



Challenges Faced by Teachers When Teaching English in Public Primary Schools in Kenya

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I discuss the challenges faced by English as second language (ESL) teachers in real classroom situation in East Africa despite their possible adequate training and innovativeness. I am going to talk about the experience in a Kenyan primary school where I teach because most of these challenges are contextual. Evidence from literature validates the notion that the teacher is the most critical participant in an educational reform, particularly in one that touches on what goes on in the classrooms (Mundy, 2008). However, their training and innovative skills is a necessary but not sufficient condition for effective learning. There are other prevailing conditions which pose a challenge to the teacher hence impeding learning.

Teachers in my context face numerous challenges in and out of the classroom. Core among them is the limited classroom language opportunity for the learners to practice the language. In upper primary, the learners' only opportunity to use English language is limited to the daily 35-min English lesson (KIE, 2002). Further, these learners are not given ample opportunities to practice the English language in the classroom when learning other subjects because of switching from one language to the other. Teachers of other subjects keep changing the language of instruction from English to either Kiswahili or Mother tongue either because they are incompetent in English language or in order to have the learners understand the subject matter. This situation results in minimal exposure to the language (Abdi and Hardman, 2007). Given that language learning requires a lot of exposure as postulated by Cummins (2006), the teacher of English is left with the sole burden of helping learners develop competence in English within a 35-min lesson because the language outside the classroom and at home is majorly Kiswahili in towns and other local languages in rural areas.

In lower primary, there is a mismatch between language policy and the actual practice in my context. Ideally, mother tongue ought to be used to reinforce instruction as recommended by the policy (Ministry of Education, 2006). However, the reality is that there is continued use of English which is an unfamiliar language as a medium of instruction. This creates anxiety and stalls effective classroom participation (Kodero et al., 2011). These observations corroborate those of Ngwaru (2010) in a study done in Zimbabwe which pointed out that using an unfamiliar language as a medium of instruction is a major impediment to learning. This is because learners are not afforded the chance to learn from their own familiar home language with a curriculum and pedagogy that recognizes their cultural setting. For instance, there are some comprehension passages which use illustrations that learners cannot relate to. A case in point is the comprehension passage in the class three English text books which has used the English expressions, "as white as snow." This expression is difficult for learners to relate to since there is no experience of snow in the Kenyan context. Therefore, the use of such English expression is a typical disregard of learners' sociocultural experience which will more often than not inhibit learning.

The learners' negative attitude toward English poses a great barrier for effective teaching. This negative attitude emanates from the fact that learners have limited competence in the language

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therefore preventing them from actively participating in classroom activities (Usó Juan, 2006). Given that English is either a second or third language to some learners, most of them have difficulties in comprehending its structures. A more recent research conducted by Tella et al. (2010) reveals that English lessons have minimal learner participation because learners do not have the necessary competence which was not developed during their formative years. This minimal learner participation can be linked to the learners' negative attitude toward the subject which eventually leads to significant levels of underperformance in the English language. Therefore, the primary school teacher in my context struggles to help learners achieve the expected proficiency. It is only when this attitude is changed that substantial learning will take place.

Many researchers acknowledge the fact that the English primary curriculum in my context is overloaded making it a major hurdle for effective classroom practice (Gathumbi, 2013; Kanga'hi and Indoshi, 2012). Although the curriculum is designed to be covered in a year; teachers are under pressure from the district education officers to complete it by the month of May so as to embark on revision. This implies that the learners are basically out of luck because teachers have to use a fast pace to meet the predetermined curricular schedules which eventually impede effective classroom practices.

The introduction of free primary education witnessed an influx of learners in the primary schools thus increasing the class size (Muchiri, 2009). The challenges of handling large classes compounded by the acute shortage of teachers puts a strain on the teachers' ability to provide quality language work to the learners because the teacher-learner ratio is not proportional. Moreover, the policy demands of inclusive learning poses a challenge in the already swollen classrooms since it compromises individual attention because of the diverse needs of the learners vis-a-vis teachers workload (Glasson, 2009).

There is limited access to resources attributed to the large enrollments, key among them are textbooks. Muthwii and Kioko (2004) acknowledge the fact that the pupil/textbook ratio is a significant measure of effective teaching because pupils heavily rely on text books. Therefore, in a constrained textbook environment, it is difficult for a teacher to implement effective practices. Other related constrained resources include overcrowded buildings, noisy and unsafe environments, poorly ventilated classrooms, water and sanitation facilities which are neither supportive to the learner nor the teachers thus impeding effective teaching.

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Drawing from a more recent study by Ngwaru and Opoku-Amankwa (2010), it is arguable that learners who are socio-economically disadvantaged face significant consequences in learning. This include absenteeism from school because of lack of school necessities, taking care of the sibling as parents look for food and even doing petty jobs to supplement on the family income. Adding to this is the minimal parental involvement in children's learning. Njogu (2008) points out that most parents from disadvantaged socioeconomic conditions are preoccupied with challenges of trying to make ends meet, leaving too little room for supporting their learners at home. Based on these circumstances, effective teaching of learners from such context can be quite challenging to the teachers.

Finally, in my context, there is a manifestation of the underlying negative and dominant coercive relations of power. Both teachers and parents perceive all the power to be vested in the school (Ngwaru, 2010). For instance, in the classroom setting, power is expressed in the sitting arrangement where all learners sit facing the teacher who stands at the front, teacher's facial expressions, voice pitch, and teachers' selective attention to some learners leaving out others impedes effective learning. Moreover, it is worth noting that pupils are highly sensitive to their image therefore as Glasson (2009) notes, verbal criticism of learners decreases their self-esteem and confidence level making them feel negative about themselves because they lose the self confidence to try out new things. Additionally, selective teacher attention creates feelings of discrimination and as a result of all these prevailing conditions in the class, learners find school not an interesting place to be hence explaining reasons why some children leave home but do not reach school. Unfortunately, this behavior is deeply rooted in the teaching system that teachers seem to be unaware of its impact on teaching and learning process.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to illustrate the challenges faced by ESL teachers in my primary school which could be generalized to other East African contexts with similar settings where English is taught as a second or third language.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author MA is the sole contributor to this work.

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