

## Improvement of Literacy Standards through Re-Engineering Research, Teaching and Evaluation Procedures in Kenya

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### Abstract

After the introduction of free primary education in Kenya in 2003, many stakeholders have been expressing concern about the falling standards in education. Research has shown that learners are graduating from primary schools without acquiring basic literacy skills. Acquisition of these skills also opens doors for learners to continue with higher education. The quality of primary school teachers has also been found to be below expectation. Much of the teaching is examination-based where learners are drilled to pass examinations. Teachers concentrate on giving norm-referenced type of tests with a cut-off point whose main aim is to compare students' performances unlike criterion-referenced testing that assesses individual learner's abilities. Teaching in primary schools should enable learners to acquire knowledge, skills, attitudes and competencies that enable them to be productive members of the society. This paper discusses the importance of quality education in primary schools in Kenya by highlighting some indicators and causes of poor quality education. The paper also advocates use of evaluation procedures that are known to improve quality of education at primary school level. Recommendations have been made, based on the discussion.

**Key words:** Literacy, Class, Learning, Evaluation, Achievement, Research

### Introduction

One of the important indices of development in any country is the measure of the literacy levels of the citizenry. Attainment of literacy skills empowers people to have self-esteem, understand their rights and also fight for them. They are able to participate in cultural, political, social and economic activities for their self-actualization. Literate people are able to engage in critical thinking, make informed decisions, make a living and stay healthy. It is important to note that, *where poverty rates are higher, literacy rates tend to be lower. Therefore, lowering the illiteracy rate should go hand in hand with reduction of poverty (Stern 1983).*

Teaching in primary schools should enable learners to acquire knowledge, skills, attitudes and competencies that would enable them to be more productive members of the society. After the introduction of free primary education (FPE) in Kenya in 2003,

many stakeholders have been expressing concern about poor learning achievement at primary school level. Research has shown that learners are graduating from primary schools without acquiring basic literacy skills (Groenewegen, 2008).

It is imperative that each student develops proficiency in English, as it is the official language and language of instruction (LOI). Lack of proficiency in English denies individuals full participation in and utilization of the many opportunities and resources available. Acquisition of these skills is also expected to open doors for learners' upward mobility to higher levels of education, and ultimately to better social life.

The deterioration of standards has been attributed to a multiplicity of factors. The quality of primary school teachers is one of the factors; it has been

found to be below expectation. Many schools are also poorly staffed and overcrowded (Republic of Kenya, 2005). Despite the government's efforts to provide instructional materials, many schools do not have adequate teaching and learning resources to enable learners to attain the expected standards. School attendance is also wanting as there are numerous cases of student absenteeism, and in some cases, teacher absenteeism. Another factor is that much of the teaching is examination-based where learners are drilled to pass the terminal Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) examination. This is at the expense of being taught how to acquire knowledge and skills that would enable them to fit well into the society. Another dimension is non-adherence to the language policy which also contributes to poor teaching, learning and performance. Some teachers continue teaching in mother tongue or Kiswahili when they should be using English as the LOI. This denies learners opportunities and exposure to develop language skills.

Discussion in this paper is based on secondary sources of information. The specific objectives are to: discuss the importance of literacy standards; highlight some indicators and causes of poor quality education in primary schools in Kenya; advocate re-engineering of research, teaching and evaluation procedures. The paper also advocates use of evaluation procedures that are known to improve quality of education at primary school level.

#### Importance of Literacy Standards

For the purposes of this paper, literacy is taken to refer to the ability to listen, speak, read, write and use English language appropriately in a variety of contexts. Literacy should enable the learner to access content and skills in English and other school subjects for general educational development (Gathumbi and Masembe, 2005). Literacy skills are essential tools of socialization because they enable an individual to comprehend oral and written information and to also function effectively in a given situation in the society (Groenewegen, 2008; 208).

