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***Learning to read in English in different environments:
A case of selected schools in Lusaka and Mufulira Districts***

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ABSTRACT

This study mainly focused on learning to Read in English in Differing Environments. Selected public and private schools in Lusaka and Mufulira urban districts in Zambia were targeted, with a population of all Grade 3 learners, totaling 150. Reading tests, semi-guided interviews, focus group discussions and a check list for lesson observation were done. A qualitative approach was used to probe and to get deep insights of how reading in English was taught. The qualitative data was analysed through the identification of teachers' common themes, descriptions and experiences. Conclusions were reached and analysed with reference to the research questions. Quantitative data was analysed using a t-test to compare the reading levels between learners in public basic and private schools. The findings indicate that learners in private schools have a conducive environment for learning how to read in English. The study found that public basic schools do not use the recommended PRP. Public schools did not have enough teaching and learning materials. It was established that learners in public schools did not read according to their reading levels while learners in private schools did that effectively. The recommendations were that the Ministry of Education needed to provide enough equipment and materials, and train teachers appropriately as well as carry out regular inspection exercises. In the same way, it was incumbent on the school authorities to cooperate with parents.

INTRODUCTION

The recurring evidence of exceptionally low levels of literacy among learners in the lower school grades in the sub-Sahara region are of great concern. The Southern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) reported poor reading performance at Grade 6 level in the Zambian basic schools (Nkamba and Kanyika, 1998). The countries involved in the SACMEQ study were Zambia, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Namibia and Mauritius. The study showed that in 1995, of the 148 Grade 6 learners in the defined target population in Zambia, only 25 per cent could read at the defined Grade 6 minimum reading levels and only 3 per cent could read at any acceptable level. These results were consistent with those of Namibia and Mauritius. The SACMEQ study demonstrated that Zambian and Zimbabwean learners showed the lowest performance in reading, both in English and in their own local language.

Kelly (2000) also reported that Grades 1 to 6 pupils performed below the level expected in literacy in both English and a Zambian Language. For instance, in English, learners in a given grade obtained scores that would be expected of learners who were two grades lower, while in a Zambian Language, learners in a given grade obtained scores that would be expected of learners who were three grades lower.

The National Assessment Report (2008) says that the low levels of learning achievement are deeper and start earlier, having as their origin the poor achievements in the lower grades. If little learning has occurred in grades 1-4, it will be extraordinarily difficult to remedy the situation in grade 5. Hence, all the necessary steps should be taken in the earlier grades to prevent the problem from developing. This can be done only by concentrating efforts on ensuring that real and substantial learning occurs in grades 1-4.

The current policy in Zambia is that initial literacy for a school child is supposed to be acquired in a local language most familiar to the child, through a specially designed programme called the Primary Reading Programme (PRP). The choice of which language should be used for initial literacy depends on the location where the child lives and the language used in education in that province. The following are the recognized official local languages for education in Zambia. Bemba is used in Luapula, Northern, Copperbelt, and the eastern parts of Central Province. Nyanja is used in the Eastern Province and eastern parts of

Lusaka Province. Lozi is used in Western Province. Tonga is used in Southern Province and western parts of Central Province. Kaonde is used in the eastern parts of North Western Province, and Lunda and Luvale in the western parts of North Western Province. However, the Ministry of Education (MoE) has maintained English as the medium of instruction throughout the country (MoE, 1996).

The Government of the Republic of Zambia (GRZ) decided to change the language of initial literacy from English to a most familiar local language due to the conclusions arrived at in a study by Williams (1993) which adduced evidence in support of the hypothesis that learning initial literacy in the most familiar local language may aid acquisition of literacy in a second language. The hypothesis follows Vygotsky's (1986) characterization of learning to speak in one's first language as symbolization at stage 1 (oral symbolization) and that of learning to write in one's first language as symbolization at stage 2 (graphic symbolization). Learning to read and write in a language that one is still learning to speak is like learning to symbolize at the two successive stages but concurrently. This is what is proving to be difficult for the Zambian children to achieve, which is in line with Vygotsky's (1986) anticipation in the characterization of learning to speak (oral symbolization) and learning to read and write (graphic symbolization) as sequential skills. There has thus been growing evidence indicating that learning to read in unfamiliar language is a big challenge for young learners because they have to learn two complex skills simultaneously, as explained here above. Studies in literate societies have long made discoveries that a high level of oral proficiency in the language of instruction is required for learners to benefit from reading instructions in school (Dickinson, et. al., 2003).

