



The Use of Mother Language Instruction in Enhancing Reading Skills to Public Pre-Primary Children in Rural Tanzania

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Abstract

Reading skills are a significant schooling issue in Tanzania and other developing nations. Tanzanian rural public primary school pupils to which pre-primary classes are attached have poor reading literacy. The present study investigated the use of the mother language to enhance reading skills in pre-primary children and primary teachers in rural areas. Specifically, the study examined public primary teacher perceptions of using mother language instructions to teach pre-primary classes. The study also assessed pre-primary teachers' perceptions of using the mother language in enhancing reading skills. Interdependence and sociocultural theories (Cummins, 1979; Vygotsky, 1978) guided the study. The study adopted a quantitative approach with a descriptive design. The study involved 226 out of 550 primary teachers who attended the December 2023 face-to-face Diploma in Primary Teacher Education at The Open University of Tanzania from five centres. In Tanzania, the primary teachers are the ones who teach pre-primary classes, and the information was collected using a structured questionnaire with four Likert scale intervals. Data analysis was done using SPSS version 23. Mean and standard deviation were computed. The findings revealed that primary teachers disagree with using the mother language when teaching pre-primary classes. However, the findings showed that most teachers felt that the mother language would easily improve pre-primary children's reading ability. In conclusion, Mother language is essential in enhancing reading skills in pre-primary classes. The study recommends the establishment and implementation of a language policy that would mandate the use of both the mother tongue and Kiswahili in the instruction of pre-primary classes.

Keywords: Public Pre-primary Classes, Pre-primary classes, Language, Mother Language, Reading Skills

Introduction

Reading is a crucial early skill that prepares children for lifelong learning and life success (McBride, 2019). Low acquisition of reading skills is a global concern (Asumang & Susuana, 2020; Relyea et al., 2023). Reading difficulties among pupils remain a persistent global challenge, in which more than 617 million children in the world are not achieving minimum proficiency levels in reading (United Nations Education Scientific

Organization, Institute for Statistics, 2017). Across 15 countries in Latin America, 60% of grade three pupils were at level 2 in reading (UNESCO, 2017). Furthermore, it was found that only 12% of students in the second grade attained the standard for oral reading fluency in Kiswahili, which is 50 accurate words per minute (RTI International, 2023). More precisely, almost 39% could not read letters, 37.9% could not read words, 42.3% could not read a sentence, and 59.8% could not read or do comprehension tasks.

Africa, including Tanzania, is the only continent where children begin school in a foreign language that instructors may not be proficient in (Ouane and Glanz, 2010). Language policy changes in many African countries provide challenges to raising literacy rates. According to USAID (2020), many policies in Sub-Saharan African Countries have recently shifted toward adopting the Language of Instruction spoken at home (LOI). Language of instruction refers to the language used for teaching the basic curriculum of the educational system (Ball, 2010)). Using familiar languages promotes inclusivity in education and protects cultural values by allowing children to utilise their native language (Lyytinen et al. 2019). The report by the World Bank (2021) demonstrates that Children across Low and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs) are learning in multilingual contexts. However, Language of Instruction (LoI) contributes to pupils' success or failure in academics (Patrick, 2020), language of instruction and home-school disconnection (John, 2023). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) underscored the significance of language instruction in the provision of high-quality and equitable education. Majority of children are not provided with education in their native language, which has a detrimental effect on their learning (Gasper, 2023). Countries like Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam are among the Southeast Asian countries that have integrated maternal tongues into their educational systems (Lang-ay & Sannadal, 2021). In regards to this information, it is possible to teach pupils using their mother tongue language in other countries regardless of the differences in context. Instruction in the pupils' native language fosters a greater sense of engagement and connection with the material (Gasper, 2023).

