



## INVESTIGATING THE LEVELS OF READING SKILLS AMONG GRADE THREE PUPILS IN NAIROBI COUNTY, KENYA

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### Abstract:

Reading skills are vital to lower primary school pupils because it is the foundation for learning. However, studies worldwide indicate low levels of reading skills in schools and little has been done to find out how different instructional strategies used in lower grade schools influence learners' acquisition of reading skills. The purpose of this study was to establish levels of reading skills among the Grade Three Pupils. The research was guided by Holdaway's Theory of Literacy Development and supported by Instructional Theory by Robert Gagne. The study established that 50% of the pupils were below average in reading of letter and letter sound recognition, 57.1% in sentence and paragraph reading, 53.6% in story reading and a mere 60.7% in comprehension skills.

**Keywords:** reading, reading skills, letter reading, letter sound

### 1. Background of the Study

Reading is a complex and active process that involves understanding of written text, developing and deducing meaning appropriately to the type of text, situation, and purpose (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2013). Reading proficiency is acknowledged as a major indicator of whether a learner will achieve the competence needed to achieve academic success and to contribute actively to society (Teale, 2003). The acquisition of reading skills is a complex intellectual [process](#) and unlike language which seems automatic, children require skilled instructions in learning to read and to develop strong reading skills (Howie, 2010).

Reading allows learners to broaden their thinking skills, learn to concentrate and expand their vocabulary. According to Gove and Cvelich (2011), learners need to absorb increasing amounts of print instructional content to empower them to master the

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learning content as they progress to the successive levels. Children who fail to learn to read in the early grades are likely to face challenges of reading in the latter grades (Blog, 2015). Through reading, learners are able to decode words and previous experiences to form the foundation and create meanings for print words (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2013).

According to Perfetti, Landi and Oakhill (2005) there are numerous reasons why many learners have struggles achieving proficient reading and comprehension skills, which requires learners to fluently decode and then understand what they are reading. Alfassi, (2014) established that reading skills and understand a simple text are the most basic skills that pupils need. Wangui (2011) in her study also asserted that, pupils in Kenya lagged behind their counterparts in Mauritius, Swaziland, Tanzania and Seychelles in reading skills. In addition, research on reading skills that have been conducted in Kenya are in harmony with these cited studies that reading skills acquisition is low (Nyamu, 2015; Ogola, 2011; UWEZO, 2011).

## 2. Literature Review

Reading skill is the ability to translate print materials to meaning. Reading levels include the phonic and phonemic awareness (letter and letter sound), whole word reading (vocabulary), sentence and paragraph reading, and story reading in comprehension (Roe & Smith, 2012). These are the skills used to improve decoding and comprehension skills to benefit the learners (Alexander, 2006). Reading skills helps the learners to learn independently and become strategic readers (Stahl, 2012).

Chaplain, (2012), established that grade three learners with strong skills to read at an early age experience quite a lot of exposure to print media and eventual advancements in a variety of knowledge domains. Amer, (2012) also identified that learner with advance reading skills may miss opportunities to develop reading comprehension strategies and often encounter reading material that is too advanced, consequently, they may acquire negative attitude about reading itself. This may lead to what Ouellette (2006) labeled as Matthew effect, in which poor reading skills impede learning in other academic areas. The reading process has five levels; phonics and phonemic awareness, whole word reading, sentence and paragraph reading and comprehension (Block & Pressley, 2012). These five levels enhance the reading skills of learners.

National Reading Panel and Center for Education (2010), defines phonics as a way of acquiring letter-sound correspondences and their use in reading and spelling. Phonic level enables the learners to be able to relate letter and letter sounds (Treiman & Kessler, 2013). According to National Reading Panel and Center for Education (2010), phonics instruction involves teaching letter sound relationships. Learners are taught the technique so that they can identify words that they do not recognize in print. Phonics strategy involves relating letter sounds to reading. It is the relationship between the letters and spellings that represent those sounds in written language (graphemes) and the sounds of spoken language (phonemes) (Wicox, 2013). In learning phonics, learners

acquire the speech sounds which are a combination of printed letters and letter combination (Marima, 2013). A series of sounds is blended by the order in which particular letters occur in printed words.

Ulusoy & Dedeoglu, (2011) identified Phonemic awareness as the understanding that letters make sounds and those sounds are systematically joined to make words. Phonemic awareness is very important in understanding phonics. According to Hempenstall (2009) once phonemic awareness is established and some sound-letter correspondences are learned, the brain begins to recognize new patterns on its own. After demonstrating phonemic awareness, learners begin to develop their phonological awareness, or their ability to rhyme, identify onset sounds, and recognize syllables (Reeb, 2011).

