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# LANGUAGE RELATED BARRIER, EXPERIENCED BY CHILDREN WHEN TEACHERS ARE NOT CONVERSANT WITH THE CHILD'S CATCHMENT LANGUAGE?

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## ABSTRACT

Preschool teachers face various challenges when instructing children. This is because of the differences in language of instruction used by the teacher from that spoken by the children. Language Policy in education demands that preschool children be taught in their mother tongue. This is challenging, particularly when the language of the teacher and that of the preschool children are different. The objectives of this study were to establish the linguistic diversity among pre-school children entering preschool, to find out language related barriers experienced by the pre-school children who do not speak or comprehend the language of instruction. This study used a descriptive research design using survey method. The study was conducted in Nyakach Sub- County in Kisumu County. The language barrier impedes quality of learning and interaction between the teachers and the pre-school children. The study recommends that the education policy that states pre-school children to be taught using the language of the catchment area be strictly implemented to facilitate adequate interaction between the teachers and the pre-school children. In areas with single language of catchment area, it is recommended that linguistic diversity be considered when employing pre-school teachers, while in areas and schools with diverse linguistic composition, teachers be equipped with skills to handle diverse learners.

Keywords: Language related barriers, linguistic diversity, Language policy, mother tongue

## 1. INTRODUCTION

All children deserve to have a conversation in their home language every day. This is necessary because if this does not happen, they are likely to take between four to eight years to reach their full academic potential or even longer Brender, (2005). Research shows that children who do not receive support in learning in their mother tongue are likely to be isolated, victims of bullying and viewed negatively by the teachers Grace, (2013). This therefore means that children need to be supported in learning in a language they are familiar with in order to avoid these problems. Further, studies shows that children taught in unfamiliar language are likely to lose their expressive ability in their mother tongue.

Children who begin learning in unfamiliar language face several difficulties of first learning the new language and the new curriculum in a new language at the same time. Instruction should be done in the first language of the child since it forms the knowledge base for learning new ideas. Due to reasons beyond the child, children usually find themselves learning in unfamiliar language which is not used outside the educational system especially in the rural areas. The reasons for these could be employment where the child has to accompany the parent to the new environment or settlement in another land among others. This lack of experience on the language used in school usually makes the children to find the school very unpleasant. According to Wallach & Miller, (1995) children with limited experiences in the school language often have hard time making transition from home language to formal classroom language. These children usually struggle to function in the learning tasks and activities within the group thus lowering their self confidence. When children lack competence in the language, they are not able to participate in classroom activities and as a result there are poor learning outcomes.

Children who are unable to communicate in the language of instruction usually suffer as a result of limited communication abilities. This can lead to negative assumption by the teachers about the child resulting in lowered expectations for what the child can accomplish Grace(2013).The teacher may mistakenly suspect that the child has a disability, for example a teacher got a child from the rural area to the urban preschool. The child could not speak in either English or Kiswahili. The child kept quiet when talked to. The teacher got annoyed and frustrated and labelled the child dumb and has a learning difficulty, Ngasike, (2011). This can really be challenging especially when giving activities based on the child's current knowledge and language proficiency.

Most children in these environments where the language used is not familiar to often have negative experiences while attempting to use the language in the classroom thus they remain silent and do not interact with others. They usually fear speaking in the classroom and unable to follow the flow of communication during learning activities Apps, McIntyre, and Juliebo, (1996).This makes them appear isolated, lonely or frustrated as they seem incapable of

communicating. The children usually become observers as they are unsure of how to express their needs to the people around them. This affects their self esteem as they view themselves unworthy and this makes them lag behind in their learning White, (1991). This feeling however, disappears immediately they learn the new language. Ngasike, (2011), found that children who cannot use the language they are familiar with usually fear to break English or Kiswahili and opt to remain silent in classroom activities and would not attempt to answer questions even if they knew the answers for fear of being ridiculed when they speak broken English or utter wrong words. This interferes with their self esteem and learning as a whole. Researches done by World Bank and UNESCO on unfamiliar language of instruction suggest that language used in school is responsible for school drop outs. This is because the children feel frightened when they cannot understand what the teacher is saying to them and get bored and confused Brender, (2005).

