



Salvaging The Marginalized: Supporting Service Teachers' Skills in Extensive Reading Pedagogies for Nomadic Pastoralist Children in Kenya

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Abstract

The societal impacts of enhancing teacher capacity in the underserved Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASAL) are significant in improving education policy and practice; yet, few studies have investigated the continuous professional support that teachers need to provide quality and inclusive education in such contexts. This research reports on the implementation of a teacher capacity-building action research project aimed at supporting primary school children's Extensive Reading (ER) activities in the context of underserved and least developed areas of the ASAL in Lodwar, Turkana County, Kenya. The trainees in the ER programme were 30 teachers from ten primary schools. Study results indicate that teachers were able to help learners develop self-directed ER, which was a positive step towards initiating a reading culture in English as a Second Language (ESL). Moreover, the reading comprehension results showed that ER had somewhat gradual significance in increasing ESL learning outcomes. However, students' motivation to read requires the sustained development of new reading strategies, accompanied by a continuous monitoring plan, to achieve considerable improvement.

Keywords: Extensive reading; Initiating; Learning outcomes; Reading culture; Motivation.

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INTRODUCTION

This research addresses the issue of societal impact by enhancing the capacity of teachers to improve ER skills among learners of nomadic pastoralists in selected primary schools in the Lodwar region of Turkana County, Northern Kenya. The region is located in the ASAL north of the country, where the literacy levels are less than 40% far below the national average of 78% (MOEST, 2025). This is primarily attributed to the hostile climatic conditions, which disrupt the learning calendar (Dyer, 2006), and the lack of adequate education infrastructure (Nga'sike, 2011). Furthermore, research indicates that teachers serving in the region are not receiving the necessary professional development opportunities to address the unique challenges facing learners (Ng'asike, 2014), and the teacher-pupil ratio is very high (Munene & Ruto, 2015; MOEST, 2015). To support the government's efforts to improve literacy outcomes among primary school learners, high-quality, innovative interventions are needed. This is the goal of our ER project with a

specific focus on strengthening teacher capacity in the least developed and underserved ASAL regions of Lodwar.

While many interventions that have been implemented by governments and key education actors in sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank, 2016) and Kenya (Kratli, 2001; Africa, 2012), to improve literacy instruction, there remains a critical gap in the societal impacts with respect to building Teacher Professional Development (TPD) in ASAL regions (Ng’asike, 2011, Ng’asike, 2014). Furthermore, although the current decade has seen an increase in primary-level education participation in these ASAL areas, literacy among learners in these regions remains extremely low (Pretorius & Currin, 2010). ER interventions have been established as the empirically proven means to address this problem. However, many primary school learners in sub-Saharan Africa, especially those from the ASAL regions, continue to lack even the most basic literacy skills (Piper et al, 2014). This problem impedes these children from taking advantage of the significant benefits of education. Effective Teacher Professional Development (TPD) is key to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. However, this remains out of reach for many of sub-Saharan Africa’s ASAL regions.

Problem and context

The research was motivated by the need to improve the learning outcomes in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms among children in marginalized contexts. The ER strategy has proven to improve learners’ ESL fluency without the compulsion characteristic that often accompanies traditional ESL teaching (Nation & Meara, 2003). Apart from enhancing learners’ listening skills (Belgar et al., 2012), reading abilities (Suk, 2017), speaking competencies, and writing knowledge (Waring et al., 2015), ER develops learners’ overall ESL proficiency (Aka, 2019). However, it takes time to realize the effects of ER, as the process is described as slow, fragile, and haphazard (Kratli, 2001). This may make educators reluctant to implement ER, especially in contexts where government curriculum guidelines often restrict teachers and have limited time for instruction (Mudogo et al., 2023). According to the results from the questionnaire survey we used, the teachers confirmed that although ER is a good strategy for improving learners’ ESL skills, only a few teachers implement this in their curriculum.

The reason for focusing on primary schools in the marginalized regions of Turkana is that the area is one of the most marginalized and underserved ASL regions in Kenya. According to the World Bank (2023), the literacy rates for males and females in Kenya are 85.6% and 80.3%, respectively. This is quite high, contrary to the illiteracy rate in Arid and Semi-Arid Areas (ASALs), which tends to be higher compared to other regions, with Turkana County leading at 82% illiteracy. This is a concern because some of these individuals are school-age children who are out of school. Furthermore, the competency-based curriculum in use in all public schools in Kenya requires some parental engagement to support learning. Scant data exist on the causal relationships that result in this worrisome statistic of illiteracy in ASAL regions and the possible interventions that may reverse the trend. It is as a result of this vast disparity and high illiteracy levels that we prioritize intervening in Turkana County. According to the Center for Advocacy, Relief, and Development (CARD, 2015), Education statistics for Turkana County are quite low. Long’or (2023) report transition rates of less than 25% for Turkana County. The table below shows the Net Enrolment Rate (NER) in primary school.

