

DISPARITIES IN ACCESS TO LITERACY PREDICTORS AMONG PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN IN KENYA

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Abstract

In working towards attaining the EFA goal, like other developing countries, Kenya is facing the challenge of providing good quality and equitable basic education to all school age children by the year 2015. The development of higher order literacy skills in English – the medium of instruction – is an important outcome of good-quality primary education. Consequently, it is important that education planners and practitioners are aware of the English literacy predictors, which refers to the factors that impinge on children's acquisition of literacy skills in English. One part of the English Literacy Norms study on which this paper is based sought to investigate such factors. In this paper, findings from Standard 6 children questionnaires on their access to English language, one of the hypothesized predictors of English literacy development are presented. The analysis reveals that there are considerable disparities in children's access to English in the home, at pre-school and at Standard 1. Children in the high cost privately owned schools have access to English much earlier in their lives at home and in the pre-school institutions they attend while access to English by children in low cost public and community schools is delayed. In conclusion, we discuss issues of language in education policy and practice in Kenya and make recommendations on what needs to be done to enhance attainment of English literacy skills by children in all school categories in Kenya.

Introduction

Following the declaration of good-quality basic education for all (EFA) goal in Jomtien in 1990 and the affirmation of the same in Dakar in 2000, developing countries like Kenya are currently grappling with this momentous challenge in their educational planning and practices. The challenges in the EFA goal have to do with improving access to education so that all children can enroll; improving the quality of education which has to do with what children learn, that is, the content of education; how well they learn, that is, educational attainment; and equity which refers to the need to ensure that all categories of children – girls/boys, rural/urban, rich/poor, minority/majority - have access to good quality education. The Kenya Ministry of Education, Science and Technology Sector Strategic Plan 2003-2007 for example lays great emphasis on the need to ensure that quantitative expansion of access to primary education goes hand in hand with the equitable provision of good-quality education (Ministry of Education Science and Technology, 2003).

In Kenya, key stakeholders in primary education such as educators, professionals, business people and parents agree that development of higher order literacy skills especially in English should be an important outcome of good-quality primary education (Stewart & Mutunga, 2002). At the same time, although many of us may not be aware, we entered into the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003-2012) in February 2003 as part of the world wide-EFA campaign. Further, literacy scholars have been reminding us of the critical place of literacy development in education.

According to Cook-Gumperz (1986), literacy development is both the purpose and the product of schooling particularly at the primary school level. Consequently, as Wells (1989) notes, as soon as children enter school they are expected to learn to read and write since subsequently, a substantial part of their learning is dependent on their ability to cope with written language. It is therefore important that children acquire literacy quickly or else risk being branded failures early in their school life, which would have serious impact on what they get from school.

The foregoing discussion underscores the need for researchers and educators generally to be concerned about literacy development at this time.

What is Literacy?

While the term 'literacy' is part of most people's everyday vocabulary, there is controversy in the literature as to what exactly the term means (Street, 1984). For example, whereas there seems to be agreement among the contending parties that literacy involves mastery of the written language, the same cannot be said about the level at which one has to demonstrate such mastery in order to be considered literate. Resnick and Resnick (1991) demonstrate that views about what is regarded as literate behaviour have varied over time and differed from one context to another both within a society and among societies. They argue that in 18th century Europe and North America, for example, high levels of literacy were restricted to a very small elite group and that for the general public, the ability to write one's name was adequate proof of literacy. Different theorists and literacy researchers approach their subject from different perspectives. In the following paragraphs, we present two conceptions of literacy found in the literature: the psychological and the social view of literacy.

