

**INFLUENCE OF CHILD FRIENDLY ENVIRONMENT ON ACQUISITION OF LANGUAGE SKILLS AMONG LEARNERS IN PRE-PRIMARY ONE IN KAKAMEGA SOUTH SUB-COUNTY, KENYA**

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**ABSTRACT**

Kakamega South Sub-County Education Office annual reports indicate that learners in Pre-primary one in the Sub-county ECDE Centres have not adequately acquired language skills in their learning activities. Acquisition of Language skills in Pre-primary one school enables learners to effectively develop communication skills in their adult lives. Lack of early development of skills like listening, speaking, reading and writing became a communication barrier in their future learning processes. This study assessed the influence of teacher characteristics on acquisition of language skills among learners in Pre-primary one in Kakamega South Sub-County. The researcher used a descriptive design to collect views and opinions of respondents as Mugenda and Mugenda denote that a descriptive survey can be used to obtain information that describes perceptions, attitudes, behaviours or values from respondents. The researcher targeted 16 teachers-in-charge, 32 teachers for the learners and 320 learners in the Sub- County ECDE centres. All the 32 teachers and 16 teachers-in-charge and 320 learners ECDE centres were selected through census. A test retest technique was used to test for a reliability index in one centre within the Sub County. Piloting of the instrument yielded 0.90 Cronbach's reliability index. Face and content validity was ensured by the supervisors from the department. This study used a questionnaire to collect data from teachers, interview schedules from teachers- in-charge and an observation check list for learners' abilities. Data was analyzed thematically and converted into frequencies. Interview results were transcribed verbatim. Respondents generally agreed that although the age of a teacher, his or her qualifications, experience and efficacy greatly influence the acquisition of language skills among learners in pre-primary one school, most teachers in this sub county have not used these characteristics to improve the acquisition of language skills to learners in pre-primary one level of learning. This study recommended that although the teachers may have age, qualifications, experience and self efficacy advantage, more sensitization seminars need to be done to help them use these advantages to boost learning experiences for the learners in Pre- primary one in the Sub-county's ECDE Centres.

**Key Words:** Child Friendly Environment, Language Skills, In Pre-Primary One.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Effective teaching and learning depend on the nature and availability of resources. Maria Montessori Montessori, (1995) emphasizes on the role of friendly teaching materials as an effective way of developing language skills. Montessori observes that an environment rich in

teaching media is an environment full of valuable aids for explaining new concepts and consolidating ideas. It is an environment that is good for presenting meaningful picture or figurative picture of an abstract situation. According to Matthews, (2010) the principle of individualization acknowledges the fact that in the classroom learners differ from one another. Bredekamp, . & Copple, (2007) report that overcrowded classrooms cause unfavourable comforts to learners.

Paley, V. (2005) holds that education offered to children who have not yet reached the statutory age of beginning primary school need to be offered in a very friendly manner. He says it is a semi-formal education arrangement usually offered outside home whereby young children from about age three years are exposed through play-like activities in a group setting. This is usually done through mental, social and physical activities suited to their developmental stages until the mandatory age of government approved formal schooling. Federal Republic of Nigeria (2008) refers to early childhood care and education (pre-primary education) an education given in an educational institution to children aged 3-5 plus prior to their enrolment in the primary school. The essence of pre-primary education has been rooted to various international conventions on the education for all (EFA). Dakar Framework for action of (2010) that insisted on education for all. Other international pressure groups include Millennium Development Goal two that advocates for universal primary education. The development of the pre-school may have been resulted from the increased urbanization like lifestyle where many parents are living in urban centers.

Maria Montessori Montessori, (1995) states that effectiveness in learning is mainly influenced by the availability of instructional materials. Such instructional materials include quality learning and teaching resources. These may include; teacher's guide books, relevant textbooks, equipment and support materials like charts and videos. In his study, Arnold found that most pre-school and lower primary teachers lack appropriate materials for training that can be utilised to impact and nurture language and literacy skills that can help children to write, read and speak fluently. The Early Childhood Development Education handbook by KICD (2011)

Categorises teaching/ learning materials (instructional materials) into four types; these are the audio-visual instructional materials which are sound and visual. The second type of visual only deals with sight. The third category of instructional materials is audio. The fourth category is the teacher's teaching/ learning materials. These are materials which are manipulated, like a toy or an orange (KICD, 2014). There are also play materials that facilitate play. Paley, (2005) observes that a school that boasts of friendly environment should possess most that these features.

