

INFLUENCE OF MOTHER TONGUE ON PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN'S PERFORMANCE IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN GACHOKA DIVISION, EMBU COUNTY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of mother tongue on pre-school children's performance in the English language in Gachoka Division, Embu County. The study used a descriptive survey design which used both quantitative and qualitative approaches to collect data. The participants included headteachers, pre-school teachers and pre-school parents from eight pre-schools. Data was collected using questionnaires and interviews. Data was analyzed using percentages and frequencies and was presented in tables and charts. The study reveals that mother tongue contributes positively towards the learning of the English language in pre-schools. It further reveals that parents have a negative attitude towards the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction. The study concludes that the language policy should be implemented in pre-schools. It recommends that the stakeholders should ensure that there are enough learning materials in pre-schools which are written in mother tongue and English.

KEYWORDS: Influence, Mother Tongue, Performance, English

INTRODUCTION

Kenya's language policy states that pre-school children and children in lower primary schools should be taught using the language of the catchment area, that is, mother tongue where it is applicable and Kiswahili or English in the urban settings if that is the language these children communicate in. That means that teachers should be familiar with pre-school children's home language and should also be conversant with language skills to teach English which is taught as a subject from early years. Learning in mother tongue within the first five years of a language helps the child relate home language with that of the school. This ability to communicate helps the children to relate to and reflect on their daily educational experience in order to extend their development. All children come to school with a basic communication competence which they develop through their everyday use of mother tongue at home. They can label, categorize and describe objects and pictures. Therefore, teachers should build on the children's use of the home language in the school. They should be responsive to the vernacular the children already have and should engage them with familiar themes that they use at home such as food, domestic animals, and family members among others. This connectivity is necessary so that the children do not experience a gap between the language they bring to school from home and the language of the school. In the development pathway of a child, mother tongue plays an important role as it is connected to various aspects of a child's growth such as emotional development, moral development and cognitive development (Cummins, 2000, Stitch & McDonald 1990).

Learning mother tongue and in mother tongue within the first five years of a child's life helps the child to perform well in school. A child who does not have a significant language has a high likelihood of having trouble with reading

which may continue throughout his school life. That means, if children are unable to communicate effectively in school, their academic and intellectual development is hindered.

Home Language and School Language of Instruction

Mother tongue based bilingual programmes use the learner's 1st language (L1) to teach reading and writing skills. The second or foreign language (L2) should be taught systematically so that learners can gradually transfer from the familiar language (L1) to the foreign one (L2). Although bilingual models, practices, and results vary, their use of mother tongue is common especially in the early years of the child. This helps the child acquire and develop literacy skills in addition to participating in class (Skutnub and Kangas, 2000). Learning to read becomes easy when children know the language and can employ psychological guessing strategies (Kibui, 2012). That means that, it is easier to learn new concepts while using the first language than while using the second language. Learning is made easy when children transfer linguistic and cognitive skills from first language to second language. UNESCO (2004) opines that the first language strengthens the child's affective domain which involves confidence, self-esteem and identity which in turn helps to increase the child's motivation, imagination, and creativity; in other words, learners become bilingual and biliterate which encourages them to speak, read, write and understand what they hear.

Bilingual instruction allows teachers and children to interact naturally and negotiate meaning together, thus creating participatory learning environment that is conducive to cognitive and affective development. L1 classes allow children to be independent, develop their personalities and intellect unlike L2 classes where children sit silently, feel demotivated which leads to poor performance. Sometimes children drop out from schools because they lack interest in learning in a new language which they do not understand (Buckey, 2003). Bilingual programs encourage learners to listen, speak, read and write in more than one language unlike L2 which promotes skills in a new language which may limit learner's competence. Home literacy environment (HLE) is significantly related to young children's oral language ability, word decoding ability and phonological sensitivity (Baker, 2001). Some of the child activities that are designed to foster language development are rhyming games, shared reading, songs, news telling, reciting poems and so on. Leseman and De Jong (1998), explain that literacy environmental factors determine children's school literacy achievement. That is, combining exposure to literacy in the home with construction opportunities increases the predicative value of home literacy in relation to early literacy achievements which affects the child's academic performance in school. Hill (2001) adds that mothers who display a high level of warmth and encouragement towards children have been found to be predictors of academic success.