In the learning process, language is very important for comprehension and making use of knowledge. Evans et. al,(2000) emphasized the role of language in learning by saying that if there is a disparity in the amount of talk performed by teachers and learners, then there will be hindrance to learning. This puts language as a very important tool in classroom discourse. To bridge the communication gap, teachers need to be prepared with skills to handle classrooms with learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

## 2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

To determine language related barriers faced by teachers who teach children that do not speak or comprehend the language the learner is familiar with.

## 3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What language related barriers are faced by teachers with children who do not speak and comprehend the language they are familiar with?

## 4. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopted a descriptive research design using survey method. The descriptive design was preferred because it allows the participants to describe the difficulties they face in an accurate way. The qualitative approach which entails the use of questionnaires to gain a deeper understanding on language related barriers in teacher-child interaction in preschool was used. The language related barriers and Teacher- child interactions are independent and dependent variables respectively.

## 5. RESEARCH METHOD

The study adopted qualitative approach where the questionnaire was used to collect data.

### i. Location of the Study

The study was conducted in Nyakach sub County in Kisumu County. Nyakach Sub County has three divisions, which are Lower Nyakach, Upper Nyakach and West Nyakach. The sub county is cosmopolitan in nature having several communities settling together for economic reasons. The area is predominantly occupied by the Luo community. The language of the catchment area is Dholuo. However there are other communities living among them with young children who are enrolled in the preschools within the sub- County. This therefore means that learning should be conducted in Kiswahili according to the language in education policy. This brings in the challenge to both teachers and children as the language (Kiswahili) is rarely used outside the school environment. The location therefore has challenges related to language of instruction.

The required data was sought from the preschools in the sub-county. This location was selected owing to its cosmopolitan nature, since it harbours Sondu town, Nyabondo Complex, Pap Onditi sub-county headquarters inhabited by people from various communities working and doing business in the region hence the schools have children and teachers who experience language related barriers in their classrooms.

### ii. Target Population

All the preschools in both private and public comprised the target population from which the study sample was drawn. The teachers from public schools constituted 70% while the number of teachers from private preschools was 30% of the target population. This is because the majority of preschools are within the public primary schools.

**Table 1, Distribution of target population**

Category of school	Percentage	Number of teachers
Public	70	72
Private	30	13

Source: researcher

### iii. Sampling Techniques and Sample Size

Sampling technique is the process of identifying the entities to be included in a sample. Sample size on the other hand is the number of observations in a sample, Evans et.al. (2000)

### iv. Sampling Technique

A sample is a small portion of the target population. Mugenda & Mugenda (1999) suggest that a sample between 10% and 30% of the accessible population is adequate to serve as a study sample. There are three divisions in Nyakach Sub County these are upper, lower and west Nyakach with eight zones. The study adopted purposive and simple random sampling technique to obtain the study sample. Out of the three divisions purposive sampling technique was used to select upper Nyakach division for the study. This is because it is more cosmopolitan. In the division there are eight zones. The researcher used simple random sampling using lottery method to select three zones for the study Tromp & Kombo, (2006). The three zones selected provided the schools where the teachers included in the study was obtained. Since there are both public and private preschools, each category was represented. 70% of the public preschool teachers were included while private preschool teachers constituted 30% of the study sample. Preschool teachers were purposively selected to get the ones to be included in the study. This was necessary owing to the classroom composition of the children in certain classes and the linguistic diversity of the teachers because these teachers are in a position to inform the study on their experiences due to linguistic diversity.

### v. Sample Size

This study used a sample size of 85 preschool teachers from both public and private preschools, this represented 70% and 30% respectively. All these came from upper Nyakach owing to its cosmopolitan nature.

