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Teaching of reading to early grade readers: implications for the Kenyan primary school teacher

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ABSTRACT

Reading is a complex process that involves the use of the cognitive, affective, psychomotor and social domains. Each of these aspects has a remarkable influence a learner's reading skills and abilities development, hence determining a learner's rate of reading success. The teacher plays a crucial role in developing children's reading skills, although most learners enter school having attained some degree of phonological awareness of their L1 languages. Effective reading instruction then, requires that the teacher manipulates the cognitive, affective, psychomotor and social domains in order to develop appropriate reading competencies in early grade readers through the instructional practices chosen during instruction. This paper examines significant aspects crucial to effective reading instruction among early grade readers and their implications for early grade reading instruction in Kenya. It is hoped that this paper will provide teachers and researchers with stimulating insights in reading instruction for early grade readers in developing countries and Kenya in particular.

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Introduction

Language is without doubt the most important factor in the learning process, the transfer of knowledge and skills is mediated through the spoken or written word (Bamgbose, 1992 cited in Moyo, 2009). In the Kenyan Education system English language occupies a central position in the school curriculum. It is the medium of instruction from standard 4 onwards in all subjects except in Kiswahili. Namachi et al. (2011) argue that learners who gain acceptable proficiency in English language can reap many academic, social and professional benefits. Kimemia (2002) agrees with this position by saying that a child who is fluent and competent in English language for instance is socially seen as a well educated individual. Also a child who does better in English language examinations stands a better chance to be considered for further education or employment. This then basically means that English language has a significant proportion of influence in educational success in Kenya.

The teaching of English language in Kenyan primary schools is aimed at enabling pupils to: acquire a sufficient command of English language in spoken and written forms, communicate fluently, follow subject courses and textbooks, and read for pleasure and information (Kenya Institute of Education syllabus, 2006). The primary English language course is meant to address itself to the four basic language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Of the four language skills reading is the most important skill any child can leave primary school with in terms of the ability to read independently and effectively for meaning (Mynard, 2007).

The Primary English language syllabus posits that the specific objective of teaching reading in lower and upper primary schools is to enable learners acquire reading skills to be able to read and understand instructions, read for information and for pleasure. Specific to teaching reading in lower primary is

the objective of enabling learners to develop vocabulary, sentence structure and comprehension skills.

It is worth noting that reading is a complex process. It involves use of the cognitive, affective, psychomotor and social domains, each of which influences a reader's reading success. Thus, reading efficiency is a matter of how effective a discourse, the reader can create from the text, either in terms of rapport with the writer or in terms of his/her purpose in engaging in the reading in the first place. Fundamentally, this view looks at reading as an act of interaction between a reader and the author mediated through the written text (Ajideh, 2003).

To participate fully in reading, the reader must be actively involved in the reading process. Learning to read is a complex process that involves a variety of skills and abilities. Young children for instance bring a variety of information to the task of learning to read. By the time children enter standard one, most of them should have attained a high degree of phonological awareness of their first language. That is, they should have developed the conscious ability to identify and manipulate units of speech. Therefore, children must bring their existing knowledge and experiences to bear on the task of learning to read which for most children, begins in earnest with the introduction of formal instruction in standard 1 (Monique & Lefevre, 2002).

Learning to read then means the ability to identify, pronounce words and decode their meanings using ones' prior experiences or as a hierarchy of skills, from processing of individual letters and their associated sounds, word recognition to text-processing competencies (Weaver, 1994, cited in Foertsch, 2003). Effective reading requires the use of many strategies and sources of information in order to understand written texts. Effective reading lessons require that the teacher carefully chooses instructional reading activities/ practices that

make learners active in reading strategies and skills development.

In the Kenyan primary school education, especially in monolingual communities, the learners' L1 (depending on their language community) should be used as the language of instruction from standard 1-3, where many of the language activities should be orally enacted. The awareness of the sound structure of the oral language provides a foundation upon which reading, writing and spelling can be taught. This too, serves as a foundation for learning the many conventions and features of printed language such as directionality, spacing and punctuation that are strange and new to beginning readers. Children whose first language is not English language should develop language systems at the lower primary school levels that can be used as a basis for reading instruction in the upper primary school levels.

