

A Survey of Approaches Used in Teaching Reading in Early Childhood Classes in Dagoretti and Westlands Divisions, Nairobi County, Kenya

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Abstract

Reading proficiency has been identified as one of the most reliable indicators of whether a learner will attain the competence needed to achieve academic success and contribute actively to society. Research findings in Kenyan primary and secondary schools reveal inadequate reading skills among the students. There are different approaches in teaching of reading in early learning. The study sought to establish teachers' orientation in reading instructions in early childhood settings and adopted the descriptive research design using the survey method and observation technique. A sample of 10 primary schools from Dagoretti and 10 from Westlands Divisions in Nairobi County were studied. The study concludes that although most teachers indicated that they were confident, they also indicated that they were not well equipped with the relevant teaching methods. Majority of pre-unit teachers used phonics and others whole-word methods. Lack of reading materials and guidelines was the most cited challenge faced by early learning teachers. The study recommends clear policy guidelines on how to teach reading and compulsory in-service training for teachers on how to teach reading and create awareness on use of phonics and whole word approaches in teaching of reading.

Keywords: Teaching reading, teaching method, Teacher qualification, Early Learning

1.0 Introduction

Reading is basic and fundamental to acquisition of language and learning which leads to high academic performance. The ability to read with understanding is also one of the most important skills not only in learning English language, but also in other subjects (Ellis, 1985). Reading in early years of schooling should among other things, aim at reading for pleasure through learners' exposure to a variety of reading materials. Stern (1983) argues that reading widely helps learners to develop a word band of vocabulary, and exposes them to new ideas and sentence structures that are used later to communicate both verbally and in the written form (Gathumbi, 2008)

2.0 Literature Review

A preponderance of reading theories identifies two strategies in reading; the phonological and the visual strategies. The phonological strategy is the process which involves separating the word into sounds (phonemes and or syllables) and then associating each part with a sound and then blending the sounds together (Siegel, 1985). Phonics method is probably the best known and widely used method in teaching of reading and writing in the English language. It relies on children being taught the alphabet first. They learn the names of the letters and the sounds they make, once they have learnt the letter sounds they begin to blend two letters to make simple words then three letters. With the whole word approach also known as "look and say", children learn to recognize whole words or sentences rather than individual sounds. Here the learner will look at a word which the teacher reads and repeat the word. If a picture is not used with the word, the child will master the shape of the word (Mercer, 2001).

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

In teaching of English Language, Bunyi (2008) laments that for the last three decades; Kenyan newspapers have carried articles that decry the poor English skills of primary, secondary and even college students but in spite of the crucial role reading plays in literacy development, reading is not taught as a subject in our Kenyan schools but as one of the four skills within the English Language. English as a subject is allocated seven lessons of which only two are on reading. It is therefore expected that children are taught reading within the English language which may not be adequate for this vital skill and for teachers to use the well structured phonics and whole word approaches in teaching of reading.

3.0 Study Methodology

The study employed a descriptive survey design. The survey design was adopted because the focus of the study was to observe, describe and document aspects of a situation as they naturally occur. Gay (2003) states that a descriptive survey is a process of collecting data in order to answer questions concerning the current status of the subject. While Abagi (1995) asserts that a descriptive survey research attempts to describe what is in a social system such as the school. Although Verma (1981) claim that a survey does not seem to aspire to develop an organized body of knowledge, they also point out the fact that it does provide information for further research of an experimental nature. Descriptive survey research was intended to produce statistical information about aspects of education that interest policy makers and educators. It is for this reason that the study chose the design which involves observation of situations in the selected schools.

