

Literacy and the English Primary Syllabus

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It is contended that most Tanzanians over the age of 50 know quite good English with good pronunciation, and many are fluent speakers. However, if you speak to most people below the age of 50 there is a noticeable degradation of their English language ability commensurate with their younger age and it is impossible to hold a conversation in English with most Standard VII pupils. Most primary school teachers are under 50, have poor knowledge of English and no confidence in speaking it. This paper will explore the role of the textbooks in this decline and what can be done to ameliorate the position.

Given that there was a time in Tanzania's past when the teaching of English was of a high standard, it would be of benefit to trace the development of English teaching.

The first records found were for 1927 when the Director of Education under the Authority of the Education Ordinance and later under the 1934 Education Regulations prescribed *The Tanganyika Territory Syllabus of Instruction*. This referred to the use of *The Oxford English Readers for Africa* or equivalent (Michael West Series) for the reading component of the syllabus. It included short paragraphs of advice for the other components of conversation, translation, writing, dictation, spelling, grammar, composition and repetition.

In the 1950s, Middle Schools were opened and English was introduced as a subject in Standard V, becoming the medium of instruction from Standard VII onwards. The 1952 *Tanganyika Department of Education Provisional Syllabus of Instruction for Middle Schools* reiterated that English as a subject is introduced in Standard V. It continued that, 'No provision for the separate teaching of formal grammar, dictation or composition is made in this syllabus, as these subjects are taught incidentally as part of the *Oxford English Course*, the adoption of which in full is recommended.'

This was followed by the *Tanganyika Department of Education Provisional Syllabus of Instruction for Middle Schools*, 1959 after English was introduced in 1958 as a subject from Standard III onwards. The *Tanganyika – Ministry of Education Approved Primary School Syllabus for Standard I to VIII* printed in 1963 in Swahili stipulated the use of FG French's *New Oxford English Course (NOEC)* Book 1 to Book 4 for Standards III to VI. The syllabus for Standards VII and VIII was written in English and stipulated the use of the *New Oxford English Course* Books 5 and 6 respectively. This, with amendments, remained in force until March 1970. However, from 1966 NOEC Book 6 was no longer used as Standard VIII was abolished.

In 1966, children started primary school aged 7 and entered Standard I. They started learning English in Standard III and at the end of Standard IV there was selection to go to Middle School which covered Standards V to VII, Standard VIII having been abolished that year. At Middle School all subjects were taught through the medium of English and at the end of Middle School there was selection into Secondary School.

In early 1970 English was introduced in Standard I using *English for Tanzanian Schools*.

In 1980 the Ministry of Education reverted to Standard III as the first year to teach English. This led to the introduction of *The English Language Syllabus for Primary Schools Standards III-VII 1986* and the number of periods allocated to English learning was greatly reduced.

Then, in 1997, it was announced that from 1998, in some regions, English would again be taught from Standard I and *The English Language Syllabus for Primary Schools Standard I to VII 1997* was introduced. Since 2005, there has been an English syllabus for pre-primary schools which is a two year course for 5 to 7 year olds.

It seems that when the NOEC books were no longer the prescribed textbooks, a syllabus or scheme was extracted from the language items introduced in them as seen in the Appendix . This would mark the beginning of the decline in English language teaching in the primary schools.

The NOEC: a comparison

In the years when the NOEC books were in use the primary schools (Standards III to IV) had seven periods a week for English, that is about 280 periods in the school year. In the Middle Schools (Standards V to VII or VIII) there were eleven or twelve English periods each week (including three class periods on Saturday mornings). Since 1997 there have been six periods of English per week for Standards I and II, eight periods per week for Standards III and IV and seven periods per week for Standards V, VI and VII; in other words, a range of 240 to 320 periods in the school year. In Norway, another country where English is taught as a second language, each of the seven years of primary school is given 328 teaching hours of English which is equivalent to 480 periods or twelve periods a week.

The NOEC was an excellent series of books, The content for the pupils was of meaning and interest drawing on their environment and people and things to whom and to which they could relate. Each lesson used language items from previous lessons so that language learning was continuous and not segmented. The exercises were many and various. There was built-in group and pair work and lots of action suggested for the pupils to be able to demonstrate their understanding. The *Teachers' Notes* and *Handbooks* were another unique feature which gave comprehensive guidelines on grammar rules, pronunciation, how to teach and teaching aids. The textbooks and subsequent syllabi introduced from 1970 suffered from a lack of detail, and contents that did not entertain or motivate the pupils.

