

Challenges Teachers Face and Strategies Deployed in Teaching Reading Skills in Public Primary Schools in Tanzania

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Abstract - This study explored challenges facing teachers in developing standard one and two pupils with reading skills in two selected districts in Dodoma region in Tanzania. Two specific objectives guided the study that purposively engaged standard one and two teachers of the four selected public primary schools. Phenomenographic design was used to achieve the study purpose through the semi-structured interview. Qualitative data analysis through coding and category formation, despite the fact that teachers held positive view with the curriculum content for teaching reading skills, a number of challenges were identified. Such challenges are poor infrastructures (clean and safe water, school meals, and inadequate desks); insufficient number of teachers; insufficient teaching and learning materials; regular curriculum change, overcrowded classrooms, and poor family income were identified as key challenges impacting effective teacher's instruction. The study also found teachers using strategies that can hardly help pupils particularly those struggling to read become good readers. The study recommends among many, deployment of teachers with particular focus in teaching lower grades and construction of more classes to reduce pupils being overcrowded in one classroom.

Keywords: reading, teaching reading

INTRODUCTION

It is widely known that children start experiencing reading early at home before they begin formal schooling. Though they start reading early at home by seeing others (parents/siblings) or through interacting with the written materials, learning to read is a complex matter that begins long before a child starts school with oral language being identified as a foundation for such learning [1]. Two theoretical perspectives describe teaching reading: the behavioural or traditional and the integrated or cognitive [2]. The author differentiates the two theories arguing that traditional theorists view

teaching of reading skills as being teacher directed at the same time regarding pupils as passive learners contrary to the integrated approach. The integrated approach emphasizes the children is an active learner, capable of integrating information with existing knowledge and capable of engaging in self-monitoring procedures making the process child-centred. The two theories are important in understanding that learning to read need to be interactive between the pupil and teacher, among pupils and or between the child and the text. In line with the theories, Donoghue [3] identify principles for effective instruction on learning to read. The principles are that reading is a complex act involving numerous factors and that reading involves constructing the meaning of a passage represented by printed symbols; that there is no one correct way to teach reading and that learning to read is a continuous process; that pupils should be taught word recognition skills to allow them to independently unlock the meanings and pronunciations of unfamiliar words while the teacher diagnosing each pupil's reading ability for planning instruction; reading is an integral part of all content areas of instruction as noted between reading and writing; and that the pupils need to see that reading is an enjoyable pursuit.

As pupils begin formal schooling, Carroll [4] lists four factors that develop pupils with grade-level reading abilities: parents who serve as their children's first teachers at child's home; access to high-quality preschool; programmes that help children catch up if they missed out on preschool; and skilled instruction in the first through third grades. The home environment is an important factor in influencing child's acquisition and mastery of reading skills in different ways apart from parents being first teachers. Chansa-Kabali [5] informs that the home environment factors- family possessions (electricity, stove, television, running water, flushable toilet and a car), parental reading attitudes, availability of reading materials, and more

literacy interactions in the home significantly improves pupil's scores in reading.

Other factors are identified by Anney, Mmasa and Ndunguru [6] as poor teachers' skills in teaching reading resulting into about 64% of grade two pupils found with limited reading, writing and inability to do simple numeracy, shortages of teaching and learning resources, and parents' level of education. Just as Anney et al. [6] and Chansa-Kabali [5] noted on the importance of material availability and supportive educators, Mwoma [7] reports similar experiences. The author reports that reading materials in both contexts-home and school as well as parents and teachers' support had significant contribution in promoting children's reading. The other factor found by Mwoma [7] essential in influencing reading ability of pupils is the language used at home and in school. The author reports teachers' experiences that using mother tongue to introduce reading was considered to be one way of enhancing children's reading ability. Teacher training particularly that focus on teaching reading to children was cited by County Education Officers in Kenya as one way of enhancing children's reading ability as trained and knowledgeable teachers do better than their counterparts.