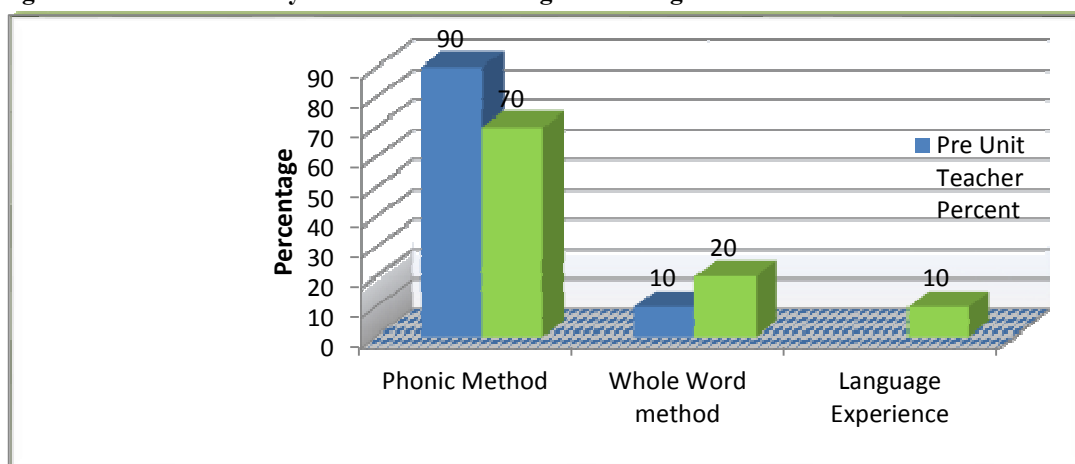
4.0 Findings and Discussion

The following section presents the findings and discussions from the study.

4.1 Methods Teachers used in the Teaching of Reading

This section discusses the methods teachers use in teaching of reading in early childhood. The section also analyses the best and recommended methods of teaching by the head of departments. Figure below present Teachers methods of Teaching Reading in both pre-unit and class three.

Figure 1: Methods used by Teachers in Teaching of Reading



The study revealed that majority of pre-unit teachers (90%) used the phonics method, followed by (10%) who indicated that they used whole-word method. On the other hand 70% of class 3 teachers used phonics while 20% used whole word and 10% language experience. From the study findings phonics method is the choice method for both pre-unit teachers and class 3 teachers. Whole word method was used by preschool and class 3 teachers while language experience was used by few class 3 teachers. In general both pre-unit and class three teachers reported that some teachers may be using certain instructional methods they are not sure of which demonstrates lack of proper training.

The literature reviewed in the study identified phonics as one of the most preferred methods used in teaching of reading in early childhood levels in Kenya. According to the reviewed research on use of phonics, this could be causing much damage to learners because not all words written in English can be read using phonics. This is made worse by the fact that most teachers do not have phonological skills needed to effectively handle children with phonemic problems. As observed by Maneno (2008, cited in Runo, 2010) this could be contributing to the poor performance in reading hence poor performance in English and the overall academic performance.

4.2 Best Method for Teaching Reading According to the Teachers

Besides phonics and whole word approaches, the study sought to find out what teachers considered as Best method and why. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 14: Best Method for Teaching Reading according to the Teachers

Method of teaching	Pre-unit teacher		Class 3 teacher	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Phonic method	18	90	14	70
Participatory	0	0	0	0
Look and say	2	10	2	10
Use of sounds	0	0	2	10
Rhymes and songs	0	0	0	0
Language Experience	0	0	2	10
TOTAL	20	100	20	100

Table 1 shows that phonic method of teaching was rated as the best method of teaching by pre unit teachers and the class 3 teachers 18 (70%). Other methods that were also considered for teaching of reading are ‘look and say’, by ten percent 2 (10%) percent of the pre-unit teachers and a similar percentage of class three teachers while use of sounds and language experience was used by 2 (10%) of the class 3 teachers.

4.3 Recommended Methods for Teaching and Reading

The study also collected data on recommended methods for teaching reading from the Heads of Departments. The results are presented in Figure.