The Psychological View of Literacy

Under the psychological view, literacy is seen as the possession of psycholinguistic skills that enable one to handle symbolic information. Such skills include: reading, writing, communicative skills and what Wells (1989) has called 'literate thinking' skills which means using language deliberately as a tool for thinking. Within this view, Cambourne (1988) has identified full literacy skills as: critical thinking, problem solving and reflection. Elaborating on what full literacy from the psychological view of literacy means, Wells (1991) makes distinctions among the processes believed to be involved in literate behavior and identifies 4 levels of literacy within an overall model which we find useful in thinking about literacy development levels in school settings. The 4 levels are:

- Performative level which is the level of encoding and decoding text.
- Functional level, which implies a level of reading and writing that enables people to function adequately in society and as such is defined relative to changing societal demands. This is the view used by UNESCO, which expects that a person is literate when s/he can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in her (or his) group and also for enabling her (or him) to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for her (or his) own and the community's development (UNESCO, 1995).
- Informational level where the emphasis is on the role of literacy in the communication of information.
- Epistemic level which refers to the psychological effects of literacy where reading and writing are seen as having the capacity to bring about changes in the mental lives of individuals and by extension of the societies in which they live.

Wells argues that full literacy is associated with the epistemic level, which presupposes the other three levels.

The Social View of Literacy

Under this view of literacy, Williams and Snipper (1990) have identified three broad categories – functional literacy, cultural literacy and critical literacy. As discussed above, functional literacy refers to basic reading and writing skills that allow one to function at a certain minimum level at work and in the everyday life of her/his community. Cultural literacy refers to the cultural context within which literacy is practiced and argues that there is need for shared experiences and points of reference within an interpretive community for meaning to be communicated. The argument is that individuals' negotiation of meaning from a text is dependent on what they bring to it and hence the need for a shared cultural heritage for meaning to be communicated. Critical literacy on the other hand has to do with the students' ability to analyze and understand the social realities of their own lives and of their communities. Critical literacy draws on the ideas of Paulo Freire (1970) who sees social transformation as the goal of literacy. According

to Freire, in acquiring literacy, the learners should critically analyse their own lived experiences in relation to the lived experiences of others in order for them to come to an understanding of their position. Freire posits that full literacy for the disempowered should enable them to become critical of the status quo and take up advocacy for true democracy.

In our view, there is no conflict between the psychological and the social views of literacy when it comes to the curriculum. The psychological view identifies the necessary skills that can be developed in the school and the social view the uses they are to be put. The social view presupposes the psychological view. Adopting a critical attitude towards the status quo and working towards social transformation requires that one is able to think critically, reflect on her/his experiences and subsequently communicate her/his thoughts and feelings.

Language and literacy

The foregoing discussion of perspectives on literacy suggests that literacy is intimately connected to language. Literacy presupposes language; one becomes literate in a language or languages. At the same time, through practicing literacy that is by engaging in reading and writing, one attains even higher levels of linguistic development. In this paper we take the view that in a multilingual country like Kenya, a child's access to the language of school-based literacy is an important predictor of the child's literacy development and that disparities in access to the language of school-based literacy development can lead to unequal academic attainment with serious consequences for social-economic and political equity.

We argue that disparities in access to the language of literacy development must therefore be acknowledged and appropriate policies and practices developed to ensure that the disparities do not become a barrier to some children's experience of educational success and the socio-economic benefits that go with such success in the modern world.

Language and literacy in Kenya

There are over 40 indigenous languages in Kenya (Abdulaziz, 1982). In addition there is Kiswahili which is the national language and which functions as the *lingua franca*, and English, which is the official language. According to the operative medium of instruction policy, in areas of linguistic homogeneity, the indigenous language is to be used from Standard 1 to 3 whereas in areas of linguistic heterogeneity such as in cities and other urban areas, either Kiswahili or English is to be used. In all places, English is the medium of instruction from Standard 4 onwards. From this policy, one can deduce that English is the language of literacy development in Kenya. Indeed, there is a general tacit agreement in Kenya that English is the language of education and hence of literacy development. In her synthesis of five recent case studies on language policy and practices in Kenya, Muthwii (2002) reports that rural parents expressed the view that their children went to school to learn English not their indigenous languages, which they already knew. On the other hand urban parents assumed that English was the medium of instruction. In what follows, we provide data on disparities in access to English – the language of literacy development - among children in different categories of primary schools in Kenya. The data we present were gathered from eight schools in four districts as part of a pilot study for the on-going English literacy norm development project. We start by providing an overview of the study.

