

Examining the Influence of Familiar Word Recognition on Performance of English Reading in Standard One: A Case of Keiyo Sub- County, Kenya

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Abstract

A word is familiar to a learner when he or she is able to decode it (sound out the word). Familiar word recognition is a reading readiness skill that marks the final alphabetic phase. Reading acquisition is successful when a learner is able to automatically recognize many words. This study was guided by two specific objectives: to examine the ability of a learner to recognize familiar words in Standard One and to establish the influence of familiar word recognition on the performance of English Reading in Standard One. Questionnaires and an Early Grade Reading Assessment tool 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) Standard One pupils from sampled schools were assessed of whom two were selected using simple random sampling from each of the classes. To analyze results, descriptive statistics were used. The level of significance was computed at $\alpha=0.05$. The regression results indicated a significant relationship between learners' ability to recognize a familiar word and English reading performance with $p = 0.000$. Based on the findings, we recommend that Pre-school and primary school teachers should label objects in the classroom to increase the number of words made familiar to the learners. In addition, Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) should develop computer programs that provide Pre- school with correct letter sound models.

Key words: Preschool, Familiar Word Recognition, Reading Performance

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INTRODUCTION

Reading acquisition is a gradual process that leads young learners to interpret print language. It, therefore, requires that reading readiness skills are emphasized in the early years to prepare learners in making grapho-phonemic connections. English is an alphabetic based language and is represented by graphemes (letters) which bear sound units (phonemes). Teaching grapho-phonemic connections will help learners in formation of words as they will be able to blend phonemes and segment words without

any challenges. Familiar word recognition enables young learners to read a sentence with ease. Recognition of words will not occur before a learner can identify a letter sound, letter name, and letter shape progressively. Familiar word recognition becomes the final alphabetic phase. This is a reading readiness skill which should not be underestimated at the onset of pre-school.

Bradley and Bryant (1983) identified both letter naming and ability to recognize one's own names as strong predictors of reading readiness, accounting for 31% and 45% respectively, of the variance found. Researchers have found out that recognition of a child's own name and letter naming are predictors of later reading. However, they have not pointed out that children should not be asked to write their own name even before the alphabetic phases are completely introduced at Pre-school. Hence, reading difficulties have always occurred as teachers assume that a child must know the spelling of their own name since it is the most familiar word. Successful acquisition of reading should involve the gradual introduction of the alphabetic phases whose final phase is familiar word recognition. Children should exhibit reading readiness at the onset of Standard One. Thus, this study examined the ability of a learner to recognize familiar words in Standard One and established the influence of familiar word recognition on the performance of English Reading in Standard One in Keiyo Sub-County, Kenya.

a) Learners' ability to recognize familiar words

Kuiper and Scott (1996) explain that early reader's access spelling sound, meaning, and context of a familiar word automatically. If a word is known to the reader, its meaning is accessed automatically in the visual Word Form Area of the human brain. Initially what occurs in the visual Word Form Area is characterized by slow and effortful letter-to-sound processing. Gradually as the responsiveness grows from back to the front of Word Form Area, both the speed of the system's responses and complexity of spelling patterns that gain a direct connection to the language centers increase as one matures (Sandak,

Mencil, Frost and Pugh, 2004). As children interact with the print rich environment, they build up a network of connections, letter sequences, letter patterns and associations between more meaningful readings (Adams, 1990). Word recognition is a gradual process that entails grapheme phoneme correspondences which leads to decoding and encoding a sight word while reading.

Children progress through developmental stages in word reading and word analysis ability in early years. The acquisition of word recognition skills is gradual. In the full alphabetic phase, children use mainly grapheme phoneme connections correspondences to identify words. Sight word reading refers to what is already stored in memory. Words become sight words once they have been read several times. Connections are created that link the written word with the sound and meaning. When sight words are already known, readers can recognize their pronunciations and meanings automatically without much effort at sounding out letters (Ehri, 1984). Teachers at preschool should help build up a vocabulary of children by teaching a word repeatedly and pairing with graphics to reinforce meaning. A word that is seen most often is easily recognized on sight.

The process of automatically and accurately recognizing words, suggests that children can decode words and understand what they are reading. This may be promoted by shared read- aloud and repeated readings by the teacher as a model. Involvement in interesting activities involving letters such as the formation of words using cards influence children's motivation to work towards learning to read and write (Hart & Risley, 1995).