Clark and Poulton [8] and Clark [9] share similar experience on the importance of the materials availability with Clark and Poulton [8] indicating that children who have books of their own enjoy reading more and read more frequently than children who do not have books of their own. In contrast, learning to read just as learning to write is a basic skill that children do not learn equally in the world though they are essential skills to all children [8]. Authors argue that schools through classroom instruction are crucial in ensuring that children develop reading ability. They further highlight that many countries' major problems impacting teaching children reading skills are too little time spent in school and lack of teachers. Berthelon, Kruger and Vienne [10] identify that development of reading skills including vocabulary in general and early skills in particular, depends on the amount of time spent by children and teachers in the classroom. Increased time for instruction found to increase grade two

pupils' reading comprehension skills with location (rural or urban) and type of school (public) or private influencing positive gains in test scores [10].

Given that success of education initiatives depends on the effectiveness of teachers, Corcoran, Shields, and Zucker [11], exploring challenges that teachers teaching grade one and two pupils in public schools face in sampled schools in Kongwa and Bahi districts was appropriate for future creation of education setting that is attractive and friendly to both teachers and pupils. In addition, the study determined strategies teachers use in coping with such challenges for improved teaching and learning in early grades.

METHODS

Research Design

Phenomenography was utilized to explore grade one and two teachers' cognition regarding challenges they face in teaching reading to pupils in public schools. The design was used as it focuses on individuals experiences while positioning their understandings of the phenomena in their lives as an outcome of their interaction with the particular phenomena [12].

Two districts (Kongwa and Bahi) constituting seven districts of the Dodoma region were sampled and its teachers in few selected schools were accessed. The selection of the two districts was based on reality that they are among the 17 districts categorized as disadvantaged districts in Tanzania. Kongwa and Bahi districts are among the least performing districts in Tanzania and were selected as to explore challenges teachers face in teaching reading skills in a way that could have contributed to the poor educational outcomes including relatively low pass rates in the primary school leaving examination [13]. A total of 20 grade one and two teachers were involved in gathering data about the teaching and learning of reading skills in early grades in their respective schools. A range of questions were administered- teachers' experiences in professional development programmes especially those targeted at improving reading skills; challenges teachers' encounter in teaching reading skills; and strategies teachers employ to improve teaching and learning outcomes of their pupils.

Data collection and analysis

Data for this study were collected using interviews that researchers sat with teachers to discuss teaching

and learning matters. As a social interaction, Kitchin and Tate [14], researchers put interviewee at ease, asked questions related to teaching and learning reading in grade one and two and recorded conversations without upsetting the flow of information. The interviews were conducted within the school premises but at the context that was convenient for the teacher to talk.

As the data collection process was complete, data coding was done to establish meaning of data collected. Through coding, various challenges emerged ranging from mostly experienced to least mentioned by teachers. The study therefore establishes that teachers are experiencing different challenges that though some are considered least, yet have significant effects in teacher's day-to-day activities. Data coding predominantly involved categorising the data for making sense of huge amounts of data by reducing the volume of raw information, followed by identifying significant patterns, and finally drawing meaning from data for building a logical chain of evidence [15].

Ethical considerations

Different ethical considerations were observed before the study (securing research permission from the University of Dodoma as well as the permission from the district councils involved in the study) and during the study. One of the key ethical issues considered during the data collection was informed consent that enabled the researcher to meet teachers individually and informed about the purpose of the study for them to share their experiences on the study purpose. Informed consent is soliciting for voluntary participation of the research subjects in the study based on full and open information [15]. Following their participation in this research, names of the participants remained anonymous in report writing and researchers used labels like teacher 1 and so on.

RESULTS

This section presents results for the study conducted in Bahi and Kongwa districts in Dodoma region. The study had two main objectives: challenges teachers face in teaching reading skills among grade one and two pupils; and exploring strategies teachers use to cope and improve learning outcomes of the grade one and two pupils.

