

Home Language Practices that Support Children's English Language Learning: A Case of Makuyu Zone, Muranga County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

The Home Literacy Environment is considered one of the significant factors affecting children's language development. However, children differ in their individual resources, basic abilities and other characteristics as well as in their developmental progress. The introduction of the Competence Based Curriculum in Kenya calls for a reconsideration of English language learning. Few studies have examined the connection between Competence Based Curriculum and Home Environment. Therefore, it is critical to understand home literacy activities that support English language learning at a young age in order to unravel the factors and processes associated with English language learning and to identify the support needed for children and families. The study applied social learning/constructivism theory (Vygotsky, 1978). The study employed descriptive research design. Two instruments were used to collect data; questionnaires and interview. The target population in the study was teachers in 46 public primary schools in the Makuyu zone. Random sampling method was used to identify 24 teachers. The findings of the study revealed that Home Literacy Environment may impact the development of English vocabulary, reading, listening, phonological awareness, and letter knowledge and comprehension skills.

Key words: Home language practices, Home environment, English language learning

INTRODUCTION

Home Literacy Environment (HLE) is considered one of the significant factors affecting Children's language development. Researchers have found that HLE has a great impact on children's language development (Bourdieu, 1990; Liando, 2007; Hamid, 2011). Peeters, et al. (2009) consider HLE as the home literacy materials and experiences, such as exposure to storybook reading, child opportunities for verbal interaction, parental literacy teaching activities and parent's literacy habits. Similarly, Puglisi, Hulme, Hamilton, and Snowling (2017) define HLE as literacy activities or the availability of literacy resources at home which can be used to facilitate children's literacy development. However, children differ in their individual resources, basic abilities and other characteristics as well as in their developmental progress. Moreover, HLE may lead to disparities in the development of language processing such as vocabulary, phonological awareness, and syntax at many different stages of

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development (cf. Whitehurst et al., 1998) along with memory and cognitive control mental functions (Evans, 2006).

This paper focused on home language practices that support children's English language learning: A case of Makuyu zone, Muranga County, Kenya. The introduction of Competency Based Curriculum (CBC) in Kenya calls for a gradual shift in the learning of English language. CBC does not just rely on the classroom teacher but also on the involvement of the parent. Teachers today are no longer the only authoritative source of language but instead must focus on assisting pupils in making the best use of content that they may find themselves. Many researchers agree that family life as well as home environment plays an important role in learning English language (Berstein, 1970; Brown, 1980; Grolnick & Ryan, 1989). That is home conditions are contributory factors to children's learning language. CBC design seeks to make learners competent in seven key areas: communication and collaboration, critical thinking and problem-solving, creativity and imagination, citizenship, digital literacy, learning to learn and self-efficacy (KICD, 2017). One core contributor in the success of CBC is Home Environment. However, fewer studies have examined the connection between Competence Based Curriculum and Home Environment. Little is known about the importance of the home environment as a significant predictor of early language and literacy development as emphasized in Competence Based Curriculum. Therefore, it is critical to understand home literacy activities that support English language learning in the early years of learners in order to unravel the factors and processes associated with English language learning and to identify the support needed for children and families. The study is guided by one main objective:

To describe the kinds of home language practices that support children's English language learning.

It is hoped that the study adds value to the theory and practice of learning English as a second language. The findings of the study create awareness among parents, learners, and all the stakeholders in the education sector, by getting information on the basic language learning environment and factors that enhance the acquisition of English. The study is beneficial to parents, teachers, and other stakeholders. The findings of this study also provide important information for language planning and policymaking to the ministry of education in Kenya.

