CHALLENGES FACED BY RURAL PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS IN TEACHING ENGLISH READING TO INFANT CLASSES IN JOJO WEST CLUSTER SCHOOLS IN NKAYI DISTRICT

Augustine Zano Muranda, Thembinkosi Tshabalala, Alfred Champion Ncube, and Tungu Mufunani Khosa

Zimbabwe Open University, Zimbabwe

ABSTRACT: The aim of the present study was to investigate the challenges faced by rural primary school teachers in the teaching of English reading to infant classes in Jojo West Cluster schools in Nkayi district of Zimbabwe. The population comprised of all the teachers teaching infant classes in the cluster. The sample comprised of 20 respondents purposively selected. The study adopted the descriptive survey design and the questionnaire was used for collecting data. The main findings of the study revealed that the majority of infant teachers were not qualified to teach these classes. The study also revealed that teachers taught English using vernacular words and this confused the children. Children were also not provided with a variety of reading materials and the home background did not assist pupils acquire the language. The study recommends inter alia, that all teacher training colleges in Zimbabwe should introduce the Early Childhood development programme in order to multiply the production of infant teachers. The study also recommends that infants classes should be exposed to a lot of material in the English language to help them build their vocabulary.

KEYWORDS: Challenges, teaching, infant classes, cluster, primary school.

INTRODUCTION

Learning to read a second language is a complicated process which is why so many children struggle to become strong readers. In Zimbabwe, English is taught to all children from primary school to all institutions of higher learning (Transley, 2007). English is one of the three official languages and is the only one out of the three that is a compulsory requirement by most employers including the Government. And yet as Moyo (2005) observes, most children struggle to read in the subject. According to Maunganidze and Latiff (2003) one of the factors that contribute to high failure rate in some Zimbabwean schools is poor reading that most pupils experience due to lack of poor foundation in reading from the infant stage. According to Wolf (2007) primary education is the basic education which aims at preparing children to attain the competence needed to advance further with their education. Central to the success of the teaching-learning process is the level of attainment by children in the area of reading (Harris et.al 2009). And yet as Krashen (2005) argues, unfortunately this has created cause for concern in many societies as the high rate of illiteracy societies as the high rate of illiteracy continues to affect the performance of many pupils. Since reading forms the basis for all other areas of learning, it is necessary to ensure that children of the primary grades attain proficiency in reading (Moyle, 2004). This study sought to explore the challenges faced by rural primary school teachers in teaching English reading to infant classes in order to come up with suggestions to improve the teaching of reading in Zimbabwean rural primary schools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dubey et.al (1988) postulate that reading is a method of getting information from the text and through reading, people learn new ideas, broaden their concepts, refine and clarify some ideas. Without reading skills therefore, learning is hindered. On the other hand, Wolf (2007) states that reading is bringing meaning to and taking meaning from the page of print. According to Wolf (2007), what the child knows before reading determines what he/she knows after reading implying that the background of the child plays a pivotal role in his / her ability to read. Afolayan (2008) suggests that reading is a skill by

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means which we look at written words and understand through them the writer's meaning. It is an activity which involves sight, intelligence, knowledge of the writers language and knowledge of the word made possible by our previous experience of learning to read. Therefore, reading a language one cannot understand is very difficult and meaningless.

There are several factors that contribute to reading failure. As Tasley (2001) argues, teachers have tended to teach reading by empirical trial and error methods rather than basing their methods and teaching on the developing abilities which are involved in the reading process and one outcome of this has been a proliferation of methods and a lack of system in organizing reading programmes. Inadequate teacher training is another cause of poor performance in teaching reading and all student teachers even those preferring to teach in secondary schools should be trained in all aspects of teaching reading (Tasley, 2001).

Grigorenko et.al (2003) posit that, another factor that impedes the acquisition of reading skills is introducing reading when pupils are not ready to read. They advise that reading readiness for instance calls for a certain level of mental development, sufficient eye coordination to permit clear perception ability to attend to a symbol, a fairly large background of experience which allows the child to relate what he/she reads to what he/she has experienced (Grigorenko et.al, 2003). Reading readiness is a state when a child is self-motivated to read and by introducing children to learning situations which they are not ready for, results in frustration and failure (Gordon and Takahashi, 2004).

