Original Article

CHILDREN'S EMERGENT LITERACY SKILLS: THE CONCEPT OF LETTER KNOWLEDGE AND THE ALPHABETICAL PRINCIPLE

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ABSTRACT

Alphabet knowledge is an important skill in children's emergent literacy. It involves letter-shape, letter-name and letter-sound knowledge. The objective of this study was to examine the influence of learners' alphabetical knowledge on the performance of English reading in grade one. The geographical locale of the study was Keiyo Sub County, Kenya. This was a mixed-method study. Stratified and random sampling techniques were used to select the 26 schools and 78 teachers. Fifty- two (52) pupils of Grade one were selected (a boy and a girl in grade one of a sampled school) using simple random sampling and assessed. The data collection instruments used were questionnaires for ECDE and Grade one teachers and EGRA checklists for Grade one learners. The research results accepted the null hypothesis which stated that there existed no significant relationship between a learner's ability to recognize letters of the alphabet and performance of English reading in Grade one. This was interpreted to mean that though it was important to teach the letter names and shapes of the alphabet, it does not necessarily impact on the reading ability of the child. Given the importance of the alphabetic principle in learning to read, this study recommends that teachers should not ask learners to write their names before they acquire alphabetic knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

Alphabet recognition is an important component of emergent literacy. It involves letter shape recognition, letter-name knowledge and rapid letter naming. It has historically been used as an indicator of future reading achievement. A pre reader's letter name knowledge is a strong predictor of success in early reading achievement. A learner's entry behavior to level one should include the ability to recognize and name uppercase letters and sound lowercase letters of the alphabet. Children need to memorize letter names through direct instruction along with exposures to the letters in print (Snow et al, 1998). Scarborough (1998), found that a child's verbal memory was a stronger predictor of later reading achievement. Additionally, the correlation between verbal memory and later reading achievement is comparable to other predictors of reading achievement such as letter identification. A

child with automatic, accurate recognition of letters will have easier time learning about letters (sounds and word spellings) than a child who does not know the letters of the alphabet (Stahl and Murray, 1994).

When educators discuss the importance of children possessing knowledge of letters of the alphabet, they are often discussing a variety of skills and some may only mean that learners will learn to recognize and name letters of the alphabet. Others will include learning how to write the letters as part of this skill, while others will include matching knowledge (Adams, 1990). Richgels, (2015) indicates that children differentiate letters according to their visual form. Given the complexities of the visually distinct forms of letters (upper case and lower case), simultaneously teaching two versions of letters with their confusable sounds and labels may be overwhelming to the young child. While alphabetic knowledge is to be emphasized, some writers have debated whether the acquisition of letter name knowledge precedes letter sounds in children's literacy (Gillet et al, 2012). Thus, letter- sound knowledge, as compared to letter names, is more relevant and useful to encode and decode words (Liberman & Shankweiler, 2015).

Although it is recommended for teachers to introduce a few letters at a time rather than teaching all of the letters at once, but also the teachers need to be sure that the pace of the letter introduction is not too slow (Wuori, 1999). Wagstaff (1998), found the 'letter of the week' approach problematic because it isolates the letters by removing them from the meaningful context of written language. He warned that the slow pace of programs like 'letter of the week' is a serious disadvantage. Aside from the slow pace of teaching only one letter a week, often teaches letters without connection to meaningful reading and writing; these children spend time practicing letters in isolation and do not learn to transfer this knowledge to literacy tasks.

Therefore, as soon as a child joins Pre-school, the alphabetical letters should be taught in phases gradually until the alphabetical principle is achieved. This paper focuses on four phases of the alphabetical principle.

