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Teaching Literacy Skills in Standard One: Challenges Faced By Language Teachers in Rural Areas in Kenya

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Abstract

The language of instruction stipulated for lower primary by Kenya's policy on language in education is mother-tongue or Kiswahili, while English is introduced as a language activity. The use of two languages in standard one can be challenging, cumbersome and demanding. The study therefore sought to find out the challenges faced by standard one teachers in teaching English Literacy skills in Ainamoi Sub-County, Kericho county Kenya. The study adopted a descriptive survey design. The study focused on all public and private primary schools in the county. Purposive and stratified simple random sampling techniques were employed. 12 public primary and 8 private primary schools were sampled to participate. This formed a 10% sample size from the private and public schools. Questionnaires were used to collect primary data from the randomly selected standard one teachers and head teachers of the selected schools. Results indicated that the challenges faced by language teachers related more to lack of the necessary and appropriate teaching/learning resources. It was also established that there was severe mother-tongue influence on English. It was found out that teachers employed certain strategies to promote English literacy skills acquisition including building warm teacher/child relationships. It is recommended that the strategies be up-scaled by teachers including improvisation of locally appropriate resources and that further research would be necessary to establish the effects of mixed languages of instruction on English language skills acquisition.

Introduction

Language is an important instrument for people to express their thoughts and opinions and creating cultural and economic relationships as suggested by Kilgour (1999). Buckley (2003) has similarly underscored the importance of language, particularly in its ability to shape the thoughts and emotions of people, in determining how individuals perceive reality and also its significance in learning about the world around us. In Kenya English is the second language for most learners, it is also an important language that has been in use worldwide for over a century and with the current rise of globalization which has made changes in the co-existence between nations and people all over the world, it has become even more of a world language. To participate in the global world, nations, institutions, groups and individuals have to prove that they are competent and proficient in the English language as asserted by Yen (2008) while examining the subject of globalization and English language teaching. It is also very important for each individual to be able to master and speak fluently the English language to be able to achieve one's aims in life in the English-speaking nations, Kenya included. Teaching of English in standard one is therefore critical as this serves to equip the children at a young age with the necessary skills needed to power them in national development. In some nations, according to Baumann and Hoffmann (2000), English is their first and native language while some have it as their second and official language. The author has reported that concern for improved performances in English language is a worldwide issue even in the affluent nations like the United Kingdom and the United States of America. In both countries, according to the researcher, maintenance of standards in education, particularly English by assessing students' achievement at different levels and in all areas of the curriculum is done very routinely and students who perform below standards are mandated to receive remediation. This report indicates that in these countries progress is monitored at all the levels of learning, unlike in the Kenyan case where official assessments are done at the end of primary schooling.

In the African continent, language educational policies are generally determined by the legacy of colonial language policies that encouraged use of African languages as media of instruction in schools. Countries such as Botswana, Ghana, Gambia, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria and Sudan all are influenced by the British colonial policies, while the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda are influenced by the legacy of the Belgian colonizers as observed by UNESCO (1991). The policies have been maintained over the years due partly to the continued use of the European languages as official languages as well as languages used in secondary and higher education.

In Kenya, the policy in language education has had a great influence on the medium of teaching and learning in lower primary schools. There have been various reports arising from special task forces and commissions addressing the issue of language of instruction in Kenya's school system since the colonial time to date according to Nabea (2009). In 1964, for instance, the Ominde Commission made a recommendation on the use of mother tongue as a language for instruction in primary schools except for a daily period of story-telling in standards one to three. In Kenya today, language policy advocates the use of mother-tongue in pre-school and lower primary

school as the language of instruction while English is introduced as a language activity as recommended by the Gachathi Report of 1976 (Nabea, 2009). In situations where the catchment area of the school is ethnically heterogeneous Kiswahili is recommended for use in the lower primary school (MOEST, 2000). However, this varies from region to region and from school to school and even from teacher to teacher. The introduction of English as a second language to learners is without doubt faced with a number of challenges, for instance, in a heterogeneous population, learning of English as a second language may present a challenge to children who are already used to a certain standard in contextual language use and this may lead to some adaptation and mixing of languages as has been observed by Dhillon and Wanjiru (2013). In a study carried out in South Africa by Mudzielwana (2004) observed that there are many challenges that are associated with teaching in second language, one of which is that the teacher should have theoretical and practical knowledge on how to teach using the languages and secondly is that the teacher must be well versed in the language. The academic and professional qualifications of the teacher are also important in ensuring the efficacy of standard one teacher. Geske and Ozola (2008) noted that some of the factors that influenced students reading literacy included the education, socio-economic and cultural status of the parents. It is against this background that the study set out to investigate the challenges faced by language teachers in rural areas in Kenya.

