

Findings and Recommendations on Literacy Benchmarks in Second Language Teaching in Kenyan Secondary Schools

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English was introduced as the language of instruction during the colonial era and in Kenya it continues to be so 50 years after decolonization. Despite its long legacy as the language of instruction in Kenyan schools, the standards of English and educational performance in general are declining (Okwara, Shiundu & Indoshi, 2009). The language of instruction significantly impacts students' success in other subject areas.

There have been concerns about the declining standards of English in Kenyan secondary schools. Learning standards are important because they clarify and explicitly state instructional expectations for all students. Currently, there are no clearly defined standards for teaching English in secondary schools in Kenya. Gauging learner's proficiency is based on objectives of the English language four-year course (Kenya Institute of Education, 2002). These are general and written in summary form.

To understand the role of the teacher and that of the learner clearly defined benchmarks are needed. Development of standards is a possible area to consider in improving students' performance in English. One means of raising students' performance in English is to have clear guidelines for what students need to know, in the form of a set of learning standards for teaching English. There is also the need to have a set of standards for preparing pre-service teachers to base their teaching on the set standards. This has important implications for teacher educators and those who

prepare teachers to teach English and to teach other subjects in English. The pilot study shed light on current instructional practices in secondary schools and challenges teachers encounter.

Research Study

As part of our partnership project, one of the collaborative research studies we undertook was to address the following research questions: (a) What are current teachers' views about secondary school teaching and learning of English?; and (b) What challenges do teachers experience in teaching English in Kenyan secondary schools?

We conducted this study to generate baseline data that would guide development of English language benchmarks. The study was aimed at identifying areas of focus for improving the teaching and learning of English in Kenyan secondary schools. The purpose of this study was specifically to generate baseline data on: the strategies used in the teaching of English language in Kenyan secondary schools, teachers' views on teaching practices, difficulties students face, and the challenges teachers experienced in teaching English. It also aimed at establishing areas of learners' weaknesses, with special reference to learning listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary skills.

We carried out a baseline survey in 11 selected secondary schools in four administrative counties – Nairobi, Kajiado, Kiambu and Murang'a. We

adopted an exploratory and descriptive survey design. The schools were placed into two categories: public and private. From the public schools, other categories were considered: boys only, girls only, and schools with mixed gender. A semi-structured teacher's questionnaire was used for data collection. The questionnaire sought teacher's views on the English language curriculum, use of the syllabus, their understanding of the language policy, teaching practices, availability and use of teaching resources, instructional challenges faced by English language teachers and what teachers do to mitigate the problems.

Data were collected from the 33 teachers over a period of one month using questionnaires. The teachers involved taught various classes. An interview schedule was used to collect information from the school principals. English lessons were observed in all the 11 schools. Data were analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative methods.

From our data analysis, we have the following findings:

- ***Finding #1: Need for Development of Standards***

Most (66.7%) of the teachers were of the opinion that teaching and learning of English would improve if based on set standards. The following are some of the reasons teachers gave for this.

- Set standards act as teaching and learning guidelines for teachers and learners
- Benchmarks ensure there are checks and balances before students proceed to the next level
- ELT would improve because the set standard would form the basis for decision making
- The set standards would become goals to focus on during teaching and learning
- Teachers are able to evaluate their own performance and that of their students

- ***Finding #2: The Strategies Used in the Teaching of English Language in Kenyan Secondary Schools***

Almost all the teachers used mainly teacher-centred methods, heavily relying on the course

book for instruction. The methods to use in teaching English and Literature in an integrated way do not seem to work either for the teacher or the learner, given the circumstances and background under which they operate.

- ***Finding #3: Teachers' Views on Teaching Practices***

Teachers do not have clear guidelines and benchmarks to use for gauging English Language learning outcomes. Teachers of English do not feel sufficiently prepared to handle the Integrated English language syllabus. Generally, the teachers' main concern was how they could be supported in gaining specific skills in English language teaching. They also said they needed to be updated with new teaching skills. This calls for a needs and situational analysis of the ELT in Kenya, with a view to developing teacher professional expectations and standards.

- ***Finding #4: The English Language Syllabus***

More than 82% of the teachers felt the English Language Syllabus was adequate for teaching and learning the expected skills. This shows that the teachers had confidence in the syllabus as they said it had adequate content. However, they reported that they needed the pedagogical and relevant technological support in interpreting and implementing the syllabus content.

- ***Finding #5: Learner Language Proficiency***

Most (81.8%) of the teachers felt that students were proficient in listening skills, while almost half of the teachers (45.5%) indicated that students were not proficient in speaking skills. Twenty six of the teachers (78.8%) felt students were not proficient in reading skills. More than half (51.5%) of the teachers felt that students lacked proficiency in writing. Eighteen (54.5%) felt students were not proficient in grammar. Twenty-one (63.6%) stated that their learners were not skilled in use of vocabulary. It is evident that extra effort should be put on the teaching of all the skills.