A study by National Reading Panel (NRP, 2011) on a meta-analysis reported that first graders who were taught phonics systematically were better able to decode and spell, and they showed significant improvement in their ability to comprehend text. The study reported that 70% of children learnt to read regardless of how they were taught, but they read more quickly if they were taught phonics, and without phonics, the remaining 30% might have had real problems with reading. A study done in India by Duke and Block (2012) found that beginning readers who were systematically taught phonics performed better than those who were not. Phonics instruction should not consist of mindless drills, should not be done to the exclusion of reading stories, and should not extend beyond the first half of first grade (Duke & Block, 2012). This study therefore investigated the importance of phonic in India while the current study sought to establish the phonic acquisition among Grade Three Pupils in Nairobi County.

Phonics learning is important because when the children are taught phonics, they will be able to recognize sound in words and spell them correctly. According to NRP (2011), phonics strategy is the most effective way in teaching reading and therefore, it is necessary to work on phonics needed at the learners reading level. This study therefore sought to establish the influence of use of phonics strategy on reading skills acquisition among Grade Three Pupils in Nairobi County.

Reading is a very important skill in both learning and communication (Teng, 2009). Reading lessons are considered an important step in the current trend of educational development of both mental and linguistic abilities (Helfrich & Bosh, 2011). Reading methods include silent reading, reading using sub-vocalization (forming the sounds of the words while reading silently), and reading orally to oneself. Silent reading means reading without labial movements or the vibration of vocal cords (Serravallo, 2010). This method implies that graphic forms are visually perceived and then transformed into meanings and ideas without passing through the vocal stage. Silent reading is usually seen as a natural reading behaviour and for decades has been associated with the idea of reading for comprehension (Hardie, 2012).

When children are able to read both letters and letter sounds, they are able to connect the letters and letter sounds to a word. Learning a [whole](#) word involves teaching children how to read words as a whole piece of language (Toste & Fuch, 2013). Proponents of the whole language philosophy believe that language is a complete

system of making meaning with words, functioning in relation to each other in context rather than breaking down language into letters and combination of letters (Bomengen, 2010). Balanced literacy is about balancing explicit language instruction with independent learning and language exploration. It aims at striking a balance between both whole word and phonics when learning to read. The strongest elements of each are incorporated into a literacy program that aims to guide students toward proficient and lifelong reading (Kimberly 2013).

Children from phonics classroom seem to develop greater ability to use words more effectively than children in more traditional classrooms where skills are practiced in isolation (Strickland, 2011). Whole-word reading is also known as whole language. This is a comprehensive and holistic approach of reading where learners focus on the meaning of words in the context of the story being read (Smeda & Sharda, 2014). Balanced literacy is a combination of phonics strategy and whole word approach in reading (Vadasy & Sanders, 2010).

In planning to teach reading skills, teachers must take into account the needs and diversity of their learners. Some learners have minimal experiences with print and will need consistent opportunities to work with connected text and meaning-based activities as well as intensive instruction in word identification strategies (Bean & Morewood, 2011). Other learners enter school with many experiences with complex print and with well-developed reading skills. These students will require less time with phonological processing activities (Jolliffe, 2012).

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### **3. Theoretical Framework**

This study was grounded by Holdaway's Theory of Literacy Development (1979). This theory was grounded on the fact that acquisition of reading skills is a complex and active process that involves developing a written text and deducing appropriate meaning from the text. Holdaway's theory asserts that, foundation of literacy development is rooted on the correct utilization of teaching strategies (group work, storytelling, play activity) in a literacy rich environment.

According to Genishi & Dyson, (2009) the Holdaway's (1979) theory of literacy development includes three postulations: (a) natural development pattern of literacy skills, (b) learning literacy through four major processes, and (c) teaching methods that

will improve the development of literacy. These three assumptions continue to drive the theory of literacy. Oral language, imitating sounds, and vocalizing words are examples of developmental language progression.

Holdaway advocates four processes of learning which include demonstration, participation, role play/practice and performance. Demonstration involves the learner listening to the teacher while learning to read. The second process is participation, where the learner participates in the reading process. The third process is role play (practice), where the learner practices what he/she has learnt from the teacher (reading process) and actively get involved in the learning process. Finally, performance involves the learner practicing the skill (reading) and becoming an independent reader (Ngure 2019).

Literacy development therefore encompasses two assumptions; acquisition of literacy skills follows a natural development pattern and that utilization of specific teaching strategies enhances literacy development. Tracy and Morrow (2006) assert that first, the children observe adults engaging in literate behavior and finally as the children progress and internalize the reading skills, they are able to become independent literate individuals. This theory asserts that, the foundation of literacy development is rooted in meaning centered instruction.

#### **4. Research Method**

The study adopted the descriptive study design and specifically mixed methods whereby quantitative and qualitative data were collected and interpreted. Quantitative data were derived from teachers' questionnaires on Grade Three children reading skills and using the reading test. Qualitative data were derived from head teachers interviews and the observation checklist (Creswell, 2009).

