

The Influence of Extensive Reading Programs on Learners' Language Skills in Language Classrooms in Kenya

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Abstract

This study investigated the influence of extensive reading programs on learners' language skills in language classrooms in Kenya. It discussed the kinds of reading programs and how they influence the learners' language skills. The target population was the teachers and learners of English language in secondary schools in Uasin Gishu County, Kenya. Convenient random sampling was used to select four secondary schools in Eldoret Municipality to contribute towards the study by giving information through language tests, Focus group discussions (FGD) and interview schedules. All the students in the four sampled secondary schools participated in language tests. Simple random sampling was used to select 12 students from each sampled school to participate in focus group discussions and one teacher per school to participate in the interview schedule. Instruments of data collection were tests, focus group discussions and interview schedules. Descriptive techniques such as narration were used in the analysis of the data collected. The researcher concluded that secondary schools in Kenya did not have defined reading programs. All they had were irregular and haphazard reading schedules. She recommended that well designed reading programs should be implemented in secondary schools in Kenya and teachers should be exposed to research based knowledge on reading programs through seminars and workshops.

Keywords: Extensive reading, Reading Programs, Language skills, Language Tests

Introduction

Extensive reading is a multifaceted process involving word recognition, comprehension, fluency, and meaning. It requires that one identifies, coordinates, constructs and makes meaning out of print. It involves reading large quantities of material for pleasure and comprehension of main ideas. The Kenyan education system recognizes extensive reading as an opportunity for learners to explore their interests, gather information, improve their knowledge of a language and gain in language skills competence. Extensive reading is a tool for acquisition of English language skills that are important in the learning process. It changes the learners attitudes and motivates them to read widely. However, the major complaint in the Kenya Education System is that, Kenyans do not have a reading culture. This observation implies that many secondary school learners do not master the extensive

reading skill. Okwako (2011) suggests that learners need support mechanisms if they have to improve on their fluency in English language. In this case the support mechanism is extensive reading. Students who are not exposed to extensive reading perform poorly in English language in general and particularly in writing and speaking. According to Wafula (2010), in Kenya, the teaching of reading is ignored or haphazardly handled. In some secondary schools, learners are hardly exposed to reading materials for pleasure. All that the teachers do is struggle to cover the syllabus thus denying learners a chance to read for pleasure.

Teachers of English language are not sure on how to go about the teaching of reading and what passes as the teaching of reading is testing or students taking turns in reading comprehension passages in class. In cases where Learners are given story books to read, teachers do not follow up the reading sessions to confirm whether the learners are reading or not. The Kenya Institute of Education syllabus (2012-2013) outlines the following objectives as key to extensive reading; students should be able to: read silently, read fast, read for detail, read for pleasure, read critically and extensively and appreciate different forms of language. If these objectives are achieved, then the teacher would have succeeded in taking learners through a process that enables them acquire effective reading skills.

Statement of the problem

Extensive reading is a tool for acquisition of language skills. However, the major complaint is that Kenyans do not have a reading culture (Buhere, 2015). This observation implies that many secondary school learners do not engage in extensive reading. Students who are not exposed to reading may perform poorly in English language and particularly in writing and speaking. 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 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 school, then they will not only perform poorly but will also be poor readers, communicators and writers in their future endeavors. With the mentioned challenges on extensive reading, it became imperative to investigate the influence of extensive reading programs on learners' language skills in language classrooms in Kenya.

The Purpose of the study

According to Kasomo (2007), purpose of the study refers to the reason why a research is carried out. It generates new knowledge and produces generalization of principles upon which ideas are based. This study investigated the influence of extensive reading programs on learners' language skills in language classrooms in Kenya. Language skills include: grammar, comprehension, writing and oral skills.

Materials and Methods

This study involved a descriptive survey. It investigated the influence of extensive reading programs on learners' language skills in language classrooms in Kenya. The focus was on classroom instruction and interaction. The target population for the study was the secondary school teachers and the form three students. The study sample was obtained using convenient and simple random sampling techniques. The research instruments included language tests, interviews and focus group discussions. Data was analyzed using qualitative techniques and presented using description.