By the end of the eight years of primary school education in Kenya, learners are expected to be proficient in English. They are expected to learn listening skills to be able to understand and respond to information and instructions appropriately. Learners' acquisition of speaking skills is expected to facilitate use of correct pronunciation, stress and intonation so that speech has human quality. At the end of the primary school cycle, learners are expected to be able to speak clearly in English to express ideas, needs and feelings, and to also convey information. At this level, learners should acquire reading skills to be able to read with understanding, understand instructions, access information and read widely for pleasure. Lastly, acquisition of writing skills enables learners to express their ideas meaningfully and legibly in English (KIE, 2002). These targets are further clarified in the *Guide on Competencies in Literacy, Numeracy and Life Skills for Pre-Schools and Primary Schools in Kenya* (Republic of Kenya, 2006). However, research has shown many learners are graduating out of primary school without acquiring the skills envisaged in the objectives of teaching English at primary school level (Uwezo-Kenya, 2011; KNEC, 2009, 2010, 2011).

Kenya aims to attain middle income status by the year 2030. The realisation of this goal commonly known as Vision 2030 depends to a large extent on the contribution of a well-educated workforce (Republic of Kenya, 2007). Through primary school education, Kenyans are expected to acquire the appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes instrumental in responding to emerging social, economic, scientific, technological and cultural challenges. One way of achieving this goal is for learners to acquire high standards of literacy.

### Indicators of Poor Literacy Standards

From past research findings, the advocacy for mastery of literacy in English at an early age is emphasized. A study by the Ministry of Education Science and Technology (MOEST) in collaboration with the Southern African Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality (SACMEQ) found that over 70% of the Kenyan primary school learners had not attained desirable reading levels (SACMEQ, 2000). Desirable levels of achievement would be a score of 75% or higher. According to parents interviewed in preparation for this study class three learners are expected to have literacy levels that enable them to read with understanding textbooks, story books, magazines, newspapers, short passages, signboards, names, and labels. Primary class six learners are expected to read with understanding letters, magazines, sign posts, prescriptions, application forms, story books, advertisements and comprehension passages. These expectations by parents underscore the importance of acquisition of literacy at an early age. Further studies conducted by SACMEQ showed that 77% of class six learners did not have adequate proficiency in English to use it as a medium of learning as their reading levels were too low (SACMEQ, 2002, 2004). These studies targeted class six learners in reading comprehension.

The 'Baseline Survey on Learning Achievement' conducted by the Ministry of Education (MOE) (Republic of Kenya, 2005), indicated that primary class two and six learners performed below 70%, which

was the Desired Competency Level (DCL) in English. The performance of class four learners in English was below 50% which was the MCL. The national assessment study (KNEC, 2010), targeted class three learners in English. Only 47.7% of class three learners attained the desired competency level in English.

According to a study: "Strengthening the Quality of Education through Institutionalization of Interventions that Promote English Language Literacy in Kenya" conducted to develop English language attainment targets for primary schools in Kenya, 72% of learners were found not to have mastered the required competencies in English at class six level (Gathumbi et al. 2008). The study targeted classes three and six in all four-language skills. Studies show that many children in Kenya are graduating from primary school without attaining desirable levels in reading and numeracy skills (Uwezo, 2011).

A look at the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) performance of learners nationally over a ten year period reveals that learners are performing poorly in English (Table 1). The table shows that performance in English over this period has been consistently poor with learners achieving a mean grade below 50% for the English Objective examination and below 40% for the English Composition examination (Kenya National Examinations Council (KNEC), 2010).

Table 1:

*Results of the National KCPE English Objective and Composition Examinations - 2004-2012*

<u>PAPER</u>	<u>YEAR</u>									
	<u>2003</u>	<u>2004</u>	<u>2005</u>	<u>2006</u>	<u>2007</u>	<u>2008</u>	<u>2009</u>	<u>2010</u>	<u>2011</u>	<u>2012</u>
Objective	44.90	45.74	43.10	45.88	47.02	41.56	45.76	49.12	46.2	49.88
Composition	30.73	35.77	36.30	35.47	41.10	40.48	32.40	42.70	42.47	42.43

Source: Kenya National Examinations Council, 2013

Over the ten-year reported period, learners scored a mean of below 50% in reading and below 40% in writing. When 50% is accepted as the MCL and 70% as the DCL, it can be argued that, most learners are leaving primary school without acquiring the MCL in reading and writing. According to the KCPE reports of the periods indicated above, there are candidates whose writing is illegible and who write compositions in a language that is not understandable.

