Abstract

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 contribute actively to society. Research findings in Kenyan primary and secondary schools reveal inadequate reading skills among the students. Two of the main approaches in teaching of reading in English are Phonics Approach and Whole Word Approach. The purpose of this study was to identify the approaches used in teaching of reading in Early Childhood Education and the usage of phonics and whole word approaches in Pre Unit and class 3 levels. The study sought to establish teachers' orientation towards usage of Phonics and Whole Word Approaches in reading instructions in early childhood settings. A sample of 10 schools from each of the two Divisions, (Dagoretti) and (Westlands) in Nairobi County were studied. The researcher adopted the Descriptive research design using the survey method and observation technique. According to the findings 60% of pre-unit teachers were very confident in the phonics method. The results showed that 100% of class 3 teachers and 70% of Pre-Unit teachers indicated that they faced challenges in the teaching of reading. The study concludes that although the teachers indicated that they were confident, they also acknowledged that there were challenges in teaching of reading which indicates that they are not well equipped with the relevant methods of teaching reading. The study recommends clear policy guidelines on how to teach reading and compulsory in-service training for teachers on how to teach reading.
Introduction

Globally 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. Reading is therefore a vital skill as access to most information is through this skill. This makes it important for the teacher in early childhood classes to use methods and techniques that will develop proficiency in reading (Cummins and Swain, 1986).

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.

The controversy between phonic and whole word approaches which came to public attention in the late 1960s and early 1970 fluctuates. When one approach is influential, it changes the way of thinking not only of researchers but also teachers and policy makers. Despite being the implementers of the change, sometimes teachers do not know the rationale for using a new approach and simply do what is directed and mixed feelings about the teaching of reading persist. During an informal discussion, one teacher said that meaning should be the first consideration in teaching reading while another believed that letter recognition and phonological awareness are prerequisites for learning to read while yet another argued that integration of the two would make teaching reading more effective. Knowing the teachers position on that issue is therefore very important for teacher empowerment in our country as the ministry of education takes up the running of early childhood education in the country.

In Kenya, English could be a second or third language for most students. Reading has been taught under English Language for years and performance in English in National Examination has remained low. Unlike Kiswahili and other vernaculars which have a one to one correspondence, English is a non-phonetic language and requires more than sounding words. 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. The Head of Primary Schools' Association in Kenya Mr. Karuga, observes that teachers lack adequate skills to transfer knowledge to learners and teacher training colleges need to do more (Daily Nation on August 14, 2012). Are they aware and are they using the right approach now that the government is yet to streamline Early Childhood Education in Kenya? 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.

Reading is a very important skill as it is recognized as a necessary part of obtaining a better job and access to literature and knowledge. 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. Chall, (1989) further adds 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.

Pre-schools in Kenya have continued to teach reading using the letters of the alphabet and their sounds for many years with some using phonics and whole word approach in varying degrees. Teaching learners by beginning with phonics has not been given the emphasis it deserves in early childhood language activities and this inadequacy has contributed to poor development of reading skills including other aspects of language such as pronunciation, spelling, reading and grammar (Gathumbi, 2009). This problem is likely to be caused by the fact that very few early childhood teachers have the right qualifications especially in English Language which is the language of instruction. There are many misconceptions about phonics that need to be addressed and many teachers seem to think phonics is only about letters and sounds which is not the case hence the need to investigate and document the usage of the two teaching of reading approaches.

With the onset of the National Literacy Strategy in 1997, a more systematic literacy was adopted in primary schools, introducing a phonics approach to the teaching and learning of reading, together with individual and shared reading, the use of a Big Book for all children to look at, and diverse activities to reinforce phoneme and word recognition. Earlier research on phonics had led to synthetic phonics, which is a much accelerated form of phonics that does not begin by establishing an initial sight vocabulary. Synthetic phonics is introduced before children are introduced to books, by being taught letter sounds. After learning the synthetic phonics, children are shown how these sounds can be blended together to build up words (Feitelson, 1988). For example, when the letters sounds /t/ /p/ /a/ and /s/ the children can build up words like, tap, and pat, pats, taps, and a tap among others which they learn very fast.

In the United States, the pendulum has swung back to Phonics as a way to educate Americans on their own language. For many years though, learning through whole word had dominated the American educational system. This, many say, has contributed to the decline of literacy in
the U.S. In 1997, the U.S. Congress convened a National Panel to assess the status of research-based knowledge regarding the effectiveness of various approaches for teaching children to read and The Director of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development in consultation with the Secretary of Education constituted the National Reading Panel (NRP).