##### **4.1 Sample and Sample Size**

Nairobi County was purposively selected before selection of Embakasi sub-county. Multi-stage sampling was used to obtain participating schools, teachers and pupils. Multistage sampling divides large populations into stages to make the sampling process more practical. Random sampling was used to select a sample of 1 (10%) of the sub-counties from the 10 sub-counties found in Nairobi county. Embakasi sub-county was picked to represent the rest of the regions in Nairobi County since all of them were similar and without distinguishing factors among them. Embakasi sub-county is subdivided into Embakasi East, West, South, North and Central district. Each district formed a strata from which 2 schools were purposively selected based on the highest and the lowest performance in the preceding end of the term English exams making a total of 10 schools out of 20 schools in Embakasi Sub-county.

In addition, purposive sampling technique was used to select a total of 10 head teachers from the sampled schools. Purposive sampling technique was also used to select 15 Grade Three Pupils from each of the 10 sampled schools by selecting 5 high performing pupils, 5 average and 5 below average based on the preceding end of the

term test giving a total of 150 pupils. In addition, the researcher used purposive sampling to select 3 grade three teachers on average from each of the 10 sampled schools totaling to 30 teachers.

The sample size comprised 10 head teachers from the selected schools, 30 teachers and 150 Grade Three Pupils totaling to 190 respondents as indicated in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Sample frame

Categories	Target Population	Sample Size	Sampling Method
Head teachers	225	10	Purposive sampling
Grade III Teachers	675	30	Purposive sampling
Grade III Pupils	3245	150	Purposive sampling
<b>Total</b>	<b>30,900</b>	<b>190</b>	

#### 4.2 Research Procedure and Testing

The research tools that were used to gather information included; questionnaires, interviews, observation schedule and reading test for Grade Three Pupils. The instruments for this study were developed along the set objectives with each objective forming a sub- topic with relevant questions.

The researcher applied a self-designed questionnaire to collect data from Grade Three teachers. The questionnaire was divided into six sections. The first section (A) captured information on respondents' demographic profiles. Section (B) collected information on the first objective, which was the level of reading skills among Grade Three Pupils. Section (C) sought information on the second objective (part a) on the use of group work strategy. Section (D) sought information on the second objective (part b) on storytelling strategy while Section E gathered information on objective two (part c) on play activities. Section F gathered information on use of instructional resources.

The researcher used structured interviews with open-ended test items to collect qualitative data from head teachers based on a set of questions on the research objectives. Prior permission was sought for interviews and explanations were offered to rephrase any questions the respondents could not feel comfortable with. Interviews were important for this study since they allowed the researcher to ask probing questions pertaining to the availability of resources and instructional strategies used for the acquisition of reading skills among Grade Three Pupils. The questions in the interview covered all the study objectives so as to help the process of determining the research hypotheses conclusions.

An observation schedule was prepared by the researcher. The classroom observation schedule enabled the researcher to observe the instructional strategies used for teaching reading skills. The resources used in teaching reading were observed too.

The researcher adopted a reading test by Uwezo Kenya National Learning Assessment, 2014 which was used to assess Grade Three Pupils reading skills. Pupils were given the sub-tasks focused on five levels of reading, namely; letter and letter sound recognition, word recognition, paragraph and sentence level, story level and

comprehension level. This reading test was important for establishing the reading skills of Grade Three children.

Ethical considerations in research involved outlining the content of research and what was required of participants and informed consent was obtained and confidentiality ensured. The researcher obtained an introductory letter from The School of Postgraduate Studies of Kenyatta University and Authorization Letter and research permit from National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI). The researcher also sought for an authorization letter from The County Commissioner and County Director of Education, Nairobi. These letters introduced the researcher to different sampled primary schools to carry out the study in Nairobi County. In this study, privacy and confidentiality of the respondents were a major ethical concern. All responses were confidential and anonymous.

## 5. Results and Discussion

The study sought to establish the reading levels of Grade Three Pupils in public primary schools as manifested by their reading skills such as recognition of letter sounds, word recognition, paragraph reading, story reading, and comprehension skills. The first step was that the researcher administered the Uwezo test, marked the reading levels for each pupil and recorded the marks. The marks were awarded in every level of reading skills out of 100 per cent. Any mark above 70 per cent was rated good; 50-69 per cent was rated fair and below 50 per cent was rated below average. The result is as presented in table 2.

**Table 2:** Ratings of reading skills among Grade Three Pupils

Reading Skills			
	Good	Fair	Below Average
	%	%	%
Word recognition (vocabulary)	53.5	7.0	39.5
Letter and sound recognition	39.3	10.7	50.0
Story reading	32.2	10.7	57.1
Paragraph and sentence reading	32.1	14.3	53.6
Comprehension skills	28.6	10.7	60.7

From the results in Table 2, slightly more than half, 76 (53.5%) of the Grade Three Pupils were competent in word recognition. About 10 (7.0%) of the Grade Three Pupils recorded fairly good results in word recognition whereas 56 (39.5%) were below average in word recognition.