Figure 2: Recommended Methods for Teaching Reading

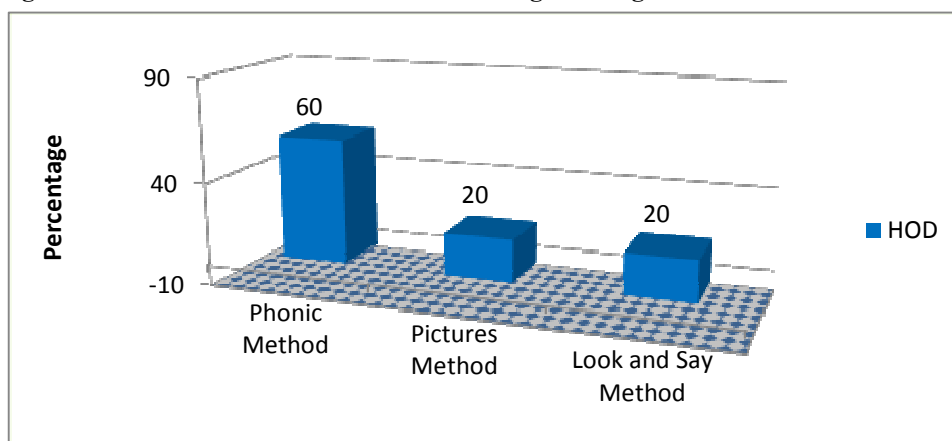


Figure 2 shows that majority (60%) of pre-unit teachers recommended phonic method, 20% recommended pictures method while 20% more recommended look and say method. Literature reviewed indicate that scholars have tried valiantly, inventing many teaching methods, in the hope that all children could read, however whatever methods that have been used to teach English reading, a few children always struggle in vain never achieving literacy. Those who choose phonics and whole word approaches have varying reasons for their choice even as the debate as to which one is superior continues.

4.4 Reasons Why Teachers Prefer Phonics Method

The study revealed that most teachers prefer phonics method. The study went further to obtain reasons as to why teachers preferred this method. The results are presented in Table 2..

Table 15: Reasons Why Teachers Prefer Phonics Method

Reasons	Pre-unit teacher		Class 3 teacher	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Easy to understand	12	60	8	40
Increases comprehension	2	10	4	20
Quickens reading ability	6	30	8	40
Total	20	100	20	100

Table 2 shows that 12(60%) of pre-unit teachers said that when used, phonic methods makes it easier for learners to understand, followed by 6 (30%) who said it quickens reading ability, while 2 (10%) said that it quickens comprehension. Some of the teachers 8 (40%) of class 3 teachers said that the phonic method makes it easier for students to understand with an equivalent number 8(40%) saying that it quickens reading ability while 4 (20%) of class 3 teachers said that the phonic method increases comprehension., These findings corroborates NRP (2001) and is in agreement with (Adams, 2001) that phonics are found to be most effective when taught systematically. This means that it is necessary to work on the phonics needed at the learners reading level which

in this case include early childhood level. However, it was not clear from the study whether the teachers are well equipped to teach phonics systematically at the level of early childhood development classes or have the knowledge base required to teach children how to read without losing them at this early stage.

5.0 Summary

The study revealed that majority of pre-unit teachers (90%) used the phonics method, followed by (10%) who indicated that they used whole-word method. In addition, 70% of class 3 teachers used phonics while 20% used whole word and 10% language experience. The study further revealed that phonics method is the choice method for both pre-unit teachers and class 3 teachers. In general both pre-unit and class three teachers reported that some teachers may be using certain instructional methods they are not sure of which demonstrates lack of proper training. The study also showed that Phonic method of teaching was rated as the best method of teaching by of pre unit teachers and the class 3 teachers 18 (70%). From the study 12(60%) of pre-unit teachers opined that they preferred phonic method because when used it becomes easier for students to understand, followed by 6 (30%) who said it quickens reading ability, while 2 (10%) said that it quickens comprehension.

6.0 Conclusion

Majority of pre-unit teachers used the phonics and whole-word method while majority of class 3 teachers used language experience. Phonic method of teaching is the most preferred method of teaching and the most recommended by the heads of departments. Reasons why Phonic method was the most preferred method of teaching reading were that it was easier for pupils to understand, and quickens reading ability and comprehension. The study concludes that Policy makers in this case the Ministry of Education (MOE) and affiliated institutions have not done enough to educate and mobilize stakeholders by creating awareness on the importance of early childhood education. There is also inadequate supervision of Early Childhood programs and therefore teachers use methods of their choice. As a result, pre-school children may not acquire the intended skills including reading skills.

7.0 Recommendation

The study recommends that the Ministry of Education should draw clear policy guidelines on how to use phonics and whole-word or any other methods of teaching reading. This can be done by giving specific objectives to be achieved at every level of reading. The existing Early Childhood Development Service Standard Guidelines for Kenya should be revised to be more specific. This should provide clearer guidelines on implementation of the ECD policy framework, the quality and provision and accessibility of learning materials.

The Ministry of Education should take full charge of Early Childhood Education in the same manner it has taken basic and higher education. In the same light it should provide guidelines and oversight on the right approach that is holistic to be applied in all Early Childhood Centers in the country. It is also the responsibility of the ministry to provide policy and more importantly ensure that it is implemented. The current policy is confusing in the sense that it states that the medium of instruction from standard Four is English language yet the pre-school teachers are using English as the medium of instruction.

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