The Availability of Instructional Materials/Resources Teachers Use To Enhance Teaching of Reading in Early Childhood Classes in Dagoretti and Westlands Divisions, Nairobi County, Kenya

Esther Wairimu Marima

Department of Education, Pan Africa Christian University, P.O Box 56875-00200 Nairobi, Kenya
Corresponding Author: Esther Wairimu Marima

Abstract: *Scholars have tried valiantly inventing many teaching methods for the children, in the hope that all children could be taught to read. This study sought to determine the availability of instructional materials/resources teachers use to enhance teaching of reading in early childhood classes. The study adopted the descriptive research design using the survey method and observation technique. Semi-structured interviews were used as the main method of collecting data from 20 class three teachers, 20 Heads of English Department. A sample of 10 primary schools from Dagoretti and 10 from Westlands' Divisions in Nairobi County was studied. The study found that majority of pre-unit teachers and class three teachers used the "Sound and Read" book while the "Picture Book" was used by a few of pre-unit teachers with the same number of class three teachers. The "Read and Write" book is used by also few of the pre-unit teachers and class three teachers, and in which case the findings were similar with another book "Lets Learn". The study concluded that sound and read book was the most used book in pre-unit and lower classes levels. The book was mostly used because it is adequate. Other frequently used resources by teachers are flashcards, plasticine, pictures and real objects, wall charts, course books and rhymes. Provision and availability of reading/learning materials is the most recognized solution to the reading problems. The study recommends that 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. The study also recommends that 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. Materials for play and learning should be developed to be used both in school and at home to enhance reading. Furthermore, at this time and age it is necessary to integrate ICT in early childhood learning institutions to enhance learning.*

Keywords: *Instructional Materials, Instructional Resources, Teaching of Reading*

I. Introduction

Proficiency in 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 to contribute actively to society. As one of the four language skills in which learners need to be versed in their earliest years in formal schooling, it builds the foundation for all formal learning in school. If learners do not acquire this skill in the Foundation phase they will struggle to catch on (Teale, 2003). Reading forms the basis of all language skills, particularly writing because the ability to write depends on the ability to read and what is written can only be meaningful if it can be read (Stahl, 2004). 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. (UNICEF, 1990)   For a rich conducive literacy environment, instructional resources are necessary.

In Kenya, the primary school English syllabus spells out the objectives of teaching English in primary schools but remains generally silent about the competences in each language skill that should be developed in learners, and particularly 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, Vikiru, & Bwire, 2008). Teachers have however observed that whatever methods have been used to

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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 (ALM) and Emergent Reading (ER).

II. Literature Review

2.1.1 Definition of Reading

Goodman (1982 cited in Kang'ethe, 1988), states that reading is a process of making sense of written language. He regards reading as receptive language, a process parallel to listening. The general assumption here is that reading is the interaction between a reader and a written text and through it with the writer. Consequently, Goodman defines reading as "a psycholinguistic process in which thought and language interact as the reader builds meaning" (p.67). He further elaborates his definition by stating that reading involves exact, detailed sequential perception and identification of letters, words, spellings patterns and large language units. In essence, reading may be considered as series of word perceptions (Runo, 2010).

2.1.2 Importance of Reading

There are many reasons why we read. It is through reading that we can access important information individuals need, understand instructions given, it is a source of entertainment and helps to attain new skills. In classroom settings reading is still a major tool used in teaching and learning. Reading is instrumental in forming a foundation on which to build a child's educational career. 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.

2.1.3 The Process of Reading

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. Runo (2010) indicates 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, Vikiru, & Bwire, 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).

The National Reading Panel Report (NRP, 2000) came up with a balanced literacy program using the five Literacy Elements which were assembled as a literacy map for teachers. Based on the findings, the Five Literacy Elements are: (a) phonemic awareness (b) Phonics (c) Fluency, (d) Vocabulary, and (e) text comprehension. Each of the five Literacy Elements is needed to create the core foundation of student's success in reading. Therefore, without proper knowledge and review of these Five Elements, teachers cannot properly implement a beneficial literacy block. Balanced literacy is widely viewed as an outgrowth of the National Reading Panel Report of 2000, combining a literature-based focus on comprehension instruction with a strong explicit phonics component. Cunningham, Perry, Stanovich and Stanovich (2004) further concluded that "the NRP has provided us with an evidence based assessment of the scientific research literature" (p.326). Goodman (1982) sees the reading process as a guessing game by which the reader reconstructs as best as he can, a message which has been encoded by a writer as a graphic display. In other words Goodman sees reading as a receptive phase of written communication whereby there exists an interaction between the reader and the written language. According to this model, the reader activates her "knowledge of language, past experience and conceptual attainments on the processing of language information encoded in the graphic symbols to decode the written language" (Goodman, 1982).

2.1.4 Instructional Materials/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. 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).

Considering children's access to the language and literacy materials, the study examined the placement of the items in the 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.