The study

In an attempt to provide guidance to policy makers, curriculum developers, text-book writers, teacher educators and teachers, learning assessment tools developers and parents on how to help children develop high level English literacy skills, a group of educational researchers has been trying to develop Standard 3 and 6 English literacy norms also sometimes referred to as standards for Kenya 1. This research has been ongoing since April 2002 and it is to be concluded by end of March 2003. The choice of Standard 3 class was because it marks the end of Kiswahili or the mother tongue medium with the switch into English in Standard 4. The choice of Standard 6 was because it is seen as the transition point from middle-primary (Standards 4, 5 and 6) to upper primary (standards 7 and 8) with the pupils having only two more years before they sit for the end of primary examination - the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education examination which marks the end of formal education for more than 50 per cent of the students.

So far, the research team has formulated hypothesized norms for the two classes in the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing and, developed and administered tests on all four skills.

Side by side with the testing, the team administered questionnaires to the test takers with the intention of finding out what home and/or school-based factors could be used as predictors for pupils' literacy development.

In the pilot study whose data we use in this paper, attempts to help the pupils fill out the questionnaires were made. However, only data from questionnaires filled by Standard 6 pupils were found to be usable and are reported in this paper. Eight schools from four districts were selected for the pilot study. The districts were Nairobi, Kajiado, Murang'a and Mwingi, which are found in Nairobi, Rift Valley, Central and Eastern provinces respectively. Two schools were selected per district. Due to time and financial constraints, the sampled schools were all within a 200 Km radius from Nairobi where the researchers are based.

The schools selected fall into three broad categories – high cost private (P), urban public and community schools (UP&C) and low cost public rural schools (PR). The schools sampled for the pilot study and their characteristics are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample Schools

School	District	Province	Ownership	Environment	Category*
1	Nairobi	Nairobi	Community	Urban-slum	UP&C
2	Nairobi	Nairobi	Private	Urban	P
3	Mwingi	Eastern	Public	Rural-urban	UP&C
4	Mwingi	Eastern	Public	Rural	PR
5	Murang'a	Central	Public	Rural	PR
6	Murang'a	Central	Public	Rural	PR
7	Kajiado	Rift Valley	Private	Urban	P
8	Kajiado	Rift Valley	Public	Rural-urban	UP&C

* There were three categories for the schools that is P = Private (2), UP&C= Urban Public and Community (3) and PR = Public rural (3).

In each school random sampling procedures were used to select 20 girls and 20 boys from each class to take the tests and fill in the questionnaires giving an overall sample size of 320 pupils. However only 311 Standard 6 pupils' questionnaires were found to be useable for the analysis. The SPSS statistical package was used to analyse the data.

Although the questionnaires sought information on a variety of possible literacy predictor factors including teacher factors, teaching-learning processes and resources, and attendance of pre-school, we focus on linguistic factors and specifically pupils' access to English on which the data were clearer. In addition, there were fewer disparities on some of the other factors such as attendance of pre-school and teacher academic and professional preparation.

For example, all the children in our sample reported having attended some sort of pre-school institution. We also found that teacher factors such as level of education and training did not vary much from one sampled school to the other. Most teachers had completed secondary level education and had been trained for two years at the Primary 1 (or above) teacher level, which is the requisite grade for them. Similarly, we also found that sharing of English textbooks was common to all schools with more pupils (even five) sharing a book in the rural public schools than

in the other categories of schools. In what follows, we present the data on access to English. Children's Access to English at home In order to source information on children's access to English at home, the children were asked to indicate what language they speak at home. The data are summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Language Spoken At Home

Language	Frequency	Valid Percent
Kiswahili	115	37.2
English	19	6.1
Mother tongue	170	55.0
Sheng*	5	1.6
Total	309	100.0

* Sheng is a youth sub-culture language mostly spoken in urban areas

Table 2 clearly shows that English is not the language of the home for an overwhelming majority of the pupils in our sample. Only a very small minority (6.1 per cent) of the children speaks English at home while 55 per cent speak their mother tongues and 37.2 per cent speak Kiswahili. Further analysis to establish which children speak what language at home gave the findings summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Language spoken at home by school cross tabulation