Table 1. Primary Schools NER per County

Rank	County	Male Ner	Female Ner	Total Ner	Rank	County	Male Ner	Female Ner	Total Ner
1	Murang’a	93.2	93.7	93.4	25	Trans Nzoia	81.8	84.3	83.1
2	Nyeri	92.1	93.1	92.6	26	Homa Bay	82.2	83.7	82.9
3	Kirinyaga	91.3	92.4	91.8	27	Nandi	80.9	84.7	82.8
4	Embu	60.4	92.1	91.3	28	Kakamega	81.1	83.9	82.5
5	Kiambu	90.4	91.2	90.8	29	Migori	81.7	83.3	82.5

Rank	County	Male Ner	Female Ner	Total Ner	Rank	County	Male Ner	Female Ner	Total Ner
6	Nyandarua	89.7	91.2	90.4	30	Busia	81	83.3	82.2
7	Machakos	89.4	90.7	90.1	31	Mombasa	80.6	81.6	81.1
8	Makueni	88.7	90.4	86.6	32	Laikipia	80.6	80.9	80.8
9	Bomet	87.9	89.6	88.7	33	Lamu	74.4	75.1	74.7
10	Tharaka Nithi	87.3	89.1	88.2	34	Kajiando	73.2	73	73.1
11	Kericho	87.4	89	88.2	35	Narok	69.5	69.7	69.6
12	Nyamira	87.6	88.7	88.1	36	Kwale	69.1	69.9	69.5
13	Vihiga	86.1	88.9	87.5	37	kilifi	67.9	69	68.5
14	Elgeyo Marakwet	86.3	88.3	87.3	38	Baringo	67.2	69.8	68.5
15	Nairobi	86.6	87.2	86.9	39	Isiolo	63.2	63.7	63.5
16	Kisii	85.9	87.4	86.7	40	Tana River	53.8	51.5	52.7
17	Taita Taveta	85.6	87.3	86.5	41	West Pokot	50.2	52.1	51.1
18	Nakuru	85.1	86.2	85.9	42	Marsabit	49	47.7	48.4
19	Uasin Gishu	84	85.9	85.1	43	Mandera	42	40.6	41.9
20	Meru	84.1	85.9	85	44	Samburu	43.1	39.5	41.3
21	Siaya	84	85.7	84.9	45	Wajir	35.9	32.9	34.6
22	Bungoma	83.2	85.7	84.5	46	Garissa	35	32.9	34.1
23	Kisumu	83.2	84.8	84	47	Turkana	24.7	24.6	24.6
24	Kitui	82.3	84.9	83.6	48	National	90.6	92.3	91.4

KIPPRA (2013:61)

The table above shows that Turkana County has the lowest NERs, at 25 percent, compared to a national average of 91.4 percent in 2010 and 95.7 percent in 2012. This is a worrying trend, and if not reversed, may negate the gains that are being made by the country to

Motivating learners in ER

Available literature reveals that teachers can enhance their learners' ESL outputs through constant exposure activities in the target language (Beglar & Hunt, 2014; Suk, 2017). Such exposure can be through ER activities, which have been proven to be the most effective method for facilitating learners' ESL language development. During extensive reading, the learners' primary focus is not on intentionally learning the second language (L2) linguistic features for formal examination but on comprehension (Nation & Meara, 2013). Such initiatives can lead to long-term enhancements in L2 outputs, although this improvement may be gradual.

In the Kenyan education curriculum, one of the primary objectives of teaching ESL is to develop learners' linguistic competence, enabling students to understand and use the language in various contexts. However, implementing ESL ER in the primary school context may be challenging if the environment does not nurture and promote the practice. This truism is confirmed by studies such as (Gubaily, 2012; Grabe, 2010) which reveal that of the students at higher levels graduate with poor mastery of language skills because they possibly missed acquiring these competencies in the lower levels of learning. Further, studies in language education have revealed the effectiveness of ER in contexts of English as a foreign language (Hitosugi & Day, 2004).

