

Full Length Research paper

Towards teacher preparedness in teaching English language in primary schools

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Kenya National Examinations Council (KNEC) reports for 1991 to 1995 on students' performance in English revealed a consistent decline in performance year after year. Despite the efforts made by the government to improve the quality of English language teaching, stated objectives are still not being achieved at a satisfactory level, particularly in the academic skills of reading and writing. The purpose of this study was to investigate teacher preparedness for the teaching of academic skills in English language in primary schools. Data was collected from teachers of English language through a questionnaire and interview schedule. Analysis of data revealed that the majority of teachers were not entirely clear about the ultimate aim of teaching English as a second language and that most teachers were not adequately prepared to teach the complex skills of reading and writing. It is recommended that induction of new teachers into the teaching profession should give much greater attention to setting objectives and to effective methods of instruction, when preparing teachers for teaching these essential academic skills in Primary schools.

Keywords: Teacher preparedness, academic skills, reading, writing.

INTRODUCTION

The important role of English in the language situation in Kenya cannot be overemphasized. English is the official language of communication in Kenya, as well as being the medium of instruction in schools, colleges and universities. English is also the pre-eminent language of international communication. Those who gain acceptable proficiency in English can reap many academic and professional benefits. In the school setting, proficiency in English also makes the learning of other subjects easier. The teachers of English language should aim at producing learners with ability to communicate accurately, fluently and confidently in all the situations in which they find themselves.

The Kenya Institute of Education (2002) states the objectives for the teaching and learning English language in primary schools in both general and specific terms. The overarching aim is that at the end of the primary

course, the learner should be able to communicate fluently, accurately and independently in his/her everyday life. This refers to communicating through both spoken and written forms of the language. To achieve this goal, teachers need to construct relevant schemes of work, develop necessary resources, and devise and implement careful lesson plans. However, some stakeholders in education have expressed doubt that teachers, particularly those new to the profession, are being prepared adequately for such a challenging task.

Teachers' views tend to be that enough work is being done in schools to make it possible for learners to achieve the expected standards; but the problem of poor performance in English at national examinations, (specifically in the academic skills of reading and writing) still persists. Ongong'a et al (2010) suggest that the situation has reached a crisis point. Yet, no research has been carried out in Kenya on this subject to find out the cause of this problem, or to give guidance to teachers and school administrators on how to improve the situation. Teachers definitely need information on

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how to best teach reading and writing in English, so that students can attain effective levels of proficiency. Investigations into this problem are, therefore, necessary. In particular, there is an urgent need to explore the adequacy of the preparation teachers receive.

Rationale

This study was structured by reference to Brophy (1999), Brophy and Good's (1986) model of 'active teaching' and positive classroom climate. The model presumes that a classroom with positive teacher's behavior, positive classroom management, and positive learners' expectations can result in high level success by both the teacher and the learners. The teacher's professional knowledge (including curriculum content knowledge and appropriate teaching methods), classroom discipline, task orientedness, and instructional strategies can together result in the most effective learning. To have all these variables contributing to effective teaching and learning presupposes that teachers have been well prepared as knowledgeable professionals.

An induction course for beginning teachers is a necessary component of teacher development. The typical teacher induction course is supposed to provide beginning teachers with all the information they need to know with regard to education practice in their nation. Okwach (2009) says that an induction course helps a teacher to get practical tips, hints and classroom activity ideas that are useful to him or her in teaching. In the context of this study, there is need to query whether induction courses are adequate for preparing teachers of English.

Aims of the Study

The aims of the study were to:

- a) Determine teachers' preparedness for the teaching of academic skills in English language
- b) Investigate the kind of teacher preparation that would be more effective.

METHODOLOGY

A descriptive survey design (Gay and Airasian, 2000) was used in this study. This approach gives the researcher an opportunity to gather factual information necessary for decision making. Also the researcher identified the opinions, feelings and practices of the subjects through discussion.

The study was carried out in thirty eight (38) primary schools in western Kenya. This area of study was chosen because the districts contain a typical cross section of primary schools in Kenya, namely: Urban, peri-urban,

Rural, Private, Girls Boarding, Boys Boarding, Girls Day, Boys Day and Mixed and City schools. The selected primary schools have shown low performance in English for a number of years. Simple random sampling was used to select 64 teachers of English in the 38 primary schools. Data were collected from teachers by means of a questionnaire and interview schedule. Reliability of the instrument was established through pilot testing on seven teachers who were finally excluded from the main study. The instrument were validated by three educational experts in the university teaching fraternity. Qualitative data were analyzed by establishing analytical categories that emerged naturally from the teachers' responses. Quantitative data was analyzed through cross-tabulation of responses to derive frequency counts and means.