From 1999 when GRZ implemented the change of policy on the language of initial literacy in all public schools, initial literacy has been taught in a familiar local language in all public schools while English has been used in all private schools. This implies that the government has recognized the critical role of Zambian languages to enhance literacy levels by introducing the PRP. The government also committed itself to providing adequate infrastructure and equipment to all public learning institutions. In support of this, the Ministry of Education (1996:vii) stated that "In order to run a responsible democratic education system, there is need to pay particular attention to capacity building through training and re-training, provision of infrastructure and equipment, logistics and adequate funding."

However, despite all these efforts by the government, literacy levels among Zambian children are still low. Providing further evidence of this, research conducted by Matafwali has shown that despite the existence of a rich literacy programme in Zambia, the reading level of the majority of Zambian children is remarkably low (Matafwali, 2010). This study further revealed that 50% of grade one and grade two children involved in the study either scored zero or could read only one word on the reading subset testing either in a Zambian language or in English.

However, no study has been done to establish how the government has provided the needed supportive environment to implement the Primary Reading Programme (PRP) in schools as provided for in Educating Our Future (MoE 1996). This study, therefore, sought to find out and describe the environment in which learners in public and private schools learn to read in English. It also sought to establish the possible effects the varying environments might have on the learners' ability to acquire the reading skills.

However, not enough is known about the environment in which children learn how to read in English among Grade 3 learners in public and private schools. The problem under investigation, stated as a question, was: In what environment do Grade 3 learners in public and private schools learn how to read in English?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design: This study was a case study of Grade 3 pupils from selected public and private schools in Mufulira and Lusaka districts. It was partly naturalistic in that it involved observation of live lessons. This allowed the subjects to be studied in their natural state in the learning process, undisturbed by the researcher. The researcher observed reading lessons at the selected schools and later had interviews with the class teacher based on the lessons observed. The study was also experimental because learners were tested in reading, in terms of the following: whole words, sentences, word initial sound, word final sound, and reading for comprehension and quantitative data was collected. The work was based on Step in English (SITE) grade two works.

Delimitation: This study was confined to Mufulira and Lusaka urban districts. Mufulira district is located on the Copperbelt province, of Zambia. It is mainly a mining town whose major mineral is copper. Lusaka is the capital city of Zambia and is located in the central part of the country. It is a commercial and industrial backbone of the country.

Sampling Procedure: The study sample consisted of ten classes in all, one class from each of the selected school located in Mufulira and Lusaka urban districts. The researcher looked at Grade 2 end of year results in reading to establish the highest, the medium and the lowest achievers, thus using stratified random sampling. Then the researcher sampled the learners from each group (highest, medium and lowest achievers) by giving them numbered pieces of papers to choose from. The pieces of paper were put in a black plastic bag and shuffled several times. The sample size from the three groups was 15 learners from each selected school and the total was 150 learners. The observation of the lessons was done in the class where the 150 learners tested were sampled from. Grade three teachers from the selected schools were used as informants in the study.

