

Kinds of Extensive Reading Materials and their Influence on Learners' Language Skills in Language Classrooms in Kenya

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Abstract

This study investigated kinds of extensive reading materials and their influence on learners' language skills in language classrooms in Kenya. It scrutinized the kinds of reading materials that learners are exposed to in language classrooms and how they influence their language skills. The target population was the teachers and learners of English language in secondary schools in Uasin Gishu County, Kenya. Purposive sampling techniques were used to select four secondary schools in Eldoret Municipality to participate in the study by giving information through language tests, focus group discussions and interview schedules. All the form three students in the four sampled secondary schools participated in language tests. Twelve students were purposively chosen to participate in focus group discussions and one teacher of English from each of the four sampled schools participated in the interview schedule. Descriptive techniques were used in the analysis of the data collected. It was concluded that secondary schools in Kenya, did not have reading materials that motivated learners to read extensively. It was recommended that, the Ministry of Education should set up network systems that will assist learners' access plenty and varied reading materials.

Keywords: Extensive Reading, Reading Materials, Language skills, Language classrooms

Introduction

Reading is making meaning from print. It requires that one identifies words in print, constructs an understanding from them, coordinates the identification of these words and makes meaning from them so that reading is automatic and accurate. Leipzig (2001) states that, reading in its fullest sense involve weaving together word recognition and comprehension in a fluent manner. It is developing and maintaining the motivation to read since it is an active process of constructing meaning. She further explains that to develop and

maintain the motivation to read, readers need to appreciate the pleasures of reading, view reading as a social act to be shared with others, see reading as an opportunity to explore their interests, read widely for a variety of purposes; from enjoyment to gathering information and endeavor to read a variety of different written forms and genres. Reading is central in the life of all learners. In order for learners to understand content in diverse subjects and in general life, they need to comprehend, analyze, interpret, synthesize, compare and contrast the information that they read. However, many second language learners do not have language skills that can enable them read extensively. Rere (2012) states that many learners find difficulty in making sense of texts they are required to read. They get to secondary schools with little knowledge on English which is the language of reading. This tendency greatly undermines the reading skills and therefore makes the learners unable to acquire English language skills. Wafula (2010) explains that, students in secondary schools in Kenya are hardly exposed to reading materials of their interest, thus denying them a chance to read for pleasure and acquisition of language skills. Sindabi (2014) gives some reasons as to why students do not read extensively. He states that, reading materials are very expensive, libraries are not well equipped to serve the reading public and they do not cater for the needs and interests of the young Kenyan readers. These reasons are a cause for boredom and a negative motivation on learners' interest in reading.

With reference to a circular from Kenya Institute of Education (2013) to all heads of secondary schools in Kenya, teachers of English are cautioned against issuing to Form one and two students past prescribed set books as class readers since they are too technical for them. What is implied in this circular is that most schools do not have a variety of extensive reading material to expose their form one and two learners to and therefore fall back to prescribed set books once read by the form three and four students for purposes of national examinations. This practice kills the students' interest in reading. Barasa (2005) notes that universities admit first year students, who can hardly write, read or hold discussions in English language. This problem is wholly pegged on lack of exposure to a variety of extensive reading materials. Learners exposed to appropriate extensive reading significantly improve on their language skills, that is: reading, writing, listening and speaking. Good reading habits should be instilled in the learners with close supervision from the teachers, who should choose extensive reading materials within the learners' level of competence, provide variety, encourage routine for regular reading and monitor and reinforce learners. When all this is done, extensive reading will facilitate accuracy in language skills.

Statement of the Problem

Reading is central in the life of all learners. In order for learners to understand content in diverse subjects, they need to engage in extensive reading. On the contrary, many second language learners do not have reading skills that can enable them read extensively. This is attributed to lack of exposure to a variety of reading materials. It has been observed that students in secondary schools in Kenya are not exposed to reading materials of their interest thus killing their morale in reading. Reading is one of the skills of English language that can be improved on by exposure to a wide variety of reading materials. The Kenya National Examination Council report (2012-2013) commenting on candidate's performance on set books stated that it was evident that most candidates did not read all the set books and therefore were limited of choice on examination questions thus causing poor performance. If students do not read extensively and yet reading is one of the skills of language that is tested at the end of their four year course in secondary schools, then they will not only perform

poorly but will also be poor readers, communicators and writers in their future endeavors. It is upon this premise that the researchers investigated the kinds of extensive reading materials and their influence on language skills among learners of English language in language classrooms in Kenya.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the kinds of extensive reading materials that learners are exposed to and their influence on learners' language skills in language classrooms in Kenya. Specifically, the study intended to;

1. Identify extensive reading materials that learners are exposed to in language classrooms in Kenya.
2. Identify the challenges to availability of extensive reading materials
3. Discuss the role of the teacher in choosing extensive reading materials for learners.