SOCIAL LEARNING

This study applied Lev Vygotsky's (1978) social learning/social constructivism theoretical framework which emphasizes the collaborative nature of learning. Vygotsky's (1978) theory was applied in the analysis of language practices in home environment and ways of enhancing HLE. The theory asserts that the society and cultural settings have a significant impact on the language acquisition process, and in the language acquisition process, the environment is the most essential factor. In social learning Vygotsky observed that crucial learning by the child happens through social interaction, indicating the need for an involved community and family. In other words, Vygotsky emphasizes on how the social environment influence the learning process that is the world of learning is defined by interpersonal interactions between a student and teacher, or student and peer, or student and adult. One key element that is Central to Vygotsky's theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). According to Vygotsky learning happens when a child interacts socially with a competent instructor. Thus, understanding of meaning is through instructions from teachers and parents. Once a child internalizes the instructions given; it leads to leads to advanced thinking skills. The researcher establishes home literacy activities that are necessary to learning of English. The study established the role of parents in the learning of English language as part of ZPD. Vygotsky's ZPD advocates for assistance children get from adults when they are learning.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out in public primary schools in Makuyu zone, Muranga County, Kenya. The area was selected due to the declining standard of performance in English at the primary level which should worry many teachers and stakeholders in the education sector. The study adopted a descriptive survey design. This design is used when the population size is large and there was need to study a fairly large sample drawn from the target population. Descriptive survey research design is more of a fact-finding enterprise, focusing on relatively few dimensions of a well-defined entity (Cresswell, 2012). Survey research designs are used in preliminary and explanatory studies to allow research to gather information, summarize and interpret for the purpose of clarification. It was therefore suitable for this study. The target populations for the study were all teachers of English in Makuyu zone. Muranga South sub-county has two education zones namely, Makuyu north and south. There are 31 public primary schools in the Makuyu north zone and 15 in Makuyu south making a total of 46 public primary schools. 24 teachers of English teachers were randomly selected from the two strata. The researcher used two sets of questionnaires; for teachers to collect data and interviews. The teachers were to provide data on some of home language practices in the home.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected through questionnaires and interviews reveal that among the English language activities that may be provided in home environment are parent child shared reading (dialogic and picture reading), parent child conversational activities (storybook reading, dialogues and storytelling), playing games and puzzles and talking and song singing activities.

Parent Child Shared Reading

One of the language practices that were predominantly mentioned by teachers as factor that would enhance the learning of English is Parent child shared reading as shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1: The influence rate of parent-child shared reading on reading and vocabulary development

	No influence	Influence	Great influence
Teachers' response	0	3	21
Percentage	0	12	88

Table 1 shows that 100% of the teachers were aware on the influence of parent-child shared reading on reading and vocabulary development. While 12% of the teachers agreed that there is an influence 88% of the teachers agreed that parent-child shared reading has great influence on reading and vocabulary development. Following Vygotsky (1978) social learning/social constructivism theoretical framework children develop early linguistic competences during the interaction with their parents. Thus, this study considers parent child shared reading as one of the ways HLE provides opportunities for teaching and learning activities that support the reading skills of a child. Through the questionnaire teachers were asked to explain why parent-child shared reading is important and the responses were that:

Parent child shared reading supports children's linguistic development, Parent child shared reading supports literacy competences, Parent child shared reading makes children to develop expressive vocabularies, Parent child shared reading improves fluency of a child, Shared reading allows parents to engage their children in a story which is good for reading skills, Parents may help children to read new words when the stumble when reading, Parents may show a child a connection between words and a picture and Parent child shared reading is enjoyable.

The data above clearly show that shared reading at home provide an opportunity for children to develop linguistic competences. The data reveal that shared reading at home may lead to language production competences such as vocabularies, for instance the teachers reported that through shared reading parents or caregivers may introduce learners to new words. This then implies that HLE is key in the development of vocabularies.

Moreover, parents may improve the learner's reading fluency and proficiency by introducing them to reading strategies. Teachers reported that among the reading strategies that CBC emphasizes on are assignments on dialogic reading versus typical reading. Zevenbergen and Whitehurs (2003) consider dialogic reading as a set of book-sharing techniques designed to encourage children to formulate and articulate their ideas about book content, eventually acting as narrators who re-tell stories and actively engage instead of passively listening to them.

In preprimary and lower primary one of the assignments given to children as they go home is dialogic reading where children will read a storybook and their parents become listeners and the audience for the child. Thus, in this sense the child reads and the role of the parent is to ask questions which will prompt the child to say something about the book, For instance, key words with Peter and Jane 3b is a story book read by PP2 children where Peter and Jane are at home playing. A parent after acting like an audience may ask the child what Peter and Jane are doing. In this vein, the parent is able to evaluate the child's response, expand the child's response by rephrasing and add information to it and repeats the prompts to ensure that the child has learnt from the expansion.

The second reading strategy in preprimary as mentioned by teachers that may assist in parent child shared reading is picture book reading. Picture book reading at home exposes learners to vocabulary, sound structure, the meaning of print, the structure of stories and language, sustained attention, and the pleasure of learning. Thus, picture book reading may be key in prompting the child to say something. For instance, Pg.6 of Peter and Jane below represents a picture that may prompt the parent to ask question. The key words to be identified are the pronoun *me* and the preposition *up* as shown in Picture 1 below:



Picture 1: Sample text where parent-child may engage in dialogic and picture reading

Thus, picture reading enhances word reading skills and also children may appreciate the aesthetic in the visual drawing that they see. Picture reading above may be accompanied by taking turns to read the pages since shared reading is a parent child interactive experience. Shared reading may therefore help model reading fluency and experience of a child. The study therefore considers dialogic reading and picture reading as some of literacy activities at home that may enhance the learning of English language. Shared reading may thus contribute to significantly to the development of receptive and expressive vocabulary as well as listening comprehension.