The importance of reading in education

Reading plays a significant role in the education of an individual, especially children, hence an integral part of any child's education. Reading is indeed a basic life skill; as such it is the cornerstone for a child's success in school and throughout life. It creates a good foundation and inspiration for a child's development and education. It awakens children's interest in books, which helps to cultivate a reading culture in them hence a push to future academic excellence. It equally provides an opportunity to develop children's minds and this helps them form enduring habits and character (Akindele, 2012). According to UNICEF(2005) cited in Akindele(2012) young children are in their most important development stage of life, what they learn now and what happens to them now will influence them for the rest of their life.

The early years in the child's life are the most significant of the child's psychosocial and cognitive development. Indeed the reading skills children are introduced to during the early years of school life will to a large extent influence their later reading for learning experiences. Reading for literacy experience and reading to acquire and use information for instance are two major purposes that account for the majority of reading experiences of young children. Readers make meaning of reading texts in a variety of ways, depending not only on the purpose of reading, but also on the difficulty level of the text and the reader's prior knowledge (Martin et al., 2007).

Reading as a language skill occupies a central position in enabling learners to access knowledge, skills and attitudes in various fields from the early years of a child's life. It is also important for survival purposes and for pleasure. A child who reads appropriately stands out to be different amidst others and outshines the ones who are not good readers. However, the ability to read with understanding is the most important skills, not only in learning English language but also in other school subjects (Ellis, 1985, cited in Groenewegen (Ed), 2008).

Without the ability to read properly, opportunities for personal fulfilment and job success will inevitably be lost. Skills in reading enable learners to benefit from educational activities, and to participate fully in the social and economic activities around them. It is indeed an important foundational skill that influences academic success across the school curriculum and an indicator for overall school achievement (N'Namdi, 2005).

The long term goal of reading instruction therefore, is to provide learners with the skills necessary to help them construct meaning from texts they come across.

For learners to develop reading skills in English language fully, the teacher should be in a position to choose reading

instructional practices carefully and purposefully. Each reading instructional practice chosen must be meaningful- should be aimed at enabling the learner to acquire a particular reading competency. This should also be followed by enough practice to ensure that the learner is able to apply the learnt skill in new reading contexts. However, a teacher's choice of inappropriate instructional practices may fail to develop in the learners the necessary reading skills to enable them make meaning from reading texts they encounter in the various fields of knowledge. This may eventually lead to poor examination performance not only in English language but also in other school subjects.

In Kenya, low reading achievement is perhaps one of the factors that are the root cause of frequent low pupils' performance in the Kenya primary school KCPE examinations. It has been observed that once children enrol in school, many fail to make progress from one grade to the next due to their inability to comprehend content in the various realms of knowledge covered. For example, the Ministry of Education Science and Technology's statistics show that the grade repetition phenomenon is considerable and that the highest repetition rate of 17.2% was in standard one by the year 2002 (MoEST, 2003).

It is possible that the low reading achievement in upper primary actually contributes to children dropping out of school, since schooling becomes a burden rather than an enjoyable experience. At this young age it can be embarrassing for them, and can result in low motivation and self-esteem. Perhaps this is owing to the use of English language as the medium of instruction, in a situation where many children do not have an appropriate English language competency to enable them make meaning of what they read. Obanya (2001) cited in Brook-Utne, (2005: 24) in support of this claim says:

The African child's major learning problem is a linguistic problem. Instruction is usually delivered in a language that is not normally used in his/her immediate environment, a language neither the learner nor the teacher understands and uses well enough.

This observation significantly reflects the Kenyan scenario, more especially for schools in rural settings where the learners' L1 is predominantly used in communication outside the classrooms.