Research Questions

1. Which kinds of extensive reading materials are learners exposed to in language classrooms in Kenya?
2. What is the role of the teacher in choosing appropriate reading materials for learners?
3. What are the challenges to the availability of extensive reading materials?

Scope of the Study

This study investigated the kinds of extensive reading materials that influence learners' language skills in language classrooms in Kenya. It involved four secondary schools in Eldoret municipality, Uasin Gishu County, Kenya. The schools involved were; one national school, an extra-county school, a County school and a Sub-County school so as to ensure that all categories of schools in Kenya were represented.

Methodology

This section entails the methods that the researchers used to investigate the problem. The study adopted the qualitative research approach. The study was strictly qualitative and not quantitative because it dealt with mental constructs that could not be quantified. The qualitative approach is flexible and seeks to generate and analyse holistic data on an issue. It ensures trustworthiness in the research process and observes ethical consideration (Jwan and Ong'ondo, 2011). It describes the situation of the phenomena vividly as it is without any interference (Creswell, 2011).

Methods used in data generation in this study included: interviews for teachers, focus group discussions and tests on grammar, vocabulary, comprehension, writing and oral skills for students. The tests and focus group discussions were administered to form three students while the interviews were administered on the form three teachers of English from four secondary schools in Uasin Gishu County. The instruments tested the students' knowledge with regard to extensive reading and its influence on the student's language skills.

Tests

Tests were used to gauge the students' level of competence in language skills. They were based on Kenya National Examination Council (2012-2013) format. The test items were extracted from different types of writings that students commonly came across such as newspapers, secondary school class texts, past paper questions from Kenya National

Examination Council and the recommended set texts. The tests used both closed and open ended questions. To score and grade learners' performance in the tests, the researchers adopted the Kenya National Examination Council grading system which was as follows: 0-29 E, 30-34 D-, 35-39 D, 40-44 D, 45-49 C-, 50-54 C, 55-59 C+, 60-64 B-, 65-69 B, 70-74 B+, 75-79 A-, 80 and above A. The researchers considered all the learners that scored below 55 marks (below C+) as below average. 55-69 marks (C+ to B) as average and 70 and above marks (B+ to A) as above average. Table 1 below presents the average scores of learners in the language tests administered.

Table 1 Language Skills Test Scores

School.	Skills.					
	grammar	Oral skills	Writing	vocabulary	comprehension	%
A	60	63	65	67	75	66%
B	60	50	50	40	40	48%
C	53	57	55	60	65	58%
D	47	53	35	33	30	40%

Data in table 1 revealed that the best performance came from school A with 66%, followed by school C with 58%, then school B with 48% and lastly school D with 40%. These results revealed that students who had some reading schedules that enabled them engage in extensive reading, school A and C, performed better in the language tests than those who had haphazard schedules and rarely engaged in extensive reading; (school B and D). It also revealed that different schools performed well in different language skills. Therefore the students' abilities in language skills differed from one skill to another, depending on the frequency of exposure to that skill. The more the students were exposed to a skill, the better the performance. This information was confirmed in FGDs where students revealed that, they performed well in comprehension tests because they were frequently exposed to comprehensions. They performed poorly in other skills because they hardly read extensively in relation to these skills.

At the end of the tests on language skills, there was a self-evaluation test where learners stated how often they engaged in extensive reading. This gave the researcher the basis for comparison on how lack of, or frequent exposure to extensive reading influenced the learners performance in language skills. Table 2 below, presents the scores of learners on self evaluation tests.

Table 2: Self-Evaluation Test Scores

Rating	Grammar		Oral Skills		Writing		Vocabulary		Comprehension	
Below average	164	80%	145	71%	163	80%	155	76%	147	72%
Average	14	7%	26	13%	15	7%	24	12%	36	18%
Above average	26	13%	33	16%	26	13%	25	12%	21	10%

Table 2 revealed that in grammar, 164 students (80%) were below average, 14 students (7%) were average and 26 students (13%) were above average. It also revealed that in oral skills, 145 students (71%) were below average, 26 students (13%) were average and 33 students

(16%) were above average. In writing, 163 students (80%) were below average, 15 students (7%) were average and 26 students (13%) were above average. In vocabulary, 155 students (76%) were below average, 24 students (12%) were average and 25 students (12%) were above average. In comprehension, 147 students (72%) were below average, 36 students (18%) were average and 21 students (10%) were above average. This data indicated that very few students engaged in extensive reading due to tight school schedules and the rigid examination oriented curriculum. 80% of the sampled population rated themselves below average in extensive reading.