In Tanzania, numerous interventions have been done to overcome the reading problem in children. The interventions include the Education Quality Improvement Programme in Tanzania (EQUIP-T) (2013-2016), Literacy and Numeracy Education Support (LANES) (2015+) and EGRA (USAID, 2013; 2014). Others are the KIUFUNZA intervention, Research Triangle International (RTI, 2016), Let's Read Together (Tusome Pamoja) and Tanzania 21st Century Basic Education Programme (TZ21). More often than not, Ndijuye & Rao (2019) and SACMEQ (2017) demonstrate that a significant number of Tanzanian children continue to experience difficulties with reading, which impedes their academic advancement and prospects. The reading problem issue continues to persist in spite of the strategies. For example, the national assessments of reading skills in 2019 and 2021 demonstrated that urban schools outperformed rural schools in reading by 6.14% and 11.01%, respectively (NECTA 2020, 2022). This finding is corroborated by Ndijuye and

Beatus (2022). Taking this into consideration, there is a problem with reading difficulties appearing in children.

According to Perfecto (2018), the term "Mother Language" (ML) refers to the language that an individual was raised in and their native language. The use of the mother tongue as the language of teaching in pre-primary classes is believed to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge by children (Saeed, 2021). The usage of the mother language in the classroom has been determined to have a number of positive effects, according to the findings of researchers. The research conducted by Gasper (2023) demonstrated that the utilisation of the mother tongue language in the school helps children build a sense of belonging and increases their receptivity. Their affective, psychomotor, and cognitive performance all improve as a result of the language, which also boosts classroom participation, decreases attrition, and increases the possibility that the child's family and community will be involved in the child's education. Further, John (2023) shows that when children learn in the language they speak, their learning is greatly enhanced. UNESCO (2018) asserts that children who are taught in their mother language are likely to develop a strong foundation in literacy skills, as they can make connections between the sounds of the language they speak at home and the symbols on the page. Moreover, Cubillas and Pardo (2023) from the Philippines; Vogelzang (2024) from India; Mohohlwane (2024) from South Africa; Brunette et al. (2019) from Uganda ;) Intervention studies found that the mother language promotes the acquisition of reading skills in children. Other authors from non-intervention studies include Serede et al. (2022). The previous literature indicates that the significance of the mother language in education, particularly in the acquisition of reading abilities, cuts across continents. Mother language is beneficial in education, and the present study is interested in assessing Tanzanian primary teachers' perception of using the mother language to enhance reading skills through recognition and production of alphabet letter names.

Language of Instruction in Tanzania

Kiswahili is the language of instruction in public pre- and primary schools in Tanzania, while English is the language of instruction in private schools (URT, 2016). Public schools are attended by 99.1% of school-age children in Tanzania. In contrast, private schools enrol only 0.9% of children, and the language of instruction in private primary schools is English throughout, in contrast to public schools (URT, 2020). However, in Tanzania, minority languages include all Ethnic Community Languages (ECLs), excluding Kiswahili. Kiswahili serves as a mother tongue for approximately 10 per cent of the population (Rubagumya, 1990) and is utilised as a second language (L2) by 99 per cent of the population for inter-ethnic communication (John, 2023). Unfortunately, most Tanzanians predominantly utilise ECL as their first language (L1s) or mother tongue.

Tanzania is characterised by an exceptional linguistic situation, in which individuals alternate between a variety of ethnic languages, including Kiswahili, English, Kisukuma, Kihaya, and many others, based on the context of language use, as per Prosper (2025). Given the information, the study aims to gather the primary teachers' views on the use of the mother language for instruction in pre-primary schools. The researcher has been attracted to working with the pre-primary level because this is the foundation of academic life (Ydo, 2022) as a strategy for overcoming reading problems in upper classes by using Mother Language Instruction. The study used primary teachers who are also entitled to teach pre-primary classes (URT, 2016).

Statement of the Problem

In Tanzania, rural public pre-primary children often struggle to develop basic reading skills, whereas Kiswahili is used as a medium of instruction. This disconnect between the language spoken at home and the language used in school creates barriers to learning, leading to poor literacy outcomes. Various strategies have been used to overcome the reading problems. Despite the efforts and the potential benefits of mother language instruction, the implementation of using mother tongue instruction in rural Tanzanian pre-primary classes remains under-researched. A comprehensive exploration of the use of mother language instruction in enhancing reading skills among pre-primary children in rural Tanzania is not clear. This study seeks to address this gap by investigating teachers' perceptions of the role of mother tongue-based instruction in enhancing reading skills in rural Tanzanian contexts.

Specific Objectives

Specifically, the study examined public primary teacher perceptions of using mother language instructions to teach pre-primary classes. The study also assessed pre-primary teachers' perceptions of using the mother language in enhancing reading skills.