RESULTS

In respect to the first aim of this study (teachers' preparedness for the teaching of academic skills in English), the information received from the field indicated that the majority of beginning teachers (70.2%) were not inducted, while 13.8% received induction courses. Some 16% of teachers did not respond to this item, and their failure to respond can be inferred to mean that they did not understand what 'induction' meant, or that they were not inducted. This could put the percentage of those who were not inducted as high as 86.2%. From this finding, it can be concluded that the majority of teachers do not receive induction, and consequently their performance is below the expectations of the nation. This is because they have not received adequate guidance in essential matters of classroom instruction.

Academic qualifications are another aspect of teacher preparedness. Out of a total of 57 respondents, 49 were holders of Ordinary-level examination results (86%), while 6 teachers were Advanced-level leavers (10.5%) Only 2 teachers (3.6%) of the total were graduate teachers. The figures and percentages indicate that all the teachers used in the research were adequately educated by Kenya standards (see Table 1).

Professional qualification is a critically important aspect for educators. Out of a total of 57 respondents, only 1 did not indicate his qualifications. Those with the highest primary teacher certificates (P1s) were 52. (91.2%), with one additional holder of a Diploma in Science Teaching (S1). There were two Graduate teachers (3.5%) and one (1) P2 teacher. This indicates that almost all practicing teachers in the study have the expected professional qualifications to teach (see Table 2). The figures and percentages in both tables indicate that the teachers are well educated and professionally qualified to do effective teaching in primary schools.

Knowledge of objectives of teaching English language in primary schools was also gauged to be an important aspect of teacher preparedness. An item in

Table 1. Summary of teachers' educational background

Qualifications	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
A-Level	06	10.5	10.5	10.5
O-Level	49	86.0	86.0	86.0
Diploma	01	1.8	1.8	98.2
KACE	01	1.8	1.8	100.00
Total	57	100.0	100.0	

Table 2. Professional qualifications of teachers

Qualifications	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Not stated	01	1.8	1.8	1.8
P1	52	91.2	92.2	93.0
S1	01	1.8	1.8	94.7
Bachelor's degree	02	3.5	3.5	98.2
P2	01	1.8	1.8	100.00
Total	57	100.0	100.0	

the questionnaire was constructed to find out if the teachers were clear about the ultimate aim of teaching English. In the item, four different objectives for teaching and learning English were given, out of which, only one was correct. The respondents were expected to identify the correct objective. Out of the 57 respondents, only 24 (42.1%) were able to identify the correct objective. Thus, 33 respondents (57.9%) did not recognize the ultimate aim of teaching English in Kenya. This meant that the majority of the teachers in the study did not appreciate the real reason why English was being taught. This can be interpreted to mean that far many teachers do not know the goal towards which they should move as they teach the language. The researcher concluded that the majority of the teachers did not know the tasks they were expected to perform and that, they were not task oriented.

Teachers' knowledge of methods of teaching English language is yet another aspect of teacher preparedness. One would hope that to most teachers 'method' refers to a way of teaching which includes strategies, techniques and procedures of teaching and of interacting with students. The teaching method used has been said to be the cause of success or failure in language learning, because it is ultimately the method used that determines the 'what and how' of language instruction (Mackey, 1974). Out of the wide range of language teaching methods available, the respondents appeared to be familiar with two different methods only, grammar-translation and direct instruction method. The teachers were not conversant with any other method. This situation is supported by Ongong'a et al (2010) and it is probably due to the fact that during their teacher training

they were not exposed to a range of effective methods of teaching English. It is possible that some teachers had difficulty with this item because they did not know what the term 'method' meant in this context. The term method can mean different things to different people. For some, it means a set of teaching procedures, for others it is the type and amount of vocabulary and structure (Mackey, 1974). However, in this study 'method' refers to the primacy of language skill.

Tables 3 and 4 summarize how teachers responded when they were asked to indicate the methods they used in the teaching of English language in their classes.

Almost 58% of the teachers indicated that they employ grammar translation method in their teaching while approximately 74% indicated that they use direct method of teaching. Teachers generally believe that the setting of examinations items in both reading and writing favors candidates who have been exposed to direct method in their learning of languages. This could mean that those students taught only by grammar translation method are disadvantaged in the national examinations.

Greater flexibility is needed in teaching, in order to cover all the skills and understandings that students must acquire. For example, a passage may lend itself to the practice of two or more sub-skills in reading and two or more sub-skills in the subsequent writing lesson. The teacher of English language should identify the sub-skills and make them the teaching points in the lesson. He or she should then prepare a lesson in which emphasis is given to these sub-skills which are practiced systematically. The teacher selects the sub-skills carefully over the term, plan to cover all of them in the plan of action, and practice them progressively using a

Table 3. Grammar-translation method

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Valid yes	33	57.9	57.9	57.9
No	24	42.5	42.1	100.0
Total	57	100.0	100.0	

Table 4. Direct method

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Valid yes	42	73.7	73.7	73.7
No	15	26.3	26.3	100.0
Total	57	100.0	100.0	

Table 5. Introduction of new lexical items through definition/explanation

Valid yes	57	100.0	100.0	100.0
No	00.0	00.0	00.0	100.0
Total	57	100.0	100.0	

Table 6. Introducing new words through contexts

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Valid yes	56	98.2	98.2	98.2
No	0.1	1.8	1.8	100.0
Total	57	100.0	100.0	

wide variety of activities and applications. It is through this systematic approach that learners will be able to form and internalize the habits involved in the process of reading and writing. Data collected from the field on the frequency of these sub-skills is indicated in the tables 5 and 6.