School & category Language	1.00 UP&C	2.00 P	3.00 UP&C	4.00 PR	5.00 PR	6.00 PR	7.00 P	8.00 UP&C	Total
Kiswahili	33 (89.2%)	24 (57.1%)	11 (26.8%)	—	3 (7.5%)	3 (7.9%)	14 (35.0%)	27 (67.5%)	115 (37.2%)
English	1 (2.7%)	9 (21.4%)	—	—	1 (2.5%)	1 (2.6%)	6 (15.0%)	1 (2.5%)	19 (6.1%)
Mother tongue	3 (8.1%)	6 (14.3%)	30 (73.2%)	31 (100%)	36 (90.0%)	34 (89.5%)	18 (45.0%)	12 (30.0%)	170 (55.0%)
Sheng	—	3 (7.1%)	—	—	—	—	2 (5.0%)	—	5 (1.6%)
Total	37 (100%)	42 (100%)	41 (100%)	31 (100%)	40 (100%)	38 (100%)	40 (100%)	40 (100%)	309 (100%)

From Table 3 it can be seen that in general, all the children in the three categories of schools in our sample have little access to English in their homes. The urban and private schools had most of their pupils conversing in Kiswahili for example Schools 1 (89.2 per cent), School 2 (57.1 per cent) and School 8 (67.5 per cent). On the other hand, public rural schools – 4, 5 and 6 had the majority of their pupils communicating in their mother tongue- 100 per cent, 90 per cent, and 89.5 per cent respectively. The highest usage of English at home is seen in the private schools – 2 and 7 reporting 21.4 per cent and 15 per cent respectively. All the other schools – the urban public and community schools and the rural public schools had less than 3 per cent of the pupils speaking English at home. These findings are not surprising given what we know about the sociolinguistic situation in Kenya where large portions of rural populations have linguistic homogeneity and Kiswahili is the *lingua franca* of the less educated urban dwellers (who send their children to urban public or community schools) with English serving the same purpose for the highly educated socio-economically advantaged urban dwellers who are more likely to send their children to high cost private schools.

Children's access to English in pre-schools

We also wanted to know when the pupils were first exposed to English in their schooling life, so we asked them the language used with their nursery school teachers. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Language spoken with nursery school teacher

Language	Frequency	Valid Percent
Kiswahili	122	39.7
English	87	28.3
Mother tongue	98	31.9
Total	307	100.0

Table 4 shows that at the nursery school level only a small minority of the children (28.3 per cent) spoke English with their nursery school teachers otherwise the highest number (39.7 per cent) spoke Kiswahili followed by mother tongue at (31.9 per cent). This means that the majority of the pupils – (71.6 per cent) had little access to English at this level of schooling. A detailed analysis of which children spoke what language in their pre-school institutions revealed the information in Table 5.

Table 5: Language spoken with nursery teacher by school Cross tabulation

School	1.00	2.00	3.00	4.00	5.00	6.00	7.00	8.00	Total
Category	UP&C	P	UP&C	PR	PR	PR	P	UP&C	
Language									
Kiswahili	33 (89.2%)	3 (7.1%)	28 (68.3%)	2 (6.5%)	6 (16.2%)	7 (17.9%)	12 (30.0%)	31 (77.5%)	122 (39.7%)
English	1 (2.7%)	39 (92.9%)	5 (12.2%)	—	1 (2.7%)	4 (10.3%)	28 (70.0%)	9 (22.5%)	87 (28.3%)
Mother tongue	3 (8.1%)	—	8 (19.5%)	29 (93.5%)	30 (81.1%)	28 (71.8%)	—	—	98 (31.9%)
Total	37 (100%)	42 100%	41 (100%)	31 (100%)	37 (100%)	39 (100%)	40 (100%)	40 (100%)	307 (100%)

From Table 5, it is clear that disparities in access to English for our study sample set in at the pre-school level. A large majority of children in the two high cost private schools (Schools 2 and 7) reported having spoken English with their nursery school teachers 92.9 per cent and 70 per cent respectively. On the other hand, the majority of children in the urban public and community schools reported speaking Kiswahili with their nursery school teachers: School 1 (89.2 per cent), School 3 (68.3 per cent) and School 8 (77.5 per cent). The rural public schools had the majority of their pupils reporting speaking their mother tongue with their nursery school teachers: School 4, (93.5 per cent), School 5 (81.1 per cent) and School 6 (71.8 per cent). Thus the exposure of the pupils to English at an early age varied according to their background with those attending private schools having the highest exposure while those in the rural public schools having the least.