- ***Finding #6: Difficulties Students Face and Areas of Learners' Weaknesses in Learning English***

Learners' primary school background has an influence on how they cope in language lessons. Rampant use of mother tongues, Kiswahili and Sheng plays a role in the kind of strategies teachers employ in English language teaching. The areas of focus for improving the teaching and learning of English as identified by the teachers were as follows:

Difficulties with listening

- Understanding the language
- Influence of the mother tongue

Reading difficulties

- Some are non-readers
- Poor pronunciation skills leading to lack of reading fluency
- Reading fluency affected by student's school background

Difficulty with speaking

- Many learners not fluent in English
- Difficulty in expressing themselves
- Influence of the mother tongue and use of slang (sheng)
- Lack of exposure to spoken English

Writing difficulties

- Using wrong vocabulary
- Lack of creativity
- Lack of practice
- Lack of proper writing skills, e.g. use of mechanical, organisational and linguistic skills

Grammar difficulties

- Poor exposure to well-constructed sentences
- Influence of the mother tongue
- Lack of a good reading culture/model
- Inability to understand grammar rules.

Vocabulary difficulties

- Rarely use of vocabulary
- Lack of exposure to storybooks/ reading materials
- Lack of a good reading culture
- Having limited vocabulary

Further explanation by the English language teachers revealed that the students experienced the following additional difficulties:

- Inability to read fluently and comprehend passages
- Use of the mother tongue, which affects all the skills
- Lack of exposure to language rich environments
- Not enough time to go through a specific area carefully
- Understanding how to relate language and literature as one entity
- Problems of understanding poetry and sounds of English
- Difficulty in inferring meaning without the use of a dictionary

- ***Finding #7: Challenges Teachers Experience in Teaching English***

Speaking skills were found to be the most difficult to teach as indicated by 33% of the teachers. This finding is also a reflection of the fact that learners also find speaking skills such as pronunciation difficult to understand. This situation might have been caused by the fact that speaking skills are not examined at the end of the primary school. This might cause a negative backwash effect where teachers and students fail to give the area the required attention. There is also, inadequate practice in oral skills, since they tend to speak languages other than English outside the classroom. Grammar also poses challenges to the learner just as it is for the teacher. Integrating the teaching of language and Literature was also found to be a major challenge.

Based on our research, we have the following recommendations:

- ***Recommendation #1: Development of literacy benchmarks/standards*** – Literacy benchmarks should be developed to assist teachers to gauge the quality of their teaching and learners to assess their progress. The Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD), Teacher training institutions, the Directorates of Quality Assurance and Standards and Secondary Education and the Kenya National Examinations Council (KNEC) need to partner with a view to improving English Language standards in Kenya. Standards for English and for ELT

should be set and the curriculum should be reviewed in the light of set standards.

- **Recommendation #2: Teacher Preparation** – Development of standards for students would also necessitate the development of standards for preparing teachers to implement the set standards. This will have implications for teacher education institutions as teacher trainers would need to reconsider how they prepare teachers of English for secondary schools with the aim of improving the training - this would entail analysing how teachers are currently trained in order to determine what needs to be done differently to improve the training. The pre-service teachers should be taken through the English language secondary school syllabus for which they are being prepared to teach, with a view to identifying and addressing the unique problems that underlie the teaching of English in Kenya. Teacher training institutions should prepare English language teachers by equipping them with a standards-based curriculum. Teacher educators' training capacity is lacking in some skills and it should be developed further.
- **Recommendation #3: Secondary School Curriculum for English** – Given the diversity of existing languages in the learners' environments, it would be important to review the English language secondary school curriculum, taking cognisance of the effect of linguistic diversity on language teaching and learning.
- **Recommendation #4: Continued Professional Teacher Development** – Teachers should undergo teacher professional development courses from time to time to upgrade their skills, paying special emphasis to the four language skills.

- **Recommendation #5: Specific Language Needs** – Recognizing that many students do not speak English outside the classroom, it would be helpful to focus on the academic language students need in the various subjects they study in secondary school. Further research should be carried out into the specific academic language needs of secondary school students in Kenya. Due to their struggle with communication in English, many learners do not have the proficiency needed to understand and use the technical vocabulary and expressions needed for specific disciplines, such as the language of Science, Social studies, Mathematics as well as Literature.
- **Recommendation #6: English Language Teaching Resources** – Relevant resources like language laboratories and authentic reading materials should be availed to teachers and learners.
- **Recommendation #7: Evaluation Based on Standards** – When evaluation is pegged on known standards, teachers will direct their language teaching strategies towards these standards. Monitoring and evaluation of teaching and learning and of learning outcomes should be carried out based on established standards. Literacy benchmarks or standards would provide a common focus for all teachers to improve the teaching of English in secondary schools.

References

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