Theories Underpinning the Study

Cummins's (1979) interdependence theory and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory guided this study. Cummins's (1979) interdependence theory explains how to positively transfer literacy skills from L1 to L2 (John, 2023, & Alimi., Tella., Adeyemo., & Oyeweso, 2020). According to Cummins, the degree of literacy proficiency in L2 attained by a child is influenced to some extent by the child's level of proficiency in L1 when intensive L2 instruction commences. Conversely, the Sociocultural theory by Vygotsky (1978) asserts that a child's cognitive development and learning ability can be guided and mediated by

social interactions. According to Brock-Unte (2007), one of the most important factors in facilitating interaction is the use of a language that the child is already familiar with. This is because instruction in the Mother Language enhances the likelihood that children will interact with others regarding content. Learners are able to connect the knowledge they have received at school with the knowledge they already possess and increase their vocabulary through interactions with their peers, family members, and teachers when they utilise their mother language. Vygotsky is able to convey the essence of the child-centred method because he places an emphasis on interaction, the assistance of teachers, and the role of the learner in the production of knowledge.

Methods

Participants

Primary teachers were involved in the study. In practice, the primary teachers are the ones who teach pre-primary classes.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics

| Variables | Categories | Frequency | Percent (%) |
|--------------|-------------|------------|-------------|
| Age | 18-28 | 54 | 31.6 |
| | 29-39 | 97 | 56.7 |
| | 40-50 | 12 | 7.0 |
| | 51-61 | 8 | 4.7 |
| Total | | 171 | 100 |
| Sex | Male | 93 | 54.4 |
| | Female | 78 | 45.6 |
| Total | | 171 | 100 |
| Regions | Tanga | 3 | 1.8 |
| | Iringa | 2 | 1.2 |
| | Arusha | 19 | 11.1 |
| | Manyara | 13 | 7.6 |
| | Shinyanga | 10 | 5.8 |
| | Tabora | 25 | 14.6 |
| | Dodoma | 22 | 12.9 |
| | Simiyu | 8 | 4.7 |
| | Mara | 3 | 1.8 |
| | Singida | 25 | 14.6 |
| | Dsm | 8 | 4.7 |
| | Katavi | 6 | 3.5 |
| | Pwani | 5 | 2.9 |
| | Mwanza | 5 | 2.9 |
| | Kigoma | 9 | 5.3 |
| | Kilimanjaro | 5 | 2.9 |
| Ruvuma | 3 | 1.8 | |
| Total | | 171 | 100 |

Source: Researcher (2023)

Table 1 shows demographic information, with males at 93 (54.4%) and females at 78 (45.6%). The majority of the primary teachers were from Tabora 25 (14.6%) and Singida 25 (14.6%), followed by Dodoma 22 (12.9%) and Arusha 19 (11.1%). Additionally, the majority of the participants had an age ranging from 29-39, 97 (56.7 %).

Table 2: Pre-primary teachers teaching and language use

| Statements | Categories | Frequencies | Percent (%) |
|---|-----------------|-------------|-------------|
| Have you ever taught Pre-primary Classes | Yes | 110 | 64.3 |
| | No | 61 | 45.7 |
| Total | | 171 | 100 |
| If the answer is Yes above, how many have you been teaching pre-primary classes | 1-5 years | 64 | 37.4 |
| | 6-10 years | 27 | 15.8 |
| | 11-15 years | 23 | 13.5 |
| | 15+ years | 10 | 5.8 |
| | N/A | 47 | 27.5 |
| Total | | 171 | 100 |
| Which language do you use most while at home | Mother Language | 94 | 55.0 |
| | Kiswahili | 71 | 41.5 |
| | English | 6 | 3.5 |
| Total | | 171 | 100 |

Source: Researcher (2023)

Regarding pre-primary classes teaching, table 2 shows that the majority of 110 (64.3%) primary teachers happened to teach pre-primary classes. Among those who reported teaching pre-primary classes, the majority, 64 (37.4%), reported to have a range of 1-5 years; surprisingly, 94 (55%) reported using the mother language mostly while they were at home.