Readers learn to process spellings of words as phonemic maps that lay out elements of their pronunciations visually. Beginners become skilled at computing these mapping relations spontaneously when they read new words. Grapheme phoneme connections provide a powerful mnemonic system and bonding of letters in written words into

pronunciations in memory along with meanings. Learners require much more practice to achieve a normal level of sight word learning. A study by Ehri and Saltmarsh (1995) showed that exposure to words enables early graders to retain information about spellings of specific words in memory and this memory persisted. Since grapheme phoneme connections provide a powerful mnemonic system, ECD educators should ensure that the alphabet principle is given due attention in the curriculum to prepare learners in word processing.

b) Influence of familiar word recognition on the performance of English reading in Standard One

Brown (1990) emphasized the importance of familiar word recognition in the reading process by stating that, a learner may have acquired adequate word decoding skills while still performing poorly in reading comprehension ability. Excellent reading comprehension will not be achieved if a learner is lacking word recognition skills. There are three elements involved in written language: script, sound, and meaning. In English, which is an alphabetic language, the written symbols primarily represent sounds, and it is through their representation of sounds that configurations of letters come to refer to meanings (Bentin & Leshem, 1993). Phonological coding is a natural cue for word recognition in the reading process and it can be found in most reading models, whether as an information processing procedure, as a componential unit, or as a processing unit connected to other units (Adams, 1990). Manipulating phonemes in the classroom and allowing children to form words will help as a word recognition strategy. Asking a child to write his or her name before mastery of grapho-phonemic connections will cause reading difficulties. Therefore, the Pre-school curriculum should ensure the gradual introduction of the alphabetic phases.

Brown (1990) provided abundant evidence to support the understanding that children who are severely impaired in recognizing familiar words in the elementary grades will

continue to be impaired in English reading throughout their educational career if they do not receive appropriate remediation. However, there is also evidence to show that the majority of the pupils who encounter early reading difficulties can be brought up to grade level if they are provided with early, individualized, and intensive intervention.

There is evidence to support that interventions given in a small group format can substantially reduce the number of pupils who experience long term reading problems (Bentin & Leshem, 1993). Exposure to reading materials like picture books will provide opportunities for teachers to help children to learn sight words. According to Uwezo Kenya Report (2011), one out of five children in standard four cannot read a simple standard two paragraph. This was found out to have affected mostly the semi-arid areas in Kenya. Keiyo Sub County being a semi-arid area 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, this study sought to establish the influence of familiar word recognition on the reading process in Standard One in Keiyo Sub County, Elgeyo Marakwet County. Instruction in Pre-school should ensure adequate preparation on reading readiness skills beginning with identification of letter sounds, letter shape, and letter name. This will be an underpinning to word processing enabling learners to read familiar words and decode any written work within their level.

RESEARCH APPROACH

The study area was Keiyo Sub County, Elgeyo Marakwet County. The study selected 26 schools from Tambach and Kamariny Divisions of Keiyo Sub County using stratified sampling procedure. Simple random sampling technique was used to select 78 ECD and Standard One teachers. Fifty two (52) pupils of Standard One were selected (26 boys and 26 girls) using simple random sampling. The study adopted a mixed methods approach so as to gain a comprehensive understanding of the influence of familiar word

recognition on the performance of English reading. A Questionnaire and the Early Grade Reading Assessment Tool were used to collect both qualitative and quantitative data.

The Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) tool is used to measure learners' progress towards learning to read. It is a test administered orally to one learner at a time. It takes about fifteen minutes to administer and it examines a learner's ability to perform basic pre-reading and reading skills (Research Triangle Institute, 2009). The sub-tasks tested the learner's ability to recognize familiar words. Each component assessed was either correct or incorrect according to the pupil's responses. Pupils were assessed after seeking informed consent from parents and the specific primary schools. Standard One and ECD teachers responded to statements on a Likert scale to obtain quantitative information using a questionnaire which had open ended questions for qualitative information.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

To analyze results, descriptive and inferential research modes were applied. A mixed method approach was chosen to ensure a comprehensive understanding of word recognition. In the qualitative technique, the researcher used open ended questions to obtain teachers' opinion on important aspects pertaining to the concept. In quantitative techniques, the researcher used descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, and means to analyze and summarize the data while in inferential statistics, the Multiple Regression analysis techniques were used to determine the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable. The collected data was analyzed and presented in tables showing frequencies and percentages.

a) Learners' ability to recognize a familiar word

Pupils were tested 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 a familiar word in relation to the performance of English reading in Standard One. The findings were as shown in Table 1.