Discussion

Reading Programs

Reading programs are well designed procedures used to teach literacy skills. The implementation of research-based reading programs in secondary schools in Kenya has not sufficiently taken place to enable students read extensively. They are haphazard and not defined. McPeak and Smith (2001) documented six reasons as to why the implementation of research-based reading programs may fail. They include the following:

- i. Not all teachers involved receive sufficient in-service training to successfully teach the reading program.
- ii. Coaching is not provided during the year to support implementation.
- iii. The grouping and scheduling requirements of the selected program are not followed.
- iv. The program is not implemented with sufficient intensity to catch students up quickly.
- v. Teachers do not monitor progress frequently enough.
- vi. Too many initiatives interfere with effective implementation of the reading program such as time, resources, and support from the institution.

These problems are relevant to the Kenyan situation and are the major hindrances to extensive reading programs in secondary schools. Implementation and sustainability of such programs requires reading interventions such as systematic organization, support from the school management, effective instructional tools and effective teacher knowledge on sustainable reading programs.

Most successful reading programs are closely related to the cooperative learning method. This is a case where students work together in small, heterogeneous groups to complete a project, or an instructional goal, while teachers act as guides or facilitators. Each member of a team is responsible not only for learning what is taught but also for helping teammates learn, thus creating an atmosphere of achievement. This group dynamic provides a supportive environment for learning new content on language skills, fosters friendships, social development and sharing of materials. Below are some of the reading programs.

Students Team Reading

This is a program where students work in heterogeneous learning teams. Activities are designed to follow a regular cycle that involves teacher presentation, team practice, independent practice, peer pre-assessment and individual assessments that form the basis for team scores. Narratives from a literature anthology are used as the basis for the reading material. Students work in teams of four to five as they read and receive rewards for working well both as individuals and as group members. Students engage in activities such as individual silent reading, partner reading, questions guide reading, word mastery where students practice saying new words with their partners, story-related writing, story retelling, summary writing and finally students are tested on comprehension, word meaning, and word pronunciation (Slavin 2009). Through this kind of program, students develop love for extensive reading.

Read 180 Read 180

This is a reading program where students work in teams of 15 with 90 minutes of instruction per day. The lesson begins with a 20-minute shared-reading and skills lesson. Students are then put into smaller groups of five to practice three activities; computer-assisted

instructional reading, modeled or independent reading, and small-group instruction with the teacher. This program makes use of videos on a variety of topics especially those from science and social studies. Students are given an opportunity to read about the video content then engage in comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, and word-study activities around this content. Students are also exposed to audios that model comprehension, vocabulary, and self-monitoring strategies used by good readers. Teachers are facilitated to make the program a success by being given the necessary materials and exposed to workshops and in-service courses to support instruction in extensive reading.

Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC)

Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition is a program where students work within cooperative mixed-ability teams of four. According to Slavin (2009), the cooperative way of learning means, all group members are equally engaged to accomplish the attainment of the group goals. Students engage in partner reading, story retelling, story related writing, word mastery, and story-structure activities to prepare them and their group members for individual assessments that form the basis for group scores.

Voyager Passport

This is a program that begins with the whole-group instruction then gradually moves to flexible small-group activities, and partner practice. It engages students with DVDs, online learning activities, and other instructional strategies focused on comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, and writing.

The Reading Edge

This is a reading program that uses the cooperative learning structure. According to Slavin, Cheung, Groff, & Lake (2008) it groups students for reading instruction according to their reading ability across grades and classes. Whole-class reading instruction is delivered in daily one hour blocks. Fiction, nonfiction, and simple scripts are used to help students develop basic decoding skills, reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Every Reading Edge lesson follows a regular pattern: it begins with active instruction, followed by teamwork, and finally a time for student reflection. This program combines explicit instruction in metacognitive reading strategies with peer collaboration, regular assessment and feedback, and classroom management techniques that are intended to encourage students to read extensively. In this program, instructions move from known to unknown concepts. The reading process kicks off with a focus on fundamental reading skills and emphasis on individual words and comprehension. Texts that are read become gradually difficult as students master new skills. Professional development for teachers is also provided through seminars and workshops.

Strategy Instruction Program

This is a reading program that focuses on the teaching of cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies such as summarization, use of graphic organizers, and previewing. Unlike reading programs that are based on the cooperative learning method which emphasizes teamwork, this program emphasizes on individual metacognitive skills, sustained silent reading, language study, and writing.

