

The Effectiveness of Thematic Teaching Approach on Developing Reading Skills Among Preschool Children in Manga Sub-County, Nyamira County, Kenya

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Abstract: Thematic teaching approach is a strategy which connects all subject areas using a common theme hence making learning integrated and meaningful. The purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of thematic teaching approach on developing reading skills among preschoolers in Manga Sub-County, Nyamira County, Kenya. The target population for the study included 120 ECDE teachers and 800 preschoolers. The study used cluster and simple random sampling techniques in obtaining a sample size of 36 pre-unit teachers and 240 preschoolers. Data was collected by means of questionnaires and observation checklists. The findings indicated that thematic teaching approach was the common approach which was used to develop reading skill among preschool children. The study also found that pre-schools in which their ECDE teachers always used thematic approach to develop reading skills performed relatively better than those where teachers rarely or never used the approach. However, reading skills still remained below average. Findings of this study could help Kenyan pre-school teachers to evaluate their instructional practices in the teaching of reading and also aid the Ministry of Education to carry out in-service training courses on appropriate methodology in developing reading skills in preschool children.

Keywords: Pre-school children, Reading skills, Thematic Teaching Approach.

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the languages skills taught in Kenya is reading. The reading skills involve activities such as proper use of books, interpreting details in objects, pictures, symbols and signs (Whitbread, 2003). With respect to Education for All global goals, pre-school and primary school education has been consistently recognized to have a major role in developing the basic reading literacy skills (Snow, Griffin & Burns, 2005). Further, MoE (2002) stipulates clearly that one of the objectives of teaching is to enable the learner to acquire reading skills hence the current study sought to establish the effectiveness of thematic teaching approach on the teaching of reading skills in pre-schools. In order to develop early reading skills, thematic approach is considered suitable and is recommended by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Koech, 2010).

In USA, a study was conducted in the state of New Jersey (Loughran, 2005), whereby 930 active participants consisting of 16 teachers and their learners from 16 different schools were used. The study used two groups of learners, the first group comprising of a controlled group of 500 kindergarteners who were taught using the single subject method, while 430 kindergarteners were educated using thematic approach. Those learners taught by thematic approach demonstrated a mean of 89.2% of tested items correct while the controlled group averaged 83.1% resulting in a significant difference of

6.1%. According to the educators involved in the project, thematic teaching approach was a great success in the teaching of reading skills (ash, 2008).

A qualitative research study conducted by Boyle (2008) and Bragg (2008) in the United Kingdom demonstrated positive outcomes of educating learners through a thematic approach. The analyzed data was collected from 1996 to 2007 from school sampling and Monitoring Curriculum and Assessment (2005–7) research projects. The primary focus was the longitudinal study and the styles of teaching courses separately versus the combining subjects. Schools in the United Kingdom taught children by combining subjects, and decided to adjust the educational agenda to teach the necessary subjects independently. During the first six years of the project, there was an increase of learning in Language Arts by only 1.1 percent within the first two years. While figures revealed a 2.3 percent increase during the third and fourth years. Finally, by the fifth and Integrated Thematic Curriculum for Primary Grades 13 sixth year, there was no significant increase within Language Arts, but the test scores remained the same. After six years of teaching one-subject at a time, 86 percent of the teachers asserted time constraints were a problem (Boyle, B; Bragg, P. 2008).

Despite a strong background in reading skills being critical for acquiring knowledge and skills, there is also a public outcry concerning the dismal reading ability among primary school pupils in Africa with over 92 percent not able to read at various class levels (National Assessment System for Monitoring Learner Achievement (NASMLA, 2010; UWEZO, 2010). According to the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality (SACMEQIII 2007) report, there is low reading achievement across many parts of Africa and Kenya as a country is not spared.

Further, other studies have shown that Children whose teachers used inappropriate teaching methods in developing reading skills join primary school with a lot of reading difficulties and hence they rarely catch up (Neuman and Dickson, 2001; Whitehurst and Lonigan, 2011). The low reading literacy levels might be attributed to methods and teachers' competency in teaching basic reading. These findings are also supported by Muindi (2011) who reported that pupils in Kenya lag behind their counterparts in Tanzania, Seychelles, Mauritius and Swaziland in reading skills. This report was according to the survey carried out by (SACMEQIII). This suggests that unless the problem is addressed contextually and effectively, the provision of quality education that would ensure equal achievement for all children regardless of their background would continue to pose serious challenges for the education sector in Kenya. This is due to the fact that a child who is a poor reader in pre-school and first grade is 88 percent more likely to remain poor in fourth grade and all other subsequent levels of learning (Maina, 2011).

According to the KIE (2007) the reading activities to be improved in Early Childhood Development Education (ECDE) include observing and appreciating the written word, recognizing letters of the alphabet and using books among others. However, of the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing; acquiring reading skills has become a problem (Boyle, B., 2008; Bragg, J., 2008, p. 12).