The Government of Kenya's language policy in education clearly stipulates the use of mother-tongue as a language of instruction in early primary schooling so as to promote and protect diversity. However, many schools use English as a medium of instruction while others use Kiswahili in ethnically heterogeneous schools as per the policy. A study done by Nyakwara (2014), however, reveals that schools that use mother tongue as per the government policy are faced with some challenges such as difficulties in translation of some concepts into mother-tongue as well as the incompetence of the teacher in the mastery of mother tongue. There is currently limited literature on the challenges faced by standard one teachers in teaching English literacy skills.

The purpose of this study was to establish the challenges faced by standard one teachers in teaching English literacy skills.

Research Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey design. Fraenkel & Wallen (2000) suggest that this type of design is used to collect information from a sample selected from a predetermined population and using a predetermined set of questions. KIM (2009) points out that a descriptive survey is used to obtain a description of a particular perception about a situation, phenomena or variable and the views of the studied sample are taken to represent those of the entire population. According to Shaughnessy & Zechmeister (2000), an advantage of using survey design is that it helps to assess people's thoughts, opinions and feelings and provides a platform to summarize and generalize the views of all respondents succinctly. This design therefore enabled the

researcher to obtain information concerning opinions or practices from a sample representing the population through the use questionnaire technique. The information gathered provided a basis for making comparisons and determining patterns, revealing current weaknesses/and or strengths in the phenomena under study and provided information for decision making.

Target Population

The target population for the study was all standard one teachers and head teachers in Ainamoi Sub-County, Kericho County, with a total of 168 schools.

Sampling Technique

Participants for this study were selected using purposive, stratified and simple random sampling techniques. The researcher obtained the sample size for the study by stratifying the sub-county into zones namely; Municipality, Ainamoi, Kapsaos, Kapsoit, Soliat and Soin. Further stratification was carried out on the basis of ownership and management, thus creating 2 sub-strata; public and private primary schools. Proportionate sampling technique was used to sample 10% of the schools from the zones as proposed by Gay (1983) in Mugenda and Mugenda, 2003. Kombo & Tromp (2007) point out that purposive sampling technique enables the researcher to target a group of people believed to have the characteristics of interest to the researcher. It was used to select head teachers from the selected public and private primary schools in the sub-county. One standard one teacher was then randomly selected from each of the selected schools.

Sample Size

In Ainamoi Sub-County there were a total of 168 primary schools; 115 public primary schools and 53 private primary schools. In the study 10% of both public and private primary schools were selected in each zone as suggested by Gay (1983) in Mugenda & Mugenda (2003). This is shown in Table 1.1 and Table 1.2.

Table 1.1: Distribution of Sampled Schools

Zone	Number of Public Primary Schools	10%	Number of Private Primary Schools	10%
Municipality	15	2	25	3
Ainamoi	18	2	5	1
Kapsaos	22	2	6	1
Kapsoit	20	2	8	1
Soliat	16	2	5	1

Soin	24	2	4	1
Total	115	12	53	8

Source: Data from MOEST, Kericho office

Table 1.2: Frequency Table showing sample size

Respondents	Frequency
Head teachers	20
Teachers	20
Total	40

Instrumentation

The study used questionnaires aimed at finding out the challenges faced by the standard one teacher in teaching of English language. Testing was carried out on the research instruments in order to ensure that the respondents were able to respond to the same questions in the same way and give accurate data. The pilot study was carried out in 4 schools which were not to be included in this study; 2 private schools and 2 public schools. In the pilot, all the 4 head teachers and standard one teachers were issued with the questionnaires. The responses were used to improve the instruments by correcting a few ambiguities that were detected on the instruments.

The research study assessed the validity of the instruments with experts experienced in research and the supervisor. The instruments were then subjected to a pilot study. A pre-test of the instruments was done to make sure that the informants are able to respond to the same questions in the same way and give accurate data. Content validity was used to ensure that the tools cover the objective of the study. Then the items found not suitable were removed.

