

**THE CHALLENGES OF LEARNERS WITH DIVERSE LINGUISTIC NEEDS:
EXPERIENCES OF TEACHERS IN UASIN GISHU COUNTY, KENYA****Solomon Kaptingei**

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ABSTRACT: *Teachers in Kenya undergo language-based training that exposes them to both the academic content and teaching methodology in order that they may be able to respond to the diverse linguistic needs of learners in the language classroom. The unquestioned guiding assumption is that such the training knowledge informs teachers' classroom practices. This paper assesses the challenges experienced by language learners in classrooms as a result of the diversity of their linguistic abilities. The paper is based on a study that examined how teachers' maxims influence the teaching of English language in classrooms with learners of diverse linguistic abilities. The study was conducted in Wareng District of Uasin Gishu County. Wareng has one hundred and twenty teachers of Standard Four level English. A descriptive survey was carried out in the selected area. The study used both simple random and stratified sampling procedures to identify the schools and teachers to participate in the study. Data was collected using questionnaire and interview schedule and analyzed by use of descriptive statistics and then presented by the use of pie charts, graphs and percentages. The study established that the language learners and teachers in Uasin Gishu County experience a number of challenges emanating from the diversity of their linguistic abilities and needs. These challenges include the feelings that they are not part of class; lack of experience to handle linguistic needs; large number of learners in language classroom; the strong influence of first language; inadequate time to address each learners' needs, and language policy not being supportive. It was, therefore, recommended that there is need for funds to be provided for teachers to attend further training and seminars on specific language needs in language education. In addition, more time is needed for teaching language to enable teachers to respond to the needs of every individual student. Teachers also need to adopt diverse methods of learning language in order to cater for the diverse learning needs of students. The government also needs to address the challenge of excessive enrolment of students that is causing congestion of classrooms in primary schools in Kenya.*

KEYWORDS: Assessment, Challenges, Learners, Diverse Linguistic Needs, Schools Uasin Gishu County, Kenya

INTRODUCTION

Students fail in school for a variety of reasons. In some cases, their academic difficulties can be directly attributed to deficiencies in the teaching and learning environment. For example, students with limited English may fail because they do not have access to effective bilingual ESL instruction (Ortiz, 2010). Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds may have difficulty if instruction presumes middle-class experiences. Other students may have learning difficulties stemming from linguistic or cultural differences. These difficulties may become more serious over time if instruction is not modified to address the students' specific needs. Unless these students receive appropriate intervention, they will continue to struggle, and the gap between their achievement and that of their peers will widen over time.

In spite of the growing linguistic diversity in today's classrooms, many teachers are not being adequately prepared to work with ESL learners. One area of particular concern for teachers is how to manage today's linguistically diverse classrooms. Ortiz (2010) suggests that prevention of failure among English language learners involves two critical elements; the creation of educational environments that are conducive to their academic success and the use of instructional strategies known to be effective with these students. Such environments reflect a philosophy that all students can learn and that educators are responsible for helping them learn.

Positive school environments are characterized by strong administrative leadership; high expectations for students' achievement; challenging, appropriate curricula and instruction; a safe and orderly environment; ongoing, systematic evaluation of student progress; and shared decision-making among ESL teachers, general education teachers, administrators, and parents. Several other factors are critical to the success of English language learners, including the following: (1) a shared knowledge base among educators about effective ways to work with students learning English, (2) recognition of the importance of the students' native language, (3) collaborative school and community relationship, (4) academically rich programs that integrate basic skill instruction with the teaching of high order skill in both the native language and in English, and (5) effective instruction (Fuchs, Fuchs, Bahr, Fernstrom & Stecker, 1990).

This means that teachers must share a common philosophy and knowledge base relative to the education of students learning English. They should be knowledgeable about all of the following areas: second language acquisition; the relationship of native language proficiency in the native language and English; socio-cultural influences on learning; effective first and second language instruction; informal assessment strategies that can be used to monitor progress, particularly in language and literacy development, and effective strategy for working with culturally and linguistically diverse families and communities.