According to Harris et.al (2009), reading readiness is a state of general development of children that allow them to read without undue difficulty. Reading readiness does not come naturally. The pre-formal learning activities help children in visual discrimination which means to notice shapes and notice details in objects and pictures, and is crucial for the mastery of letters. It also trains visual memory where a child is trained to recall an object even if it is out of sight and activities involved include sorting similar shapes or pictures, matching similar pictures or letters (Harris et.al, 2009). According to Gough and Tunner (1986) pre-formal learning activities help children with auditory discrimination; which is the ability to notice similarities and differences in sound and helps in mastering the sounds of different letters of the alphabet. Activities could include listening to sounds in the classroom or outside. Pupils could also memorise short rhymes. The ability to recall, recite rhymes or retell stories trains the child's auditory memory (Gough and Tunner 1986).

English reading failure could be caused by insufficient language development. As Commeyras et.al (2011) say, for many children to venture into reading, be it in their mother tongue or English, they should be able to speak it. It is therefore unrealistic to expect a child to read words which are not already part of his / her spoken vocabulary. Taylor (2007) concurs and adds that it is essential for children to have a good level of spoken language before they are asked to read in that language. Many scholars argue that the mother tongue plays a pivotal role in the learning of the second language (in this case English) and they add that this might be true in the sense that some languages share similar sounds. When the child has learnt to read in his / her mother tongue, it becomes easy for him / her to learn to read in the second language as he/she would be able to apply the same skills of phonic word attack (Morris, 1966; Krashen, 2005; Carsten and Parkinson, 2002 and Afolayan, 2008).

Another critical skill that children need to acquire through pre-formal learning is what Fidzgerald (1995) terms language development which helps children to understand the use of language with accuracy and help in increasing the children's vocabulary in general expression. This can be achieved through retelling of stories, asking and answering questions related to stories told by the teacher and pupils could also recite rhymes and also interpret pictures (Fidzgerald, 1995). Krashen (2005) adds the left to right orientation skill as another skill that children should do at the pre-formal learning stage which helps them to master the skill that reading starts from the left to the right. Pupils could follow a path with their fingers from the left to the right. They could also follow the movement of a shiny object moved by the teacher from the left to the right.

Moyle (2004) provides the following principles of learning reading. A child should be able to understand the material that he/she is asked to read. This can be achieved by introducing words using actual objects found in the classroom. Pupils could also be asked to collect objects and make drawings so as to contextualize the situation. The teacher should make sure that reading instruction is attractive through use of learning aids that will arouse the child's interest. The teacher should also vary his/her teaching approaches in the teaching of reading from one lesson to another or within the same lesson.

The teacher should also aim at developing the word attack skills to develop independent reading. This can be done by employing the phonic method (Moyle, 2004). Moyle (2004) advises that to confine the child on one reading scheme without the provision of other reading experiences is not helpful in promoting growth and independence in reading and therefore, a variety of reading methods can help foster independence in reading in that one method may be suitable for one child and not necessarily be so with another.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

English is a second language for most children in Zimbabwean schools and their attempts to acquire the proficiency in the language are hampered by many obstacles. Reading in any language is the most fundamental process of acquiring knowledge in that language and thus the need to teach reading properly.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The study sought to investigate how teachers teaching infant classes assist children with reading skills to establish if the methods they were using were benefitting pupils and to suggest ways of improving the teaching of reading in English by teachers in rural primary schools.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study addresses the following sub-questions:

1. Are infant teachers qualified to teach the infant classes?
2. Do infant classes possess adequate textbooks for pupils in English language.
3. Do schools have clear reading policies adhered to by all infant teachers?
4. Is reading time allocated to infants classes adequate?
5. What role do parents play to promote a reading culture in their children?
6. Are all children prepared for formal reading before it is introduced to them?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study's importance stemmed from the fact that it seeks to expose the challenges faced by teachers teaching English language to infants as a second language so that practical suggestions for the mitigation of the challenges are put forward.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study is limited to challenges faced by rural primary school teachers in teaching of English reading to infant classes using the descriptive method which according to Ary and Razaviach (2010), lacks predictive power since the research may discover and describe "what is" and unable to predict "what would be". In view of the small size of the sample and sub-samples used, the findings of the study therefore, will have limited generalisability.

DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study confined itself to the challenges faced by teachers taking infant classes as they guided children in the reading of English as a second language using a sample of 20 respondents made up of 100 percent females. The views from other teachers taking classes outside the infant classes were not solicited for. Heads of schools, teachers-in-charge and deputy heads were also excluded from this study.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed the quantitative paradigm. The quantitative methodology was found useful because it is statistics driven and can provide a lot of information (Bell, 2013). It is also relatively easier to compile the data onto a chart or graph because of the numbers that are made available. As Cohen and Manion (2011) state, another advantage of quantitative research is that the research can be conducted on a large scale and give a lot more information as far as value is concerned. However, one major weakness of the quantitative methodology is that numbers change often (Anderson, 2012). So if research is conducted on a statistical level, then it would have to be conducted much more frequently to help balance out the numbers (Bell, 2013). The use of the survey research design enabled the researchers to gather widespread perceptions of the respondents on the studied phenomenon (Anderson, 2011). The study employed purposive sampling because those people who are unsuitable for the sampling study or who do not fit the bill are eliminated, only the most suitable candidates remain (Kumar, 2008). The researchers used a questionnaire to collect data from the respondents and close-ended questions enabled the researchers to collect pre-determined respondents' opinions regarding the studied phenomenon (Kumar, 2008). The researchers distributed the questionnaires to the selected schools and collected them after two weeks

through the heads of the schools. Data collected from the questionnaires yielded descriptive statistics around the variables understudy. These statistics were computed and inferential implications from them derived and recorded.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study set out to establish the challenges faced by infant teachers as they attempt to teach English reading in the Zimbabwean primary schools. This section is presented in two parts; namely, presentation of data and discussion of the data.

PRESENTATION OF THE DATA

Table 1: Composition of sample by gender (N=20)

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Male	0	0
Female	20	100
Totals	**20**	**100**

Table 1 above shows that all the respondents (100%) were female. The research site is in the comfort of realising that female teachers are more readily accepted than male teachers in the class allocation of Early Childhood Development classes.

Table 2: Composition of sample by professional qualifications (N=20)

Professional Qualifications	Frequency	Percentage
General Diploma in Education	15	75
Diploma in Early Childhood	3	15
General Bachelors degree	0	0
Untrained	2	10
Totals	**20**	**100**

The information above (Table 2) shows that the majority of respondents were holders of the General Diploma in Education qualification. (75%) and 15% of the respondents were holders of the Diploma in Early Childhood Development and 10% were untrained teachers.

Table 3: Composition of respondents by area of specialization (N=20)

Area of Specialisation	Frequency	Percentage
Infants	3	15
Juniors	15	75
Untrained	2	10
Totals	**20**	**100**

The above table reveals that 15% of the respondents were specialist infant teachers. Seventy-five percent (75%) of them were specialist in the juniors section and 10% were untrained.

Table 4: Composition of respondents by years of experience in an infant grade (N=20)

Experience in Years	Frequency	Percentage
0 − 5	16	80
6 − 10	3	15
11 − 15	1	5
16 and above	0	0
Totals	**20**	**100**

Table 4 above shows that 80% of the respondents fell within the 0 − 5 years of experience as infant teachers, 15% fell within the 6 − 10 years of experience group, 5% were within the 11 − 15 years age group, and none had taught the infants for more than 16 years.

