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Methods used to assess learners in English reading comprehension skills for effective communication in Public Primary Schools in Keiyo North Sub-County, Kenya.

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Abstract: Reading comprehension is one of the most important skills for learners not only in English language learning but also in other school subjects in the school curriculum. The inability of the pupils to read and comprehend in English language effectively remains a challenge to learners of English as a second language particularly at primary school level. For the teacher to find out whether learners are comprehending what they are reading, assessment needs to be done during and after the lesson. The purpose of this paper was to examine the methods used to assess learners in English reading comprehension skills for effective communication. The study was based on Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social interaction and his concept of zone of proximal development (ZPD). Descriptive survey research design was adopted. The sample for the study was obtained through proportionate sampling, simple random sampling, and purposive sampling. The study sample consisted of 112 Standard 7 pupils and 16 teachers from 8 selected schools. Data was collected using questionnaires, interview schedules and observation checklist. Piloting of the instruments was done. Reliability of the instruments was tested using test retest technique. A reliability coefficient above 0.8 was obtained and considered acceptable. Both qualitative and quantitative data was generated. Qualitative data was organized according to the study themes and presented descriptively on the basis of the study objectives. Descriptive statistics was used to analyse quantitative data. Quantitative data was coded and entered in the computer for analysis using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The data was analysed in line with the objectives and summarized in tables and pie charts. The study found out that several methods were used in assessing learners. The most frequently used method were written questions, then oral questions and silent reading. However, the most effective method identified was written answers followed by aloud reading and silent reading.

Keywords: Assessment methods, Reading Comprehension Skills, Instructional Materials.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Assessment is a crucial part of the instructional process in determining the learner's progress. It provides guidance for revision, feedback to both the learners and teachers that they can use to improve teaching and learning of reading comprehension skills (Kroll, 2003). According to Isaacson (1996) a teacher cannot ensure students' success and make necessary adjustments in instruction without engaging in frequent assessment. He further asserts that self-assessment helps students take ownership for their own reading and enables them internalize the skills they are learning. Assessment is therefore an important consideration in planning for teaching. Assessments must thus closely resemble meaningful learning tasks and assess the acquisition of high level thinking and reasoning abilities as integral to subject matter knowledge.

Chuunga (2013) says that assessment plays two roles in education. Firstly, it is used to evaluate teaching and learning. Secondly, it is used to support learners having difficulties. So evaluation is an integral part of the teaching and learning process. Spiller (2009) supports this view and notes that assessment is part of the learning cycle and adds value to student's performance. In addition, the assessment information assist in interpretation, monitoring student progress, giving constructive feedback, and improving both student learning and teaching methods (Flanagan et al, 2009)

In English reading comprehension skills, assessment will indicate areas where learners demonstrate their strengths and weaknesses. It also shows how well they are able to extract information and analyse what they are reading (Cullingfold, 2001). On the other angle of assessment, Blair-Larsen and Williams (2004) point out the importance of assessing reading comprehension skills. In their way of assessment, a learner reads one or more samples of grade level materials out loud for one minute. These total number of words read in one minute

is used as base core and the number of errors subtracted from this amount. Some of the errors to be noted as the learner reads are: omissions, substitution and mispronunciation. If learners do not successfully read a word after three seconds, the word is supplied by the teacher and counted as an error, inserted words/errors that are self-corrected are not considered as errors. The final score is determined by the number of words correct per minute.

According to Cullingford (2001), teachers should constantly diagnose children's abilities: not allowing an initial impression to influence their attitudes, but must be concerned with the children's attitudes as well as skills. The teacher needs to find ways of assessing the individual learner by making criteria reference marks with criteria being different for each individual child's needs.

The purpose of using assessment is to test whether learning and lesson objectives are met (N'Namdi, 2005). He further explained that forms of assessment must be based on reflection of what is taught in the classroom as well as be varied and relevant to the lessons. Haley and Austin (2004) point out that assessment method is not the only means of determining learners' progress, but, are also tools to make the learning and instruction more cohesive and interactive. Assessment needs to be reflexive and teachers need to act in case. It helps to mirror the design of the English reading programmes. It can enrich further development, revisions, modifications and implementation to suit the needs and the levels of the growing child.

K.I.E (2002) recommends reading comprehension passages, answering multiple choice questions on passages, reading extracts and cuttings from magazines and newspapers as some of the methods of assessing English reading comprehension. Herbert (2003) points out that reading assessment can be done by form of text comprehension. Text comprehension is usually assessed through questions. Comprehension questions should focus on main ideas and viewpoints, not minor details. Hempenstall (2009) argues that the purpose of reading comprehension assessment includes comparing one learners' progress to that of their peers, screening learners for special assistance, measuring an individual's progress over a period of time, diagnosing particular areas of strength or weakness, using information for decisions about instruction, and determining placement within a reading comprehension. From the foregoing review, it is evident that relevant assessment methods are an essential pre-requisite in the teaching and learning of English reading comprehension. This study sought to investigate the frequently used and effective assessment methods for English reading comprehension in Keiyo North Sub County.