Additionally, language programmes must have the support of principals, teachers, parents, and the community. School staff should understand that native language instruction provides the foundation for achieving high levels of English proficiency (Cummins, 1994). Language development should be the shared responsibility of all teachers, not only those in bilingual and ESL class.

Parents of students learning English must be viewed as capable advocates for their children and as valuable resources in school improvement efforts (Cummins, 1994). By being involved with the families and communities of English learners, educators come to understand the social, linguistic, and cultural contexts in which the children are being raised. Thus, educators learn to respect cultural differences in child-rearing practices and in how parents choose to be involved in their children's education (Ortiz, 2010).

Ortiz adds that students learning English must have opportunities to learn advanced skills in comprehension, reasoning, and composition and have access to curricula and instruction that integrate basic skill development with higher order thinking and problem solving. They must have access to high-quality instruction designed to help them meet high expectations. Teachers should employ strategies known to be effective with English learners, such as drawing on their prior knowledge; providing opportunities to review previously learned concepts; organizing themes or strands that connect the curriculum across subject areas; and providing individual guidance, assistance, and support to fill gaps in background knowledge.

Early intervention for English learners who are having difficulty in school is first and foremost the responsibility of general education professionals (Fuchs, Fuchs, Bahr, Fernstrom & Stecker, 1990). Most learning problems can be prevented if students are in school and classroom contexts that accommodate individual differences. However, even in the most positive environments, some students still experience difficulties. For these students, early intervention strategies must be implemented as soon as learning problems are noted. Early intervention means that 'supplementary instructional services are provided early in students' schooling, and that they are intense enough to bring at-risk students quickly to a level at which they can profit from high-quality classroom instruction' (Madden, Slavin, Karweit, Dolan & Wasik, 1991).

The intent of early intervention is to create general education support systems for struggling learners, as a way to improve academic performance and to reduce inappropriate special education referrals. Examples of early intervention include clinical teaching, peer and expert consultation, teacher assistance teams, and alternative programmes such as those that offer tutorial or remedial instruction in the context of general education.

Clinical teaching is carefully sequenced. First, teachers teach skills, subjects, or concepts; then they re-teach using different strategies or approaches for the benefit of students who fail to meet expected performance levels after initial instruction; finally, they use informal assessment strategies to identify the possible causes of failure (Ortiz, 2010). Teachers conduct curriculum-based assessment to monitor student progress and use the data from these assessments to plan and modify instruction.

Intervention using **peer or expert consultation** involves peers or experts working collaboratively with general education teachers to address students' learning problems and to implement recommendations for intervention (Fuchs, Fuchs, Bahr, Fernstrom & Stecker, 1990). For example, teachers can share instructional resource, observe each other's classrooms, and offer suggestions for improving instruction or managing behaviour. ESL teachers can help general education teachers by demonstrating strategies to integrate English learners in mainstream classrooms. In school with the positive climates, faculty function as community and share the goal of helping students and each regardless of the labels students have been given or the program or classroom to which teachers and students are assigned.

Teacher assistance teams (TATs) is an intervention strategy that can help teachers resolve problems they routinely encounter in their classrooms (Chalfant & Psych, 1981). These teams comprise four to six general education teachers and the teacher who requests assistance, design interventions to help struggling learners. Team members work to reach a consensus about the nature of a student's problem; determine priorities for intervention; help the classroom teacher to select strategies or approaches to solve the problem; assign responsibility for carrying out the recommendations; and establish a follow-up plan to monitor progress. The classroom teacher then implements the plan, and follow-up meetings are held to review progress toward resolution of the problem (Fuchs, Fuchs, Bahr, Fernstrom & Stecker, 1990).