In PP1 and PP2 teachers disclosed that one of the recommended books for reading skills is ladybird series a to c (with 12 series each) of Peter and Jane that exposes learners to key words. One of the learning activities in this book are a follow up assignment for parent child shared reading. The data collected from private schools reveal that shared reading is emphasized and that parents have to assess whether their children’s articulate words correctly. The teachers reported that such activity develops the reading proficiency of a child and enhance English vocabulary skills.

Furthermore, parent-child shared reading may provide learners support on word knowledge and reading fluency. The findings of the current study are in line with Nicklas and Schneider (2013) who argue that literacy activities such as shared reading may develop a child’s language production competencies such as receptive vocabulary and phonological awareness. Thus, in the home environment parent child shared reading has effects on language development when parents stimulate dialogue related to the content of the story.

Parent Child Conversational Activity

The study also identified parent child conversational activity as one of the home literacy activities that enhances the learning of English language. Following Vygotsky’s (1978) social learning/social constructivism theoretical framework children’s knowledge and skills develop in the context of interactions with others who have more experience such as parents, caregivers and other adults.

The analysis of the data collected through the questionnaires show that support of learners’ conversational skills may enhance the learning of English language especially vocabulary development. The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (2000) views vocabulary as one of the five pillars that support literacy. Table 2 below provides the findings on the teacher views on the influence of parent child conversational activity on the development of vocabulary.

Table 2: The influence rate of parent child conversational activities on speaking skills and vocabulary development

	No influence	Influence	Great influence
Teachers’ response	0	2	22
Percentage	0	8	92

The results in Table 2 show that parent child conversational activities may have an influence on speaking skills and vocabulary development. While 92% of the teachers agree that parent child conversational activities greatly influence the development of speaking skills and vocabulary development 8% agree. The results therefore suggest that English language input in the home environment may have an impact on vocabulary development which consequently impacts on oral and reading proficiency.

Through the questionnaire teachers were asked to explain why they think parent child conversational activity impact on vocabulary development and the responses were as shown below:

Parent child conversations may increase the number of words the child has acquired
A parent who has some knowledge in English language and interacts with the child through speech improves the vocabulary of a child

Involvement in any discourse at home may increase both vocabulary and structure

Home environment provides different settings that enhances vocabulary development

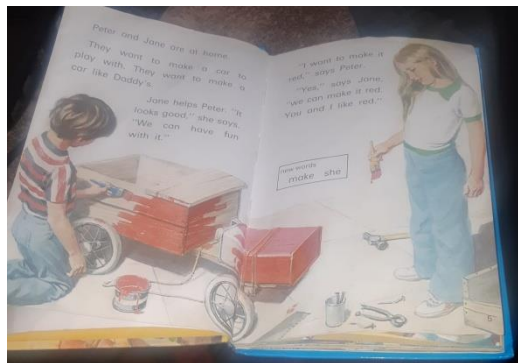
From the data above it is clear that parent child conversation may increase or support vocabulary development in young children. The data show that home environment provides a linguistic environment that increases responsive talk that enhances oral language development.

The teachers reported children who interact with their parents in English language showed a high level of vocabulary development as compared to those who did not. Thus, the study conclude that parent child conversational activities may account for vocabulary level that pupils in preprimary and lower primary possess. The teachers in preprimary level reported that children who frequently interacted with their children in English contributed significantly to their vocabulary development.

Storybook Reading

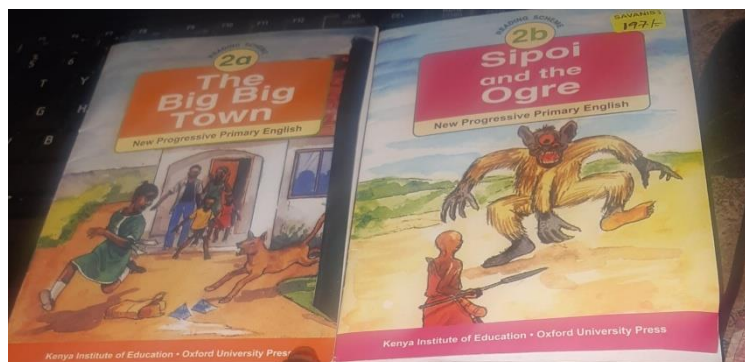
Parent child conversational activities are one way of providing language input by exposing the child on the English language. One of the activities that enhance parent child conversational activities is storybook reading as explained earlier. The data collected revealed that shared reading allows parents to provide feedback about the story and ask questions that promote conversation. Such activities may target specific vocabulary words.