### **Causes of Poor Literacy Standards Evaluation procedures**

Assessment is the determination of learner achievement in a school subject. One type of assessment is the Continuous Assessment (CA) as an integral part of classroom instruction (Ginidza and Mazibuko, 2001). Continuous assessment tests are also referred to as School Based Assessment (SBA). It is formative as it is conducted as learners progress through school. This type of assessment can be oral or taken in form of teacher-made quizzes, tests, assignments or projects. The major purpose of CA is to provide feedback to learners, teachers, school administration as well as parents or guardians so that they can take measures to enhance learner achievement or address identified problems (Twoli *et al*, 2007). They also serve as a means for promotion of learners to the next class.

The assessment system in Kenya is dominated by national examinations which are conducted at the end of every educational cycle with little emphasis being put on the assessment of learners as they progress through school. At primary school level KCPE has a very strong influence on teaching and learning as teachers tend to teach what is going to be examined instead of teaching to impart knowledge and skills which learners need for their life out of school. The focus on KCPE is mainly because it is a selection examination which determines learners' entry into secondary schools. The competition to enter national or district schools is fierce as these are the schools that guarantee good performance at Kenya

Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) examination which in turn promises easy admission in public universities.

A look at testing and assessment at primary school level today shows that most schools are administering commercially developed tests for all levels. These are set using the KCPE examination format. Other teachers use past KCPE papers to drill their learners to answer specific questions in a certain way (Gathumbi, *et al.*, 2009). Commercial tests are administered frequently at a high cost but their results are yet to be determined through research. There is an assessment called "tune up" which is administered on the first day of term. It has been observed that some learners fail to attend school the first week of term for fear of this assessment. It has also been observed that teachers give tests and assignments as punishment for misbehaviour and this makes learners develop a negative attitude towards assessment. The reasons given for using commercially developed tests is that teachers do not have time to set tests due to heavy workloads, large classes and no facilities to prepare assessment tests. However, research has shown that many teachers do not have test construction skills and the capacity to develop the tests (Ngugi, 2008). The researcher found out that primary school teachers in one division in Kitui district were not skilled in test construction and lacked the necessary mastery of content to develop credible continuous assessment tests. Niwagaba, (2010) observes that teachers in Kampala, Uganda have difficulties constructing credible continuous assessment tests, which leads to poor performance grade.

### **Quality of primary school teachers**

Achievement in literacy in English at primary school level also depends largely on the quality of teachers. Teachers need to be competent in the subject, professional in their

teaching approach and committed to their work. Gathumbi, (2009) in a paper titled "Primary Teacher Education in Jeopardy: Pre-service Teachers' Under-achievement in Attainment of Desired English Competency Levels in Kenya", decries the poor quality of primary school English language teachers. The paper reports the findings of a study conducted to find out the competency levels of pre-service teachers who aspire to teach English. Performance scores were placed in three competency levels: Below Minimum Competency Level (BMCL), Minimum Competency Level (MCL) and Desired Competency Level (DCL). Most of the pre-service teachers' scores fell in the BMCL category. These results can be interpreted to mean that poor mastery of English on the part of teacher trainees would inevitably translate to poor teaching and to poor learning achievement on the part of the learners. In a Daily Nation newspaper article titled: "Shock as teachers fail subject tests" on November 28<sup>th</sup> 2013, it was reported that the results of a study conducted by the African Population and Health Research Centre (APHRC) between January and March 2012 in urban informal settlements in Kisumu, Eldoret, Mombasa, Nairobi, Nakuru and Nyeri. The purpose of the tests was to establish whether teachers had mastery of content and the skills to teach the subjects. The study revealed that a third of the primary school teachers tested scored 40% while others got as low as 10% in English and mathematics. According to Kenya Institute of Education (KIE) monitoring report, (KIE, 2007), many teachers had difficulties interpreting the new syllabus and using the integrated approach.

#### Overloaded syllabuses

According to the report on the monitoring of Phase Four of the implementation of the revised primary school curriculum, 46.7% of the teachers of English reported that time allocated was not enough for them to cover the syllabus adequately. (KIE, 2007). In the KNEC, (2010) monitoring learner achievement study, class three teachers reported inability to complete the syllabus within the school

hours and 71% of the teachers reported existence of remedial teaching programmes in their schools. These remedial programmes which mainly take place during the holidays have been outlawed by the government. However, learners continue to receive holiday tuition in homes, churches and other premises.