The earlier children start to enjoy stories and start to develop reading skills the better for them. Effective reading skills helps children enjoy and find pleasure in reading books which forms into long life reading habits for reading in later years. The need to inculcate this reading culture early in the life of children is of great importance. It thus requires the teacher to understand the reading instructional environment under which s/he works so as to select appropriate reading instructional practices for reading instruction.

The status of learners' reading abilities in Kenya

Despite the fact that educational outcomes are narrowly measured by students' achievement in national examinations and other types of assessment, there are indications from research that Kenyan primary school learners are not attaining reading competency levels necessary for successful learning. Kigotho (3rd October, 2012) observes that 20% of children complete primary school without having learned how to read, write...skills that should be obtained in the first two years of primary school learning. Out of the 770,000 pupils who sat KCPE in 2011, 153,000 pupils registered no tangible academic skills. The teachers who are supposed to guide pupils to develop

the reading skills are themselves poor in the same skills. For instance UNESCO studies have pointed out that a large number of teachers in North Eastern counties of Kenya for instance have little competence in reading primary English language books. Indeed, if this is the case in most rural primary schools in Kenya, it effectively then means that pupils' academic performance will forever remain low.

The 1998, Southern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) administered a criterion referenced English language reading test to a representative national sample of Kenyan primary schools. The results of this study indicated that 77% of Kenyan standard 6 pupils had not attained the English language reading mastery level, deemed desirable for successful learning in standard 7 (UNESCO II EP, 2001). This perhaps points to the eventual poor performance in the standard 8 Kenya Certificate of Primary Examination (KCPE), both in English language and in the content areas/subjects.

In another context, a Kenya National Examinations Council (KNEC) report of the KCPE of 2005 observed that some of the candidates were not ready for the examination. The candidates should not have gone beyond standard 1 as they had not learned appropriate skills in reading in English language and other subject areas, by the time they sat for the examination in standard 8. The report singled out the English language composition paper where some candidates spent their examination time copying the lead sentence over and over again instead of constructing a piece of narrative in line with the sentence.

This is a clear indication of how a number of learners are not able to read and interpret questions correctly; perhaps due to the inappropriate reading instructional practices that teachers take them through during reading lessons. This further shows that some second language learners leave primary school without the necessary enabling reading skills and strategies to enable them interact with printed information (Groenewegen (Ed), 2008; Gathumbi & Masembe, 2005; Inyega, 2007).

This situation might be attributed to the inappropriate instructional practices used by teachers' in the teaching of reading. As observed by Pressley (2001), most teachers' reading instruction is usually based on post-reading comprehension testing. In this type of instruction learners are given a text to read and later attempt a comprehension task based on the text. This instructional approach assumes that learners know how to read, interpret the questions appropriately, construct appropriate responses and will be successful in future reading tasks. Post-reading comprehension testing in one text does not provide learners with decoding, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension skills to overcome reading difficulties in another text. Due to lack of these enabling skills, learners will go through the education system with little gains in reading competencies.

Gathumbi and Masembe (2005) observe that much of the English language teaching in Kenyan primary schools is teacher-centred and pupils are hardly ever provided with any opportunity to express their ideas. 'Teacher-talk' dominates language classroom teaching, giving the learners little time to practice the learnt skills. This approach presupposes a situation where the teacher's choice of instructional practices is skewed to what the teacher will do during instruction rather than what learners will do. Learners in most educational settings are viewed as passive

listeners who are provided with knowledge by the teacher, their contribution in meaning construction being minimal.

The teacher's role in developing early grade readers' reading competencies

The ability to read is highly valued and is important for personal, social and economic well-being of an individual. For children to acquire this ability, they need to be taught by knowledgeable teachers who provide quality reading instruction. The role of the teacher is to be responsive to the vast and varied needs of each child, and to promote an educational climate that facilitates motivation and the desire to read. Firstly, the reading lesson must reflect the identity of the children, children's orientations and beliefs towards reading. For this to be possible teachers teaching reading should learn to plan their instructional lessons so as to meet the individual needs of each learner in the reading lesson by using appropriate instructional approaches and resources. This is through the use of images that reflect the children's physical (pictures of people in the community or of the children themselves) and cultural identity. If children see themselves as contributors, they are able to take responsibility for the reading process (N'Namdi, 2005).