Procedures

This paper employed a quantitative research approach with descriptive design in investigating pre-primary teachers' perception of the use of the mother language in enhancing reading skills. The primary teachers involved were from five centres: Singida, Chato, Mtwara, Korogwe and Njombe. The primary teachers were doing intensive face-to-face in December 2023. Approximately a total of N=400 attended, according to Krejcie and Morgan (1970), the N =400, s=196. Data collection was done through a closed-ended questionnaire consisting of a level Likert scale: Agree=3, neutral =2, disagree=1. The questionnaire had three sections with 24 items, .880 Cronbach's alpha; section one was all about demographic information of the pre-primary teacher, it involves 16 items, .924 Cronbach's alpha; section two was about primary teachers' perception of using their mother language in teaching pre-primary classes; and the last section was about the primary perception of using their mother tongue in enhancing reading skills to pre-primary children, eight (8) items, .920 Cronbach's alpha. The questionnaire was made after visiting empirical

pieces of literature. Descriptive analysis: Means and standard deviation were used for data analysis. The questionnaire was distributed to 196, and 171 questionnaires were returned. The findings were interpreted using the following range of three Likert scale levels made by a researcher. The range involved; Disagree=1.00-1.66, Neutral =1.67-2.33 and Agree= 2.34-3.00.

Analysis and Presentation of the Findings

The analysis and presentation of the findings have been accurately organised into tables, which are further categorised according to the specific questions addressed by the articles. This structured approach ensures a clear and comprehensive understanding of the data in relation to each research question.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics: Means, standard deviation and mean ranks

| Statements of the general use of mother tongue teaching pre-primary classes | N | Mean (M) | Standard Deviation (SD) | Mean Rank |
|--|-----|----------|-------------------------|-----------|
| 1.Children who start their education in their mother tongue have a good start | 171 | 1.46 | .59 | 8.94 |
| 2.Use of regional language as the language of instruction in teaching pre-primary classes | 171 | 1.43 | .57 | 8.77 |
| 3.Mother language makes it easier for children to pick up and learn other languages | 171 | 1.50 | .59 | 9.30 |
| 4.The use of the mother language will increase the level of performance of children | 171 | 1.44 | .57 | 8.79 |
| 5. Mother tongue instruction will greatly aid in developing curriculum and instructional materials that are easily understood by pre-primary children. | 171 | 1.39 | .53 | 8.56 |
| 6.The use of the mother language is an innovative approach to learning | 171 | 1.40 | .54 | 8.66 |
| 7.The use of the mother language will make teachers who know the language to explain concepts easily | 171 | 1.36 | .52 | 8.36 |
| 8. Children learning in their mother tongue will enhance communication between children and their teachers. | 171 | 1.42 | .54 | 8.85 |
| 9.Children learning in their mother language adopt a better understanding of the curriculum | 171 | 1.37 | .53 | 8.43 |
| 10. Skills acquired in the mother tongue do not | 171 | 1.39 | .54 | 8.55 |

| | | | | |
|---|------------|-------------|------------|------|
| need to be re-taught when a child transitions to a second language | | | | |
| 11. Children who learn in their mother tongue tend to enjoy school more and learn more quickly because they feel comfortable in their environment | 171 | 1.33 | .53 | 8.08 |
| 12. Self-esteem is higher for children learning in mother language | 171 | 1.31 | .52 | 7.95 |
| 13. The use of mother language helps a child develop their critical thinking | 171 | 1.32 | .51 | 8.04 |
| 14. The use of the mother language helps a child develop literacy skills | 171 | 1.37 | .54 | 8.42 |
| 15. Children are more likely to engage meaningfully with their peers in a classroom where instruction is given in their mother tongue | 171 | 1.35 | .51 | 8.31 |
| 16. A child cannot effectively learn in a language they do not understand | 171 | 1.30 | .50 | 7.98 |
| OVERALL MEAN | 171 | 1.38 | .37 | |

Source: Researcher (2023)

Table 3 presents the findings on primary teachers' perception of the use of mother language in teaching pre-primary classes. Generally, the findings show that primary teachers disagree with using the mother language for teaching pre-primary classes in rural areas ($M=1.38$, $SD=.37$). The table shows that, out of 16 items, one ranks 9th, 13 items rank 8th, and two items rank 7th. The findings indicate that 14 items of the items were highly disagreed.