The presentation of the study results is preceded by the presentation of the demographic characteristics of the study respondents. Table 1 summarizes teachers' characteristics. The table presents among other the kind of professional development training that the involved

teachers participated. Professional development training attended by teachers was important as training had impacts in improving the teaching and learning conditions. Teachers were asked to provide the kind of professional training undertaken in the past three years which focused on teaching reading skills. The results are indicated on Table 1.

Table 1 Teacher's demographic characteristics

Training attended	Attended		Not Attended	
	F	%	F	%
3Rs	8	53.3	7	46.7
EQUIP-T	12	80	3	21.4
PRE-SERVICE	0	0	15	100

Table 1 indicates that all (100%) the involved teachers had professionally attended pre-service teacher education that qualified them to be employed as teachers. It could further be learnt that about 53.3% of the teachers participated in professional development programmes organized by the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training through the Tanzania Institute of Education-TIE for improvement of the teachers' pedagogical practices on reading, writing and arithmetic for grade one and two. The professional development programmes are well-known in Tanzania as the "KKK" (Kusoma, Kuandika na Kuhesabu) programmes. Meanwhile, a total of 12 (80%) teachers reported to have attended different professional development programmes provided by the EQUIP-Tanzania in their schools or districts.

Table 2: Teachers' challenges in teaching reading skills

Challenge	Responses	
	F	%
Truancy	5	38.1
Poor family income	5	38.1
Overcrowded classrooms	8	66.7
Insufficient teaching and learning materials	9	71.4
Poor parents – school partnership	4	31.7
Insufficient number of teachers	9	71.4
Distance from school	4	31.7
Poor remuneration	1	9.5
Lack of INSET to teachers	1	9.5
Regular curricular changes	6	47.6
Poor infrastructures	9	71.4
Mother tongue effect	3	28.5
Presence of multi- texts	4	31.7

Source: Fieldwork (2017)

Analysis of the data collected from teachers regarding challenges they face in teaching skills among

grade one and two pupils revealed different challenges. Table 2 presents such challenges.

Table 2 illustrates that working conditions-poor infrastructure (71.4%), fewer number of teachers required to work with the enrolled pupils (71.4%), inadequate supply of instructional materials (71.4%) and overcrowded classrooms (66.7%) are the major challenges that teachers in the sampled schools in Bahi and Kongwa faced for them to provide effective classroom instruction. In such conditions, teachers argued that it would be difficult for instructors to achieve the lesson objectives, hence continue having a great number of pupils unable to develop sufficient reading skills. Poor working conditions such as poor supply of clean and safe water, no provision of meals to school pupils and inadequate desks also limited teacher's creativity and end-up demoralized and incapable of putting knowledge and skills gained in their pre-service and professional development programmes in practice for pupils' benefits.

Further, truancy (38.1%), poor family income (38.1%), and longer walking distance from home to school for both pupils and teachers (33.3%) contribute in affecting teachers, school and government initiatives in improving pupil's reading competencies for better reading outcomes and in other school activities. Poor pupil's attendance to school and class in particular, affects progressive learning and gaining continuity of reading skills. During the study, it was noted teachers arguing as Teacher 2 was quoted saying that;

It becomes difficult for the teacher to positively interact with pupils and develop them with reading skills as expected because of having many pupils and teaching all the three subjects alone. That is more seen as you plan lessons, teach and mark all pupils' exercise books. In such situation a teacher gets tired (Female teacher at school A on January 20th, 2017)

Teacher 3 informed that;

Imagine you have 150 pupils in a class you teach and you have less than 20 textbooks for any of the subject. Who would have to such textbooks and others will face difficult in following learning. Therefore, that makes teaching benefiting few as many of the pupils will have no direct contact with the texts. We sometimes tend to write on the board so that all pupils can see and participate in learning, yet our chalkboards are not friendly to make writings

easily seen by all (Male teacher at school B on January 24th, 2017).

Looking at the teachers' concerns on their working environment, it is evident that national and community or parents' expectations of having pupils completing standard one and two able to read have a long way to go. This suggests that the community and the government should work collaboratively to raise structures mainly classrooms and teacher houses to attract both pupils and teachers for better instruction.