**Table 2, Distribution of sample size**

Division	Zones	Category of Schools	Number of Teachers	Total Number of Teachers
Upper Nyakach	1	Public	50%	72
	3	Private	30%	13

## 6. RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

In this study the research instrument used to collect data was the questionnaire. The questionnaires were used to obtain information from the participating teachers in the study. The questionnaire was used because it covers a large sample. The items in the questionnaire are questions for preschool teachers designed to collect information on the objectives of the study. The questionnaire had both open-ended and close-ended questions. The close ended questions were chosen because they are easy to administer and analyze therefore economical both in terms of time and money. The open-ended questions are useful in collecting in-depth information from the respondents hence enriching the study. The questionnaires were administered by the researcher. The questionnaires were divided into two sections. Section one gathered general background information while section two gathered information on language related barriers in teacher-child interactions.

## 7. DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis was done qualitatively. Data was first sorted and coded. The codes were assigned to each item in the questionnaire and a code list obtained. Data was then grouped into categories to get related items. After

categorization data was interpreted, presented and discussed according to the objectives of the study and conclusions drawn from the issues addressed by the respondents.

i. **Demographic information**

This section gives the data in raw form, indicating how the respondents understood the questions. Data presentations cover biographical data of the respondents. The data is presented in table 3 below.

**Table 3: Biographical Data**

Biographical data				
Category of school	Public	Private	Total	
	54	24	78	
Highest qualification	Certificate	Diploma	Degree	Others
	41	23	8	6
Teaching experience	0-5 years	5-10 yrs	over 10 years	Total
	43	32	3	78

Source: Research Data

ii. **General information**

The data collected showed that the majority of the respondents at 69.2% were from public schools, while 30.8% were from private schools. Teachers handling the preschool children were trained from certificate to degree level. Data showed that 52.6% of the teachers were trained to certificate level, 29.4% diploma level and 10.3% degree level. Only 7.7% of the preschool teachers who responded to the questionnaires were untrained form four leavers employed by the school boards in the village schools. The teaching experience of the respondents showed that the majority (55%) of the teachers had worked as preschool teachers for less than 5 years as a result of the recruitment by the county government of Kisumu. Very few teachers had worked for more than 10 years as pre-school teachers.

**Table 4: Linguistic Diversity**

Language Diversity in Schools			
	Yes	No	Total
Language diversity of children admitted in your class	63	15	78
Do you have Children who do not understand the language you use to teach them?	62	16	78

Source: Research Data

Table 4 presents the data on linguistic diversity of children enrolled in pre-school in Nyakach Sub County, Kisumu County. The data indicate that 63 out of 78 teachers agreed that they had children from diversified linguistic backgrounds in their classes. Similarly, when asked the same question differently, nearly equal number of 62 out of 78 agreed that they have children in their classes who do not understand the language used in teaching. The data presented in table 4, above directly responds to objective one of the study that assesses the linguistic diversity of children enrolled in the pre-schools within Nyakach sub-county.

This indicates that it is a reality that there are children who are enrolled in preschools without the ability to use the language used by the teachers to instruct them. This therefore makes teacher- child interactions to be difficult as the teacher and the child are not able to have effective communication. When communication is not effective, learning is also minimal since language is fundamental to learning. Language is required for interaction in the learning environment and comprehension of curriculum content.

**Table 5: Language related barriers faced by teachers**

<b>Language related barriers faced by teachers</b>		
Do you have children who do not understand the language you use to teach them	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
	62	16
Challenges faced by teacher who do not speak language of local community	<b>Language barrier</b>	<b>Limited learning</b>
	62	16
How do the children cope with class activities	<b>They are silent</b>	<b>Active</b>
	50	28
Which alternative language is used other than The local language	<b>Kiswahili</b>	<b>English</b>
	56	22

Source: research data

The main language related barriers faced by the respondents are presented in figures. There are children enrolled in the pre-school handed over to teachers who are unable to teach in the language they understand. When asked that question, 62 pre-school teachers agreed that the enrolment is done based on age but not the language. There are teacher-child interactions difficulties faced by teachers according to table 5, which includes language barrier, limited learning, children being inactive in the class activities and are usually silent. The table also present the responses on the alternative languages the teachers often use when unable to teach using the language of catchment area. Detailed analysis of the findings is in section 4.3.