Children's Access to English in Standard 1

Information on the Standard 1 language of the children studied is summarised in Tables 6 and 7 below.

Table 6: Language spoken with Standard 1 Teacher

Language	Frequency	Valid Percent
Kiswahili	136	46.3
English	111	37.8
Mother tongue	47	16.0
Total	294	100.0

For the language used with the Standard 1 teacher, there is a slight difference from that of the nursery teacher. Although the majority of the study pupils (46.3 per cent) reported using Kiswahili a higher percentage (37.8 per cent) reported using English while a small minority (16 per cent) reported using their mother tongue. Table 7 contains information on what had happened to children in the different schools.

Table 7: Language spoken with Standard 1 teacher by school cross tabulation

School, Category	1.00 UP&C	2.00 P	3.00 UP&C	4.00 PR	5.00 PR	6.00 PR	7.00 P	8.00 UP&C	Total
Language									
Kiswahili	29 (76.3%)	7 (16.7%)	27 (65.9%)	9 (29.0%)	20 (74.1%)	20 (52.6%)	10 (25.0%)	14 (37.8%)	136 (46.3%)
English	5 (13.2%)	35 (83.3%)	9 (22.0%)	4 (12.9%)	4 (14.8%)	2 (5.3%)	29 (72.5%)	23 (62.2%)	111 (37.8%)
Mother tongue	4 (10.5%)	—	5 (12.2%)	18 (58.1%)	3 (11.1%)	16 (42.1%)	1 (2.5%)	—	47 (16.0%)
Total	38 (100%)	42 (100%)	41 (100%)	31 (100%)	27 (100%)	38 (100%)	40 (100%)	37 (100%)	294 (100%)

Table 7 shows that the high cost privately owned schools (Schools 1 and 7) had the highest number of children reporting that they spoke English with their Standard 1 teacher, 83.3 per cent and 72.5 per cent respectively. On the other hand, very few children in the urban public and community schools (with the exception of children in School 8) and in the rural public schools reported speaking English with their class 1 teacher. The percentages in these schools were quite low: School 1 (13.2 per cent), School 3 (22.0 per cent), School 4 (12.9 per cent), School 5 (4.8 per cent) and School 6 (5.3 per cent).

The picture that is emerging from the analysis of children's access to English at home, in pre-school and in Standard 1 is that the children in the high cost privately owned schools have access to English much earlier in their lives – at home or in the nursery school. On the other hand, access to English by children in low cost public and community schools is delayed.

Children's Access to English in their Current Class – Standard 6

When Standard 6 students in our sample were asked about the language currently used by the teacher in teaching, the responses that emerged are as shown in Table 8.

Table 8 Language used by Standard 6 teachers in teaching

	Frequency	Valid Percentages
Kiswahili	61	19.6
English	244	78.5
Mother tongue	6	1.9
Total	311	100.0

Table 8 shows that in Standard 6, English had the highest usage (78.5 per cent) of the children studied followed distantly by Kiswahili (19.6 per cent) and only 1.9 per cent of the children reported using the mother tongue. This means that about 20 per cent of the pupils reported little access to English even in their classrooms where, going by the language policy, exposure to English is expected to be highest.

In Table 9, information on what pupils from different school categories said about the language Standard 6 teachers' use in teaching is summarised.