When prevention and early intervention strategies fail to resolve learning difficulties, **referral to special education** is warranted. The responsibilities of special education referral committees are similar to those of TATs. The primary difference is that referral committees include a variety of specialists, such as principals, special education teachers, and assessment personnel. These specialists bring their expertise to bear on the problem, especially in areas related to assessment, diagnosis, and specialized instruction (Ortiz, 2010).

Decisions of the referral committee are formed by data gathered through the prevention, early intervention, and referral processes. The recommendation that a student receives a comprehensive individual assessment to determine whether or not special education services are needed indicates the following: (1) the child is in a positive school climate; (2) the teacher has used instructional strategies known to be effective for English learners; (3) neither clinical teaching nor interventions recommended by the TAT resolved also proved unsuccessful. If students continue to struggle in spite of these efforts to individualize instruction and to accommodate their learning characteristics, they most likely have a learning disability (Fuchs, Fuchs, Bahr, Fernstrom & Stecker, 1990; Ortiz, 2010).

The anticipated outcomes of problem-prevention strategies and early intervention include the following: a reduction in the number of students perceived to be at risk by general education teachers because of teachers' increased ability to accommodate the naturally occurring diversity of skill and characteristic of students in their classes, reduction in the number of students inappropriately referred to remedial or special education programmes, reduction in the number of students inaccurately identified as having a disability, and improved student outcomes.

Statement of the Problem

In spite of growing linguistic diversity in English language classrooms, many teachers are not adequately prepared to work in such language classrooms. The main challenge is on whether or not the teachers' maxims actually reflect on English language learners' needs and consider the classroom implications and management. This is in spite of the existence of various pedagogical techniques best known to the language teachers through their professional training which in this case is not a panacea towards effective language teaching. According to Yates and Ortiz (1998), a variety of reasons may account for students' failure in learning language. In some cases, their academic difficulties can be directly attributed to deficiencies in the teaching and learning environment. For example, students with limited English language knowledge may fail because they do not have access to effective instruction. Students from lower linguistic backgrounds may have difficulty if instruction presumes a different level of linguistic experience. Other students may have learning difficulties stemming from linguistic or cultural differences. These difficulties may become more serious over time if instruction is not modified to address the students' linguistic needs. Unless these students receive appropriate attention, they will continue to struggle, and the gap between their achievement and that of their peers will widen over time. There is therefore need to have effective English language instruction that would address individual learner's linguistic abilities.

Current literature in Second Language Teacher Education (SLTE) point out that language teachers tend to develop their teaching strategies based on personal beliefs and principles of what constitutes good teaching (Richards & Burns, 2008; Kumaravadivelu, 2008; Freeman, 2002; Richards, 2008). Early intervention for English learners who are having difficulty in school is first and foremost the responsibility of general education professionals. If a school climate is not supportive and if instruction is not tailored to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students in general education, these students have little chance of succeeding. Interventions that focus solely on mediating students' learning and behaviour problems will yield limited results. What informs the teachers' approaches in a diverse linguistic classroom is worth investigation in order to link the role of the teachers' maxims and the learners' linguistic abilities.

Limitations of the Study

The generalization to be made in relation to the study was limited within the area of the study since not all teachers use the same strategies and hold the same principles as those used in the study. There are myriad of factors that influence the teachers' choices of strategies or techniques of teaching, all of which may not have been included in the study.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was carried out in Uasin Gishu County in the Rift Valley Province, Kenya. Previously, the County comprised three districts, namely Eldoret West, Eldoret East and Wareng. The study was carried out in Wareng District because of administrative structures of the educational institutions. The study was deemed suitable in any locale where English language teaching is practiced since it is possible that instructional problems and teacher maxims exist in virtually all schools. In order to monitor data collection effectively, Wareng District was thus the appropriate area of the study. Wareng has forty-five secondary schools and one hundred and ten teachers of English.