As shown below, 35 (67.31%) of pupils were able to read their first names whereas 17 (32.69%) were unable to read their first names. Notably, 21 (40.38%) were able to read the second names whereas 31 (59.62%) were not able to read their second names. This finding was contrary to teachers' opinion that learners transiting to class one had a high ability to recognize their names. It was established that pupils memorize their names instead of mastering the letters that make up their names.

Table 1: Familiar Word Recognition

Familiar Word	Correct		Incorrect	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
First name	35	67.31	17	32.69
Second name	21	40.38	31	59.62
Man	41	78.85	11	21.15
Pan	36	69.23	16	30.77
Clip	19	36.54	33	63.46

It was established that pupils memorize their names instead of mastering the letters that make up their names. It was evident when a learner followed with a finger reading two names on the first name. On finding out if there are learners who memorize words instead of understanding letters making up the words, the majority of respondent teachers agreed that learners memorize words instead of mastering the sounds making up the word. They suggested mastery of letter sounds like a remedy to the challenge. Repetition of sound models was also cited as an activity to aid learners to read with letter sound

rather than memorizing words. However, there were teachers who indicated they had not witnessed the memorization of words.

b) Influence of familiar word recognition on the performance of English reading in Standard One.

This paper also sought teachers' opinions on familiar word recognition in Standard One. As shown in Table 2, it was established that 81.6 % of teachers agreed that learners in their class have a high ability to recognize simple words in English like 'cat' and 'dog'. Another 78% of teachers agreed that learners transiting to class one had a high ability to recognizing their names while 77.2% of teachers agreed that learners are able to remember the meaning of familiar words upon looking at the spelling. Further 76.4% of teachers agreed that a learner in their class has a high ability to identify letters that make up his or her name.

Table 2: Teachers' opinions on Familiar word recognition

Statement		SD	D	UD	A	SA	Total	Mean
1. Learners transiting to class one have a high ability to recognize their names	F	5	6	1	42	24	78	3.94
	%	6.4	7.7	1.3	53.8	30.8	100	78.8
2. Learners in my class have a high ability to recognize simple words in English like "cat" and "dog".	F	2	9	1	33	33	78	4.10
	%	2.6	11.5	1.3	42.3	42.3	100	82.0
3. Learners in my class are motivated by recognizing simple words from flashcards	F	2	4	4	46	23	78	4.08
	%	2.6	5.1	3.8	59.0	29.5	100	81.6
4. Learners are able to remember the meaning of familiar words upon looking at the spelling	F	3	11	0	44	20	78	3.86
	%	3.8	14.1	0	56.4	25.6	100	77.2
5. A learner in my class has a high ability to identify letters that make up his or her name	F	3	10	0	50	15	78	3.82
	%	3.8	12.8	0	64.1	19.2	100	76.4

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

Teachers agreed that a learner joining Standard One had high ability to read a picture story having simple words and also had a high ability to read and answer a written test without the help of the teacher.

Majority of the teacher respondents emphasized that learners in their classes had a high ability to recognizing simple words in English like 'cat' and 'dog' and teachers suggested use of 'look and say' and demonstration methods to help learners internalize the meaning of words. This is in agreement with Ehri (1984) who asserts that if a word is known to the reader; its meaning is accessed automatically in the Visual Word Form Area which is characterized by slow and effortful letter-to-sound processing. In this study, children were presented with both of their own names on a card and asked to read; a pupil pointed on the first name while already saying the second name. They failed to recognize their

names as they had memorized instead of mastering the sounds of letters making up their names. This finding is in agreement with Clay, (2001) who points out that learning to recognize the letters in their names and to write their names provide children with a personal connection to writing. Within everyday routines, children are frequently exposed to their written names, providing them with multiple learning opportunities to connect with their names. Having children write and read their names is an important step towards literacy.

c) English Reading Performance Indicators

Responses from teachers with respect to the English reading performance in Standard one were rated using a 5 point Likert scale. Particularly, the teachers were asked to respond to a series of statements about the performance of English reading. These responses were then analyzed in terms of the extent to which they agreed with them, and so tapping into the cognitive and affective components of their knowledge on English reading performance.