To enhance the reliability of the instrument, sampling techniques were employed to ensure the 10% sample size was a true representative of the target population as suggested by Mugenda & Mugenda (2003). The research instruments were subjected to a pilot study in which test re-test method was involved. Pre-testing of the data collection instruments was carried out in order to identify omissions, errors and ambiguities in the questionnaire. After the pilot survey, adjustments were made to correct the weaknesses identified particularly on items that were not clearly understood by the respondents. In order to optimize the reliability of the research instruments, research assistants were trained adequately prior to being assigned tasks in order to ensure that inaccuracies in scoring are eliminated.

Data Analysis

The data collected through questionnaires were edited, coded and analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20 for windows. Both quantitative and qualitative techniques for data analysis were used. The data was presented using means, frequency tables and standard deviations that were generated from analysis of the data collected from the secondary sources; learners' marks and from the questionnaires. Tests for statistical relations between variables were conducted using Pearson's Chi-Square test. The strength of association between the variables was tested using the Phi Coefficient and its extended form the Cramer's V.

Results and Discussion

When the teachers were asked to state the major challenges they faced in the teaching of English, a variety of responses were received. Each teacher respondent was required to state not more than three major challenges they faced as they executed their duties in L2 teaching. The challenges they came up with could be classified into seven broad categories; cross-interference of languages, teaching/learning resource constraints, learner/parent attitude, communication barriers, foundation problems and catchment area challenges.

Among the challenges identified by the teacher respondents, 30% was attributed to cross - interference of languages, with 21% of the challenges mentioned being attributed to teaching/learning resource constraints, the other challenges included; learner/parent attitude (16%), communication barriers (14%), weak foundation for the learner (12%) and catchment area related challenges (5%). The observations suggest that according to the teachers, cross-interference of language and in particular mother tongue interference in the teaching of English presents a major challenge and this coupled with challenges associated with lack of teaching/learning resources constituted about half the challenges (Figure 1.1) that faces the efficacy of English teaching in standard one.

A similar question was posed to the head-teachers on what it is that they considered a major challenge. The responses, when grouped into categories, fell in the same categories as that reported by the teachers, with cross-interference of languages being attributed to 30% of the challenges, 21% teaching/learning resources, clearly similar to that reported by the teachers.

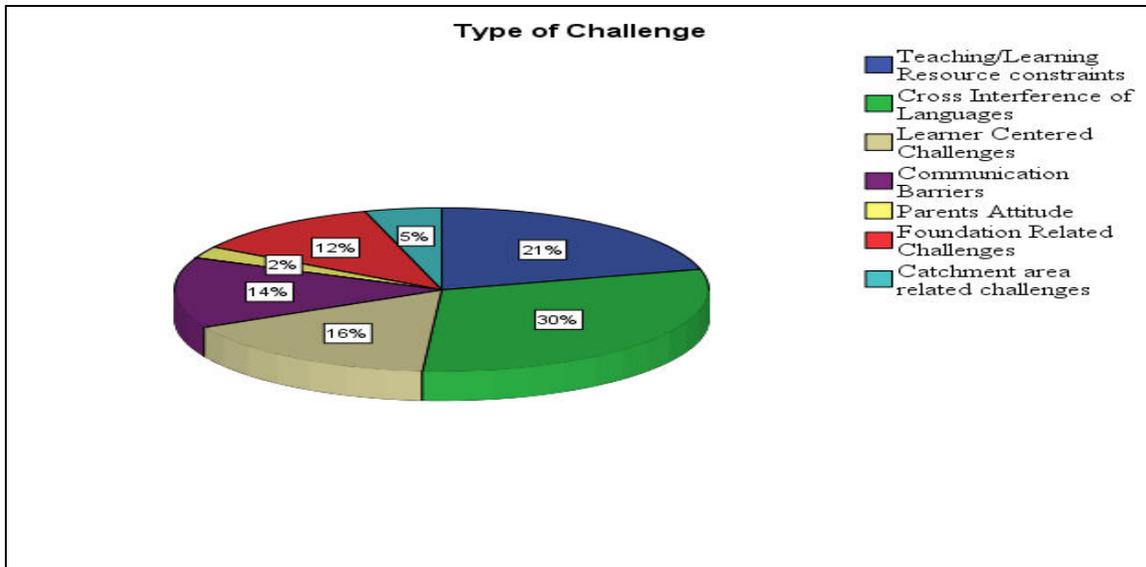


Figure 1.1: Challenges faced in English Literacy teaching as cited by respondents