Table 5: Responses to the statement: "Indicate the number of children in your class" (N=20)

Category	Frequency	Percentage
31 − 40	2	10
41 − 50	2	10
51 − 60	14	70
61 − 70	2	10
71 and above	0	0
Totals	**20**	**100**

The information on table 5 shows that 10% of the respondents indicated that their classes had between 31 − 40 children, another 10% had between 41 − 50 as well as between 61 − 70 children. 70% of the respondents indicated that their classes had between 51 − 60 children. None of the classes had 71 or more children.

Table 6: Responses to the statement: "Indicate pupil-textbook ratio in your class" (N=20)

Textbook pupil ratio	Frequency	Percentage
1.1	0	0
1.2	0	0
1.3	2	10
1.4	5	25
1.5	6	30
1.6	7	35
Totals	**20**	**100**

Table 6 above shows that 10% of the respondents indicated that the pupil textbook ratio was 1:3, 25% stated that the ratio was 1:4, 30% indicated that it was 1:5 and 35% said that it was 1:7. None stated that it was 1:1 or 1:2 respectively.

Table 7: Responses to the statement: "Indicate how your school handles the following areas" (N=20)

Area	Frequency	Percentage
My school has a reading policy	2	10
Infant teachers use English as a medium of instruction	0	0
Teachers teaching infants keep clear reading records	15	75
The head / D/head/ teacher-in-charge of infants (TIC) monitor infant reading lessons	3	15
Totals	**20**	**100**

As table 7 above shows 75% of the respondents indicated that they kept clear reading records, 15% stated that the head, deputy head and teacher in charge of infants monitored infant reading lessons. Ten percent (10%) stated that their school had a reading policy and none stated that infant teachers used English as a medium of instruction.

Table 8: Responses to the statement: "Infant teachers at my school conduct pre-formal activities" (N=20)

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	15	75
No	5	25
Totals	**20**	**100**

Table 8 shows that 75% of the respondents indicated that they conducted pre-formal activities while 25% did not.

Table 9: Responses to the statement: "Time allocated for teaching English reading is adequate" (N=20)

Responses Category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	0	0
No	20	100
Totals	**20**	**100**

The information on table 9 above shows that all the respondents indicated that time allocated for teaching of English reading was not adequate.

DISCUSSION

The information from the study shows that all the infant teachers used as respondents were female. As Ndlovu (2013) states, the reasons for deploying female teachers in the infant department could be that female teachers are generally motherly and the young children feel more comfortable in the hands of females as they resemble their own mothers. An infant class with a female teacher is not different from the pupils' own home, hence this would make pupils relax and feel at home. On the other hand, a class with a male teacher would be more threatening since in most rural homes, males or fathers are known for their aggressive and disciplinary role (Ndlovu, 2013).

Data also reveal that the majority of the respondents did not hold professional qualifications relevant to the teaching of infant classes. They were holders of the Diploma in Education to teach mainly the junior classes in the primary school. In some classes, schools deployed teachers who had no professional qualification at all, due to shortage of qualified teachers. Moyo (2005) also found that the majority of Grade One teachers had low professional qualifications and cited teacher incompetence as a contributory factor to reading failure in English language in primary schools. In addition to being under qualified, the majority of the infant teachers were also inexperienced to teach the infant classes.

Information from the study shows that most of the infant classes were oversubscribed in terms of teacher-pupil ratio. Most teachers were working with over fifty (50) children per class which is way above the official teacher-pupil ratio in Zimbabwean primary schools of 1:40. The implications of this situation are that because of the high numbers of children, teachers are not able to provide them the intensive reading guidance that would enable them to master the skill of reading in the English language. Proper teaching of reading requires that the teacher works with each individual child for long periods of time and these large classes would not permit the teachers to provide that guidance.

Data indicates that generally, most classes have a fair quantity of textbooks. Textbooks constitute one of the most critical variables in the teaching of reading. The textbook can help children read alone or in groups without the teacher. Most textbooks as Moyo (2005) posit, provide organised units of work and balanced and chronological presentation of information and good textbooks are excellent teaching aids. They are a critical resource for both teachers and children.