This implies that, the level of reading skills among Grade Three children was not good (Nguru 2019). During the reading process, the researcher also observed that children could not read words such as goat, umbrella, queen, mat, milk, home, teacher, parent, field, leg, sin and cup. The views of the head teachers were also in line with Bean and Morewood (2011), who advocated for careful monitoring and evaluation of reading skills.

Table 2 further indicates that 55(39.3%) of the learners recorded good performance in letter and sound recognition, 15(10.7%) performed fairly while a half, 71(50%) of them recorded below average in letter and sound recognition. This was thus an indication that the performance in letter and sound recognition was not encouraging. Further, the fact that majority of the learners recorded below average performance, is an indication that they were not well equipped to handle grade three tasks adequately. (Nguru, 2019). The findings of the current study echo those of UNESCO (2011) and also those by Uwezo (2011) which earlier found out that 70% of grade three children in East Africa could not read grade two work. The implication is that, there remained a lot to be done as far as letter/sound recognition was concerned. In fact, the challenges of inappropriate instructional methods and resources pointed out by IPAR (2008) are still faced by Grade Three pupils in Nairobi County up to date. These findings are in line with the assertions of Bell and Limber (2010) that early teaching of decoding skills lays a firm foundation for acquisition of reading skills. In other words, successful acquisition of decoding skills during the lower primary levels is a good indicator of later literacy achievement. This performance could be as a result of poor teaching methods on letter and sound recognition.

Judging from the researcher's results from Table 2, 45 (32.2%) of the Grade Three Pupils read story well, 15 (10.7%) indicated fair reading and 81 (57.1%) indicated that their pupils' story reading skills were below average. These findings revealed that majority of the pupils were below average in story reading. This could be an indication that Grade Three teachers may not be exposing the learners to adequate reading materials.

It was further observed by the researcher that 85 (60.3%) Grade Three learners read words faster without spending so much time figuring out words, were unable to recognize letters when reading words, had a high degree of difficulty with phonics patterns and activities and stumbled a lot and lost their paces when reading aloud. These findings indicate that 99 (70.2%) of the Grade Three Pupils had a problem in sound recognition, word recognition and hence could not read sentence and paragraph easily. It could also be an indication of poor reading practices by the pupils. These findings corroborate the assertions of Grende (2013) that, fluency is usually measured through oral readings, although good readers also demonstrate this skill when reading loudly.

These findings are consistent with the assertions of Hanson and Padua (2014) that word recognition plays a crucial role in reading process and that, in reading, comprehension is necessary to understand the text. These findings also lend credence to the viewpoints held by The NICHD (2000) and NRP (2000) that sound and word recognition lead to better comprehension skills. Further, Glende (2013) confirms that pupils with poor letter, word, and sound recognition skills are likely to experience reading problem.

These findings affirm the fact that letter, letter sound recognition, word recognition (vocabulary), and comprehension skills are imperative to children's acquisition of reading skills. In other words, Grade Three learners with poor reading



skills need early intervention to enable them to become good readers. These findings were consistent with the findings of a study conducted by Kim, Petscher and Foorman (2015) which examined variance in reading comprehension scores that existed between learners, classes, schools and districts for children in grades 3. They affirm that, many factors such as the cognitive factors, fluency and semantic, spelling and a motivational factor, reading and self-concept knowledge matter in influencing comprehension.

## 6. Conclusion

The study established that most of Grade Three Pupils in public primary schools manifested relatively low skills in word recognition. Most of the pupils were below average in reading words and had difficult time figuring out the sounds and letters. Majority were unable to differentiate between letters and sounds making it difficult to read words, sentences and paragraphs and hence comprehension. This was an indication that reading levels among Grade Three pupils was low.

### 6.1 Recommendation

The study recommended that:

- MoE should provide refresher courses on teaching methodologies that would improve reading skills among the pupils.
- Curriculum support officers should ensure learner-centred teaching methods are practiced in lower primary classes.
- Other stakeholders like parents, teachers should come together and develop learning resource materials to help in the acquisition of reading skills.
- Quality assurance curriculum support officers and head teachers should strengthen quality assessment, supervision and evaluation of children reading skills acquisition.

### 6.2 Recommendations for Further Research

The study recommends that:

- Further studies should be conducted to establish the influence of teachers' characteristics on acquisition of reading skills among Grade Three Pupils.
- A further study should be conducted to evaluate the influence of learners' characteristics on acquisition of reading skills.
- Other studies should replicate other areas not covered in this study.

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