Thus, ER plays a pivotal role in developing fluent L2 readers, as learners develop the ability to rapidly read a variety of written material without needing references for new words encountered. In this

light, extensive reading enables learners to engage with new knowledge independently. In addition, research on ESL literacy suggests that children exposed to complex disciplinary texts through ER tasks in the early years of learning have opportunities to acquire knowledge of vocabulary, background knowledge, and an understanding of how reading material is structured (Palincsar & Magnusson, 2001). This is why it is necessary to initiate ER programs at the primary school level of education. This will lay the foundation of the learners' future academic advancement.

RESEARCH METHODS

Project Design

We employed a descriptive research design, and the inferences drawn from the collected data were analyzed and described qualitatively. Teachers participating in the ER research were in the marginalized areas of Turkana County, in Northern Kenya. The schools are located far apart from each other in this ASAL region, and the transport and communication networks are inferior (Dyer, 2006). We selected government schools where the majority of the learners are enrolled.

Research Target/Subject

The participants for this research were 30 teachers from 10 primary schools in the Lowdar region of Turkana. These included 10 head teachers of the sampled schools and at least 2 English language teachers teaching grades 5 and 6 per school. The sampled teachers were initially informed about the project's implementation modalities. They were also briefed on the project's goals and their role in supporting different types of learners during the project period. We collected data from the participants using Key informant Interviews (KII) for the headteachers and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) for the teachers. The headteachers were coded as HT1 to HT10, while the teachers were coded as TR1 to TR20.

Research Procedure

The implementation design comprised the following activities;

1. We did a baseline survey to establish the ER capacity gaps of the teachers in the sampled schools. Preliminary findings indicated that the teachers lacked the necessary skills to initiate continuous English language activities that can enhance the learners' proficiency in the underserved study region. The schools visited had no or very few books for ER activities.
2. We did a ten-day teacher training to align classroom practices of the sampled schools with the objectives of the ER. The training helped the teachers understand the aim of the ER and also become familiar with the graded readers. After this, we distributed graded readers to the target classes in schools and began implementing the intervention. The storybooks had been purchased locally from Phoenix Publishers. They were approved by the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD), ensuring the reading content was relevant and at the learners' level. The student-to-textbook ratio was 1:1.
3. The implemented program in schools consisted of a 30-minute ER activity, three days a week, during the study period. In addition, each class ER task focused on the following activities: story reading, retelling parts of the story to a group of classmates, and writing about the interesting parts they read in their books. Learners were also allowed to spend more time reading the books than the allocated time if they wished. Teachers also ensured that learners progressed at their own pace. This lasted for three months.
4. During the first months of the project, the teachers allowed learners to choose their preferred graded readers. However, in the second and third months, the learners were assigned to read stories and attempt guided ER activities provided by their teachers.
5. Teachers were advised to introduce reading gradually, without using compulsion techniques, so that students view it as a leisurely task rather than a punishment or test. We also created a group WhatsApp platform where teachers could receive continuous mentorship and share lessons on strategies that were working or not working.

6. A weekly monitoring and feedback process was in place for the implementation of ER activities. Regular feedback helped in redesigning the programme according to the expected demands.

Instruments and Data Collection Techniques

To gather comprehensive and reliable data for the study, two primary instruments were employed: Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Key Informant Interviews were conducted with the head teachers (coded HT1 to HT10) of the ten sampled primary schools in the Lowdar region of Turkana. These interviews provided in-depth insights into the institutional perspective on the implementation of Extensive Reading (ER) and the support structures available within schools. In addition, Focus Group Discussions were held with 20 English language teachers (coded TR1 to TR20), two from each school, teaching Grades 5 and 6. The FGDs allowed for collaborative reflection among the teachers on their experiences, challenges, and observed outcomes related to the ER activities. These instruments were chosen to ensure a balance between administrative and classroom-level insights and to capture qualitative data that would inform the effectiveness and sustainability of the ER programme.

Data analysis technique

The collected qualitative data from Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were analyzed using thematic analysis. This involved transcribing the interviews and discussions, then systematically coding the responses to identify recurring themes and patterns related to the implementation and impact of the Extensive Reading (ER) programme. Thematic categories were developed based on the research objectives, including teacher preparedness, learner engagement, resource availability, and perceived outcomes. These themes were then interpreted to draw meaningful insights into the effectiveness of the ER intervention and to inform future improvements in similar educational contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The respondents indicated that the intervention was highly relevant in supporting learners from underserved pastoral regions to improve their English language competencies. Available evidence suggests that literacy levels in Turkana are among the lowest in Kenya (MOEST, 2015), underscoring the urgent need for targeted interventions to support school-aged children in this context. The ER programme was widely acknowledged as a timely and practical initiative that addressed this critical gap. One of the key challenges highlighted was the lack of sustained professional support for teachers in pastoralist settings—an issue with broad societal implications. Through this initiative, teachers had the opportunity to acquire practical skills designed to enhance learning outcomes in English for children in these marginalized communities.