Data Collection: The different types of data collection techniques used were as follows. Pupils were tested in their reading abilities by giving them two reading comprehension tests on different days. The work was marked and the marks were recorded and used in the t-test. A lesson observation guide was used to observe literacy lessons. Thereafter, the researcher interviewed the teacher basing the questions on the lesson observed in class for reading in English. Face to face unstructured interviews were held with teachers to find out more on the reading abilities of their pupils. A focus group discussion guide was used to collect data from informants who were Grade 3 teachers. The questions sought to solicit the teachers' feelings and opinions on the learners' reading abilities. The discussions were tape recorded. An observation check list was used to take stock of the learning environment and the following information was captured: sitting arrangement, number of learners in class, learning resources available, time tabling of reading lessons, talking walls, or anything which could either encourage or discourage learning to read and write.

Data Analysis: Quantitative data collected from the pupils' reading tests were analysed using the t-test. The data collected using focus group discussions, interviews, and class observation was analysed using the thematic approach; meaning identifying themes.

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FINDINGS

Infra-structure: The purpose of investigating on the infrastructure was to find out if the buildings in which the learners were learning how to read were appropriate. Under the investigation on infra-structure were included such structures as classrooms and library facilities. To ascertain the appropriateness of the buildings, the researcher sought the school administrators' permission to inspect each of the buildings used by the investigated learners for the learning of reading in English.

Classroom: The study made the following observations on the classrooms in which the Grade 3 learners from the 10 selected schools were learning to read in English. Schools 1 to 5 were private schools, and schools 6 to 10 were public basic schools. Tables 1 and 2 give a summary of factors affecting classroom space.

Table 1: Summary of factors affecting classroom space availability in private schools

<i>Schools</i>	<i>Number of Pupils</i>	<i>Number of desks</i>	<i>Teacher's table</i>	<i>Teacher's chair</i>
1	20	12	1	1
2	22	12	2	1
3	22	12	2	1
4	20	12	2	1
5	28	14	1	1

Schools 1 to 5 had enough desks and learners sat comfortably, two learners at each desk.

Table 2: Summary of factors affecting classroom space availability in public schools

<i>Schools</i>	<i>Number of Pupils</i>	<i>Number of desks</i>	<i>Teacher's table</i>	<i>Teacher's chair</i>	<i>Desks Needed</i>	<i>Difference of desks Needed</i>
6	49	20	1	1	25	05
7	58	18	1	1	29	11
8	59	20	1	1	30	10
9	57	20	1	1	29	09
10	47	16	1	1	24	08

Schools 6 to 10 had insufficient desks as Table 2 shows. School 6 had a deficit of 5 desks. School 7 had a deficit of 11 desks, school 8 had a deficit of 10 desks, School 9 had a deficit of 9 desks and school 10 had a deficit of 8 desks.

The researcher took account of the sitting arrangement of the learners in the classrooms. It was established that in public basic schools learners were crowded in all the selected classrooms. As evidenced in Table 2. School 5 had an interesting setup. The desks were arranged in 3 rows at school 5, which made it difficult for the learners to work in groups. Some learners were distracted when the others were making noise. There was communication breakdown when it was time for group work. School 5 had 2 small windows and a small bookshelf in front. Congested warm classrooms tend to make learners become sleepy, inattentive, and consequently bored and disruptive.

Class-management: To ascertain the classroom management, the observer physically went into the classrooms and met the teachers and learners, then observed lessons on learning how to read in English, and then later discussed the lessons with the teachers.

The researcher observed that all the schools involved in the study divided their classes into four reading groups with each group given an identifying name having a given number of members for each group.

The private schools: In the private schools, the classes contained between 20 and 28 learners. There were two learners occupying a desk meant for two, while teachers kept a class library for the learners with books enough to go round and work cards for their individual practice. School activities were well-organized and learners kept time in all activities. Learners were divided into groups of not more than seven for each group. Moreover, the learners were well-disciplined and had well-ordered desks during lessons. It was rare for the researcher to observe instances of absenteeism.

The public schools: The public schools, however, presented a different scenario concerning class enrolment. The numbers ranged between 47 and 59 learners per class. Here also, as in the private schools, the classes were divided into four reading groups with the minimum of thirteen learners in a group, each given an identification name. However, most of the schools did not have a common library, except the class ones which also did not have sufficient and appropriate reading books for the particular grade. Furthermore, it was observed that quite often learners were absent from lessons due to reasons such as a rainy day. Besides, activities

such as sports and others that are of entertainment nature took prime stage, thereby replacing reading and writing lessons.