Educational Language Policy in Kenya

In upper primary, secondary and university, English is used as a medium of instruction and taught as a compulsory subject from pre-unit to form four. In urban areas in Kenya, there is no uniformity in the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction because of language diversity. There is more emphasis on the use of English than mother tongue or Kiswahili. In Kenya, Kiswahili is the national language. This is an indication that promotion of mother tongue needs broad support by all stakeholders. Parents and teachers should be sensitized about the importance of using mother tongue to teach children in formative years. Daily Nation (2014), laments that teachers in lower primary classes ignore mother tongue or language of the catchment area in favour of English as a medium of instruction. According to Oduor (2016), this abandonment contradicts sentiments expressed in a survey conducted by Kenya Institute of Curriculum

Development (KICD) which stated that Kenyans want children taught good manners and their mother tongue.

Language Development

The study applied Vygotsky's theory (1934) which combines the use of social environment and cognitive ways of learning in order to enhance language acquisition. He suggests that language development depends on interaction with people and the tools that environment provides to help children form their view of the world. There are three ways in which cultural tools can be passed from one individual to another, namely; imitative learning, where a person tries to imitate another; instructed learning, which involves recalling instructions given by teachers and then using these instructions to self-regulate; collaborative learning which involves a group of peers who strive to understand one another and work together to learn a specific skill. Vygotsky asserts that children will acquire the ways of thinking and acting through interacting with a more knowledgeable person. Berks (1994) explain that there are four principles underlying the Vygotskian framework namely, children construct their knowledge; language development cannot be separated from social context; learning can lead to language development; language plays a central role in mental development.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Pre-school children's performance in the English language in Gachoka Division, in Embu County, has been below average according to Education Division Office of 2015. This could be as a result of failing to use mother tongue as a medium of instruction in pre-schools as teachers and parents prefer the use of English. Thus, there is a lack of transition from the home language which the children know to the new school language. In rural and urban areas, teachers are faced with a challenge of implementing the language policy because parents of pre-school children prefer the use of English as a medium of instruction instead of mother tongue. This in turn affects the children's performance in English because it takes time for them to understand concepts in the new language. It is on the basis of this background that a study was conducted in order to establish the problem affecting pre-school children's performance in English and the influence of mother tongue in promoting better performance.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study focused on the following objectives:

- Establish the influence of home language on pre-school children's performance in English in Gachoka Division, Embu County.
- Determine the influence of the school language of instruction on the pre-school children's performance in the English language in Gachoka Division, Embu County.
- Evaluate the implementation of the educational language policy in Kenya on pre-school children's performance in English in Gachoka Division, Embu County.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study used a descriptive survey research design. The design used quantitative and qualitative approaches to collect data from 8 head teachers, 8 teachers and 8 parents from 8 pre-schools. Data was collected by use of questionnaires and interviews. Data was analyzed using frequencies and percentages. Tables and charts were used to present the findings

of the study.

DATA ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSIONS

Data was presented as per each objective.

- Objective number one sought to establish the influence of the home language on pre-school children's performance in the English language in Gachoka Division, Embu County. The findings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Does Home Language Enhance the Learning of English in Gachoka Division: Pre-School Teachers' Responses

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly disagree	0	0
Disagree	1	12.5
Neutral	0	0
Agree	5	62.5
Strongly agree	2	25
Total	8	100

The analysis presented in Table 1 shows that the majority of the participants 62.5% (no5) and 25% (n=2) agreed that as children join pre-school, they are fluent in home language and therefore teaching and learning should be done in pre-schools using that home language rather than English. This view was supported by headteachers 87% (n=7) and parents 75% (n=6). According to Hill (2001), initiatives focusing on building positive parent-child relationship and enhancing readiness related aspects of home environment influence child's achievement in language acquisition.