The study adopted the qualitative research approach based on interpretivism research paradigm with the ontological belief that the world is dynamic and is constructed by people in their interactions with each other and a wider social system. The study adopted this design because it allows a researcher to probe a situation in details, yielding a wealth of descriptive and explanatory information. Interpretivist paradigm gives a researcher deeper insight on the responses as the researcher is also a participant and surveys also facilitate the discovery of unexpected relationships. Because the researcher observes virtually everything that happens in a given situation, he or she learns beyond those originally chosen for study.

The author used both simple random sampling and stratified sampling procedures to identify the schools and teachers who would participate in the study. Slovin's formula $S = P / \{1 + P(e^2)\}$ was used to determine appropriate samples for the study, where

S = desired sample size;

P = total population;

e = error tolerance (in the proposed study a margin error of 0.05).

This formula yielded a sample of 40 schools and 106 teachers. In order to ensure that the sample was adequately representative of the different school categories in the sampling frame, stratified sampling was used. The different school categories (zones) were considered as clusters each from which schools were selected to participate in the study. In determining the size of the sample from each stratum, proportionate allocation was used in order to ensure that the samples from different strata are kept proportional to the strata.

The data for the study was obtained using different instruments. These ranged from questionnaires, to personal interviews in obtaining, reinforcing and cross-checking obtained data. The data generated for the study comprised secondary (desk survey) and primary sources (field survey). Primary data are those obtained directly from the originators or main source. A questionnaire formed the major source of primary data used in the study. Secondary data was

based on past research work on this area of study. They were collected from Internet, textbooks, government publications, unpublished research work and journals.

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed in analyzing the data obtained. Descriptive statistics were employed; the data was organized, summarized and described using descriptive statistics and presented in the form of frequency counts distribution tables, graphs and pie charts that facilitated description and explanation of the study findings. SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) was used to facilitate computations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Challenges Faced by Learners and Teachers Owing to Diverse Linguistic Needs

The objective of the study was to identify the challenges faced by learners with diverse linguistic needs. To achieve this objective, the participants were requested to indicate their opinions on a four Likert scale questions in the questionnaire. Their responses were scored and the results were as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Challenges Faced by Language Learners and Teachers

Challenges	Strongly Agree F(%)	Agree F(%)	Strongly Disagree F(%)	Disagree F(%)
The feelings that they are not part of class	36(33.6)	22(20.6)	21(19.6)	25(23.4)
Lack of experience to handle linguistic needs	35(32.7)	28(26.2)	21(19.6)	23(21.5)
Large number of learners in language classroom	56(52.3)	28(26.2)	16(15.0)	7(6.5)
The strong influence of first language	59(55.1)	38(35.5)	5(4.7)	5(4.7)
Inadequate time to address each learners' needs	59(55.1)	37(34.6)	8(7.5)	3(2.8)
Language policy not supportive	55(51.4)	20(18.7)	15(14.0)	17(15.9)

As shown on Table 1, it was found out that 36(33.6%) respondents strongly agreed with the statement that pupils with diverse linguistic needs have the feelings that they are not part of class, 25(23.4%) respondents disagreed with the statement, 22(20.6%) teachers agreed with the statement while 21(19.6%) respondents strongly disagreed with the statement. The responses indicate that majority of the teachers from the District believe that pupils with diverse linguistic needs have the feelings that they are not part of the class.

On the challenge that there is lack of experience to handle linguistic needs amongst the teachers, 35(32.7%) respondents strongly agreed with the statement, 28(26.2%) teachers agreed with the statement, 23(21.5%) respondents disagreed with the statement while 21(19.6%) respondents strongly disagreed with the statement. It therefore seems that majority of the teachers in the District lack experience to handle learners with diverse linguistic needs and therefore are not in a position to teach these pupils in an effective way.