#### Increase in enrolment

In Kenya, primary education continues to experience many challenges, which include overstretched facilities, overcrowded schools and high pupil/teacher ratios especially for schools in urban slums and densely populated areas (Republic of Kenya, 2005). Large classes are reported to make teaching inefficient and to pose a challenge in syllabus coverage (KIE, 2007). The monitoring learner achievement study conducted by KNEC revealed that learners in smaller classes performed better than those in larger classes (KNEC, 2010). It is likely that those in smaller classes benefitted from individualized learner-friendly instruction. Teaching English requires a lot of practice and involves a lot of marking and assessment of learners' work. When classes are large, the teaching and learning of English becomes ineffective and thus achievement is adversely affected.

#### Shortage of teachers

According to the Teachers' Service Commission (TSC, 2010) primary schools were short of 41,520 teachers as they only had 177,605 against a staff establishment of 218,530. This number is needed to teach over 8.4 million children enrolled in primary schools in Kenya. Due to this shortage, teachers report of being overworked with heavy workloads which lead to poor teaching and learning. Shortage of English language teachers has a negative effect. Teachers are expected to be role models to the learners but there

is no time to go outside the syllabus, which makes learning artificial. Marking of large numbers of students' books is tiresome and it discourages the teachers to do this frequently as expected. Students need to be informed frequently of their weaknesses and given a chance to correct their mistakes. It is also difficult to attain proficiency without much exposure to the language under study. Most classrooms are dominated by "teacher talk" with the aim of covering the large syllabus content. This is detrimental to the development of learners' fluency in the target language, as they are made passive listeners, rather than active participants in the learning process.

#### Provision of instructional resources

In recognition of the importance of instructional materials for quality teaching and learning, the government has been meeting the cost of providing books to primary schools since 2003 under the Kenya Education Sector Support Programme (KESSP). According to a report published in August 2009 by the MOE, the Kenya National Audit Office and the UK National Audit Office, KESSP procured 58 million textbooks between 2003 and 2009. By the time of reporting in 2009, only 36 million of them were still in use in schools. This was a decline in use of 38% suggesting that a large number of books were either lost or misplaced.

#### Poor school attendance

One of the major challenges facing primary school education today is poor school attendance (KNEC, 2010). In the ELN, (2009) project, a research was conducted on 30 primary schools across Kenya. Learner attendance was tracked in the sample schools in order to find out whether the use of interventions that promoted literacy in English encouraged learners to stay in school. It was observed that many schools registered relatively good attendance but little or no attendance in the month of November. Most schools took advantage of KCPE, which is normally done in the middle of that month to close early.

When criterion-referenced tests were administered to the sample schools, it was observed that improved performance was registered in schools whose pupil attendance was high (Gathumbi *et al.*, 2009).

A study to monitor learner achievement in class 3 was conducted by KNEC and the results revealed that absenteeism from school was by 70.1% of the learners (KNEC, 2010). According to Uwezo annual learning assessment report (Uwezo, 2011) based on the assessment of 134,000 children aged 6-16 years, there is high absenteeism among learners and teachers. In many of the schools, half of the children were reported to be missing school daily and 13% of the teachers were absent each day.

#### Use of English, Kiswahili, Sheng, and Mother Tongue

In Kenya, the language policy states that the child's first language either Mother Tongue or the language commonly spoken in the school's catchment area should be used as the Language of Instruction (LOI) in lower primary up to end of class 3. In the meantime, English should be taught as a subject. From class 4 upwards, English should be used as the LOI (Republic of Kenya, 1977). However, this policy is not always adhered to. Lack of adherence to the language policy in Kenya is largely influenced by national examinations, which are conducted in English and consequently, teachers do not find it necessary to use mother tongue (Gathumbi, 1985, 2002). The most common practice, therefore, is to use a mixture of mother tongue, often Kiswahili and English as LOI in lower primary school. Classroom teachers are constantly faced with the dilemma regarding what language to use in the course of teaching English (Bunyi, 1986). This dilemma is due to a combination of factors, such as the inability of learners to understand and communicate in English and the

teachers' inability to communicate in the first language of the catchment area. The situation is further complicated by the fact that most teachers do not have adequate pedagogical preparation for promoting English language learning and many parents demand that their children be taught in English from pre-school. (Gathumbi *et al*, 2009).