Lower case letters should be introduced first labeled as sounds. The learner will grasp the letter sound while associating with the letter shape. Upper case letters displayed on a chart will then be introduced as letter names. At this stage, learners will recite their ABCs to provide a pneumonic towards mastery of letter names. When learners can recite letter names, then pairing upper case and lowercase comes in handy. This is an opportunity for the teacher to help learners understand that the capital (uppercase) letters and small (lowercase) letters have the same letter name and letter sound. This becomes a strategy towards establishing the concept of letter-sound correspondence. The final phase would be word recognition as letter- sound correspondence provides cues for correct pronunciation, thus reading. Using letter names in encoding and decoding words is an ineffective strategy because letter names do not approximate the pronunciation of words. Some letters for example 'w' is a challenge to learners because the letter name does not provide any cue towards sound /w/.

RESEARCH APPROACH

According to Uwezo Kenya Report (2011) one out of five children in grade four cannot read a simple grade two paragraph. This was found out to have affected mostly the semi- arid areas in Kenya. The Keiyo Sub County is a semi- arid area; this makes it susceptible to challenges like rampant absenteeism. This is due to learners' interest in activities like herding which limit class attendance. Basing on this, the study sought to investigate the relationship between Alphabetical knowledge and performance of English reading in Grade One in Keiyo Sub County, Elgeyo Marakwet County.

The study adopted a mixed method approach so as to gain a comprehensive understanding of the influence of alphabetical knowledge on the performance of English reading. Questionnaire and Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) tools were used to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. Stratified and random sampling techniques were used to select 26 schools and 78 teachers. Fifty- two (52) pupils of Grade One were selected (a boy and a girl in grade one of a sampled school) using simple random sampling. The EGRA tool was used to test a learner's ability to recognize

letters of the alphabet presented in uppercase. To analyze results, descriptive and inferential research modes were applied to determine if there existed a relationship between alphabetical knowledge and the performance of English reading in grade one.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Learners' ability to recognize letters of the alphabet

The null hypothesis stated that there exists no significant relationship between the learner's ability to recognize letters of the alphabet and the performance of English reading in grade one. To be able to test this hypothesis, it was necessary to obtain responses from teachers.

Responses from teachers regarding learners' ability to recognize letters of the alphabet were rated using a 5-point Likert scale. Particularly, the teachers were asked to respond to a series of statements about the learners' ability to recognize letters of the alphabet. These responses were then analyzed in terms of the extent to which they agreed with them, and so tapping into their cognitive and affective components of their knowledge on the learners' ability to recognize letters of the alphabet. The findings are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Learners' ability to recognize letters of the alphabet

Statement		Dsd	D	UD	A	SA	Total	Mean
1. Pupils transiting to class one are able to recognize all alphabetic letters	F	2	10	0	44	22	78	3.94
	%	2.6	12.8	0	56.4	28.2	100	78.8
2. Adequate teaching and learning materials enhancing learners' ability to recite all alphabetic letters	F	3	18	3	40	14	78	3.56
	%	3.8	23.1	3.8	51.3	17.9	100	71.2
3. Pupils transiting to class one are able to recognize letters and form simple sentences in English	F	5	10	1	47	15	78	3.73
	%	6.4	12.8	1.3	60.3	19.2	100	74.6
4. Teaching of letters beginning with letter names followed by letter sounds enable learners to easily recite and recognize letters	F	8	6	2	32	30	78	3.89
	%	10.3	7.7	2.6	41.0	38.5	100	77.8
5. A learner at the onset of grade one is helped to recognize letters of the alphabet	F	10	32	1	26	9	78	2.89
	%	12.8	41.0	1.3	33.3	11.5	100	57.8
6. Uppercase letters are introduced to learners before the lowercase letters	F	17	28	6	22	5	78	2.61
	%	21.8	35.9	7.7	28.2	6.4	100	52.2

Key: SD= Strongly Disagree; D=Disagree; UD =Undecided; A=Agree; SA=Strongly Agree; F=Frequency.