In Kenya, Nasibi (2005) points out that thematic teaching approach enables a teacher to incorporate many activities under one theme. Thematic teaching approach therefore enhances development of reading skills through repeated skills in all activity areas. The approach allows learners to feel motivated especially when the teacher selects a theme to which learners can connect (Nasibi, 2005). For example in the theme family members; in language learners identify and read the first letters of family members. In mathematics, they count the identified letters in relation to family members. In science learners colour and label family members and read names of colours. In social studies learners name work done by family members. In creative arts learners model the first letters of family members while in music they sing about family members. At the end of it all, learners acquire reading skills in a more natural way (NACECE, 2008). This is enhanced by the use of relevant and appropriate teaching and learning resources which promote development of reading skills (Koech, 2010). This therefore led the researcher to investigate the effectiveness of thematic teaching approach in developing reading skills among preschoolers

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

Pre-school children develop particular reading related behaviours that are important for later reading (Osakwe, 2006). Various methods of teaching exist but there are some that are more specific and effective for teaching young children how to read than others, an example being thematic teaching approach (Koech, 2010). The government of Kenya has given the attention and support required through the recent introduction of community support grants, employment of ECDE

teacher trainers and some counties have employed ECDE teachers. Despite these efforts, Uwezo (2013) reports that seven out of ten standard three public school pupils cannot read standard two level stories and illiteracy has become a serious challenge facing language development in early years. Further, the assessment reports carried out in Manga Sub-County revealed that many pre-school children do not know how to read (D.E.O's office, 2013). To date, the efforts by the government to improve the ECDE education and lower primary reading skills have not yielded impressive results. It was therefore imperative to examine the teaching approaches in pre-reading skills for this is the foundation for skill development.

PURPOSE OF STUDY:

The purpose of the study was to investigate the effectiveness of thematic teaching approach on developing reading skills among pre-school children in Manga Sub-County, Nyamira County, Kenya.

2. METHODOLOGY SUMMARY ON RESEARCH DESIGN

The study adopted a descriptive survey design. Descriptive survey design was found appropriate because it enables the researcher to collect information by administering questionnaires to a sample of individuals. It is also appropriate as it enables an in-depth collection of data to study a phenomenon the way it is without manipulation of variables (Orodho, 2005).

The study was conducted in public ECDE centres in Manga Sub-County, Nyamira County, Kenya. The other Sub-Counties in Nyamira include Borabu, Nyamira North and Masaba North. Of the four Sub-Counties, Manga lags behind with a mean score of 243 marks in KCPE results (2012) while Borabu tops with a mean score of 274 (Sub-County office Manga, 2012). A report by Uwezo 2013 indicated that seven out of ten standard three public school pupils cannot read standard two level stories. The methods of teaching used could be questionable depending on varied factors. The above factors contributed to the researcher's choice of Manga Sub-County. The target population for the study included 120 ECDE teachers and 800 preschoolers hence 920. The study used cluster random and simple random sampling techniques to obtain a sample size of 36 pre-unit teachers and 240 preschoolers making a total of 276 respondents. Cluster random sampling was used to select ECDE teachers and pre-school children from three geographical divisions to ensure a fair representation in their proportion (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003). Simple random sampling also ensured a good sample representation of the entire population. Thus the sample yielded research findings that can be generalized to a large population with margin errors that can be determined statistically. Teachers' observation checklists and questionnaires were used to collect information from teachers on the effectiveness of thematic teaching approach on developing reading skills. Also the preschoolers' observation checklists were used to record the preschoolers' reading ability when using thematic approach. This included a one to one reading text by the preschool teacher as the researcher observed and recorded the learners' abilities in various reading skills. This was important as it permitted the researcher to record each activity as it occurred (Mugenda, 2003). Data collected was both qualitative and quantitative. With the qualitative data, the researcher used analytical technique including quick impressionistic summary, thematic analysis and content analysis. Quantitative data was coded and entered into the computer for analysis using the statistical package for social science (SPSS) version 22.0. The descriptive statistics used included frequency counts and percentages which enabled the researcher to meaningfully describe a distribution of scores or measurements using a few indices (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF STUDY

The goal of the current study was to establish the effectiveness of thematic teaching approach on developing reading skills among pre-school children.

1. Teachers' Use of Thematic Approach in Teaching Reading Skills:

The ECDE teachers were requested to provide information on the frequency at which they used thematic teaching approach. Their responses are summarized in figure 1.