Results from the study also reveal that most schools understudy did not have reading policies. Infant teachers were not using English as a medium of instruction. The majority of teachers were keeping clear reading records and school administrators were to a lesser extent monitoring the reading of infant classes. As Ndlovu (2013) advises, school reading policies are designed by staff so as to have a systematic method of teaching reading and it is important that the staff gets together to come up with a reading method that is acceptable and helpful to all in the school.

Data from the study also reveal that the majority of the teachers adhered to the official requirement of teaching pre-formal activities. Some of them however, admitted that they were not conducting the pre-formal activities. If pre-learning is properly done it helps a great deal in promoting reading readiness among the children. As Moyle (2004) postulates, reading readiness is another factor that impinges on the acquisition of reading skills like hand and eye co-ordination, visual memory, visual discrimination, auditory memory and auditory discrimination. Children who have not mastered reading readiness skills may have difficulty in reading.

The study revealed that all the teachers concurred that time allocated to teaching of English reading in their timetables was not adequate. Reading is a delicate skill that requires a lot of time and patience from the teacher to help all children. Teachers need adequate time so that they may use all the methods of teaching reading which include the alphabetical method, the phonic method, linking together approach among others. But as a result of shortage of time, most teachers confine the child to one reading scheme which is not helpful in promoting growth of independence in reading (Moyo, 2005).

CONCLUSIONS

Given the background of the above findings, the researchers make the following conclusions:

- Most schools deploy female teachers to teach the infant classes.
- The majority of teachers teaching the infant classes did not possess the requisite professional qualifications relevant for the infants.
- There are large classes in the infant classes which negate quality teaching and learning.
- Most classes have relatively fair quantities of textbooks for use by pupils.
- Most schools did not have a reading policy to guide and promote a reading culture.
- Most teachers adhere to the official requirement of teaching pre-formal learning. However, being aware of the official position and actually implementing it are two different processes.
- Time allocated to teaching and learning of reading in the English language is very inadequate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the findings of this study, the researchers would like to make some recommendations:

- The Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education should extend the Early Childhood development programme to all teacher training colleges so as to supply adequate qualified teachers to teach infant classes.
- The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should review its language policy in order to establish whether using the vernacular as a medium of instruction in the first three years of schooling has positive or negative effects on the child's ability to learn English reading.
- Heads of schools should deploy qualified teachers only to teach infant classes since children in these classes require special handling which most untrained teachers have no capacity to offer.
- The schools should adhere to the official teacher-pupil ratio of 1:40, which is also rather unmanageable. The large classes make it difficult for teachers to effectively guide the pupils during the reading sessions.
- All teachers teaching infant classes should be given the opportunity to attend in-service sessions to up-date them on requirements in this area.

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AUTHORS' BIO-DATA

1. **Muranda Augustine Zano (Mr):** He is a Harare Regional Programme Co-ordinator in the Department of Teacher Development in the Faculty of Arts and Education at the Zimbabwe Open University. He has published six papers in peer reviewed journals. He can be contacted by E-mail (murandaa@gmail.com)

2. **Thembinkosi Tshabalala (Dr):** He is a Senior Lecturer and National Programme Leader for the Master of Education in Educational Management in the Faculty of Arts and Education at the Zimbabwe Open University. He is a PhD holder in Educational Management. He has published more than 30 papers in peer reviewed journals. He can be contacted by E-mail (tshabalalathembinkosi@yahoo.com).

3. **Alfred Champion Ncube (Dr):** He is an Acting Pro-Vice Chancellor-Academic at the Zimbabwe Open University. He is also the substantive Dean for the Faculty of Applied Social Sciences. He holds PhD studies in Educational Management. He has published more than 20 papers in peer reviewed journals. He can be contacted by E-mail (ncubeac@gmail.com).

4. **Tungu Mufunani Khosa (Dr):** He is a Senior Lecturer and National Programme Leader for the Bachewlor of Education in Educational Foundations in the Faculty of Arts and Education at the Zimbabwe Open University. He is a PhD holder in Educational Management in the area of Monitoring and Evaluation. He has published more than 5 papers in peer reviewed journals. He can be contacted by E-mail (tungukhosa@gmail.com).