Studies have also shown that in Kenya, English is mainly learnt in schools where it is taught as a subject or used as the medium of instruction. This means most learners do not have exposure to the target language outside the classroom. After school, learners are exposed to either mother tongue, Kiswahili or a code called "Sheng", which is a mixture of English and Kiswahili, and sometimes a mixture of English, Kiswahili and mother tongue. During their free time, learners interact with their peers in school or in their neighbourhoods where they speak Sheng. According to Espelago (2001) cited in Kibui (2006), peer pressure dictates that for one to belong and be accepted in a group, one must behave like it. Consequently, the Kenyan youth must speak "Sheng" as speaking English is not acceptable as it is regarded as a formal way of communication. Speaking "Sheng" hampers the mastery of English language and does not assist learners as they struggle to acquire English language skills (Kibui, 2006). When releasing the KCPE results of 2011, the minister for education attributed poor performance in English to the speaking of "Sheng" by primary school learners.

Re-Engineering Processes to Improve Literacy Standards

Re-engineering research

Kenya should strengthen national assessments because they measure actual learner competencies and they have gained popularity for being effective methods of evaluating education systems across the world. Kenya should adopt an evaluation model that provides a broader picture of the learners mastery of content and acquisition of analytical skills (KNEC, 2010). More research should be conducted in the area of testing and assessment. The policy document

also recommends adoption of collaborative demand-driven research, that emphasizes value added research findings.

Re-engineering teaching

A sound grounding in language and linguistics is important for every language teacher and teacher trainer. Sufficient emphasis and practice should be made regarding the teaching and learning of the four basic language skills. Teachers of English in Kenyan primary schools are themselves second language speakers of English. In addition, the majority of students joining the local teacher training colleges (before 2003) usually possessed low national examination grades in the English language which did not provide a head-start as future classroom teachers of English. In a baseline study conducted by ELN Project researchers in 2003, it was found out that overall, 40% of the pre-service teachers did not attain the desired competency level in English, i.e. They did not score at least 75% or more in a class 6 criterion-referenced test. This raised a major concern on the quality and modalities of training of primary school teachers. It is, therefore, necessary that would be primary school teachers of English be proficient in the English language which is the LOI.

Primary teacher training course should ensure that the trainees, specialising in teaching English language, become thoroughly conversant with the English language primary school syllabus. They should be able to put across to learners how grammar relates to communication. They should also work out the language needs of the learners. This should be realized through use of appropriate teaching-learning methodology. Current teaching should infuse norms-based approach to teaching and learning English, where specific skills are addresses and assessed using criterion referenced tests. This will go a long way

in producing primary school graduates who are able to communicate and function effectively within and outside the school setting. As for all school subjects, constant monitoring and evaluation, coupled with frequent in-service courses, should become a common feature in the teaching and learning of English since it is the central means of accessing knowledge and skills in all the primary school subjects except Kiswahili. Sessional Paper No. 1 of 2005 outlines issues that need to be addressed in the attainment of Education for All (EFA) goals by the year 2015. One of the key concerns is quality and relevance. Among the strategies recommended for improving teaching and learning in schools include: regular in-service training of teachers on the best methods of teaching English language literacy, revision of teacher education curriculum, and capacity building for school-based assessment.

Re-engineering evaluation procedures

Continuous assessment should be distinguished from national examinations like KCPE which are summative and terminal in nature. The KCPE examinations are norm-referenced as they are used mainly for selection, placement and certification. In most cases, they are of no instructional value to those who sit it. Classroom tests in English, as well as in other school subjects at primary school level adopt a similar format to that used in KCPE. This approach is

inappropriate. Instead, it is recommended that teachers should conduct criterion-referenced tests which target particular competencies in learners. Both MCL (50%) and DCL (75%) should be set in advance. There is need to know how the desirable literacy levels are to be assessed for example, whether it is by children speaking and writing English or by being able to meet the requirements for admission to secondary school. Teacher should be trained to use assessment to identify learning gaps in order to give remedial work and enhance learning achievement.

There is need therefore, for the development and administration of tests that require a demonstration of how well they can use specific features of the language, and also that they understand how such features operate within naturalistic discourse. If we are to develop the communicative nature of our teaching and testing, it is important to focus, for example, on performance tasks in teaching and testing, as well as use of information transfer techniques and other restricted response formats.

Conclusion

Literacy is important for individuals and for the development of a country yet learners are completing and leaving primary school before they acquire expected levels of literacy.

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