Immediately following the use of the NOEC was *English for Tanzanian Schools* (Ministry of National Education, 1969-1973). Books VI and VII were highly criticized in 1984 by Criper and Dodd as being inappropriate, very dense in content and too difficult. Books I and II introduced novel techniques for Tanzanian teachers in that pupils were expected to work on their own. There were only short orientation courses for teachers for using the books.

In the early 1980s *Primary English for Tanzania* (PET) was introduced. However, no syllabus then existed in the schools. Teachers' Handbooks were not introduced at the same time as the textbooks. The PET books were 'not transparent as far as their use is concerned, and they do not provide the support for the teachers that they should. The books have been written by panels and lack the coherence and imagination that a smaller and more skilled set of authors might have produced. Perhaps an opportunity was missed to introduce an interesting coherent primary textbook which would have encouraged a much more active and oral approach to the language. They also contain errors of English and of design which have received much criticism.' (Criper & Dodd, 1984)

In *PET*, and most textbooks that followed, each chapter or unit was a self-contained entity that bore little relevance to what went before or after, and so items already learned were not practised, and hence were not remembered. The teachers' books lacked any detailed guidance and had very little, if any, help with the correct pronunciation of words or the rules of grammar.

Things could have improved in the early 2000s with the opening up of the school textbook market to private publishers and the permitted multi-textbooks. However, standards in teaching English had already declined, and many teachers were not equipped to choose the best books for their purposes. The introduction of the multi-textbook system has not assisted the teaching of English in primary schools which can further be attributed to the fact that they are written by authors with experience of English as a foreign language but who have little or no experience of primary school teaching in Tanzania.

A textbook should take into account the way children learn and the natural stages of child development within the context of a primary school classroom. Indeed, the *Report on the Teaching and Learning of English in Primary Schools in Tanzania-Mainland* by the Ministry of National Education as far back as 1982 went so far as to assert that 'the teaching and learning of the English language in Tanzania's primary schools at the moment is very bad.' This was supported by Criper and Dodd's 1984 national survey which concluded: 'At the end of primary education after five years of English the average score of the pupils tested was only 4.0 i.e. barely capable of reading even a picture story book simplified down to the level of using 300 headwords and the present tense. Put another way 68% of Standard VII pupils are unable to read and understand any connected text at this level. [...] The level of learning implied here is such that one must question whether these five years have not resulted in a waste of resources. [...] The current level of English of the majority of primary teachers is extremely low. It is clear that little progress can take place at the primary level until the proficiency of those teaching English in the classroom has been substantially upgraded.'

There may have been some improvements since the 1980s but none significant, and in the intervening period many of the teachers with good English have retired. Indeed, in *The Daily Mail* and *The Citizen* of 20th December 2007, responding to the Standard VII national examination results, the then Honourable Minister for Education & Vocational Training, Mrs Sitta, was quoted as saying, 'The ministry has noticed with great concern the poor performance in the three subjects (English, maths and science)...'. Mrs Sitta also noted the lack of competent teachers in those key subjects and said that poor performance posed a major challenge to the government's drive to improve both primary and secondary education. In particular, only 31.3% of pupils passed the Standard VII English paper in the national exams.

In addition to poor quality teaching, numerous teacher absences result in many English periods being untaught. The teaching year is reduced from 38 teaching weeks or 190 days to 130 days or 26 weeks (a shortfall of 12 weeks or 3 months) if you deduct 10 days to collect salaries, 10 days for other absences, 30 days for weekly/monthly tests and 10 days when lessons are missed for other reasons. Contrast this with the advice in the *NOEC Handbook for use with Teachers' Notes to Book One*: 'Lessons, that is one year's work, have been divided into 232 periods, but the seven English periods a week on the time-table make a total of about 280 periods in the school year. This leaves about 50 periods for giving extra practice, or for days when lessons are not taught because the teacher is absent, because there is a special holiday, or because of rain etc. A good teacher should be able to finish Book One in a year, but it is important that at least the 232 periods outlined in the books should be taught.' At present, Tanzanian children receive approximately 182 periods of English per year.

The textbooks available today give little guidance as to the periods to be used for each topic or section. They give no such lee-way for absences and untaught periods.