Baseline survey data confirmed that most teachers lacked the necessary pedagogical skills to implement ER effectively. For instance, HT1 noted: *“Our teachers do not have skills in initiating ER programmes relevant to our learners. They only rely on the course books, and given the nature of our learners, that does not help us.”* Similarly, TR1 shared: *“In college, we learned how to involve learners in ER activities, but that remained theory. This programme is more practical and has really helped us enhance the teaching of ESL skills.”* These responses reveal a critical skills gap among teachers and school heads regarding ER practices. The training and subsequent implementation of the ER programme directly addressed this gap by equipping educators with relevant, context-sensitive literacy pedagogies.

This finding aligns with broader research, which shows that education stakeholders in Low and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs) are not investing sufficiently in context-responsive Teacher Professional Development (TPD) (Evans & Acosta, 2023). Much of the existing TPD remains theoretical and disconnected from the evolving pedagogical needs of learners. Our initiative helps close this gap by providing a practical, classroom-based model for literacy instruction that is both inclusive and sustainable.

FGD responses also revealed that no structured TPD programmes focusing on English language pedagogy currently exist in these settings. As HT9 explained: *“We have never had any TPD programme focusing on English language enhancement pedagogies. Sometimes we talk about ER activities informally on parade, but such talks do not have any meaningful impact.”* Similarly, TR6 remarked: *“We have never had facilitators to initiate such a programme. Our schools also lack enough class readers for the whole class. This training is very timely.”* These statements reinforce the view that the intervention filled a long-standing gap in literacy-focused professional development and resource availability.

During the initial phases of implementation, teachers reported several challenges, including time constraints and low learner motivation. However, as the programme progressed—with continuous monitoring, feedback, and redesign, teachers observed increased learner engagement. TR6 shared: *“Most of them are doing the activities willingly. In fact, they are the ones who remind us to give them tasks.”* This transformation highlights the potential of ER to promote self-motivated reading and cultivate a reading culture, even in low-resource settings.

Moreover, the ER programme proved effective in improving the quality of English language instruction, thereby contributing to educational equity. This aligns with the vision of Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, a goal that remains out of reach for many children in marginalized LMIC contexts. As TR3 noted: *“This programme is creating much interest from the learners themselves. Although it may seem time-consuming and involving, I can see some improvement, especially in written English, among my Class Six pupils. It is working well”.*

One of the sampled schools, Lowdar Primary School, stands out as a best practice case in implementing the ER programme. The headteacher (HT4) and English teachers actively embraced the intervention, creating a supportive reading culture within their classrooms. Teachers at Lowdar Primary allocated dedicated time for ER activities and encouraged learners to choose stories that interested them, which boosted motivation and participation. According to TR7, *“At our school, learners started coming early just to read before lessons. The gradual introduction of ER without compulsion helped them see reading as enjoyable rather than a task.”* The school also innovatively used peer reading groups, where stronger readers helped their classmates, fostering collaboration and confidence. This approach led to noticeable improvements in learners’ reading fluency and written expression within just two months, demonstrating the positive impact of sustained teacher engagement and creative strategies in resource-limited settings.

These results affirm that, with the proper support and materials, learners in pastoralist regions can significantly benefit from well-structured literacy interventions, such as ER. The programme’s impact on both teacher capacity and learner outcomes suggests its potential for scalability in similar underserved educational contexts.

CONCLUSION

Based on the study's findings, it can be inferred that a well-implemented ER programme in marginalized contexts can offer numerous benefits, significantly enhancing learners' literacy development and overall learning experience. By engaging in controlled ER tasks, children not only improve their vocabulary and comprehension skills but also develop a lifelong love for reading. Our intervention encourages independent learning and critical thinking among learners, laying the groundwork for more innovative capacity-building strategies that can be piloted in similar contexts.

To sustain and scale the positive outcomes of the Extensive Reading programme, it is recommended that education stakeholders invest in ongoing, context-specific professional development for teachers, with a focus on literacy pedagogies. Additionally, increasing the availability of graded readers and other reading materials in underserved schools will be crucial. Policymakers should also support the integration of ER activities into regular school curricula, accompanied by regular monitoring and mentorship to ensure effective implementation. These steps will help strengthen English language skills among learners in pastoral and marginalized communities, ultimately contributing to more equitable education outcomes.

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