The Rose Report commissioned by the Secretary of State for Education in England, recommended in March 2006 that early reading instruction must include synthetic phonics. In June 2006 the government duly announced a review of teaching of early reading. The report starts by stressing the importance of including systematic phonics instruction in early reading programs, a position that is supported by international research. Rose (2006) proposes that it is sensible to teach both names and sounds of letters. This is because the pronunciations of many of the letter names actually provide a clue to the letter sounds.

Study Methodology

The study employed a descriptive survey design to observe, describe and document aspects of a target population comprising the teachers in the 20 schools in Dagoretti division and 26 schools in Westlands Division and their pupils in early childhood grades which are from pre-unit to Class 3. They were chosen because they are in direct contact with the pupils at this level and are well versed with teaching methods and strategies in reading in early childhood. Questionnaires and observation schedules were used to collect data. School heads of English Department from each school were also included because they were the ones in charge of their respective schools as the main curriculum implementation agents through the class 3 teacher. They provided the required guidance to the teachers and could therefore enhance or be a hindrance to effective implementation of the curriculum policy. The study used teacher questionnaire as the main tool and class observation for reading problems and resources available inside the classrooms. Data collected were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

Literature Review

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 and the fact that most teachers do not have adequate phonological skills needed to effectively handle children with phonemic problems (Maneno, 2008) cited in (Runo, 2010) could be contributing to the poor performance in reading hence poor performance in English and overall academic performance.
Majority of pre-unit teachers (90%) indicated that they used the phonics method, followed by very few (10%) who indicated that they used whole-word method. From the study, 70% of class 3 teachers also used phonics while 20% used whole word and 10% language experience. From the study phonics method is a preferred 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 class 3 teachers. In general both pre-unit and class three teachers reported use of some instructional methods in teaching of reading but the finding suggests that some teachers may be using certain instructional methods they are not sure of which demonstrates lack of proper training hence failure of children to learn appropriate reading. Information about stages of learning to read indicate that learners starting at this level should be reading to learn, where they use reading as a tool for acquiring new knowledge (Goodwin, 1982, cited by Kangethe 1988).

From the reviewed literature, these findings are in line with the NRP (2001) which agrees with Adams (2001) and have found phonics to be the most effective when taught systematically. This means that it is necessary to work on the phonics needed at the students reading level which in this case include early childhood level. 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. This may require further research.
Evidence from different assessments in Kenya reviewed in the literature estimates that about 50% of children in grade 4 are able to read at grade 2 and a significant number of learners complete the primary school cycle without having achieved the basic levels of reading and comprehension (Uwezo, 2010/2011). From the findings the level of confidence does not seem to translate into reading skill acquisition by the pupils. Pre-unit teachers reported more confidence in the use of phonics than class 3 teachers who were more confident in the language experience method. This indicates that although majority preferred phonics they were not very confident which could be attributed to their level of preparedness.

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 appropriate literacy levels. 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.

Table 1: Responses of Teachers on Teaching of Reading using Phonic.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons</th>
<th>Pre-unit teacher</th>
<th>Class 3 teacher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy to understand</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increases comprehension</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quicksens reading ability</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>20</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Above findings indicate that phonics method is most preferred. Sixty percent (60%) of pre-unit teachers said that when used it becomes easier for students to understand, followed by thirty percent (30%) who said it quickens reading ability, while ten percent (10%) said that it quickens comprehension. Forty percent (40%) of class 3 teachers said that the phonic method makes it easier for students to understand with an equivalent number forty percent (40%) who said that it quickens reading ability. Twenty percent (20%) of class 3 teachers said that the phonic method increases comprehension.

**Conclusion**

The study concludes that teachers use some instructional strategies and not others. The strategies revealed in the study that were most preferred were phonics, whole word and language experience. This is an indication that the guidelines available to the teachers are not clear on how to teach reading in a uniform way. The guidelines do not clarify which one of the available strategies to be used and how. Another observation was that some of the teachers were not using the reading method they had indicated in the study.
Recommendations

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 by giving specific objectives to be achieved at every level of reading. The Early Childhood Development Service Standard Guidelines for Kenya should be revised to be more specific. The study also recommends teachers' sensitization on the importance and advantage of whole word methods of teaching reading since not all teachers were confident in the use of phonics or whole word approaches of the method. Finally the study recommends that the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) to ensure that teachers' training syllabus is sufficiently developed together with relevant resources so as to prepare teachers for teaching of reading.

References


Jim Rose,(2006) Independent review of the teaching of early reading Final Rose Report,