There is urgent need to differentiate between the younger pupils and the older pupils; partly because of the pupils' developmental stages but also because of the allocation of teachers in Tanzanian primary schools. Thus pre-primary, Standard I and Standard II pupils have teachers who are with them all day long but the teachers allocated to those pupils tend to have lesser subject skills than those teachers allocated to older pupils. From Standard III to Standard VII the pupils have different teachers for each subject and so are taught English by teachers who have some subject knowledge, but who only teach for time-tabled 40 minute periods. These two categories of younger and older pupils deserve urgent, separate attention.

Factors to consider when designing a language course for primary school children

It is important when designing or assessing a model of education that a range of development issues be covered, including physical, psychological, emotional and motivational development. Models or theories which have been found useful in the Tanzanian context include Piaget's (1961) stages of child development, Glover and Bruning's (1987) six principles of cognitive psychology and Gardner's (1993) seven intelligences.

There is strong empirical evidence to support younger pupils' superiority in oral and aural performance irrespective of formal or informal settings. Young learners appear to possess a superior 'sound' system which enables them to imitate sounds more accurately, and increasing age shows a decline in the quality of native-like pronunciation. (Singleton, 1989, Hawkins, 1984, Vilke, 1988)

However, before looking at foreign language learning, a brief consideration of a child's acquisition of his or her mother tongue or native language (L1) is useful. L1 acquisition is a monumental task with five main components (Tabors, 1997) needing to be mastered in the child's first five years:

- i. phonology
- ii. vocabulary
- iii. grammar
- iv. discourse (how sentences are put together such as stories, explanations)
- v. pragmatics (rules about how to use the language).

The speaker must have control over all five to be a native speaker.

The child's L1 development is broadly:

- 5-8 months = syllables, ba, ma
- 12-18 months first words, and turn-taking in conversation.
- The process of learning culturally appropriate ways to use the language continues throughout the pre-school years as the child learns rules of politeness etc. During pre-school years children engage in extended oral language development and acquire 6-10 new words a day while broadening their understanding of meaning of words they know, and grammar.

When a child learns a foreign language (L2) in Tanzania, eg English, there is generally no native speaker of English at hand to imitate, nor is there as much social encouragement as learning L1. Possibly patterns of speech of L1 are in conflict with those of English especially in the early stages. Most striking is the relative lack of powerful motivation. In learning L2 the teaching must be systematic, progressing from one point to another in regular fashion. Structural patterns must be taught in an orderly way, and therefore insight into grammar is absolutely essential, and central to L2 learning.

Learning English is a task of learning new habits and skills. It is more like riding a bike or learning to swim than learning history or geography. Learning new habits is a matter of practising new patterns of behaviour, not of learning facts. So, the learner must be shown patterns that recur regularly and practise them systematically. The whole of English should be broken down to a limited number of regular patterns. If pupils practise these regularly and systematically they can quite quickly acquire a mastery of speech habits in English. (Boadi et al, 1968)

L2 is acquired after the basis of L1 is established. However, for child learners it is important to compare cognitive capacity and cognitive demand: The older the child, the greater cognitive capacity and the greater the demands made on him. Young children might not be better or quicker language learners but if they know a little it impresses others because of their overall cognitive ability. So, the belief that primary school children were *ipso facto* better language learners than older children has not been upheld. (McDonough, 1981) Factors affecting L2 acquisition are aptitude (some are more talented at languages), social (some are more outgoing and talk more) and psychological (some are more motivated because they want to become like people who speak L2).

There are two other factors at least which affect a child's progress in language acquisition:

- Motivation: the child must want to learn L2. Even if the child has made the decision to take on the process of learning L2, they may stay in a non-verbal phase for ages. Wanting to communicate with people who speak that L2 is crucial if acquisition is to occur.
- Exposure: the quantity of exposure to L2 in a learning environment.

Motivation is perhaps the greatest factor: 'Let us say that, given motivation, it is inevitable that a human being will learn a second language if he is exposed to the language data.' (Corder, 1967) Alongside motivation the incentive value of success is another most important factor. For teachers and writers of the language materials there are five 'strengths' to bear in mind (Stevick, nd) :

1. Relevance – of the content to the pupil's own language needs
2. Completeness - inclusion of all the language necessary for the stated aims of the course
3. Authenticity – the material should be both linguistically and culturally authentic
4. Satisfaction – the pupil should leave each lesson feeling he has benefited more than simply progressed
5. Immediacy – the pupil can use the material in a lesson straight away

The first three apply overall to courses and the last two more particularly to individual lessons. It is not to be expected to find all five present in any one piece of teaching material.