The cross-interference of languages appeared to focus on a perceived negative influence of mother tongue on the reading, writing and speaking in English. Some teachers referred to it as first language influence, others referred to it as first language interference, and others called it mother-tongue influence or interference while other cited direct translation of words from mother tongue as a challenge, while others still referred to it as interference from the language of the catchment area. In all the cases the teachers appeared to have a perception that the first language had a significant influence on the acquisition of English language skills by the learner, particularly of new concepts, fluency in their pronunciations and presented a communication barrier. Muthwii (2004) notes that English literacy skills becomes a challenge to pupils immediately they start school since reading, writing, listening and speaking is introduced to them in their first language, then there is a switch over to the second language. This seems to suggest that the cultural background gives the learners a different exposure from that of the school environment. Meyer (2000) has argued that classroom lessons are culturally embedded and for this reason it is important for the teacher to understand the cultural background of the learners so as to introduce new concepts from the point at which the learner has already reached. This appears to be the case, judging from what the teachers suggested as the measures they have put in place to address the challenges which include “giving topics of learners’ experience” as one teacher put it, as an aid to introducing new concepts.

The cross-language interference cited by the respondents appears to be in line with the theoretical argument by Cummins (2005) that individuals’ language representations are stored in an individuals’ “cognitive operating system”. The author has argued that the exposure at home leads to development of underlying attributes which will be carried along for a while. Meyer (2000) has referred to this kind of interference as a ‘culture load’ as the learners learnt their first language in a context different from that in school, where meanings of words are determined by the cultural background.

The teaching/learning resource constraints were among the highest in the frequency of occurrence. This was cited as the second most important constraint in a question that solicited not more than three major challenges from each teacher respondent. The respondents described the challenge as inadequate resources, limited resources, lack of teaching and learning aids, lack of sufficient teaching-learning resources but broadly all amounted to inadequacy of teaching/learning materials. Allwright (1990) maintains that teaching/learning materials should guide pupils in the learning process; they should be complementary books for ideas and activities to be used during instruction and learning; and they should provide teachers with underlying principles for what they do. In the year 2000, the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) conducted a survey on the pupil to book ratios in Africa. The study revealed that the pupil to book ratios ranged from 1:1 to 1:7, with the rural areas having the lowest supply of books. In order to promote a literate environment in the developing countries greater attention and focus therefore needs to be put on access to reading materials or manuals that are responsive to the interests and learning needs of learners in school. Faced with this challenge, the teachers reported that they have developed coping mechanisms which include improvising materials and sometimes requesting the parents to participate in the provision of the materials.

The learner-centered challenges cited by the respondents included a poor attitude towards the language, lack of interest by the learners, a poor understanding of language, poor reading habits and frequent absenteeism. A similar challenge to the one of child-centered constraints was referred to by the respondents; a challenge attributed to poor foundation which according to the respondents resulted in poor handwriting, poor composition writing, poor pronunciation of English words, mixing up of letters and a general poor understanding of English. Then there was the challenge related to the parents' attitude whereby some respondents cited non-payment of fees and parents doing homework for their children as a sign of a poor attitude of the parents to the pupils learning process. This, according to the respondents requires a continuous awareness creation among parents and sensitizing them on the pupils' role in learning and the nature of supportive role of the parent, definitely not including doing homework for the pupils. According to Morrow (1995), parents spend the greatest amount of time with their children, making them the first teachers. They therefore play a major part in getting children ready to read once they begin school. He further points out that certain practices in the home such as reading aloud and promoting positive attitudes towards literacy have been found to have a major effect on children's literacy. Lyon (1999) noted that the involvement of parents in child reading activities where the parent reads loudly for the child enhanced the reading skills of the child.

Conclusion

It is concluded that the teachers of English in standard one face major challenges key among them being inadequate teaching/ learning resources and what is perceived by teachers as cross language interferences and child related factors. On the basis of the frequencies with which these challenges occur, they may present a major threat to the performance of the pupils in English literacy skills.

Recommendation

Standard one teachers faced a variety of challenges mostly emanating from cross-language interference and teaching/learning resource constraints. The study recommended that teachers improvise and adopt more locally available resources in order to promote learners' acquisition of literacy skills.

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