The researcher discovered that the furniture in the public schools, especially desks for the learners, was insufficient in that there would be three learners sharing a desk meant for two and some pupils preferred to sit on the mat or carpet when writing, doing Individual Learning Activity (ILA).

Supporting libraries facilities: All the private schools (school 1-5) had the library infrastructure and a qualified librarian to manage it. The study revealed that the librarian helped the learners to choose books according to their reading levels and interest. The old readers from the ZPC were also used by learners who usually took them home to read over the weekend. In addition, teachers managed a class library for the learners with enough books to go round, and they gave the learners work cards for their individual practice. At schools 1 to 4 the library period was used for extension reading where learners used the Oxford Reading Tree co-books, for each grade from grade 1 to 4. The teacher's duty was to ensure that he/she listened to the learners read so as to identify difficulties (words, phrases, sentences) which would be included in the learner's 'Reading Signing Book' for the attention of the librarian and the parents or guardians. Then, the parents signed the books after assisting the learners. The learners showed willingness and actively participated in the reading lessons at these schools. Learners read the books at home with the help of more knowledgeable other (MKO) persons. This is called 'Shared Reading'. In addition, the study found that the learners recorded whatever happened at school and at home in their 'journals'. Each learner read aloud his/her journal to the class on either Friday or Monday. A journal is a pupil's exercise book organized like a diary for daily record of his/her activities in school or at home. In these private schools, each learner kept records of books read successfully. At school 5 it was observed that the learners were not allowed to carry the library books home. The learners were only allowed to read the books during the library lesson.

On the contrary, the public schools in the study had only class libraries managed by the class teachers only. Most of these libraries did not have sufficient and appropriate reading books for the particular grade. All the public schools had many English readers from the Zambia

Primary Course (ZPC) and other old readers in English but which were packed in the senior teachers' offices without being used.

It was also observed that learners in private schools spent more time practising reading, for instance, at the library and in the classroom than their friends in public schools who did not have enough books to practice reading in class.

Materials: The reason for seeking to know if the investigated schools had learning to read materials in English was to discover if the schools had the appropriate and adequate books, charts and other equipment.

The researcher observed that the Ministry of Education recommended books from different publishers and the public schools were at liberty to choose and buy a title of their choice. The following were some of the recommended books for Grade 3: *Breakthrough to English* by Longman, *English Grade 3* by Macmillan, *Stepping Stones Grade 3* by Maidens, *Grade 3 English* by Insaka, and *New Progressive English Grade 3* by Oxford University Press.

In schools 1 to 4 private schools, learners used a variety of reading materials. They used a combination of Oxford Reading Tree and Zambian reading books. At school 5 they used English Grade 3 books and ROC activity books. At these schools reading books in English were sufficient for all learners. The learners were also involved in reading games and reading clubs. Either Wednesday or Friday afternoons were spent on reading new words from the "talking walls" for that week. It was observed that at private schools they had "talking walls" for all the subjects. The teachers changed the "talking walls" every week replacing the old with new ones. At school 3, learners were encouraged to read the Zambian language vowels which were written on some of the talking walls although it was not taught as a subject at this school. Parents and guardians requested the school administration to teach the learners how to read in a Zambian language so that they could learn to pronounce their Zambian names properly, not like the way foreigners would do.

The researcher also found that it was standard practice in the private schools administration to inform parents/guardians about the kind of books required for the following term for them to buy.