Interviews and the focus group discussions were used to supplement the limitations of the tests. Mackay and Gass (2005) state that unlike tests, interviews and focus group discussions give the researcher freedom to digress and probe for more information. Data obtained from these instruments revealed that the students' scores were below average because they hardly engaged in extensive reading.

Discussion of Findings

Materials for Extensive Reading

Materials for extensive reading refer to texts that learners read for pleasure. They are a good source of language input and assist learners acquire language skills. When choosing Materials for extensive reading, the simplicity and authenticity of the text should be considered. Teachers play an important role in guiding learners on the kinds of reading materials to choose. They should guide learners through progressively challenging reading materials. According to Guo (2012) the teacher must choose from the following kinds:

- i. Graded Readers. These are texts available by major publishers. In Kenya, we have books by Cambridge University Press, Heinemann, Oxford, Penguin, East African publishers and Macmillan which was rebranded Moran. These books include readers with specific levels of word frequency, idiom counts and the introduction of new vocabulary at a planned rate. Guo (2012) states that in graded readers, at least one word in every hundred is unfamiliar to the readers. This enables learners to benefit in vocabulary.
- ii. Texts on the same topic. These involve reading more than one text on the same topic. They allow for transfer of background knowledge from one text to another.
- iii. Authentic materials. These include reading materials such as newspapers and magazines, which are related to the second language culture of the learners, since it is through learning a people's culture that you acquire their language.
- iv. Web resources. They should be chosen with the teacher's assistance so that students do not choose those that are too overwhelming or unwanted with regard to their culture.
- v. Stories and articles chosen by the teacher. The teacher may consider using some materials that match with the students cultural backgrounds since students bring different knowledge of text types from their first language.

Teachers in Kenyan classrooms may have the knowledge on the kind of extensive reading materials to select for their learners; however these materials may be beyond reach for most learners in secondary schools. This leaves the teachers and learners of English language with no option but to concentrate on set books and class texts in the name of covering the syllabus thus, failing to read extensively.

Role of the Teacher in Choosing Extensive Reading Materials for Learners

Teachers in secondary schools in Kenya should take the responsibility of ensuring that students read extensively for purposes of acquiring language skills. According to McRae and Guthrie (2009) the teacher plays an important role in promoting extensive reading by doing the following:

- i. Giving recommendations on reading materials based on student's interests.
- ii. Guiding students in choosing appropriate levels of material.
- iii. Guiding students in choosing a variety of materials of their interest.
- iv. Guiding students in setting specific goals for amounts to be read.
- v. Providing modeling by reading the same books that the students read.
- vi. leading pre-reading activities to build interest in the text, such as narrating a story that relates to the one the students will read but must be careful to provide just enough to stimulate curiosity but not too much to pre-empt what is to be read.

Teachers of English language agree with McRae and Guthrie (2009), but do not put these ideas into practice due to lack of commitment, demanding curriculum, lack of motivation and lack of materials to engage learners in extensive reading. Bell (1998) came up with the following ways to assist a teacher make extensive reading in second language a success.

- i. Maximize learner involvement
- ii. Read aloud to the class
- iii. Encourage student presentations
- iv. Give students written work based on the reading
- v. Use audio materials in the reading program
- vi. Discourage the over-use of dictionaries.
- viii. Monitor the Students' Reading.
- ix. Avoid the use of tests.
- xi. Maintain the entertainment

Maximum learner involvement requires regular interaction between the teacher and learner. This kind of engagement motivates students to read. It also enables the teacher to effectively monitor individual learner's progress and provide opportunities for encouragement to students to read widely. This kind of practice rarely happens in Kenyan classrooms, since learners have to struggle with heavy workloads of eight to nine subjects that have to be examined at the end of the four years of study at secondary school level.