## **2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

In her annual academic reports, the common feature in the Kakamega South Sub-County Education Officer' report is the non acquisition of language skills in learning activities of Pre-primary one school children. Learners in Pre-primary one in the Sub-county ECDE Centres have not adequately acquired language skills in their learning activities. Acquisition of language skills in learning is thought to be greatly influenced by teacher characteristics together with facilities and activities learners interact with in the school environment. A school environment that helps

pupils to acquire language skills in learning activities enables learners to effectively develop communication skills in their adult lives. Lack of early development of skills like listening, speaking, reading and writing can become a communication barrier in their future learning processes. By the time this study was being born the reasons behind inadequate acquisition of language skills among pre-primary one learners had not been established. This study assessed the influence of teacher characteristics on acquisition of language skills among learners in pre-primary one in Kakamega South Sub-County.

### 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study was anchored on three theories, the Nativist Theory by Naom Chomsky, Constructivist theory by Piaget and Learning theory by Maria Montessori. Naom Chomsky's Nativist's theory on language acquisition holds that people are born with a predisposition to learn languages (Piaget, 2002; Maria Montessori Montessori, 1995 and Naom Chomsky, 2002). They explain that children are born with a hard-wired language acquisition device in their brains and that the brains contain the major principle of language, which is ready made to quickly acquire language at specific stages in the development process.

These theorists suggest that children learn from action and exploring their own environment at different developmental stages. The life experiences each child brings to the classroom will help determine how they process new material. on the other hand Piaget asserts that people learn knowledge either through accommodation or through assimilation, assimilation occurs when the child uses an old schema or skills out on an object. Accommodation is when he realizes the old ways cannot work and so the child is either applying previously acquired skills to a new situation in order to understand it or adjusting the skills or accommodating acquired skills to better understand a situation.

To be effective for all learners, the environment of the learners must be responsive to a broad range of needs among a diverse learner population. These diverse needs include cultural and linguistic differences as well as developmental levels, academic readiness, and learning styles. A responsive learning environment engages all learners by providing a respectful climate where instruction and curriculum are designed to respond to the backgrounds and needs of every student. Research on responsive teaching emphasizes the importance of teachers' understanding of the cultural characteristics and contributions of various ethnic groups (Fraser Loubser & Van Ruoy (2014). teaching of children must show respect toward their culture. Responsive teaching is defined by Inhelder, (2008) as "using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse learners as conduits for teaching them more effectively" Research on responsive teaching has found that learners are more engaged in learning and learn more effectively when the knowledge and skills taught are presented within a context of their experience and cultural frames of references (Case & Okamoto, 2006).). Areas considered part of creating a responsive learning environment understand the cultural lifestyles of their learners, such as which groups give priority to communal living and problem solving, knowing differences in the modes of interaction between children and adults in different ethnic groups; and becoming aware of cultural implications of gender role, socialization among different groups.

Since quality teaching must be embraced to ensure quality learning by the child, some factors that need to be considered in teachers' capacity to deliver include teacher's effective communication skills, access to good teaching and learning materials, level of training, preparation of learners and motivation. Case, & Okamoto, (2006) also aver that effectiveness in learning is mainly influenced by the teacher's status; competencies, skills, and their access to quality teaching and learning resources which may include teacher's guide books, relevant textbooks, equipment and support materials like charts and videos. In their study, they found that most pre-school and lower primary teacher's lack appropriate training that can be utilized to impart and nurture language and literacy skills necessary to help children to write, read and speak fluently. The Federal Republic of Nigeria (2008) report that the Nigerian pre-school centres have a shortage of qualified teachers because course developed and taught in universities had not attracted sufficient applicants probably because upon graduation pay prospects are unattractive.

The Kenyan situation is not very different on the issue of unqualified teachers at the ECDE level. However, various recent government policies have had different impacts on the ECDE sector. The policy emphasizing on the training of ECDE teachers has had a positive impact on ECDE centres. More than one half of the ECDE teachers are now trained. The trained teachers are able to implement the ECDE curriculum because they have adequate, skills and positive attitude (Margret and Anne, 2009). ECDE is now a devolved function under the jurisdiction of the 47 county governments. Whereas ECDE teachers were previously demotivated and demoralized because of low and delayed pay, the situation is quickly changing under the county governments.