Table 3: Books used by learners in private schools

School	Textbook title	Number of copies	Number of pupils
1	Break Through To English 3	30	20
	Stepping stones	24	
	ZPC, Work book 1,	20	
	New progressive English	22	
	ROC Activity book according to level.	6 in each level	
2	New Progressive English 3,	25	22
	Stepping stones,	22	
	Break Through To English 3	23	
	ZPC workbook 1,	08 in each level	
	ROC Activity book according to level.		
3	Stepping stones	25	22
	Ginn level 6,	22	
	New Progressive English 3, Junior	23	
	English 1,	23	
	Explore English,	23	
	ZPC workbook 1	22	
ROC Activity book according the level	06 in each level		
4	Ginn level 6.	20	20
	New Progressive English 3,	25	
	Junior English 1,	25	
	Explore English,	22	
	ZPC workbook 1	19	
	ROC Activity books	5 in each level	
5	ROC Activity book according to level,	8 in each level	28
	English Grade 3 by Macmillan	29	
	Stepping stones,	29	
	New Progressive English 3	29	

Source: Field Data 2010

It was a different story for the public schools where, ten years after the inception of the PRP, there had not been any replenishing of the reading books' kits that had been received in the schools. In most public schools, it was observed that reading books in English were not enough for the learners to read individually. It was observed that at schools 7 and 10, learners in Grade 3 were using books meant for Grade 2 both at starting time and sharing time. At these schools, teachers wrote part of the story of the day's lesson on the chalk board. The teacher then read the story aloud and allowed few learners to read aloud after him/her. Most learners were not able to read the given tasks. Instead, the teacher asked the learners to answer questions based on the story in their books. Lack of learner's textbooks and other

teacher's supporting materials made teachers feel that a variety of possible approaches to teaching reading were limited and inadequate. The study observed that in all public schools studied, learners were slow in performing the writing tasks assigned to them by the teacher.

Table 4: Books used by learners in public basic schools

School	Textbook title	Number of copies	Number of pupils
6	Break through to English, ROC Activity: Red level, Yellow level Green level	15	49
		02	
		05	
		06	
7	English Grade 3 by Macmillan, ROC Activity: Red level, Yellow level Green level	20	58
		06	
		04	
		08	
8	Stepping stones ROC Activity book: Red level, Yellow level Green level	18	59
		05	
		03	
		02	
9	English Grade 3 by Macmillan, ROC Activity: Red level, Yellow level Green level.	20	57
		08	
		02	
		03	
10	English Grade 3 by Macmillan, ROC Activity: Red level, Yellow level Green level	16	47
		05	
		03	
		01	

In conclusion, the research established that the private schools had adequate reading materials and could easily obtain more, while the public basic schools struggled to inadequately distribute the little material they had among the large learner numbers.

The Possible Effects of the Differing Environment: The researcher needed to compare the English reading levels between learners in the investigated public basic schools and private schools. A t-test was used for the purpose.

A t-test was used to investigate the reading levels between private and public basic schools selected in Mufulira and Lusaka urban districts. The findings are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Summary of paired samples t-tests

<i>Variables tested</i>	<i>Private Mean</i>	<i>Public Mean</i>	<i>t statistic</i>	<i>Df</i>	<i>p value</i>	<i>Comment</i>
<i>Reading words</i>	52.1867	14.4267	19.623	74	0.001	<i>p value <0.05; therefore reject H_o</i>
<i>Reading initial sounds</i>	4.8133	2.6800	12.331	74	0.001	<i>p value <0.05; therefore reject H_o</i>
<i>Reading final sounds</i>	4.8800	2.6800	4.575	74	0.001	<i>p value <0.05; therefore reject H_o</i>
<i>Reading sentences</i>	16.0533	2.6800	20.433	74	0.001	<i>p value <0.05; therefore reject H_o</i>
<i>Reading comprehension</i>	9.0800	4.4533	12.903	74	0.001	<i>p value <0.05; therefore reject H_o</i>

Source: Field data, 2010

Learners in private schools performed better in all tests than the learners in public basic schools in reading words from Grade 2 teacher's SITE book. They were also tested in reading initial and final sounds, reading sentences and reading for comprehension.