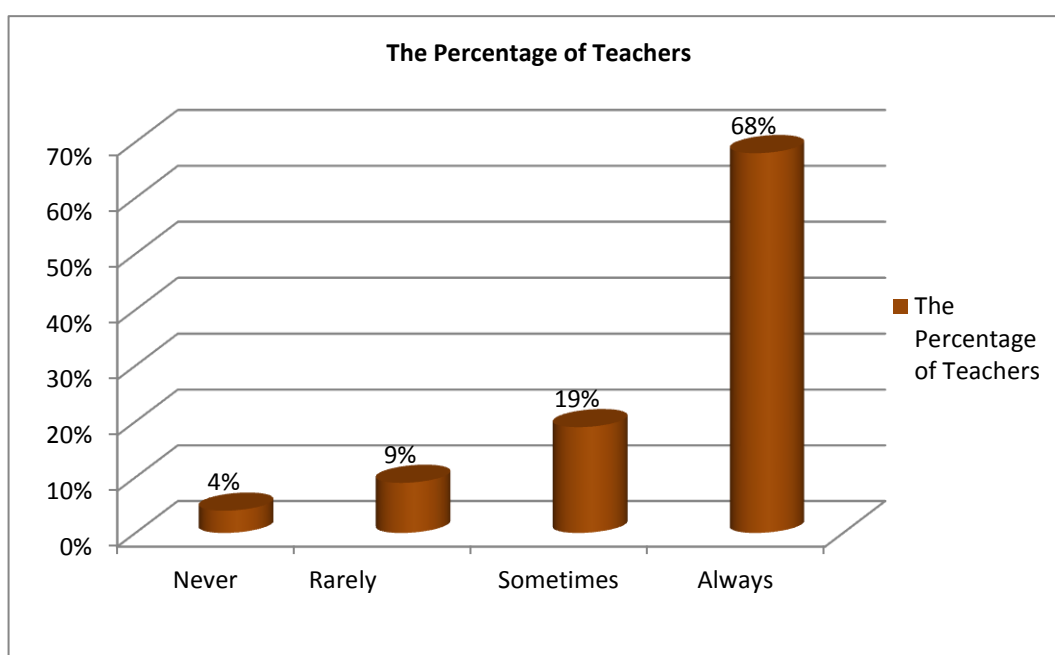


Figure 1 Teachers' Use of Thematic Approach in Teaching Reading Skills

Figure 1 shows that 68 percent of the ECDE teachers always use thematic teaching approach while only 19, 9 and 4 percent of pre-school teachers use thematic approach to teaching sometimes, rarely and never respectively. This was done to establish the frequency of the use of thematic teaching approach and reveal whether the teachers were acquainted with the approach. The results revealed that thematic approach was the common approach that was used in teaching of reading skills in the pre-schools in Manga sub-county and majority of the ECDE teachers were comfortable with the approach. This implies that thematic teaching approach is the most common teaching approach used by majority of the ECDE teachers. The findings of this study, however contrasts those of Boyle (2008) and Bragg (2008) which found that majority of the teachers do not frequently use thematic teaching approach of Thematic Approach in Teaching Reading Skills in pre-schools since time constraints were a problem.

The ECDE teachers were requested to rate how thematic teaching approach was effective in the teaching of various reading skills. Their responses are summarized in table 1 below.

Table 1 Teachers' Opinion on the Effectiveness of Thematic Teaching Approach

The activities children are involved in during the Reading lessons	The Percentage of Teachers			
	Very Effective	Effective	Less Effective	Ineffective
Reading the letters sounds	26%	28%	36%	10%
Reading three letter words	19%	34%	38%	9%
Hold books correctly	20%	34%	36%	10%
Reading pictures of domestic animals	35%	33%	26%	6%
Tell stories about pictures	17%	35%	44%	4%
Name numbers in their correct sequences	15%	33%	48%	6%
Average	22%	33%	38%	8%

children as more effective in the teaching of pictures of domestic animals while they were of the opinion that the approach was less effective in teaching the reading of the letters sounds, three letter words, telling a story about a picture and naming numbers in their correct sequences.

This study concurs with Boyle (2008) and Bragg (2008) on data collected from 1996 to 2007 from school sampling and Monitoring Curriculum and Assessment (2005-7) research projects. During the first six years of the project, there was increase learning in language arts by only 1.1% within the first two years. While figures revealed a 2.3 % increase during the third and fourth years. Finally, by the fifth year the Integrated Thematic Curriculum for Primary Grades 13 sixth year had no significant increase within Language Arts, but the test scores remained the same.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The results revealed that thematic teaching approach was the common approach that was used in teaching reading skills in the pre-schools in Manga Sub-County since 68 percent of the ECDE teachers always used the approach while 19, 9 and 4 percent used the approach sometimes, rarely and never respectively. The findings also revealed that the approach was more effective (35 percent) in teaching pictures of domestic animals while others (36 & 38) were of the opinion that the approach was less effective in teaching the reading of letter sounds and three letter words respectively. Hence, the low achievement in reading skills remained a major concern in the pre-schools in Manga Sub-County.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, it was therefore recommended that teachers should provide effective reading instruction by carefully observing each learner's reading needs in multiple contexts in order to provide appropriate instruction and monitor progress. In addition, the Ministry of Education should review training of pre-school English language teachers in order to update their knowledge in line with the current education needs so as to solve the problem of low reading skills.

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