## 8. FINDINGS

The analysis of data collected from the field showed that teachers of pre-school children in Nyakach sub- County face numerous challenges related to the language of instruction. During the early age of schooling, children enrolled to the schools only understand their mother tongue and are unable to comprehend Kiswahili or English. This means that in many occasions, there is no communication taking place between the teachers who cannot speak the child's mother tongue and the child. As a result of the language barrier and miscommunication some of the children remain passive in class.

When asked the challenges faced when instructing pre-school children, more than half of the teachers noted that language barrier is their main challenge. These finding, tally with the statistics of the number of children who do not understand the language used by their teachers to teach them, which is at 79.5%. The language barrier is on two fronts; first, the children being unable to understand either English or Kiswahili, which are languages used in the examination; and two, the teacher being unable to speak and understand the language of the catchment area or the mother tongues of the children from other ethnic groups within the area such as the Abagusii and Kipsigis among others. As a result of the language barrier, 16 out of 78 making 20.5% of the pre-school teachers noted that there is limited learning taking place. The children are unable to speak and understand the language used by their teachers, unless they see or copy from their classmates. This makes them passive and unable to follow the class activities.

Further, when the teachers were asked how the children cope with class activities, 64.1% of the teachers said that as a result of the language barrier, children who do not understand the language used by the teachers to teach are always silent in class, while only 35.9% said that they are active in class activities. The analysis show that the majority of the children are silent and inactive in class, indicating that there is limited learning and poor interaction between the pre-school teachers and the children because of the language barrier.

This means that in classes where language barriers exist, minimal learning takes place. This means that a lot of learning time is spent on looking at ways and means of assisting the learner to get the concept being taught and as a result learning is slowed. On another level, the teacher gets frustrated and may ignore the child and only concentrate on the other children who get along. This results in the children missing out on important activities. The children sometimes become naughty in class in order to get the teacher's attention thus disrupting learning activities.

The findings are presented in figure 1 below.

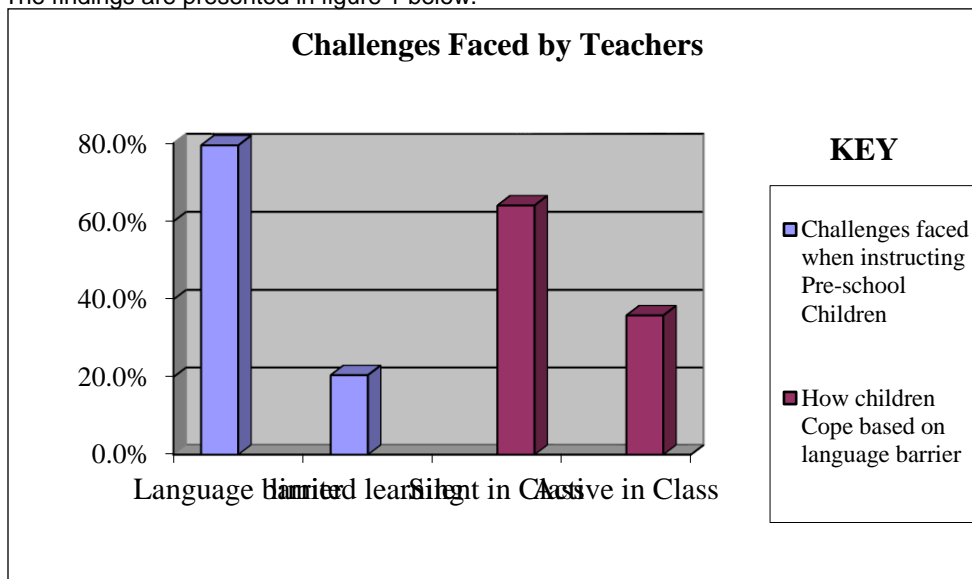
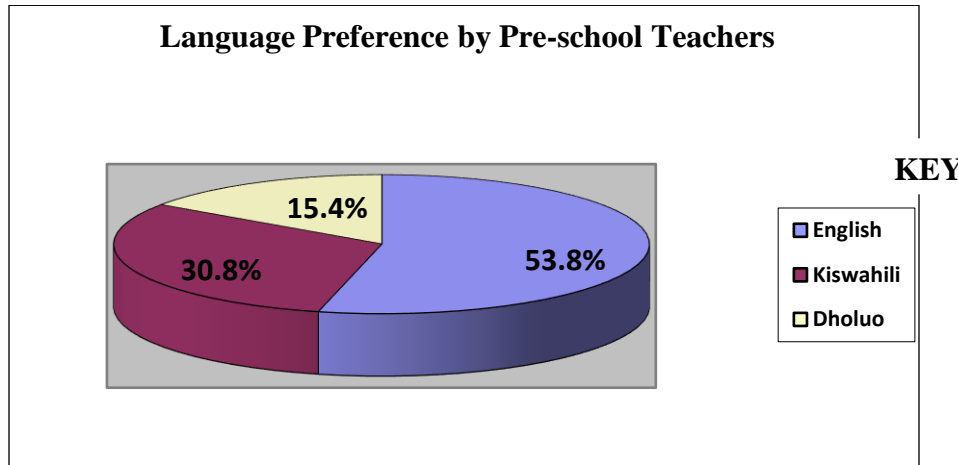