From the t-test chart, it can be attested that learners in the investigated private schools read better than their counterparts in the public schools.

DISCUSSION

Public basic schools under investigation did not have a good conducive classroom environment. Classrooms were overcrowded. All the grade 3 classes in public basic schools had more than 40 learners. School 5, a private school, had a small room which was used as a

classroom for grade 3 learners. Although it had enough desks, they were arranged in three rows because of inadequate space. The findings tended to agree with Dean (1997) who suggested that the classroom should have ample space to make alternate seating arrangements. The five selected public basic schools had adequate space but fewer desks, making some learners sit either on the bare floor or on mats.

Classroom Environment: According to the second Zambian Education policy document, the policy stance (MOE1992: vii) states that "an average class size of 40 learners and classrooms to have 20 two-seater desks, for textbooks, the learner to book ratio to be 2 to 1". The five public basic schools (school 6-10) did not have enough desks to comfortably accommodate learners. Each desk was occupied by three to four learners instead of the recommended two learners per desk, giving a 3:1 pupil-desk ratio which does not promote interactivity. The problem of desks in schools goes beyond the class teacher's powers. It is the government's responsibility to provide enough desks in schools.

Teacher-pupil ratio: The teacher-pupil ratio was unbalanced in the public basic schools selected (see Table 1 and 2) - the highest was 59 and the lowest was 47. Private schools had 28 and the lowest was 20. On average public schools had a 1:54 teacher-pupil ratio compared to the 1:25 teacher-pupil ratio in private schools due to the introduction of Free Primary Education in 2002 which resulted in a substantial influx of learners in public basic schools thereby adversely affecting quality of education. Any government's expansion of the education system by increasing the enrolment of learners should increase desks and teachers to cope with the situation.

Supporting Library facilities: This study supports Marit (2003) whose research established that a well stocked library is very important in the learning process of every child in learning how to read in English. Learners in private schools had a variety of reading materials graded according to their reading levels. Keith (2004) suggested that school libraries help teachers teach children. Similarly, Clark (1999) states that a "school library is an academic library that supports school programmes as well as the teaching and learning process". Learners in private schools spent more time practising reading, for instance, at the library, and in classroom than their friends in public basic schools. As Bus and van Ijzendoorn (1995) rightly observed, book reading greatly depends on the accessibility in the community of learners to reading materials and on availability of adults in charge of the children. The selected private schools' library staff helped learners select reading materials and provided

literacy-enhancing programmes such as story-telling, music and creative arts, in line with Ministry of Education (2002) PRP recommendations.

Materials play a vital role in pupils' learning how to read in English. The selected private schools had enough class textbooks to be used by learners within the classrooms (see Table 3 and 4) having a one-to-one correspondence of book to learner, while the public schools had an average of 3 books for an average of 52 learners.

The results also revealed that it was difficult to obtain a wide variety of story books at the five selected public basic schools. This made it difficult for learners to practice reading at home.

Anderson et. al., believe that differences in reading ability are consistently associated with the availability of books so that materials play a vital role in the improvement of education. In the same way, learning to read in public basic schools was discovered to be severely hampered by an undersupply of basic text books just as Theisen et. al. (1983:29), suggest that "students who do not have their own texts to study and take home do not do as well as those who have them".

CONCLUSIONS

Classrooms: All the selected public basic schools visited did not have enough desks. Three to four learners shared a desk meant for two learners. Learners found it difficult to participate in group work, cardinal in the learner-centered approach recommended by the PRP in Zambia. Private schools had enough desks and spacious rooms except for school 5 which had a small room used by Grade 3s as a classroom to learn how to read in English. Desks were arranged in three rows which made it difficult for learners to work in groups and the room was hot because of poor ventilation.

Libraries supportive facilities: In all the selected public basic schools visited the schools did not have modern library textbooks. On the other hand, all the private schools had libraries which were well stocked with modern books.

Tests: This study established that learners at all the *selected public basic schools were not able to read according to their grade levels.*

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