Conclusions and Recommendations

It is easy to blame the teachers for the current situation, but this ignores the fact that they are the result of the system they are in. Their pre-service training needs to be considered, as does their on-the-job support needs and any continuing professional development. The present teaching force is shouldering the brunt of the continuing problem of the teaching and learning of English. They are the teachers in post and are the resources with which we have to work. The only solution is to give them every bit of support and help possible.

From the analysis above, what is needed is separate consideration of English for the younger learners in pre-primary and Standards I and II, and for the older learners in Standards III to VII.

Younger learners in pre-primary, Standard I and Standard II are only just beginning to gain literacy and numeracy skills in Swahili. As a result, they should have:

- frequent, short sessions of English using a variety of activities, which should take account of Gardner's notional seven intelligences.
- regular routines in English showing practical, real application such as taking the register, lining up, writing the date, distributing or collecting books.
- inter-cultural in-put in their own language, L1, to provide motivation and to promote interest in the Tanzanian culture and that of speakers of English – eg learning about flags, music, children's songs, rhymes and games, food, gestures, playtime activities.
- examination of language and its influence to show that young pupils already know several English words without realising that they do so, eg coat, socks, bag, ruler, pencil.

This would also assist the teachers who have weak language ability themselves in English, but who can learn set phrases, structures etc.

The teachers need a clear framework, models for pronunciation and a scheme of work. It is not sufficient to leave these teachers with inadequate support. They need to be provided with lesson plans, detailed ideas for games and activities and material for inter-cultural studies, as well as basic structures, words and phrases for them to conduct classroom routines in English as well as delivery of some specific English tuition. All of this should take account of the age of the pupils, their stage of cognitive development and also the current level of expertise of the available teachers, the need to motivate both pupil and teacher, and the time available in the classroom for routine activities.

Recommendations for learners in Standards III to VII include:

- Materials to ensure that teachers have confidence in the grammatical structure of the English language
- Teachers' books that are comprehensive, with guidance on the structural patterns and pronunciation and written in Swahili. This should be the very first step undertaken. European countries, and many others too, have the teachers' books in L1 for the teaching of foreign languages in primary and secondary schools.
- A text book that introduces structural patterns step by step giving at least 85% of the time to practice with constant revision and repetition of content, grammar and vocabulary and which motivates pupils. Consideration should be given to having instructions in the pupils' books in both English and Swahili.

As the teaching of English is in a state of crisis and action needs to be taken sooner rather than later, it is important not to re-invent the wheel nor to rush to a 'quick fix' solution which in practice will remedy nothing but have incurred time and cost.

In the short to medium term it would seem sensible to accept the only tried, tested and successful text book for re-admission to the primary sector for Standards III to VII: a reissue of the NOEC. This would ensure that teaching would be systematic, progressing from one point to another in regular fashion; that English would be broken down to a limited number of regular patterns and that these would be practised regularly and systematically; that new habits and skills be learned by practising the patterns of behaviour of the language and that the pupils enjoy the content and are motivated to learn.

The only additional need is for the teachers to be committed to teach all their periods – but this concern is present now, and remains a concern with whatever solution is adopted to address the current problem. Indeed the number of periods of English should be increased.

The reintroduction of the NOEC with the teachers' books in Swahili for at least 15 years (or two complete sets of primary school pupils) would give the teachers an opportunity to learn on-the-job, as they would, initially, be learning with the pupils from the course books. In addition, consideration should be given to a complementary radio programme series (in conjunction with a national newspaper for advance schemes, timetables, written records etc) taking teachers through a step-by-step guide to basic English with emphasis on pronunciation. Further, short residential courses could be conducted in school holidays in Teacher Training Colleges. Possibly native speakers could be used liaising with British Council, VSO or the US Peace Corps.

This would allow the authorities time to work on a completely new syllabus for English language teaching in primary schools. Such a syllabus could take into account that many more pupils progress to secondary school from primary school, and so the seven years of primary school need only provide a good foundation in English, and not a complete, definitive course. For instance, the need to have question tags, reported speech, the passive voice, form-filling and business letters as part of a primary school English syllabus could be reconsidered.

Planning is absolutely crucial. Five-year programmes (so timeconstrained because of available funding) are not successful in government schools in the long-term. Many such programmes have 'been and gone' and primary school teachers not only cannot remember the essence of the programmes but more importantly have not changed their practices. A long-term programme is needed if 'deep change' is to be attained. If, on visiting primary schools there is little or no evidence of pupils mastering even basic structures in English, as is contended in this paper, then the teachers need further help to be able to teach the subject. The suggestions above would help achieve this aim.