Strategies used to address reading challenges

In this objective, the study explored strategies that teachers use to cope with the challenges they face in teaching reading skills to pupils of standard one and two. Before exploring the strategies, they use, researchers explored classroom teacher's views on the relevance of the content they use in developing pupils with reading skills. Interview was conducted with teachers and the analysis reveals that the content is generally relevant as illustrated in table 2.

Table 3: Teachers' Perception on Relevant Content in Developing Pupils' Reading Ability

Content Aspect	F	%
Letter naming	13	86.7
Letter sounds	14	93.3
Identification of initial/ final letter sounds	13	86.7
Syllable Identification	15	100
Word formation	15	100
Separating words	12	80
Word reading	13	86.7
Sentence reading	14	93.3

Source: Fieldwork (2017)

As table 2 illustrates, all teachers participated in the study (100%) held positive view with the content indicated in the curriculum as well as the textbooks that they use for teaching reading skills. Looking at the curriculum content, one could learn that all the teachers were informed of the essential contents for teaching pupils to develop and use the reading skills in reading. During the interview with researchers, they gave several comments regarding the curriculum content.

Teacher 1

Teaching the standard one and two pupils requires among many factors, a curriculum that is well prepared and understood to the teachers for easy implementation. That has been possible as we have been oriented about its implementation and that added to me some pedagogical skills that made me to a greater

extent teach pupils reasonably well than if I could not receive training (Female teacher at school D, January 25th 2017)

Teacher 2;

Teaching children studying standard one and two on letter naming and letter sounds has been enjoying to pupils particularly when using songs relating letters of alphabets and real things/objects found in their natural contents. Singing letters of alphabets made them active in the lesson despite the fact that when tested, pupils demonstrated failure in such areas of the contents (Female Teacher at School C January 23rd, 2017)

Teacher 3;

In teaching reading, the curriculum has stipulated very well procedures and examples identified for teaching standard one and two pupils about the phonological tasks (syllable identification and word formation). The examples used are age appropriate as require teachers to use few words but more pictures as they begin formal instruction at standard one while advancing with increased number words as children demonstrate mastery (Female teacher school A on January 20th, 2017).

In the teacher's views, curriculum content for teaching pupils reading skills is well organized except that learning achievement that pupils demonstrate is dependent on other factors. Taking an example of the statement given by teacher C, teachers should be professionally oriented to learn on factors that affect pupil's to achieve as planned and expected in each lesson. That is seen as the teacher explained indicating that though pupils demonstrate being active during learning, yet score poorly when tested. That implies teachers feel comfortable as they note pupils just singing well and ignore conducting individualized instruction and formative evaluation in class to learn about each pupil learning achievement within the located period.

Researchers worked to determine and establish strategies standard one and two teachers use to address challenges identified in table 2. Classroom teachers were involved through interview to share with researchers on strategies they deployed to better their working conditions for pupils to benefit on their basic right-education. Analysis of data collected revealed that teachers employ strategies that have short-term

solutions. For more details of the instructions teacher's use to address the challenges and improve their working conditions see table 3.

Table 3: Strategies teachers use to address challenges they face in teaching reading skills

Strategies	F	%
Using books of old curricula	06	42.9
Improvise instructional materials	08	57.2
Using variety of teaching and learning strategies	01	7.1
Using remedial sessions	07	50.1
Communicating with parents for truant pupils	02	14.3
Provide instruction in groups of pupils	04	28.6
Involve different stakeholders to address the challenges	02	14.3

Source: Fieldwork (2017)

Regarding the strategies teachers use in addressing the challenges they face in teaching reading skills to pupils, data analysis reveal that teachers improvised instructional materials (57.2%) to facilitate meaningful learning. Materials improvised by teachers include boxes cut into pieces as letter cards. Improvisation was found by researchers as being used by teachers to make the class rich of the prints able to be seen and read by pupils easily. The other strategy is use of remedial teaching sessions (50.1%). Remedial sessions were used for helping mostly those appeared to be behind other pupils so that they are able to develop reading skills they could not manage to develop during normal school calendar as their peers. Teachers made different statements about the strategies they identified and used to address the challenges prevailed in their schools for improved working environment.