The teacher should establish an environment where language exploration and usage is encouraged. Language here should be used to develop reasoning skills. Teachers have a variety of roles in supporting integration of children's play in ECDE curriculum (Case & Okamoto, 2006). These roles include providing materials for play, encouraging high quality play, structuring environments for play, modelling play and introducing children to new play opportunities. Teachers in ECDE programs are facilitators who need to engage children in multiple experiences to foster their all-round development. The teacher should facilitate the transition process of moving from one activity to another, which is often difficult for young children. The teacher must prepare and provide children with a variety of learning materials for various activities. They need to use attention getters like signals, songs, finger play, rhymes, games and puppets to signal change. These activities promote listening and speaking skills in language. Creating environments where children can learn through play is very important at this level of learning.

#### **4. METHODOLOGY**

The researcher used a descriptive research design to collect views and opinions of respondents on the influence of child friendly environment on acquisition of language skills among learners in pre-primary one in Kakamega south sub-county. Mugenda and Mugenda (1999) denote that a descriptive survey can be used to obtain information that describes about perceptions, attitudes,

behaviours or values from respondents. They posit that a survey is an excellent vehicle for measurement of the characteristics of a large population. The researcher target 16 teachers-in-charge, 32 teachers for the learners and 320 learners in the sub-county ECDE centres. All the 32 teachers and 16 teachers-in-charge and 320 learners ECDE centres were selected through census. A test retest technique was used to test for a reliability index in one centre within the Sub County. Piloting of the instrument yielded 0.90 Cronbach’s reliability index. Face and content validity was ensured by the supervisors from the department. This study used a questionnaire to collect data from teachers, interview schedules from teachers-in-charge and an observation check list to collect data from the respondents. Data was analyzed thematically and converted into frequencies. Interview results were transcribed verbatim

**5. FINDINGS**

The study sought to establish the influence of teacher characteristics on acquisition of language skills among learners in pre-primary one in Kakamega South Sub-County. The indicators that were used to describe teacher characteristics were age of the teacher, teacher qualification and experience of the teacher and teacher efficacy. The views of the teachers were recorded in Table1

**Table 1 Influence of Teacher Characteristics on Acquisition of Language Skills**

Item	SA	A	N	SD	D
The age of a teacher influences acquisition of language skills by pre-primary one learners	40 83.3%	7 14.6%	1 2.1%	0 0%	0 0%
The qualification of a teacher influences acquisition of language skills by pre-primary one learners	42 87.5%	5 10.4%	0 0%	1 2.1%	0 0%
The experience of a teacher influences acquisition of language skills by pre-primary one learners	41 85.4%	6 10.4%	0 0%	1 2.1%	0 0%
The level of motivation of a teacher influences acquisition of language skills by pre-primary one learners	43 89.6%	2 4.2%	1 2.1%	1 2.1%	1 2.1%
A teacher's beliefs and judgments (efficacy) of his or her capabilities to bring about desired outcomes of learner’s engagement in learning process influences acquisition of language skills by pre-primary one learner	43 89.6%	2 4.2%	1 2.1%	1 2.1%	1 2.1%

Analysis in Table 1 showed that majority of the teachers 40(83.3%) strongly agreed that the age of a teacher influences acquisition of language skills by pre-primary one learners. 7(14.6%) teachers agreed, while only one (2.1%) was neutral. This indicated that the 47 (98%) majority of

the teacher respondents were in agreement that the age of a teacher influences acquisition of language skills by pre-primary one learners. This result on this item implied that acquisition of language skills by pre-primary one learners depends significantly on the age of the teachers handling them.

On the influences of a teacher's experience on acquisition of language skills by pre-primary one learners, 41 (85.4%) teachers either strongly agreed or just agreed that the experience of a teacher influences acquisition of language skills by pre-primary one learners. None dissented. Their opinion on this item implied that acquisition of language skills by pre-primary one learners depends the experience of teacher. A majority 45(93.8%) of the teachers either strongly agreed or agreed that the level of motivation of a teacher influences acquisition of language skills by pre-primary one learners. Whereas another total 45(93.8%) both strongly agreed and agreed that a teacher's beliefs and judgments (efficacy) of his or her capabilities to bring about desired outcomes of learner's engagement in learning process influences acquisition of language skills by pre-primary one learner.

These results are in agreement with Nguro (2011) who in her correlation analysis of teachers' age and learners' performance matrix found out that the age of a teacher positively correlates strongly with his or her experience in teaching. She submits that age is an accumulation of experiences gained in handling learners in schools. Zuzovsky, (2003) also affirmed that age has more effect on classroom management alongside with the other teacher characteristics. Richardson, (2005) confirmed that a higher percentage of the older teachers have a higher affinity and patience in handling young tender learners than the younger generation of teachers who have challenges in guiding them. The researcher opines that although age of teachers correlates strongly with performance of learners, newly trained teachers who were young can equally be enthusiastic and possess better organizational skills than the older teachers who left Teacher Training Colleges several years ago.