III. Study Methodology

The study employed a descriptive study research design. The purpose of a descriptive design is to observe, describe and document aspects of a situation as they naturally occur. A descriptive survey is a process of collecting data in order to answer questions concerning the current status of the subjects and involves collecting information from members of a target population by administering a questionnaire (Gay, 2003). The study used purposive sampling to select the two divisions out of the eight divisions in Nairobi County, Westlands and Dagoretti. A total of 260 respondents were selected for the study. Ten schools from each of the two Divisions were randomly selected. Two, Pre- Unit, two Class three teachers and two Heads of Department from each of the 20 schools and ten pre unit pupils from ten schools were purposively selected. The sample size consisted of 200 pupils, 20 Pre-unit Teachers, 20 Class three teachers, 20 Heads of English Department. Westlands Division representing the best performing Division while Dagoretti represents the lowest performing Division. Stratified random sampling was used to select the 10 schools in Westlands and 10 schools in Dagoretti and 10 pre-unit pupils from each school. Semi-structured interviews were used as the main method of collecting data from 20 class three teachers, 20 Heads of English Department. A pilot test was undertaken to test the feasibility of this study. Two schools from the two Divisions were randomly sampled for the pilot-test outside the ten for the actual study. Two regular teachers and two heads of English Department were selected for the pilot test to ensure that the instruments yielded the needed data. Questions were corrected and the questionnaires given to the same respondents. Questions which were vague were rephrased to convey the same meaning to all subjects.

IV. Findings And Discussion

The study revealed that the "Sound and Read" book was used by 80% of pre-unit teachers compared to 60% of class three teachers who used the book. The "Picture Book" was used by 10% of pre-unit teachers, with the same number 10% of class three teachers. The "Read and Write" book was used by 10% of the pre-unit teachers that compares to 10% of class three teachers. Another book "Lets Learn" used by 10% of pre-unit teachers compared to 20% of class three teachers who used the book. Ten (50%) pre-unit teachers and 10 (50%) of class three teachers said that the books were adequate. Another eight (40%) pre-unit teachers said that the books were not adequate compared to 10 (50%) of class three teachers who said that the books were not adequate. The study further found that (30%) of the respondents responded that the authors did not focus on teaching of reading and eight (20%) said that the wording of the books was not well arranged. Only four (10%) said that the books did not have all sounds and pictures while two (5%) indicated that the books were not enough while 14 (25%) did not respond. Variation in their responses indicate lack of insight as to what content is required in the teaching of reading at the level of pre-unit to class three. On other resources used by teachers; flashcards were used by eight (40%) of pre-unit teachers compared to nine (45%) of class three teachers. Two (10%) of pre-unit teachers used plasticine, four (20%) of pre-unit teachers used pictures and real objects, compared to five (25%) of class three teachers. Four (20%) of pre-unit teachers used wall charts compared to two (10%) of class three teachers who used them. One (5%) of class three teachers used course books while another one (5%) used rhymes, songs and poems. Flashcards and wall charts were largely used by pre-unit teachers, with eight (40%) of teachers using flashcards, while plasticine, pictures and real objects were not used frequently with two (10%) and four (20%) respectively. Class three teachers mostly used flashcards nine (45%).

From the responses given by the teachers on all the reading methods they knew, it was quite clear that many teachers are not familiar with many other methods and other resources available including modern technology and none of the materials were preferred by more than half of the respondents.

V. Summary

Teachers observed that the reading content, instructional materials used are not adequate or designed to address the needs of early childhood reading in all settings. The study observed that the main resource used by teachers are books, the Sound and Read was used by majority of teachers, which implies scarcity and need for more relevant books for teachers to use in teaching of reading. Majority of the teachers observed indicated that there were challenges in teaching of reading with the main challenge as provision of teaching and reading materials. This implies that with the right resources and the right curriculum, teachers are capable of teaching reading effectively.

VI. Conclusion

Teachers in both pre-school and lower primary observed are academically qualified and thus capable of reading and interpreting given curriculum guidelines. However, lack of teaching and reading materials is the most common problem implying that there is a gap in the provision of these materials. 'Sound and Read' book was the most used book in pre-unit and lower classes levels, the reason of its use being that it is mostly adequate. Other frequently used resources by teachers are flashcards, plasticine, pictures and real objects, wall charts, course books and rhymes. Provision and availability of reading/learning materials is the most recognized solution to the reading problems which means that teachers depend on text books for reference as well as course book. whereby majority of the teachers indicated that the challenges in teaching of reading was related to provision of teaching and reading materials. This implies that with the right resources and the right curriculum, teachers are capable of teaching reading effectively.

VII. Recommendations

The study revealed that available books are not adequate and therefore curriculum developers should come up with more resources for teaching reading in early childhood classes. There should be teaching guides for language and reading complete with instructional strategies, which include thematic guidelines for teachers. In addition, a lot of reading materials and storybooks for stimulation of children's reading skills should be supplied. Majority of books are put on the market by educational publishers; the publishers need to be properly guided by experts in reading. The study recommends that Early Childhood Development Service Standard Guidelines for Kenya should be revised to be more specific. This should provide clear guidelines on implementation of the ECD policy framework, the quality, provision and accessibility of learning materials. 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. Materials for play and learning should be developed to be used both in school and at home to enhance reading. At this time and age it is necessary to integrate ICT in early childhood learning institutions to enhance learning too.

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