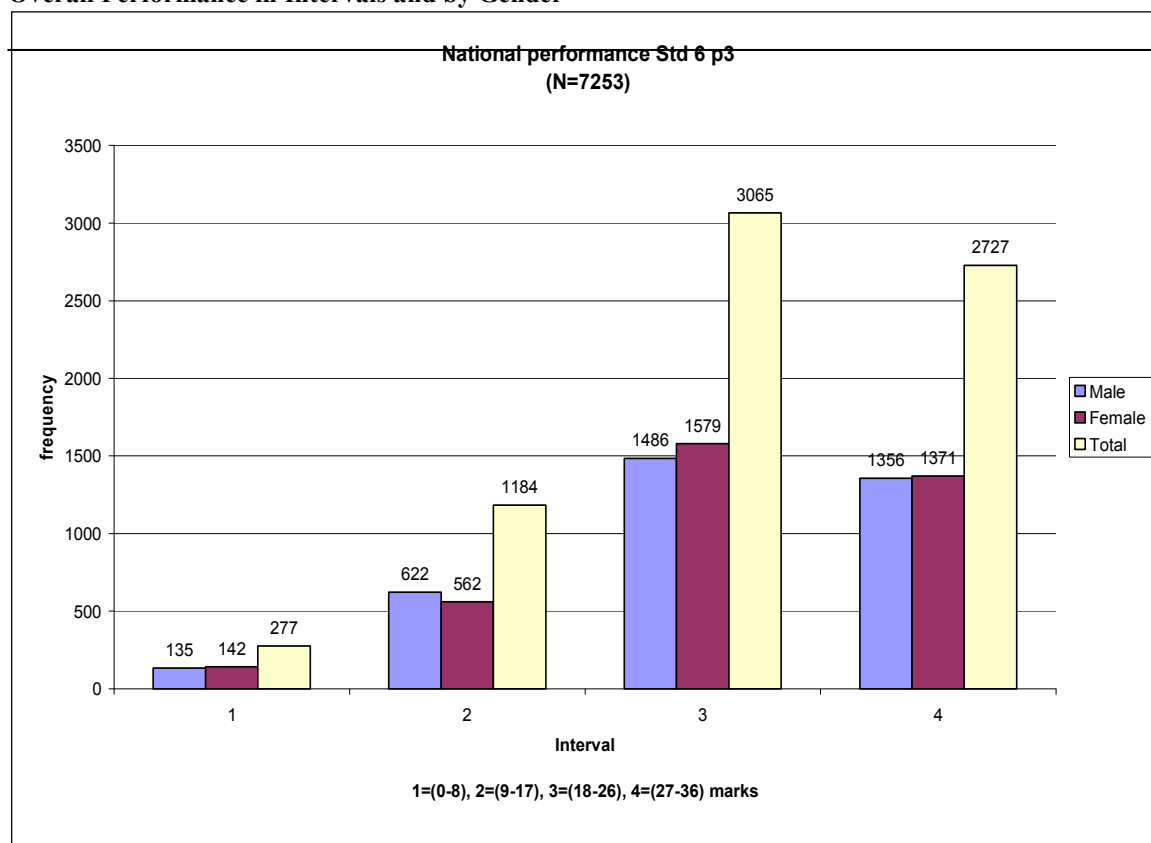
instruction. English language would, therefore, not be a barrier to accessing content in English and in other subjects. There were 3065 learners (42.26%) who obtained MCL. This implies that, learners are able to follow instruction in English and access curriculum materials at the next level, with some difficulty. A substantial number of learners: 1461(20.14%) were within the 0-17 marks range which is below the MCL. This category was referred to as Below Minimum Competency Level (BMCL). Learners who fell within this category would not benefit much from instruction in English. They would not benefit from learning in English which is the language of instruction. Learning in English would also mean that they could not access content in other subjects taught in English.

The above results show there is a lot that both the teacher and the learners will need to do to get to the DCL of operation in English, before they complete their primary school course. The above data also show the majority of the learners (4526 – 62.4%) failed to attain the DCL. Overall, girls performed slightly better (18.8%) at DCL than boys (18.6%) in every Province except in North Eastern. The findings contradict those of Belton (1995) that showed gender did not contribute significantly to the variations in writing performance. Terman and Tyler (1954) in their study found girls doing better in verbal skills than boys. Table 2 and bar graph below show performance in intervals by gender.