Jostens Reading Program

Jostens Reading Program is based on Computer-Assisted Instruction (CAI). This program teaches basic reading processes such as identifying main ideas and details in a text, drawing inferences, making comparisons, drawing conclusions, determining authors' purposes, organizing strategies of the story and concept mapping, summarizing, outlining, applying comprehension strategies to both literary and content area selections and organizing information. Students are encouraged to read widely from a variety of literary genres and are given the opportunity to respond critically to what they read. Like the Strategy Instruction program, students work individually on provided texts, especially computer based texts. During assessment, students are placed in an individualized instructional sequence to work individually on exercises designed to fill in gaps. Through self-paced instruction, students are carefully guided through every genre they read and write. As a result, they develop proficiency in word analysis, vocabulary, comprehension, and study skills.

Guided Extensive Reading (GER)

Asraf and Ahmed (2003) devised a program called Guided Extensive Reading (GER) for students with varying degrees of proficiency in extensive reading. They had six guiding GER features that could motivate learners to read extensively. They included the following:

- i. The reading materials should be within the students' level of competency.
- ii. Students should be given the opportunity to choose the books that they would like to read.
- iii. The program needs to be conducted on a regular basis.
- iv. Established routines aimed at inculcating the reading habit and love of reading among students, are an important part of the program.
- v. Students are encouraged to retell to the class the stories they read.
- vi. Students' reading progress is monitored and reinforced by giving words of praise and encouragement.

These programs are designed to give learners skills that enable them engage in extensive reading. They can be adopted in Kenyan secondary schools to help students develop a love for reading. Stanley (2005) states that extensive reading programs help learners gain in vocabulary, spelling, reading ability and overall linguistic competence. They can also motivate and change learners attitude towards reading and thus boost their ability in language skills.

In agreement with Asraf and Ahmed (2003), Day and Bamford (2002) advanced ten characteristics of a successful extensive reading program:

- i. Students should read as much as possible.
- ii. A variety of materials on a range of topics should be availed to learners.
- iii. Students should be allowed to select what they want to read.
- iv. Reading should be for pleasure, information and general understanding.
- v. Reading is its own reward.
- vi. Reading materials should be within the linguistic competence of the students in terms of vocabulary and grammar.
- vii. Reading should be done individually and silently.
- viii. Reading speed should be fast.
- ix. Teachers should prepare students to the goals of the program.

x. The teacher should be a role model of a reader for the students.
If all these characteristics are achieved in any given school, then the school would have met the requirements of a successful reading program.

Shahonya (2014) suggests that to motivate learners to read extensively, digital books should be brought to all learners. He uploads the Jubilee Governments' policy on laptops to all class one pupils. This, he states, is a positive move towards effective extensive reading. He gives an example of a Rwandan primary school and a Kenyan primary school in Kilgoris, Intimigom, where each child has a laptop equipped with e-readers. The e-readers improve the reading culture among pupils thus improved language skills. Shahonya (2014) further suggests that, it is possible to set up a mobile library of soft copy books that a child can take home or read anywhere at their convenience. As many as 300 books are compressed as e-books. This means that technology has helped to put a whole library in the hands of the children. However this is not so in most Kenyan schools especially those in rural settings because they have no electricity or other sources of power to make this practical.

6. Benefits of Extensive Reading Programs

Well designed reading programs enable learners to read extensively. McCrimmon (2013) outlines the benefits of extensive reading as follows:

- i. develops learner autonomy,
- ii. offers comprehensible input,
- iii. enhances general language competence,
- iv. creates and sustains motivation and confidence to read more,
- v. extends, consolidates and sustains vocabulary growth,
- vi. helps improve writing and develop prediction skills,
- vii. enables learners to have a positive attitude towards reading,
- viii. increases word recognition ability and
- ix. Enables learners to gain fluency.

Extensive reading is a readily available form of comprehensible language input to students who hardly come into contact with the native version of English as a target language. In agreement with this statement, Maley (2009) states that the only reliable way to learn a language is through massive and repeated exposure to it in context. This is precisely what extensive reading provides for learners in secondary schools in Kenya. There is a spread of effect from a student's extensive reading practices to other language skills. The more the learners read, the better they can write and speak.

Buhere (2015) appreciates the importance of extensive reading. He states that our usefulness to society is attributed to our ability to read. Behind every impressive communicative ability is the ability to read. Reading is the secret code or password that enables one access knowledge that defines ones expertise. For secondary school students in Kenya, reading enables them attain good academic results in English. Okwako (2011) states that, students who read more English books improve greatly in their reading ability and vocabulary knowledge than those who read less.