Study Design and Methodology

This study was carried out in Public Primary School within Keiyo North Sub-County in ElgeyoMarakwet County. The choice of Keiyo North Sub-County for the study was due to its low literacy levels in English language (Uwezo 2015) and like many others parts of the County its performance in English language as in many public primary schools at the Kenya National Examination level has been poor (KNEC report 2016).

The study employed descriptive survey design. This considered appropriate since it would allow the researchers collect quantifiable information from the sample (Kombo and Tromp 2006 cited in Ochera and Munyasi, 2013) the population from which the sample for this study was drawn consisted of 8 public primary school and 16 teachers of English language.

The researcher employed purpose sampling technique to obtain a representative sample of public primary school for this study. This technique was used because the researcher wished to include only those schools that perform poorly in English language at KCPE in Keiyo North Sub-County and Atlasian (2003) recommend at least 10% to 20% of the targeted Public Primary Schools were selected so that enough time would use to collect the data. This was a total of 16% out of 78 public primary school as shown in Table 1 eventually 30% of the sampled schools were selected by simple random sampling technique for classroom observation. The choice of 30% was based on Orodho (2008) recommendations. A total of eight school and eight lessons were selected for observation.

The total number of teachers handling English language at standard seven was 161 therefore 10% was 16 teachers. This number was divided among 8 schools that resulted to 2 teachers per school selected using simple random sampling.

Information was collected using questionnaires for teachers and classroom observation checklist. These research instruments were designed by the researchers in line with the research objective and research questions. The teachers' questionnaires consisted of two sections; A and B. Sector A captured biographical information which was used to obtain teachers highest academic qualification, experienced in teaching the subject and training background.

Section B contained questions on the availability and use of instructional materials used to teach English reading comprehension skills. The observation checklist was used to get the kind instructional materials available in the classroom and how they were used. The researcher observed one English lesson from each of the sampled eight schools which lasted for a period of 35 minutes each.

To validate the test items, the questionnaire was discussed with educational research experts for their input and verification. A pilot study was conducted in one school in order to eliminate items that would have

likely elicited no response. The Instrument was then amended accordingly after piloting. A test-retest strategy was to establish the reliability of the instruments. The questionnaires were administered within a period of two weeks. The responses to the questionnaires were assigned numeral values. to test the reliability of the tools the researcher used Cronbach's Alpha. A Cronbach's alpha of 0.86 was obtained indicating that the research instruments were reliable and therefore adopted for the study.

Table 1: Sample Table. Keiyo North Sub-County Grid size.

Division	Public Primary Schools	Sampled Schools
Kamariny	42	8
Tambach	36	8
Total	78	16

Source: Researcher (2017)

II. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The data which was used to address this objective was collected using pupils' interview schedule, teachers' questionnaires and the observation schedule.

Teachers' questionnaire sought information on the frequency of assessing learners in English reading comprehension skills. Table 2 below summarizes their responses:

Table 2. Assessment methods in Teaching Reading comprehension

Assessment methods	Never F(%)	Rarely F(%)	Occasionally F(%)	Frequently F(%)	Always F(%)	Mean
Written answers	0(00)	0(00)	3(18.8)	3(18.8)	10(62.5)	4.44
oral questions	1(6.3)	0(00)	0(00)	7(43.8)	8(50)	4.31
Filling in gaps	0(00)	0(00)	7(43.8)	4(25)	5(31.3)	3.88
Reading aloud	1(6.3)	1(6.3)	6(37.5)	5(31.3)	3(18.8)	3.44
Silent reading	0(00)	1(6.3)	3(18.8)	6(37.5)	6(37.5)	4.06
Rearranging sentences	0(00)	4(25)	6(37.5)	1(6.3)	5(31.3)	3.44

Source: Field Data (2017)

The analysis of results revealed that 3 (18.8%) teachers said that written answers are occasionally used as assessment methods in reading comprehension, 3 (18.8%) said it was frequently used while 10 (62.5%) said it was always used. 1 (6.3%) said oral questions are never used, 7 (43.8%) said it was frequently used while 8 (50%) said it was always used. 7 (43.8%) said that filling in gaps is occasionally used, 4 (25%) said it was frequently used while 5 (31.3%) said it was always used. 1 (6.3%) said that reading aloud is never used, 1 (6.3%) said its rarely used, 6 (37.5%) said its occasionally used, 5 (31.3%) said its frequently used while 3 (18.8%) said its always used. 1 (6.3%) said that silent reading is rarely used, 3 (18.8%) said it was occasionally used, 6 (37.5%) said it frequently used and 6 (37.5%) said its used always. 4 (25%) said rearranging sentences is rarely used, 6 (37.5%) said its occasionally used, 1 (6.3%) is frequently used while 5 (31.3%) said its always used. From the analysis of data, written answer is the most used assessment method of reading comprehension followed by oral questions. Reading aloud and rearranging sentences are least used.