Further, 56(52.3%) teachers strongly agreed with the statement that they have large number of learners in language classroom, 28(26.2%) respondents agreed with the statement, 16(15.0%) respondents strongly disagreed with the statement while 7(6.5%) respondents disagreed with the statement. From the responses, it is clear that majority of the respondents were in agreement with the statement that they have large number of learners in language classroom. It seems

therefore that the large number of pupils in language classrooms poses a challenge to teachers as they are not able to attend to the individual needs of a pupil in a class.

Similarly, 59(55.15) teachers strongly agreed that the strong influence of first language poses a challenge to learners with diverse linguistic needs, 38(35.5%) teachers agreed with the statement, 5(4.7%) teachers strongly disagreed with the statement while on the other hand 5(4.7%) respondents disagreed with the statement. From the responses it can be inferred that majority of the respondents were in agreement with the statement that the strong influence of first language poses a challenge to learners with diverse linguistic needs. This implies that the first language has influenced negatively the acquisition of the second language in primary schools in the district and is a challenge to teachers teaching languages learners with diverse linguistic needs.

Notwithstanding, 59(55.1%) respondents strongly agreed that they have inadequate time to address each learners' needs, 37(34.6%) respondents agreed with the statement, 8(7.5%) teachers strongly disagreed with the statement while 3(2.8%) respondents disagreed with the statement. It can therefore be shown that majority of the respondents were in agreement with the statement that they have inadequate time to address each learner's needs. This can be attributed to the large number of pupils in language classrooms which may affect the attention to individual learners needs by the teachers.

On the statement that language policy is not supportive, 55(51.4%) teachers strongly agreed with the statement, 20(18.7%) respondents agreed with the statement, 17(15.9%) teachers disagreed with the statement while 15(14.0%) teachers strongly disagreed with the statement. It can therefore said that language policy is not supportive to teaching of learners with diverse linguistic needs as supported by majority of the teachers who agreed with the statement that language policy is not supportive.

Based on the above findings, the author carried out t-test relating to a particular aspect of the variables. Table 2 shows the results of the test.

Table 2: One Sample T-test

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Test Value = 0		
				Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
The feelings that they are not part of class	5.339	106	.000	3.44860	2.1679	4.7293
Lack of experience to handle linguistic needs	20.810	106	.000	2.29907	2.0800	2.5181
Large number of learners in language classroom	19.333	106	.000	1.75701	1.5768	1.9372
The strong influence of first language	20.842	106	.000	1.58879	1.4377	1.7399

Inadequate time to address each learners' needs	21.702	106	.000	1.57944	1.4351	1.7237
language policy not supportive	17.645	106	.000	1.94393	1.7255	2.1623

As noted in Table 2 at 95% confidence level, all the challenges posed in the study were significant ($p \leq .05$). This shows that among the challenges of teaching pupils with diverse linguistic needs include the feeling that they are not part of class, lack of experience on the side of teachers to handle pupils with diverse linguistic needs, large number of learners in language classrooms, the strong influence of first language, inadequate time to address each learners' needs by the teachers and non-supportive language policy.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The language students in Uasin Gishu County experience a number of challenges emanating from the diversity of their linguistic abilities and needs. These challenges include the feelings that they are not part of class; lack of experience to handle linguistic needs; large number of learners in language classroom; the strong influence of first language; inadequate time to address each learners' needs, and language policy not being supportive.

To alleviate these challenges, this paper recommends that there is need for funds to be provided for teachers to attend further training and seminars on specific language needs in language education. In addition, more time is needed for teaching language to enable teachers to respond to the needs of every individual student. Teachers also need to adopt diverse methods of learning language in order to cater for the diverse learning needs of students. The government also needs to address the challenge of excessive enrolment of students that is causing congestion of classrooms in primary schools in Kenya. Moreover, there is need to exploit the techniques of first language learning to develop strategies for teaching second language in primary schools in Kenya. A model should be developed that relates how children learn the first language with how they approach the process of learning the second language. This is an issue of both policy on the part of government and other education stakeholders and further research on the part of scholars.

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