Asraf and Ahmad (2003), conclude that the most convincing evidence for the benefits of extensive reading programs comes from what has come to be known as the "book flood" This

concept refers to a situation where learners are exposed to a wide range of texts to be read thus promoting proficiency in skills of language especially in composition writing.

Challenges to Implementation of Reading Programs

A number of logistical hurdles have to be overcome in order to make extensive reading programs successful in Kenyan Secondary schools. Teachers and students of English language gave the following reasons as to why extensive reading programs have not taken off successfully in secondary schools in Kenya:

- i. Tight school schedule that hinders learners from reading extensively.
- ii. Lack of a variety of reading materials both at school and at home.
- iii. Emphasis was mainly placed on the reading of the set books.
- iv. Interferences from new technology. Majority of the students spend their time on the net and watching television instead of reading.
- v. Negative attitude towards reading. Some students feel reading is boring.
- vi. Lack of funds to buy extensive reading materials.
- vii. Lack of motivation from teachers. Some teachers did not attach any importance to extensive reading. They even used the library lesson to engage students in other activities.
- viii. Lack of follow up activities on extensive reading.
- ix. Lack of teacher knowledge on research based reading programs

These hurdles can be overcome by the Ministry of Education and the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development working hand in hand with schools to ensure that they have effective extensive reading programs. Successful extensive reading programs should not have the pressures of testing or marks. The use of tests goes against the objective of creating stress-free conditions for pleasure reading. Majority of the learners do not derive pleasure from tests and if used they demotivate them.

Learners should be exposed to appropriate ways of reading extensively. For example, over-Use of dictionaries should be discouraged since it results in slow, inefficient reading and destroys the pleasure that comes with the reading of novels and other literature. It makes learners focus only on the language used, and not on the message conveyed. To motivate learners to read widely, teachers need to keep them entertained. They can do this by telling the students about interesting titles, taking them out to see plays based on books read, exploiting posters, leaflets, library resources, and even inviting visiting speakers to give talks in class on books read.

Extensive reading should be carried out in conducive environments; spacious, informal and relaxed rooms. Most of the reading by secondary school students is done in their congested classroom; an unconducive environment that discourages them from extensive reading.

Teachers should motivate students to read extensively through choice. Most students tend to be more motivated and more successful in extensive reading when they have meaningful opportunities to choose materials that interest them. Extensive reading should be under the learner's control and not an obligation imposed on them by the teacher. Teachers only come in to guide them to avoid wrong choices

Conclusion

Based on the research findings, the following conclusions were made:

Kenyan secondary schools do not have organized reading programs. Therefore, the students' frequency in reading extensively is minimal. As a result, more than half of the sampled population was rated below average in all the language skills tests administered. The rigid and examination oriented curriculum was cited as the major hindrance to extensive reading.

It was also concluded that, though not well implemented in secondary schools in Kenya, extensive reading benefited learners in the following ways:

- i. Vocabulary acquisition.
- ii. Enhanced creativity in writing.
- iii. Enhanced class performance e.g. in cloze tests, spelling, grammar, comprehension and oral skills.
- iv. Improved reading speed through quick word identification
- v. Improved fluency in speech e.g. pronunciation.
- vi. Improved learners' confidence in facing more challenging tasks in language.

Recommendations

Based on the issues raised in the preceding discussion, the following recommendations were made:

- i. The Ministry of education in collaboration with county governments should support extensive reading programmes by setting up libraries in schools to enable learners' access reading materials at any given time. They should also equip the school libraries and National libraries with variety of reading materials suitable for varied age groups and tastes. The rules set up at the libraries should also be user friendly to avoid repulsing the users.
- ii. The Ministry of Education should sponsor workshops and seminars to equip teachers with research based knowledge on how to carry out extensive reading programs.
- iii. The Ministry should make follow ups to ensure that extensive reading programmes succeed and stay alive in schools. This can be done through the County Director of Education's office.
- iv. With technology, the Ministry should set up network systems that will assist students' access plenty and variety of e- reading materials.
- v. The Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development should develop organized extensive reading programs and well defined reading activities to be implemented in secondary schools in Kenya.
- vi. School administration should ensure that the reading programs and activities are successfully implemented and run without interference.

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