Table 4: Descriptive statistics: Means, standard deviation and mean ranks

| Statements of the general use of mother tongue in enhancing Reading skills in pre-primary classes | N | Mean (M) | Standard Deviation (SD) | Mean Rank |
|---|------------|-----------------|--------------------------------|------------------|
| 1.Children will manifest reading skills | 171 | 2.73 | .57 | 4.85 |
| 2.Children can develop reading skills on their own | 171 | 2.56 | .66 | 4.37 |
| 3.Children will acquire the capacity to comprehend reading concepts | 171 | 2.63 | .62 | 4.63 |
| 4. A teacher who understands the local language can effectively evaluate reading progress and pinpoint areas that need improvement. | 171 | 2.64 | .67 | 4.54 |
| 5. Using their mother language enables children to quickly identify and produce alphabet letter names in Kiswahili. | 171 | 2.56 | .70 | 4.38 |
| 6. Learning in the mother language helps pupils quickly recognize and produce Kiswahili alphabet letters | 171 | 2.59 | .71 | 4.42 |
| 7.Pupils learn to read fast when they are taught using their mother language | 171 | 2.55 | .75 | 4.37 |
| 8. Learning in the mother language will help children easily recognize both lowercase and uppercase letters. | 171 | 2.55 | .74 | 4.34 |
| OVERALL MEAN | 171 | 2.60 | .55 | |

Source: Research (2023)

Table 4 presents the perception of primary teachers on the use of the mother language in enhancing reading skills in pre-primary children. The findings show that primary teachers agree on the use of the mother language in enhancing reading skills in a rural area ($M=2.60$, $SD=.55$). All items (8) presented in the table have the same rank, which means all the items had the same weight.

Discussion

The findings of the present study indicated that teachers in rural schools disagree with the use of mother tongue instruction for pre-primary students. The findings are consistent with Makokha (2023). Makokha (2023) found that teachers in Kenya teaching early childhood classes rarely used their mother tongue in instruction. They preferred using English and Kiswahili. However, the present study is inconsistent to Raphael and

Tibategeza (2022), Mwambula (2021), and Kosonen (2005) contrary to the present study in which parents and teachers had a favourable opinion of and perception of the employment of the mother language as a medium of instruction in elementary schools. The study did find, however, that despite instructors' favourable opinions and perceptions of using mother tongues in the classroom, they are afraid of how the policy and curriculum planners will implement it, particularly in regard to their knowledge and proficiency in facilitating instruction in their mother tongues—after all, they are trained to use Kiswahili as the language of instruction. The majority of them don't speak the native tongue of the regions they are instructing.

This study revealed that teachers have opinions on the use of the mother language to improve reading skills in pre-primary classes. The present study is consistent with Mohohlwane et al. (2023), Vogelzang et al. (2024), and Cubillas and Pardo (2023), authors found that first language that means mother language (L1) had a positive effect on reading proficiency. Dickinson et al. (2019) show that children's oral language plays a role in reading, particularly reading comprehension. Nishanthi (2020) also asserts that speaking in one's mother tongue fosters confidence and fluency in one's mother tongue as well as readiness for literacy acquisition. It aids in the development of the knowledge and abilities kids need to learn to read. Moreover, Edward and Shukia (2023) are contrary to the findings of the present study. Edward and Shukia (2023) found that in the acquisition of pre-reading skills, the mother language is a significant barrier used by pre-primary children in rural areas.

Conclusion

Primary teachers discourage the use of mother tongue instruction across the entire pre-primary level. According to the findings of this research, one of the strategies that may be implemented to aid in the development of reading skills in rural areas is the utilisation of mother language instruction. Knowing children's abilities to recognise the names of the letters in the alphabet and to produce the names of those letters is beneficial to the development of reading skills in youngsters. Theoretically, reading skills can be transformed from L, the mother language (L1), to L2, Kiswahili in Tanzania, if at all children and their teachers comprehend the language of instruction.

Recommendations

The study recommends that language planners and policymakers include home languages in the curriculum to provide flexibility at lower educational levels, especially in rural areas where children are fluent in their mother languages.

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