Teacher 1 said that;

We sometimes experience shortage of teaching and learning materials in a way that for the whole class you find we have up to four textbooks for using in teaching reading. That makes us fail to distribute the books to all pupils, hence we write on the board what we expected pupils to learn to read and write (Female teacher at school D, January 25th, 2017).

Teacher 4 added that;

Use of remedial classes has been useful in helping pupils we find they hardly learn reasonably equal to others in the class. We used to tell their parents/caregivers about the learning progress of their children and the plan for

remedial classes as we have agreed with the head teacher. Even though the plan does not manage to have all targeted pupils attending sessions, we manage to uplift learning achievement of those attend (Male teacher at school A on January 20th, 2017).

Teacher 6 explained that;

Though we used to be told that the government through the Ministry of Education is developing new books matching with the new curriculum/syllabus, we use textbooks and or supplementary books of the old syllabus so that our pupils do not miss lessons due to the change of the syllabus or curriculum (Teacher at School D on January 25th, 2017).

The strategies like group learning (28.6%), use of different instructional strategies (7.1%) and asking parents to participate in teaching their children at home and involving other stakeholders (14.3%) though worked to improve pupils' reading skills in other areas as per involved teachers' responses, were not reported to be used by the participating teachers. That clearly indicates that teachers lack pedagogical competency in away that pupil's learning outcomes became poor because of the strategies identified in table 4 while perpetuating the existence of challenges they pointed-out in table 2.

Inviting stakeholders would have assisted the schools in supply of instructional materials like textbooks and manila sheets/cards that would facilitate meaningful learning. Though teachers improvised by using locally available materials (boxes) and contributed in cost-cutting for running schools, yet the letter cards could insufficiently save the role of the textbook. Importantly, stakeholders including parents/caregivers when invited and involved in challenges impacting teachers and pupils in teaching and learning contexts would contribute in raising more classes to divide pupils into more manageable number and solve the challenge of overcrowded (66.7%) class identified to be among serious challenges impacting positive teacher-pupil interaction. Partly, one could as well learn that teachers lack collaborative skills that could enable them cooperate with fellow teachers teaching in upper classes of their school in reducing the burden of large or overcrowded classes as it would add the number of teachers teaching lower classes.

It further indicates that head teachers lack pedagogical leadership that enhances good cooperation between parents and teachers so that challenges like

truancy (38.1%), and poor parents'-school partnership (31.7%) would have been solved.

DISCUSSION

Different from the study report by Gelandar, Rawle, Karki, and Ruddle [16] that inadequate instructional materials and poor infrastructures are among the challenges highly impacting teachers in facilitating effective learning. In their report, Gelandar et al. [16] identify large classes, difference in language of instruction and that spoken at home and high level of teachers turnover remained as major constrains in the studied areas. Though mother tongue was not considered as a challenge to pupil's learning and classroom instruction in the two districts involved by this study, Gelandar et al. [16] report that in the EQUIP-T districts where Kongwa and Bahi are among those districts, more than three-quarters of pupils do not speak Kiswahili at home and face difficulty in following classroom instructions easily. Failure to understand and follow instructions is the basis for pupils falling substantially behind their peers in acquiring foundational reading skills. As this study found that teachers faced difficult in teaching reading to pupils because of different factors or challenges, Chuunga [17] revealed similar changes as were experienced in the sampled schools in Bahi and Kongwa. The challenges identified by Chuunga [17] are over enrollment, teacher-pupil ratio and lack of teaching and reading materials.