On the item addressing the influences of a teacher's qualification on acquisition of language skills by pre-primary one learners again, the majority of the teacher's 42(87.5%) strongly agreed together with 5(10.4%) who agreed that the qualification of a teacher influences acquisition of language skills by pre-primary one learners. This meant that for pre-primary one learner to acquire language skills, the teacher's qualifications must be considered. Scholars like Unanma (2013) confirm that relationships between qualifications of a teacher and learners' academic achievement are strong. Unanma's findings supported those of Adeyemi (2013) whose analysis of performance of the language teachers and teachers with Formal Education at a pre-primary school in Nigeria confirmed fifty percent correlation. Adeyemi's results showed that those learners who receive instructions from teachers with higher qualifications showed better results in their final examinations as compared to those who receive input from teachers with lower training backgrounds. Boyd (2008) also found out that improvements in teacher qualifications, especially among the poorest schools, appear to have resulted in improved student achievement. Tombowua (2013) established that there is a statistically significant relationship between teacher qualifications and academic performance of learners especially in acquisitions of language skills.



Studies have reported that motivation of teachers is very important as it affects the learner’s academic performance directly. These studies allege that teachers’ motivation, satisfaction and performance are inter-dependent (Alarm and Farid, 2011; Marques, 2010). They further state that teacher efficacy affects learners directly as there is strong correlation between teacher motivation and students' performance hence a desired outcome by the learners can occur with the help of the teacher. This means that low motivation of teachers affect performance which affects the learners' performance (Alarm and Farid, 2011; Marques, 2010; Dornyei, 2001).

During the interviews between the researcher and the 16 teachers- in- charge of the ECDE centers, nine teachers- in- charge observed:

*“The age of a teacher appeals to pre-primary one learner in several ways one, the learner looks at the teacher as a mother away from home. Obviously, the mother of the child should be old and warm enough to the young girl or boy. So clearly, the children look for love substitutes of their mothers at home from their teachers. A learner will always create great interest in learning if he or she likes and loves the teacher. This helps a lot in creating interest in teaching and learning of language skills”.*

**Table 2 Rating of the Child’s Ability in routine ECDE activities**

Item	Category			Average
	Exceeds Expectations	Meets Expectations	Approaches Expectations	
Tell simple stories in catchment language	0.2138	1.4235	2.7396	1.4300
Talks about 3 items related to a given sub-theme	0.2955	1.1529	1.9112	1.2190
Identifies any 3 colours in a given picture	0.2376	1.9059	1.9019	1.3940
Identifies a 3 letter sounds, 3 letters and 3 syllabus	0.2761	1.8235	2.9995	1.6391
Reads at least 3 letter words	0.2384	1.7929	2.7604	1.6504
Writes any 3 letter words	0.2372	1.6895	1.9901	1.8970
Writes own name	0.2376	1.6248	2.9019	1.6972
Sounds 3 letter words	0.2761	1.9794	2.9487	1.8074
Recites short poems	1.0170	2.7834	2.3114	1.7732

Names family members	1.0250	2.9019	2.9011	1.9104
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Likert Scale Weightage: SA - Exceeds expectations = 3; Meets expectations =2; Approaches expectations = 1;  $P=0.05\%$ ; Highest Mean = 3.00; Lowest Mean = 1.00

Results in Table 2 shows that the highest Mean was 1.910 on the child can name her or his family members. It was followed by a mean of 1.897 which was established on the item that the child can write any 3 letter words followed by a mean of 1.807 on the child can Sound 3 letter words and 1.697 that the child can write own name. According to the likert scale, the highest mean is 3.000 whereas the lowest mean is 1.000. A score of less than 3.000 indicates that the respondents disagreed somewhat with the suggestions given. Since the scores of all the rating of the child's ability during routine ECDE thematic activities were below the average mean of 1.500, the researcher inferred that most the learners in pre-primary one in Kakamega south public primary schools do not exceed expectations in language competencies.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results showed that respondents generally agreed that the age of a teacher, his or her qualifications, experience and efficacy have greatly influenced the acquisition of language skills among learners in pre-primary one in Kakamega South Sub-County. However, they have not used these characteristics to improve acquisition of language skills to learners in pre-primary one suggesting. This study recommended that although the teachers may have age, qualifications, experience and self efficacy advantage, more sensitization seminars need to be done to help them use these advantages to boost learning experiences for the learners.

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