- Objective number two sought to determine the influence of the school language of instructions on pre-school children's performance in the English language in Gachoka Division, Embu County. The findings are presented in table 2 and figure 1.

Table 2: Does the use of Mother Tongue for Instruction Help Learners' Performance in English? Head Teachers' Responses

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly disagree	1	12.5
Disagree	2	25
Neutral	0	0
Agree	4	50
Strongly agree	1	12.5
Total	8	100

The analysis presented in Table 2 shows that the majority of the participants 62.5% (n=5) agreed that the use of mother tongue in pre-schools helps children acquire and perform better in the English Language. Cummins (2000) asserts that children who come to school with a strong foundation in their mother tongue develop strong literacy abilities in the school language. When parents and other caregivers participate in developing children's mother tongue at home, children come to school well prepared to learn school language since their knowledge and skills transfer across the two languages and both languages nurture each other.

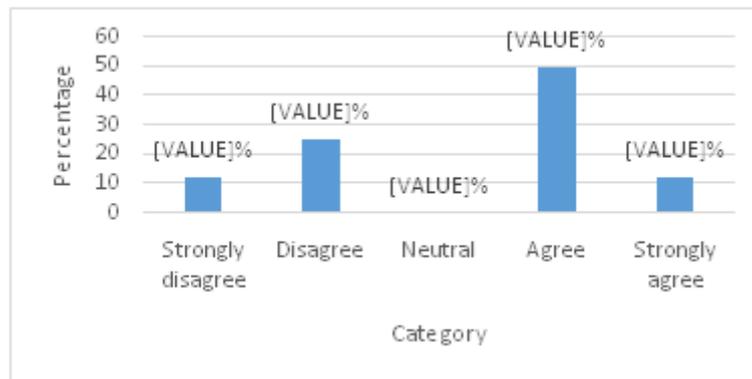


Figure 1: Is English used as a Medium of Instruction in Your School? Pre-School Teacher’s Responses

The analysis in Figure 1 shows that the majority of the participants 62.5% (n=5) agreed that English is emphasized in schools as a language of instructions which may impact negatively on pre-school children’s performance in the English language.

- Objective number 3 sought to evaluate the implementation of the educational language policy in Kenya on pre-school children’s performance in the English language in Gachoka Division Embu County

Table 3: Is Language Policy Implemented in the Schools in Gachoka Division? Head Teachers’ Responses

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly agree	0	0
Agree	1	12.5
Neutral	0	0
Disagree	4	50
Strongly disagree	3	37.5
Total	8	100

The findings presented in Table 3 indicate that the participants 87.5% (n=7) agreed that language policy is not implemented in Pre-Schools. Pre-school teachers, 75% (n=6), and parents 75% (=6) also agreed that the language policy is not well implemented in Gachoka Division. The participants preferred English being used as a medium of instruction instead of mother tongue. The participants who were interviewed confirmed that when children join pre-school, they are fluent in their mother tongue. However, the schools prefer using English as a medium of instruction. Some parents were not aware of the language policy in Kenya and they also preferred the use of English as a medium of instruction in pre-schools.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Mother tongue (L1) should be used in pre-schools because it helps the children to acquire and understand various skills easily. It helps them to learn the English language easily since skills gained using L1 can be transferred to L2 since both languages, that is L1 and L2, nurture each other. The main language of instruction in pre-schools should be mother tongue and English should be taught as a subject. This helps children to learn English easily. L1 and L2 produces best performance in the pre-school children’s performance in the English language. There are no teaching and learning resources in pre-schools written in L1 and the majority of parents would like L2 to be used as the school language of instruction. In addition, the language policy is not implemented in pre-schools in Gachoka division. The study recommends

that the language policy should be fully implemented in pre-schools in Gachoka Division and that labelling of teaching and learning materials should be written in mother tongue and English. Parents should be encouraged to have a positive attitude toward the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction in pre-schools. This will motivate them to show their children the value of mother tongue at home and in school.

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