Teachers' views of the sampled and involved schools in Kongwa and Bahi concur with researchers' Clark and Poulton [8], Clark [9] findings on the importance of availability and adequacy supply of instructional materials. In the involved schools, teachers were worried with the inadequacy of textbooks for reading and using manila sheets in designing various reading materials. Different to the strategies used by teachers in teaching reading skills in Tanzania, Chuunga [17] found teachers in Zambia using appropriate strategies in teaching their pupils reading skills. Such strategies used by teachers in Zambia schools were direct group-based teaching, small groups, question and answer, one-on-one teaching, paired reading, chorus reading, role sharing and sharing/presenting tasks as groups and individuals, and use of the local language as medium of instruction. On one hand, one could learn that teachers had limited time for engaging in observing a pupil while teaching a lesson, and measure and document learning experiences and progress as considered most fundamental aspects of the emergence of literacy

theory [18]. Observing pupils as they learn reading is important as child development experts assert that literacy learning is a complex process that actually show gradual and vary over time [19].

In addition, though teachers reported using remedial class as a strategy for improving pupils reading ability, yet they were not well informed of the remedial class strategies appropriate or remedial teaching and learning. Instead, teachers used similar strategies though they had reduced class-size from the normal they usually teach in school calendar. The well-known strategies for teaching in remedial classes are described by Chikwature and Oyedele [20] to include individualized education programme that is general to learning needs of individual pupil aiming to reinforce the foundation of learning, help pupils to overcome their learning difficulties and develop their potentials. The other strategy though seems to be costful to teachers and schools is the use of the reward scheme as fiancé is major base for rewards. The third strategy that has worked well in remedial classes is the use of peer support programme. Use of the strategy is reported by Chikwature and Oyedele [20] to be motivational aspect as through socializing with their peers and being sharing their ideas with peers especially pupils who excel on their academic work poor readers may become motivated.

Analytically, use of strategies mentioned by teachers in public primary schools in Tanzania could be associated with the current poor state of pupils reading as most of such strategies do not regard learner as the centre of learning. Hence, the teacher dominates learning sessions. While local languages were used in Zambia schools for classroom instruction, it was not identified as the crucial strategy in addressing challenges facing teachers in teaching reading skills in Tanzania instead they mentioned it as among the challenges. Study findings on the use of remedial class, Chuunga [17] reports that teachers in Zambia used the so called Day 5 or the Fifth Day specifically for helping pupils who have reading difficulties.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For the government

It is important that teachers being professionally prepared in both levels of training (pre-and in-service) on using appropriate strategies for teaching pupils on 3Rs. As it is, pupils would continue struggling in reading as even remedial classes are allowed to continue on reasons that teachers do not change strategies by employing appropriate strategies for remedial classes to meet the learner's needs

sufficiently. Deploying teachers on one hand is critical in increasing manpower so that teacher-pupil interaction is improved for close monitoring of pupil's learning progress, teachers have time in developing instructional materials, and teaching and marking pupil's assignments. Increased manpower would reduce the current burden of teachers in planning and implementing all lessons in their respective classes.

In line with increasing number of teachers is the increase in number of classrooms to match with the increase of the enrolled pupils through the fee free education. As classes are increased and teachers deployed by the government, the number of pupils overcrowded in one classroom would be solved.

Thirdly, the study recommends that the government continue organize and provide leadership skills to head teachers so that they could proficiently deliver leadership that is more responsible in improving teachers working conditions and improving learning environment for comfortable school environment. Fourthly, parent engagement in child's learning is of great concern as a good number of pupils were reported being exempting themselves in attending schools for reasons that are not well-known to teachers.

For classroom teachers

Teachers should work individually and cooperatively with other teachers to better their understanding and classroom performance so that they are able to address some of the challenges particularly those within their capacity. Teacher's self-study engagement is necessary for developing professional competencies necessary in improving their own understanding of the theories and principles related to teaching and learning reading to grade one and two pupils. Further, through working with others in groups, it would make them learn about useful strategies for reading instruction such as read aloud, shared reading and guided reading. Secondly, teachers should develop and use partnership skills with parents as well as other stakeholders to improve cooperation with fellow teachers and parents for strong partnership essential in improving pupil's learning and teacher's working environments.

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