Secondly, the teacher should employ various behavioural and teaching strategies to promote pupil motivation. If children are motivated to learn to read, they will try to learn to read, and continue to do so, even when faced with reading difficulties. The teacher is responsible for creating an environment that motivates children to read. This will be done through planning quality reading instruction by drawing on the knowledge base of how children learn to read, grade level expectations, fundamental principles of effective instruction, learning to observe and assess children's reading, writing and spelling competencies (Slowik, et al. 2012).

A teacher's academic and professional qualifications are important predictors of the quality of teaching because the "essence of effective teaching lies in the ability of the teacher to set up desired outcomes" (Muthwii, 2002: 44). Too often, primary school teaching in Kenya is someone's final option for a professional career. It is the career to take when all other options have failed to materialise. This situation explains in part why primary school teachers need better teacher education in reading to develop their own language skills so that they are better prepared to teach and conduct needs-based instruction (UNESCO Nairobi/IRA, 2004 cited in Commeyras, & Inyega 2007).

Research carried out in this area indicates that regardless of the quality of an education programme, resources and strategy, it is the teacher and the learning situation that makes the difference in reading instruction (Bond & Dyksra 1967/1997, cited in Tierney & Readence 2005). In his discussion on teaching reading to struggling readers, Rupley (2009) in Tierney & Readence (2005) argues that "Over the past 70 years, a number of major studies have demonstrated repeatedly the importance of the teacher to students' learning to read." One of such studies postulates that although, mental age is correlated with beginning reading success, the type of instructional activities, the teacher's expertise and teaching effectiveness are important predictors of learners' English language reading success.

In a study comparing different instructional methods at the first grade level, Dykstra (1967) in Tierney & Readence (2005) noted wide differences in reading achievement among classes and school systems that were using similar instructional methods. These differences repeatedly underscore the

importance of the teacher's role in reading instruction (Rupley, 2009). The scientific study of reading has yielded major findings on the teacher's role in reading success among learners of different levels. One of this is on the understanding of how to teach the majority of learners to acquire basic beginning reading skills such as identifying words and reading connected text. The other is on the many instructional decisions teachers always make regarding reading instruction.

To make informed decisions that positively affect children's reading achievement, teachers must be knowledgeable about the reading process, principles of effective instruction and expectations of teaching reading as outlined in the standard 4 English language syllabus. Therefore, teachers of early grade readers should carefully diagnose student needs and provide direct, explicit, and systematic instruction that fills the gaps students have in phonemic awareness, phonics, decoding, and spelling, including the delivery of a complete sequence of the fundamentals, if necessary. This can be achieved if a teacher observes the following reading instruction principles.

Principles of Early Grade Reading instruction and their implications for early grade reading instruction in Kenya

These are guidelines that guide the development and implementation of successful early grade reading instructions. They are essential to quality beginning reading experiences.

- **Oral language is the foundation of learning to read and write.**

At the initial stages, reading builds on an oral language. Any reading instruction designed to build early reading skills must offer support for and connections to an oral vocabulary in a spoken language. In multilingual environments as is the case in Kenya, consideration must be given to building connections between the home language, the language of instruction, and written language. English language has a lot of orthographic similarities with most Kenyan languages i.e. Ekegusii, Kikuyu, Kamba among others. However, it has different phonological features with these languages. Once learners are able to establish letter sound connections in their home language, transferring the same knowledge to the second and any other subsequent languages is easier.

- **Books and texts for reading instruction should be varied in genre, form and should be plentiful.**

Children need access to quality books and print to develop and grow as readers. Children thrive in learning to read when the environment contains ample books and print. This in essence means that the teacher should avail a large supply of books for instruction as well as for independent reading in a classroom library. The books must be of high quality and at the learner's ability range of reading. To foster varied reading abilities, the learners should be exposed to different genres, such as information books, fictional stories and poetry. A classroom library should be a special place to enjoy books and book-related activities. It need not be large, but it should be inviting, providing a quiet setting for reading and sharing of books. The number of books in the classroom library can be increased gradually through contributions from parents, well wishers and from the school budgetary allocations for each class.