Table 2: Performance in Intervals and by Gender

Category	Interval (Marks)	Boys	Girls	Total	
1	0 – 8	135	142	277	Below minimum
2	9 –17	622	562	1184	
3	18 – 26	1486	1579	3065	Minimum Competence Level
4	27 – 36	1356	1371	2727	Desired Competence Level

Overall Performance in Intervals and by Gender



Performance at DCL in each Region

As stated above, it is the wish of every educator to have learners fall under the Desired Competency Level as this is a sure way of ensuring better performance and academic upward mobility. In Kenya there are varied regional disparities in terms of provision of both human and physical resources. This is despite the fact that the

curriculum and national examinations are centralized. The test results reported here also confirmed this through the varied performance data in each region. The overall performance at the DCL was 37.6%. Nairobi, which is a cosmopolitan city, had the best performance with 59.2%. Central province followed with 52.0%. These two provinces are next to each other and they have better educational facilities than are found elsewhere. Access to information and technology is also easier in central due to its proximity to Nairobi. However, it should be noted that while some schools in these provinces, especially the private ones, scored high marks, which helped to raise the overall percentage, score, some schools in the same provinces that are located in rural or slum settings scored very low marks. Rift Valley was third with 36.3%. The province too has some urban and private schools but the performance fell below the national overall performance. This might have been caused by the expansive nature of the province where pastoralists move with their children from place to place in search of pasture, thereby disrupting the learning process. The other five provinces are mainly rural in nature and had lower percentages at the DCL. These provinces are situated away from Nairobi and many have poor learning facilities and resources. The lowest scores (13.9%) were observed in North Eastern province (NEP). This might have been caused by a number of factors. Firstly, most people are pastoralists thereby having little time to concentrate with education. Secondly, much of the province is semi arid and poor, and the attitude among parents about the value of education, especially girls' education is negative. It is important to note that only in NEP that girls' performance was lower than that of boys. The girls in the province have no role models to emulate as the majority of them are married off early, thereby curtailing their chances of getting formal education. Again, only in the same region that we could not get the boys/girls 50:50 ratio used in sampling, as there were not enough girls in school to obtain the required sample.

Performance in Public and Private Schools

Performance in private schools was much better than that of public schools. This may be due to several factors. One being that English is the common language of transacting business in private schools, unlike in public schools where mother tongue and Kiswahili are the languages of communication, especially outside the classroom. Private schools are better resourced in terms of finances and materials, including other motivational school facilities. Class sizes in private schools are much smaller than in public schools where classrooms are congested. Learners in private schools can, therefore be given individual attention when need arises. which is not the case in public schools. In a private school too, there is enough space to practice various teaching techniques like group discussion that promote language learning. It is impossible to use such teaching techniques in congested classrooms like those found in public schools.

Conclusion

It is important to note that in this study, attaining the DCL is not equivalent to optimum competence as this is never attained, and it is a goal towards which all language speakers, be they native or otherwise, constantly aspire to. The findings in this study confirmed that the pattern of competencies in English had not improved since the SACMEQ study in 1998 where 77% of class six learners had not attained the desired reading competency level. The overall conclusion was that there was an urgent need to improve the teaching and learning of the English language, if measurable improvement in performance in all subjects of the curriculum is to be registered, especially in rural schools. Given that the new FPE programme had added 1.5 million children into the system (Kenya Government 2004), it is all the more imperative to promote early and proper mastery of reading and writing skills, since English is the LOI and of examinations.

If a learner in class six is unable to read and write comprehensively, it is most likely s/he will complete primary school education still illiterate, unless measures are put in place to remedy this malfunction. An illiterate person has limitations when it comes to fully participating in the activities of a modern technological world.

On the part of the teacher, Manaka (1999) says, "To be fit for teaching is to be able to handle change". This applies to both teachers and teacher educators. There are many challenges for the teacher that have come with the introduction of FPE. Education requires that teachers be prepared to guide the change process within schools and in teacher training institutions. Criteria for selecting prospective teachers should make it mandatory for one to get a pass in English at the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education examination, done after four years of secondary school education. Currently, a pass in English is not a requirement for those who want to train as primary school teachers, provided one has an aggregate 'C' grade. A teacher, who fails in English and is trained to teach English, would not be effective as s/he lacks the tools of the trade. Teachers are also in a dilemma as many schools do not have the required resources and facilities, and there is also lack of support. With the FPE in place, the teacher is overwhelmed by the large numbers of students, without proper provision of resources and facilities. In-service training of teachers on how to teach large classes is also necessary. Lastly, the results of this study should be used to further the reform agenda in teacher education, especially in the development of educational resources. Unless these measures are put in place, it will not be possible for learners to attain the

DCL to be able to cope with challenges of learning at various levels.

There should also be institutionalization of the developed interventions in the Ministry of Education, together with its constituent institutions namely Kenya Institute of Education in charge of curriculum development, Kenya National Examinations Council in charge of national examinations, and institutions responsible for training teachers. This would ensure there is ownership of the interventions and commitment to accept and sustain the innovations to improve education quality.

Establishment of school and class libraries should be made mandatory in every school to improve the reading culture. This would ultimately lead to improved writing skills as there is a lot to be gained from reading widely. A learner who reads widely is able to write using, for example, creativity, proper and varied sentence structures, vocabulary and spelling. All these are gotten from reading materials. Lastly, future teaching, assessment, development of reading materials and curriculum development, should be based on attainment targets, as they provide benchmarks upon which to peg teaching, learning and assessment procedures, at various levels.

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