This implies that 78.8% (M=3.94) of teachers agreed that pupils transiting to grade one could recognize all alphabetical letters and 77.8% (M=3.89) support the statement that, 'teaching of letters beginning with letter names followed by letter sounds enable learners to recognize letters of the alphabet easily.' Further, 74.6% (M=3.73) support the statement that pupils transiting to class one are able to recognize letters and form simple sentences in English and 71.2% (M=3.56) agreed that adequate teaching and learning materials enhance learners' ability to recite all alphabetic letters. Notably, only 57.8% and 52.2% of teachers supported the statement, 'a learner at the onset of grade one is helped to recognize letters of the alphabet' and that uppercase letters are introduced to learners before the lowercase letters respectively.

Particularly, the findings of this study indicate that, without a firm knowledge of letters, children will have difficulty with all other aspects of early literacy. Children who have already learned to recognize most letters as pre- scholars will have easier time learning upon formal school entry. Those whose knowledge of letters is not well developed when they start school require organized

instruction and practice that will help them learn how to identify, name and write letters. Letter recognition is, therefore, a critical factor in learning to read, as letters are the most basic units of written languages. Beginning readers cannot become skilled readers if they do not understand the alphabet (Ehri, 2003).

Results from Assessment of Learners

Pupils were assessed using the Early Grade Reading assessment tool basing on the objectives of the study. Particularly the researcher sought to test the learner's ability to recognize letters of the alphabet by name in relation to the performance of English reading in grade one. The findings were as follows;

Table 2: Recognition of Letters by Name

Letter	Recognize		Not Able to Recognize	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Q	22	42.3	30	56.75
P	39	75	13	25
S	43	82.7	9	17.3
M	47	90.4	5	9.6
L	25	48.07	27	51.92

It was established that 22(42.3%) of pupil respondents were able to recognize letter Q. The remaining 30(57.69%) could not give the letter name. The letter P seemed familiar as 39 (75%) recognized it, 13(25%) did not remember the letter name and confused with the number 9. It was seen that 43 (82.7%) recognized letter S by name while 9 (17.3%) did not identify letter s by name. Further 47(90.4%) recognized letter M whereas 5 (9.6%) did not identify letter M. It was established that 25(48.07%) identified letter L and 27(51.92%) did not recognize letter L. These finding concurs with a study by Snow (1998) that alludes that a child with automatic, accurate recognition of letters will have easier time learning about letters and learning about letter sounds and word spellings than a child who does not know the letters of the alphabet. Accordingly, the entry behavior to grade one should include the ability to recognize and name upper and lowercase letters as envisaged by Stahl (1997). Particularly, the findings of this study indicate that children need to memorize letter names through direct instruction along with exposures to the letters

in print. Further, this study is in tandem with a study by Lyon (1997) who indicates that learning of letter names helps children understand the alphabetic principle; or how letters and sounds connect, because names of many letters contain the sounds they most often represent.

Hypothesis Testing using Multiple Regression

The research hypothesis was tested using the significance level of coefficients to ascertain the influence of alphabetical knowledge on the performance of English reading in Grade One. The research hypothesis stated; there exists no significant relationship between a learner's ability to recognize letters of the alphabet and the performance of English reading in Grade One.

The research results accepted the null hypothesis which stated that there existed no significant relationship between a learner's ability to recognize letters of the alphabet and the performance of English reading in Grade One. The regression results showed no significant relationship between a learner's ability to recognize letters of the alphabet and performance of English reading in Grade One with a beta coefficient of 0.061, the influence is not significant at (p=0.453). This was interpreted to mean that though it was important to teach the letter names and shapes of the alphabet, it does not necessarily impact on the reading ability of the child.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings, the following conclusions and recommendations were made;

The Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) through the Ministry of Education (MoE) should ensure that the Alphabetic principle is introduced to Pre-school learners in phases as follows: lowercase letters associated with letter-sounds, uppercase letters associated with letter-names, paired upper and lowercase letters then finally word recognition for learners to correspond letters with their correct sound.

Teachers of Pre-school should acknowledge that emergent reading is dependent on the alphabetic principle. Therefore, the gradual introduction will

lead to successful reading as alphabet recognition is a critical underpinning to the performance of English reading. This study recommends that letter sounds be introduced before letter names and learning the letters that make up a word or name will be easily attained.

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