Table 9 Language teacher uses in teaching Standard 6 by school cross tabulation

School, Category	1.00 UP&C	2.00 P	3.00 UP&C	4.00 PR	5.00 PR	6.00 PR	7.00 P	8.00 UP&C	Total
Language									
Kiswahili	20 (52.6%)	4 (9.5%)	9 (22.0%)	6 (19.4%)	4 (10.0%)	16 (41.0%)	1 (2.5%)	1 (2.5%)	61 (19.6%)
English	17 (44.7%)	38 (90.5%)	30 (73.2%)	24 (77.4%)	35 (87.5%)	23 (59.0%)	38 (95.0%)	39 (97.5%)	244 (78.5%)
Mother tongue	1 (2.6%)	—	2 (4.9%)	1 (3.2%)	1 (2.5%)	—	—	—	5 (1.6%)
Total	38 (100%)	42 (100%)	41 (100%)	31 (100%)	40 (100%)	39 (100%)	40 (100%)	40 (100%)	311 (100%)

It can be seen from Table 9 that with the exception of School 1, the community school in our sample, English use in Standard 6 is above 50 per cent in all schools.

Discussion

The data presented in the preceding section clearly illustrate the disparities in access to English, the language of literacy development in Kenya. A large majority of Kenyan children do not have access to this language at home, in their pre-school institutions or even in the early years of their primary schooling.

The numbers of this group of children has no doubt risen significantly owing to the implementation of the free primary education policy at the beginning of this year, which has led to an estimated additional 1.7 million children enrolling in various classes. Our own data analysis on performance in the English literacy tests and how performance in them is impacted by various factors is yet to be completed. However, there are indications that all is not well with literacy development in Kenyan primary schools. A Southern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) assessment of reading in English at Standard 6 found that about 35 per cent of the

children had not attained even the minimum level of literacy in English which was deemed to be the mastery necessary for recognition of basic linguistic building stones, for example the alphabet and simple words. On the other hand, 77 per cent of the pupils had not attained a desirable mastery level, which was deemed to be the mastery necessary for successful learning in Standard 7 (UNESCO, 2001).

Although the SACMEQ study did not classify children along the same parameters as we have done in this paper, the study did report on disparities in performance by school location. For example, while 86.2 per cent of the children in large city (read Nairobi) obtained the minimum mastery level and 59.6 per cent the desirable level, only 59.6 per cent and 17.1 per cent obtained the minimum and desirable levels respectively in the rural schools. Given that around 80 per cent of Kenyans live in the rural areas, we argue that the educational system is not even assisting the majority of Kenyan children meet the UNESCO functional literacy criterion, which is deemed insufficient by literacy theorists.

Further, according to the Ministry of Education Science and Technology Sector Review Report, (Ministry of Education Science & Technology, 2003) school drop out and grade repetition rates are high in Kenya. Over 50 per cent of the children who enroll in Standard 1 drop out of school before they complete the 8 years' primary education cycle. While we do not dispute that the previously high cost of education was partly responsible for this, we suspect that a good proportion of these children drift out of school on failing to become literate quickly enough and thus failing to see meaning in what they are doing in school. At the same time, according to the same document, grade repetition rates range between 13 to 16 per cent for Standards 1-6 and between 18 and 19 per cent in Standard 7 with repetition being highest in Standard 1 (17.2 per cent). In explaining this high drop out rate at Standard 1 the report says that there is an unofficial requirement that Standard 1 entrants are able to read and write and are therefore made to repeat the class when they fail to demonstrate competence in these literacy skills yet the official pre-school syllabus does not prepare them for that.

We would add that as the data presented in this paper have shown, the majority of Standard 1 children in the urban public and community schools and in rural public schools have not had access to English, the language they are expected to be literate in. This, we want to argue, is an important part of the explanation of the unacceptably low literacy levels at this and the whole of primary level of education. Indeed, in her ethnographic work in primary classrooms in Kenya, Bunyi (2001) demonstrates that Standard 1 teachers expect that all children already have knowledge of English. Those children who do not demonstrate such knowledge are quickly labeled as non-knowers and assured failures.

Given the above scenario, it is our contention that for the majority of primary school children, the educational system in Kenya is failing in its responsibility of equipping them with the basic literacy tools for learning in school and in their lives after school. In addressing this problem, there is cause to be concerned about the language in education policy and practice in primary education.