Findings indicated that majority of teachers, 89% agreed that learners had high ability to answer oral questions compared to written questions while 87.2% reiterated that a learner is promoted to Standard One with the ability to read his or her name. Further, 86.4% of teachers agreed that learners transiting to Standard One had high ability to read regularly spelt words whereas 83% of teachers agreed that a learner joining Standard one had high ability to read a picture story having simple words.

This finding concurred with Clay, (2001) who found children's skills in naming letters at five years was linked with their reading skills at age seven years. Pupils' ability to read familiar words is interwoven with their ability to write letters and words (Chard and Dickson, 1999). This is because grapheme phoneme associations lead to phoneme blending and therefore proper pronunciation of words.

d) Multiple Regression Results for English Reading Readiness Skills and Performance of English Reading.

The study adopted the regression model to evaluate how each of the independent variables; learners' ability to recognize letters, learners' ability to correspond letters with their correct sound, learners' ability to recognize a familiar word and learners' ability to read a text in left right, top bottom progression relate to the dependent variable (performance of English Reading in Standard one). The results are illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3: English Reading Readiness Skills and Performance of English Reading (Regression Model)

Model Summary					
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin Watson
1	.620 ^a	0.884	0.361	0.51393	0.715
a. Predictors: (Constant), Recognition of letters, Corresponding letters with their sound, Recognition of familiar words and Reading text in correct progression					

Source: (Data analysis, 2016)

The correlation statistics ($R=0.620$) indicates that there exists a correlation between Reading Readiness skills and English reading. About 88% of the data could be accounted for in the regression model ($R^2 = 0.884$). The Durbin Watson test indicated a value of 0.715 to indicate that there was a positive autocorrelation.

Table 4: English Reading Readiness Skills and Performance of English Reading (Correlation coefficients)

Coefficients					
Model	UnStandardized		Standardized	T	Sig.
	Coefficients		Coefficients		
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	.822	.543		1.513	.133
Learners' ability to recognize letters	.059	.078	.061	.754	.453
Learners' ability to correspond letters With their correct sound	.391	.086	.403	4.536	.000
Learners' ability to recognize a familiar Word and learners	.360	.095	.335	3.781	.000
Learners' ability to read a text in left Right, top bottom progression	.082	.081	.077	1.005	.317

Source: (Data Analysis, 2016)

e) Hypothesis Testing using Multiple Regression Model

From the regression model computed in Table 4 above, the research hypothesis was tested using the significance level of the coefficients; the research tested the hypothesis with an aim of establishing whether there was any influence of familiar word recognition on the performance of English reading in Standard one.

The research results rejected the null hypothesis which stated that; there exists no significant relationship between the learner's ability to recognize a familiar word and performance of English reading in Standard One. The regression results indicated a significant relationship between learners ability to recognize a familiar word and English reading performance with $p = 0.000$. This was interpreted to mean that being able to read a familiar word such as one's own name indicates emerging knowledge of the recognition of sight words. The finding is in tandem with Watson (2001) who argues that familiar

word recognition is the foundation of the reading process and that name writing with preschoolers showed how the written name mirrors a child's literacy acquisition.

The present study argues that if children cannot recognize a word by the letters making it up, they may with difficulty memorize it but they will not have a real understanding of what they are learning based on the vocabulary they acquire. Therefore, the simplest way of noticing familiar word reading is by presenting the child's own name to see if they know the letters making up the name. The blending of phoneme and word segmentation will also work best in reinforcing word recognition. This will enable learners to transit to Standard One with reading ability.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings, the following conclusions were made;

1. It was established from the assessment of learners in Standard One that some pupils memorize their names instead of learning the letters making up their names hence the ability to recognize words at this level was still a challenge.
2. There exists a significant relationship between word recognition and performance of English Reading; therefore, words should be made familiar to learners in early years. It is important to help learners to associate sounds of letters to those forming a word.
3. Familiar word recognition is an important reading readiness skill which marks full Alphabetic - phase.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. This study proposes to the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) through the Ministry of Education that, pupils should be introduced to letter sounds at the onset of Pre School since the sounds offer cues to recognizing letters making up a word. As they progress, they learn the letter names then letter shapes.

2. Teachers of Pre-school and primary should label objects in the classroom to increase the number of words made familiar to the learners
3. Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development should provide computer programs that allow learners to get correct sound models.

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