Table 5 shows that 57 teachers (100%) in the study introduced new lexical items through definition and explanation. In this approach learners have direct association with foreign words, phrases, objects and actions without the use of native languages either by the learner or the teacher. This is the approach the respondents claimed to be using. This method draws heavily on skinner’s theory of behaviorism which states that children learn language by listening to a great deal of what is said, imitating and associating what is said with appropriate actions, and are reinforced every time they perform correctly (Skinner, 1954). Learners who transfer to foreign environment also acquire a second language in this way without any difficulty.

However, in Table 6, it can be noted that 56 teachers introduced new lexical items through context. This is

98.2% of the population used in the study. According to this assertion, the teacher assisted the learners to work out meanings of new words from contexts in which the words were used. When the respondents were probed further, their oral responses revealed that they did not know the difference between the strategy of contextual clues and strategy of explaining and defining. The researcher then concluded that the respondents understood the two to mean the same thing.

In terms of reading comprehension, there were differences among teachers in how they developed the necessary sub-skills. From the sample, 70% of the teachers made efforts to develop skills for making inference, while 30% did not focus specific attention on this important skill. The latter teachers did not really understand what was involved in working out inferences, and therefore they did not include activities or exercises to establish this skill in students. Table 7 indicates that 55% of teachers engaged their classes in the process of identifying the main and minor points from the passages read. However, 45% of the teachers neglected this skill. The questionnaire revealed that although the respond-

Table 7. Identifying main and minor details

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Valid yes	31	54.4	54.4	54.4
No	26	45.6	45.6	100.0
Total	57	100.0	100.0	

ents understood the concept of minor and main points, they did not explore this area of reading with their students.

DISCUSSION

The study found that the majority of the teachers were adequately educated and professionally trained, which implies that the teaching force in Kenya is potentially capable of educating and producing good results at the end of primary education. Teachers who are well educated and professionally qualified have a high degree of autonomy and flexibility in their delivery of lessons. However, for two main reasons, teachers who are well educated and professionally qualified may still fail to have their learners acquire proficiency in academic skills of reading and writing. First, a teacher may lack motivation to teach effectively and may give too little attention to planning and delivering effective lessons (Indoshi and Okwara, 2011). Data collected on teachers' knowledge of objectives of language teaching indicated that 58% did not know ultimate aims and objectives of teaching English. Another finding that is disturbing in this research is that the majority of the teachers of English language in primary schools in Kenya do not know the sub-skills of reading and writing that they are expected to develop. The second reason for poor standards is that the learners themselves may lack motivation to learn. They may not understand the importance of learning English skills, and any interest they may have had is quickly eroded by poorly structured and boring lessons.

The issue of teacher preparation needs to be addressed urgently. It has been noted that teachers of English language rarely prepare adequate lessons (Ongong'a et al., 2010). This is one of the major factors leading to lack of good coverage of topics, consequently leading to underdevelopment of reading and writing skills. It emerged from the research that teachers use the same teaching notes to teach year after year while others use course books to teach. However, teaching notes should not replace lesson plans (Ngo'ng'ah, 2007). There was no evidence that teachers made lesson plans to suit their individual classes in their different situations. The teachers who use course books without a reasonable degree of flexibility fail to target and, or individualize their teaching since course books are for average classes.

Teachers need to be more autonomous, creative and innovative in their teaching approaches

The majority of the teachers, according to this study were not inducted in schools on their first posting; consequently, they did not get to know the schools expectations and were not given practical tips on teaching methods and activities. It follows logically, therefore, that the majority of the teachers do not know what they are expected to achieve and thus lack a sense of direction. It is evident that teaching strategies are not directed towards achievement of the stated objectives in the National Syllabus and consequently, examinations in the area of reading and writing may end up testing skills and knowledge that are different from those developed by teachers. The learners therefore find themselves strangers in national examinations.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMENDATION

Three major conclusions emerge from this study. First, Primary school teachers in western Kenya are educationally and professionally well qualified. Second, despite their education and professional qualifications, the teachers are not well inducted and do not prepare to teach academic skills of English. Third, over half of the teachers do not know the ultimate aims and objectives of teaching English in Primary schools, with consequent negative implications in the delivery of English language learning in primary schools in western Kenya.

It is recommended that beginning teachers should be thoroughly inducted into the teaching profession before they take up their career. Such an induction should thoroughly involve the briefing of the teachers on the aims and objectives of teaching English. It should also underscore the need for preparation of schemes of work and lesson plans. Most importantly, induction courses should present teachers with a broad range of effective and motivating teaching methods.

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