According to Isaacson (1996) self-assessment helps learners take responsibility for their own reading and enables them internalize the skills they are learning. Collingfold (2001) says that assessment shows how well leaners are able to extract information and analyze what they are reading.

Teachers' questionnaire also sought information on the effectiveness of the assessment methods used in teaching English reading comprehension skills. Table 3 below summarizes their responses:

Table 3 Effectiveness of the assessment methods

Assessment methods	Not effective F(%)	Less Effective F(%)	Average F(%)	Effective F(%)	Very Effective F(%)	Mean
Written answers	1(6.3)	0(00)	1(6.3)	8(50)	6(37.5)	4.13
Filling in gaps	1(6.3)	0(00)	6(37.5)	6(37.5)	3(18.8)	3.63
Aloud reading	0(00)	1(6.3)	4(25)	5(31.3)	6(37.5)	4.00
Silent reading	1(6.3)	1(6.3)	2(12.5)	5(31.3)	7(43.8)	4.00
Rearranging	1(6.3)	1(6.3)	6(37.5)	4(25)	4(25)	3.56

sentences						
Completing	1(6.3)	1(6.3)	3(18.8)	5(31.3)	6(37.5)	3.88
sentences						

Source: Field Data (2017)

The analysis of data revealed that 1 (6.3%) teacher said that written answers are not effective, 1(6.3%) said it was average, 8 (50%) said it was effective while 6 (37.5%) said it was very effective. 1 (6.3%) said filling the gaps was not effective, 6 (37.5%) said it was average, 6 (37.5%) said it was effective while 3 (18.8%) said it was very effective. 1 (6.3%) said loud reading was less effective, 4 (25%) said it was average, 5 (31.3%) said it was effective while 6 (37.5%) said it was very effective. 1 (6.3%) said silent reading was not effective, 1 (6.3%) said it was less effective, 2 (12.5%) said it was average, 5 (31.3%) said it was effective while 7 (43.8%) said it was very effective. 1 (6.3%) said that rearranging sentences said it was not effective, 1 (6.3%) said it was less effective, 6 (37.5%) said it was average, 4 (25%) said it was effective and 4 (25%) said it was very effective. 1 (6.3%) said completing sentences was not effective, 1 (6.3%) said it was less effective, 3 (18.8%) said it was average, 5 (31.3%) said it was effective while 6 (37.5%) said it was very effective. From the analysis of data, the teachers felt that written answers were the most effective methods used in assessing English reading comprehension followed by reading aloud and silent reading. Rearranging sentences was the least effective method used.

From observation schedule the below data was obtained

Mode of Assessment	Used	Not Used	Effectively/ Not Effectively used
Writing comprehension	8	0	Used effectively
Oral comprehension	6	2	Used effectively
answers			
Filling gaps	5	3	Used effectively
Reading aloud	5	3	Not used effectively
Silent reading	6	2	Not used effectively

From the observation schedule, the most used method of assessment is writing comprehension, writing oral comprehension answers and silent reading. Filling gaps and reading loud were less used. Writing comprehension, oral comprehension answers and filling gaps were effectively used while reading aloud and silent reading were not used effectively.

From the questionnaires and observation schedules, writing answers was identified as the most effective method of assessment. However, there was mixed feelings on reading aloud and reading silently as methods of assessment. Whereas the teachers questionnaire identified reading aloud and reading silently as effective, observation schedules identified these two methods as used ineffectively.

Assessment is a way of getting feedback from both the learner and the teacher. This will help both parties develop necessary strategies for improvement. Chinga (2013) supports this argument and adds that assessment is used to evaluate teaching and learning in the classroom. He also said that assessment is used to support learners with learning difficulties. N'namdi (2005) asserts that the purpose of using assessment is to test whether learning and lesson objectives are met.

III. CONCLUSION

There are several methods identified that are used to assess learners in English reading comprehension skills. The most frequently used method was written answers, then oral questions and silent reading. The most effective method identified was written answers followed by aloud reading and silent reading. Isaacson (1996) said that self-assessment helps learners take responsibility for their own reading and enables them internalize the skills they are learning. Chinga (2013) supports this argument and adds that assessment is used to evaluate teaching and learning in classroom.

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