- **The classroom learning environment should contain abundant numbers of print of many kinds.**

In addition to books, the classroom learning environment should contain high-quality reading materials of different types. This will include charts, journals, and work displays available in the classroom setting. This should include texts created/authored

by the learners as well as the teacher. The learning environment also should reflect the psychological environment of the classroom that values all forms of reading and writing and supports risk-taking as the learners explore new literacy practices. This means that writings by novice as well as established writers should be displayed on the class walls. However, pupils should be made to distinguish between the two levels of writing, this is to ensure that the wrong skills are not perfected at the expense of appropriate ones.

- **An evidence-based curriculum guides reading instruction**

In most countries today, including developing countries like Kenya, there is a prescribed curriculum. Reading instructions should be designed to support the literacy goals and other learning outcomes in the curriculum. They should be evidence-based, developing concepts, strategies, and skills found to be essential in learning to read (e.g., orthographic factors). The curriculum can serve as an important source of support in focusing early grade reading instruction on what pupils need to know and be able to do at each grade level. Knowledge of the curriculum should be used as the basic framework for instruction and as the basis for making informed decisions but not used exclusively as the only source of such information for reading instruction. This implies that teachers should constantly establish through research, the reading instructional practices that are recommended for different types of learners in different instructional environments.

- **Teachers should be prepared to teach the reading program well.**

There is no substitute for a teacher who is knowledgeable, flexible, and strategic in helping children learn to read. This includes skill mastery to organize early grade reading instruction under the conditions of large class sizes and limited resources. On-going support for the teaching of reading is critical. Teachers must be actively supported through coaching in the implementation of programs, must be encouraged to work together to adapt reading programs to local conditions and through participation in training workshops. These attempts must focus on early grade levels unlike the current trend in Kenya, where most English workshops are mostly focused on the candidate classes. In most cases concentrating workshops for teachers teaching standard 7 and 8 is an attempt coming a little too late.

- **Assessment should be used to support reading instruction.**

Teachers must learn to develop reading assessment tools as they plan to teach and as they teach. Assessment guides both ongoing and long-term decision making. Tools and strategies for assessment must be provided as part of any program and should be aligned with instructional goals. Teachers need to become systematic in gathering data, recording the data, and interpreting that data so as to inform instruction. They need to be skilled in the use of multiple assessment tools to guide instruction.

- **Family involvement is an integral part of early grades reading**

Any initiative that focuses on reading success must attempt to foster home-to-school and school-to-home literacy connections. The literacy practices outside of school must become part of the curriculum in schools, and the literacy practices in school must spill out into the community. Developing a sense of school-community partnerships is a start point for building relationships with parents as partners in supporting the learn-to-read process. Both the literate and illiterate parents and care givers should be guided on ways of

promoting children's reading skills. Parents should be asked to spare some time from their busy schedules to read with or to listen to their children reading for at least 30 minutes every day. This will help to foster the school and home literacy practices which are very critical for early grade readers success in reading.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to examine the significant aspects that are crucial in the teaching of reading for early grade readers and their implications for early grade reading instruction in Kenya. It has also addressed itself to the importance of reading in education, the status of learners' reading levels in Kenya and the teacher's role in developing early grade readers' reading competencies. The conclusion envisaged in this paper is that teachers play a crucial role in developing learners' reading competencies. However, the teachers must be knowledgeable, have a good understanding of their reading instructional environment and ready to up-date themselves on the latest reading instructional strategies if effective reading instruction is to be possible in the Kenyan classrooms today. Successful efforts to improve reading achievement should emphasize identification and implementation of evidence-based practices that promote high rates of achievement when used in classrooms by teachers with diverse instructional styles with children who have diverse instructional needs and interests (Bond & Dykstra, 1967/1997; National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform, 2001 in IRA 2002).

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