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APPENDIX: THE NOEC AND SYLLABI TOPICS			
Language item	NOEC	1986	1997
	Bk St		
this is a ...	1 - St III	St III	St I
this and that	1 - St III	St III	St I
the ...of the	1 - St III	St IV (not 'of the')	
pres cont - 1st pers sing	1 - St III	St III	St I
pres cont - 2nd & 3rd pers sing	1 - St III	St III	St I
preps: on, in, under, near	1 - St III	St III	St III
over, behind, in front of	1 - St III	St III	St III
my, your, his, her	1 - St III	St III	St III
parts of the body	1 - St III	St III	St II
plurals - z sound	1 - St III	St III but no pron work	
them, they	1 - St III	St III	
plurals - ss sound	1 - St III	St III but no pron work	
plurals - iz sound	1 - St III	St III but no pron work	
have ... has	1 - St III	St III	St II
parts of the body – plural	1 - St III	St III	St II
colours & other adjectives	1 - St III	St III	St II & III
simple past tense - 3 irreg verbs	1 - St III	St IV	St IV
simple past tense - in –ed	1 - St III	St IV	St IV
negatives - don't, didn't	2 - St IV	St IV	
simple present tense revision	2 - St IV		
simple present tense - habit	2 - St IV	St III	St III
going to + inf (future)	2 - St IV	St V	St V
time phrases eg on Sunday, never	2 - St IV	St III	St III
countable and uncountable	2 - St IV	St IV	St IV
can - for ability	2 - St IV	St IV	St V
conjunctions; and, but, when, then	2 - St IV	St III	St II
questions; what, where, who etc	2 - St IV		
simple future – will	2 - St IV	St IV	St IV
why – because	2 - St IV	St V	St V
comparative adjectives	2 - St IV	St IV	St IV
why – because	3 - St V	St V	St V
Instructions	3 - St V	St V	
past continuous tense	3 - St V	St V	St V
relative 'who'	3 - St V	St V	
countable and uncountable revised	3 - St V		
simple future revised	3 - St V		
relative 'which' 'what'	3 - St V	St V	St VI
superlatives	3 - St V	St V	
1st conditional	3 - St V	St VI	St VI
modal auxiliaries	3 - St V		St V
use of apostrophes	3 - St V	St IV	St V
all, every, some, none, many, a few	3 - St V	St V	
present simple passive	3 - St V	St VII	St VII
present perfect	3 - St V	St IV	St V
2nd & 3rd conditionals	3 - St V	St VI	St VI
past perfect (introduction)	3 - St V	St VI	
ordinal numbers	3 - St V		
Punctuation	3 - St V		

Language item	NOEC	1986	1997
	Bk St		
revision of known tenses	4 - St VI		
Relatives	4 - St VI		
phonic units	4 - St VI		
assisted composition	4 - St VI	St IV	
adverbials for time relations	4 - St VI		
constructions conveying comparisons -	4 - St VI		
- positive and negative	4 - St VI		
opportunity for dramatic work	4 - St VI		
numbers & quantities - constructions	4 - St VI		
interrogative constructions - old & new	4 - St VI		
infinitive phrases eg 'what to do'	4 - St VI	St VI	St VI
past perfect tense	4 - St VI		
passive voice forms	4 - St VI	St VII	St VII
indirect questions	4 - St VI		
reported speech/ present simple tense only	4 - St VI	St VI	St VI
until	4 - St VI		St VI
compositions with less assistance	4 - St VI		St VII
grammar - naming parts of speech	4 - St VI	St VI	St VII
more grammar - naming parts of speech	5 - St VII	St VI	St VII
composition - controlled	5 - St VII		
spelling	5 - St VII		
modal auxiliaries - instructions	5 - St VII	St VI	St VI
vocabulary	5 - St VII		
composition - free	5 - St VII		
spelling - plurals	5 - St VII		
revision of possessive pronouns	5 - St VII		
addressing envelopes	5 - St VII		
letter writing	5 - St VII	St VI	St VI & VII
adjectival phrases	5 - St VII		
with' - with a knife, with his father, etc	5 - St VII	St V	
sentence order	5 - St VII		
revision of 'too'	5 - St VII		St VII
adverbial phrases	5 - St VII		
revision - countable and uncountable	5 - St VII		
sentence construction - controlled	5 - St VII		
<i>Additional language items</i>		time telling St IV	nationality
		question tags St VII	
		form fillings St VII	