Challenges to availability of reading materials

Many of the challenges that learners encounter when engaging in extensive reading are related to reading materials. Learners identified novels on love, thriller, adventure and crime, plays, magazines, newspapers, spiritual articles, short stories, poems and articles from the net as their favourite reading materials. However, these materials are not available in their school libraries. In the focus group discussions, they indicated that their school libraries did not have reading materials of their interest. The libraries, only had reference books, text books used in their day to day coverage of the Kenya National Examination Council syllabus, text books read in the previous years, old newspapers, encyclopedias and outdated journals which demotivated them from reading extensively.

Lack of public libraries in most parts of Kenya and harsh library regulations that apply to the few that exist are another challenge to learners' extensive reading. Sindabi (2014) notes that

many a critic have decried the poor reading culture among Kenyans due to failure by the government to set up libraries especially in schools and community centers. The harsh rules and regulations applied in the few public libraries also repulse the readers. They also put readers off other information centers like archives, museums and record centers. The readers, in fear of failing to abide by the complex rules and the consequences that come with them, choose to avoid registering and being active members of libraries. School, college and university students rarely borrow books from libraries due to these harsh library conditions. For example, library users undergo thorough vetting before entering the library building, readers who fail to return borrowed books on time meet harsh punishments that include heavy fines and even cancellation of their borrowing privileges. Public libraries have also failed to market themselves simply because librarians feel that they do not have the capacity to serve too many clients. Sindabi (2014) questions:

- Has anyone ever come across an advertisement in the media about a library?
- Has anyone ever come across a newspaper or magazine article highlighting services offered by a certain public library?
- Has anyone ever attended a trade show and come across a stand for any library in Kenya?
- Have we ever, in the recent past, heard about an exhibition of books and other information materials found in any library in Kenya?
- How many libraries, be they community, school, academic or national, ever engaged in corporate social responsibility to promote their services?

Such factors, unfortunately, have over time eroded the confidence of library users and the importance of libraries in society has been down played. Many information seekers now prefer going to the internet and other cheaper sources of information thus impacting negatively on the reading culture. Okwany (2014) commented that the current crop of learners does not buy and read books, which are vital in improving vocabulary and language use. They have completely lost the reading culture.

Teachers also noted that some students could easily stray and read pornographic materials if not guided and strictly monitored. Due to these fears, schools have devised ways of regulating so as to limit students from accessing bad literature. However, in the process of guarding against bad literature, they have locked out good literature that could enhance learners' language skills.

Another challenge is that reading materials are expensive and meeting each and every learner's needs and interests is difficult. Teachers also blamed learners for not being proactive in finding books that would benefit them from the school library. They focused on the cover, forgetting the inner details.

Conclusion

Data analysis and interpretation of the responses revealed that secondary schools in Kenya did not have reading materials that were of interest to the students. Students showed interest in literature on love, thriller, adventure, crime and newspapers, which were not available in the school libraries, thus discouraging students from engaging in extensive reading. These

findings were consistent with results of several other studies. Hill (1997) established that extensive reading should be based on materials that focus on student interests and are within the students' level of competence. A study by Asraf and Ahmed (2003) on GER established that, students only succeed in extensive reading by getting exposed to what they refer to as book flood; a case where students have a variety of books to choose from.

In conclusion, students do not engage in extensive reading often due to: insufficient reading materials, costly reading materials, unavailability of reading materials, extensive reading is not linked to the syllabus and the examination, lack of understanding of the benefits of extensive reading, pressure on teachers to conform to syllabi and textbooks, the Internet culture of young people and discouragement from teachers, parents and fellow students who believe that extensive reading is a waste of time.

Recommendations

1. With technology, the Kenya Ministry of Education should set up network systems that will enable students access plenty and variety of reading materials from the net.
2. The Ministry of Education should device ways of creating awareness in society on the importance of extensive reading.
3. The Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development should come up with a list of books that should be made a must read for all students beginning from form one to form four.
4. The school administration should ensure that the reading programs and activities are successfully implemented and run without interference.
5. Teachers should provide guidance to their students on the types of books to read and allow them to actively participate in the selection of the reading materials. Possible, they should be given a chance to give opinion on the type of books to be purchased for the school library. Teachers should refrain from playing a domineering role over their learners when choosing reading materials because this creates a negative attitude towards extensive reading.
6. Parents should encourage their children to read extensively by buying for them reading materials.
7. Students should seek help from their teachers whenever they encounter challenges during extensive reading. They should allow their teachers to guide them on the kind of materials to read. For positive development, socially, morally and academically, students should refrain from reading pornographic literature and develop a positive attitude towards literature that will add value to their lives.

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