Figure 1: Challenges faced by teachers

The alternative language used by teachers to try to communicate with the children who do not understand the language of the catchment area or by teacher who do not speak the language of the catchment area are Kiswahili preferred by (71.8%) pre-school teachers who returned their questionnaires, while (28.2%) said they use English. Similarly, when teachers were asked their preferred language, 42 (53.8%) preferred that pre-school children be instructed in English, with a reason that books used are written in English and exams are done in English thus teaching in English would start preparing the children early and be able to answer tests done in English. Twenty four (30.8%) of the teachers preferred using Kiswahili as a language of instruction, with a reason that other than mother tongue, Kiswahili is understood by a reasonable number of children compared to English. Lastly, 12 (15.4%) of the teachers preferred the use of Dholuo with a reason that education policy states that the language of the catchment area be used when instructing preschool children. The choice of language and the preference of the language used in which 81.6% of the teachers do not use the language of the catchment area is a clear finding that children have language barrier and are largely unable to follow class activities. This impedes quality of learning among the preschool children in Nyakach sub- county Kisumu County. This analysis effectively responds to objective two and research question two of the study which was to determine the language related barriers faced by teachers who teach children whose language they are unfamiliar with.

These findings indicate that children are taught using either English or Kiswahili because this is the language the teacher understands. This is against the language policy as children should be taught using the language of catchment area. It was also found out that most private schools regardless of language policy require teachers to instruct children in English. This also hampered teacher-child interaction as most children do not understand the language (English) as it is not used outside the learning environment.





**Figure 2: Preferred language by teachers**

## 9. CONCLUSION

The study sought to investigate the language related barriers and teacher-child interactions in preschool in Nyakach sub county, Kisumu County. Based on the findings, the study concludes that language barrier results from the children from other ethnic groups like Abagusii and Kipsigis among others who do not speak or comprehend Dholuo language, which is the language of the catchment area recommended for instruction.

## 10. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is also recommended that in areas and schools with diverse linguistic composition, teachers to be equipped with skills to help them handle diverse learners in their classrooms. This is because is because most teachers find children from diverse linguistic backgrounds in their classrooms whom they are not able to handle.

Recommendations for further research

Based on the concern that language influences teacher-child interaction in preschools, the researcher suggests that a study could be done to assess training needs of preschool teachers who handle children from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

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