Language policy

As indicated earlier on in this paper, the policy on language in education is well articulated in government policy documents that researchers have access to, however, it is evident that not enough has been done to disseminate the policy to teachers who are the implementers of the policy let alone helping them work with the policy in ways that are likely to enhance acquisition of literacy by the various categories of children in Kenyan and particularly by those children who have little access to English. Muthwii (2001) reported that the March 15 1976 three-page Ministry of Education circular to schools about the language in education policy is stored in files, which are now closed and secured in archives. She concluded that few teachers have ever read the policy. In the study whose findings are reported on in this paper, we found that of the 25 teachers who filled our questionnaires, only two (8 per cent) had a good idea of what the policy says.

We believe that there is need to re-examine the language in education policy in Kenya in light of data on access to the different languages by different categories of children and data on literacy attainment and other social-cultural, economic and political considerations (Bunyi 2001) and either reaffirm the policy or revise it. Perhaps more importantly, whatever policy we opt for, there will be need for better dissemination and implementation. Owing to the multilingual nature of the Kenyan society and the critical role that the various languages play, it is unlikely that we

will have a monolingual policy and that bilingualism will continue to be a feature of education in Kenya. Due recognition will have to be paid to this reality and appropriate literacy programmes based on research developed and implemented. In the case of literacy in English, given the differential access to the language demonstrated in this paper, we will need research on the best ways of developing it among different categories of children with differential access to the language.

Success in implementing whatever language policy and/or literacy programme(s) we develop will very much depend on the teacher. Policies on teacher education and teaching assignments will also need re-examination. Currently, the policy is that primary school teachers are trained to teach all subjects of the curriculum across the eight years of primary education. Consequently, teachers who teach English at Standard 1 for example, are not given any special training in initial literacy development methods for English as-a-second language learners. Indeed, during their two years of teacher training, they are expected to take 14 subjects in their course work. In the circumstances, it is unlikely that they get much opportunity to reflect on the critical role of literacy or on how best they can ensure that each child in their class acquires reading and writing skills in English quickly. We would recommend that teachers who teach initial English literacy are specifically trained for this role.

Teaching-learning methodologies

Currently, two broad approaches to the teaching of literacy are to be found in the literature (Chall, 1999). The first approach views language as being made up of different components that have to be studied as separate entities and therefore lays emphasis on phonics in initial reading programmes. The second approach views language more holistically and therefore supports methodologies that approach it as such, for example, the whole language method. In choosing which methodologies to emphasise, there is need to learn from others. In her overview article on three research reviews comparing the two approaches to reading achievement in the United States of America, Chall (1999) demonstrates that these assessments conducted separately and for different purposes found that approaches with a stronger phonics emphasis produced higher reading achievement than those that had weaker phonics components.

On the other hand, while considering literacy development in Kenya, it is important to consider which amongst the various second language teaching-learning methodologies is most appropriate. Three main second language teaching methodologies; grammar-translation, audio lingual and communicative approach, have all had some influence on the teaching of English in Kenya. However, we want to point out that as we reflect on the best method it is important to remember that primary school children in Kenya need to learn English quickly so that they can use the language to learn other school subjects. None of the three teaching-learning methods above has had helping English as-a-second language learners use the language as a medium of learning as its central purpose. The approaches have been basically concerned about language learning without too much attention to the content. Admittedly, communicative language teaching has taken a step towards dealing with this problem in its attention to discourse competence but emphasis in the approach is on face-to-face communication. It does not take the subject area content as the primary context in which second language learners will use the second language. Clearly, any educational approach that considers language learning alone and ignores the learning of subject matter is inadequate to the needs of Kenyan learners who need to learn content through the second language. Second language teaching-learning methodologies that integrate language and content (Crandall, 1987) would seem more suitable. However, such integration would have to be undertaken at the curriculum development and materials development stages and teachers trained on how to work with such methodologies to avoid the frustration and failure experienced by both teachers and students when the curriculum declared the policy of integrating English and literature (at the secondary school level) without any supporting curriculum materials and/or teacher training (Magoma, 1999). Clearly, there are considerable challenges in language policy and practice to be faced in ensuring equitable quality education for all Kenyan children. Not least of these challenges are disparities in access to English among Kenyan primary school learners.

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