For instance, in preprimary ladybird series 4a parent child activities targets lexical building on words such as *make, she draw, us, house, children, be, off, there, then, work, away, his, fire, big, keep and little*. Through dialogic and picture reading both the teacher and the parent at home aims at supporting the child to expand. Picture reading below for instance aims at enhancing on the lexical building of the word *make* and *she* in a learner.



Picture 2: Sample of a picture that enhances lexical building in a child

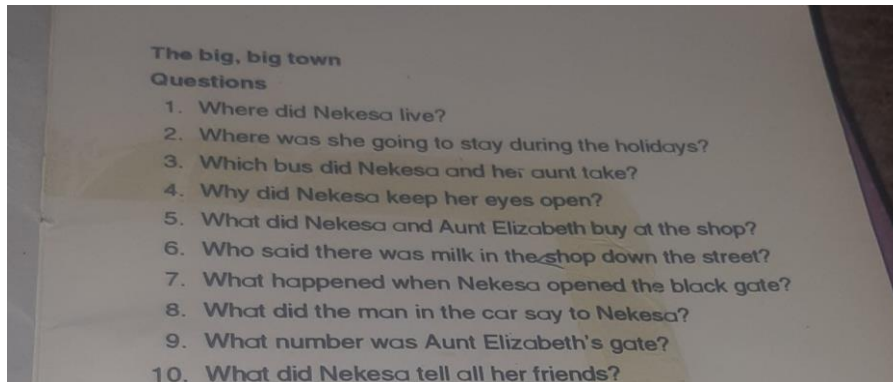
Picture 2 above shows with parent’s intervention the child may be able to build new lexical terms make and she. In both Lower primary (Grade 1 to 3) and upper primary Grade 4 to 6 among the activities that may enhance conversations among parents and children is an interactive storybook reading. The teachers reported that in Lower primary (Grade 1 to 3) among the interactive story books that have been identified by Kenya Institute of Education are *The Big Big Town* and *Sipoi the Ogre* which are 16 pages each and with big print out. The storybooks are attractive both to parents, teachers and the children and their main aim is to entertain by providing fun. The story books emphasize on specific language skills. The books are shown below:



Picture 3: Sample of storybooks recommended for parent child reading in preprimary

The storybook reading aims at expanding the lexical density of a child. The assignments to this storybook are for Grade 2 parents who engage the child in prompt question that triggers the child to speak about the story. For instance, *The Big Big Town* is a story about Nekesa who travels from Kitale to Nairobi, the big town.

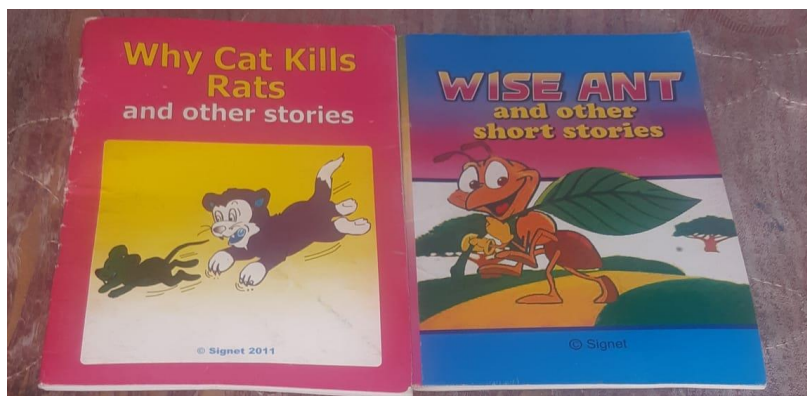
A follow up assignment for parent to engage their children in a conversational activity that may enhance vocabulary development is shown below:



Assignment 1

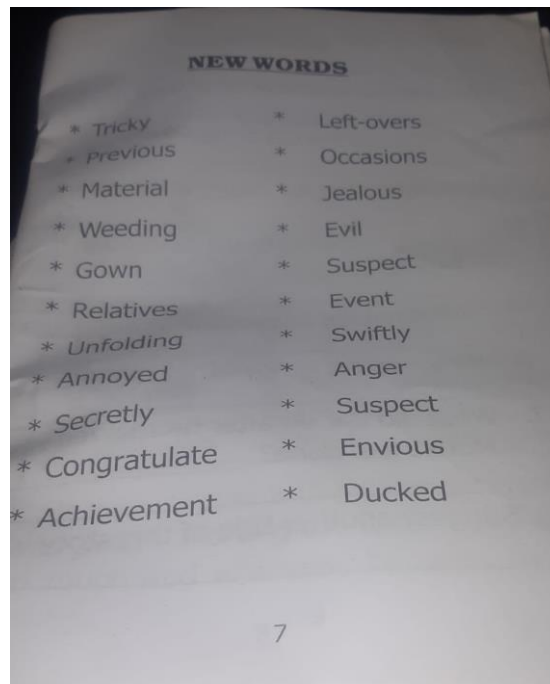
Assignment 1 above gives the parent an opportunity to prompt the child to say something about the book, then the parent may evaluate the child's response and expands on the child's response by rephrasing and adding information to it, and repeats the prompt to make sure that the child has learned from the expansion. All the questions above also are the questions that give children an opportunity to recall and express themselves using language. Thus, such activities enhance vocabulary development. Moreover, since the assignment is dialogic it may stimulate dialogue between parent and child. The interactive questions and active dialogue about the story ready allow the child to feel supported while reading the book.

In Grade 4 and 5 the learners' storybooks are advanced in terms structure and word density. A sample is given below:



Picture 4: Sample of storybooks recommended for parent child reading in grade 4 and 5

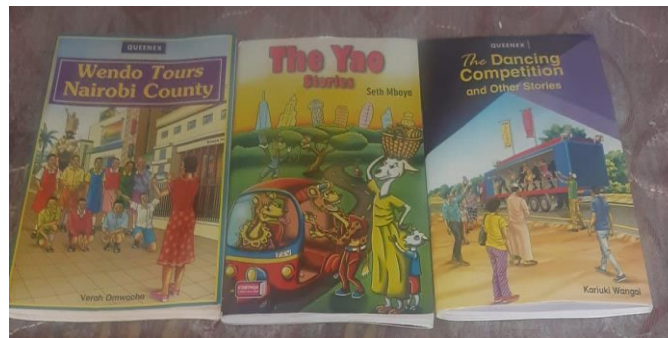
The story books above have three main functions; to entertain, educate and to give moral values to the young ones. In terms of language the text are meant to build the lexical knowledge of the child by introducing complex vocabulary. In the story *Why Cat Kills Rats* the story aims at developing vocabularies of children by introducing them to complex words as shown below:



Assignment 2

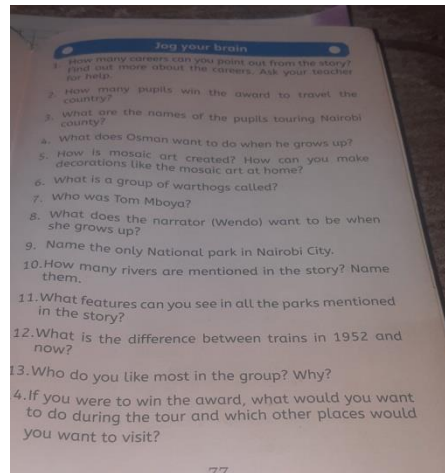
Assignment 2: A sample of an assignment that aims at building lexical items for the child

The data above shows that in upper primary vocabulary is introduced during book reading and the meaning is explained as the word is encountered in the story. The parent should therefore initiate purposeful conversation that may enhance learning of new vocabulary and meaningful ways in which the word may be used. Some of the recommended books in Grade 6 include: *Wendo Tours Nairobi County* by Vera Omwocha, *Yao stories* by Seth Mboya and the *Dancing completion* by Kariuki Wangai as shown below:



Picture 5: Sample of storybooks recommended for parent child reading in Grade 6

Picture 5 above shows sample of selected texts that may be used by parents to engage in storybook reading with their children. The storybook *Wendo Tours Nairobi County* for instance is about Wendo Wanani a pupil at Kaptiket primary school in Kericho County who visits Nairobi for the first time. The book introduces learners on different carriers. Thus, one of the way parents are encouraged to prompt dialogue in this story is through prompt question on different carriers through assignment 2 below:



Picture 6: A sample of an assignment 3 that may prompt parent child conversation in Grade 6

The parent child assignment above aims to facilitate of conversation between the parent and the child. In this context, responsive conversations between the parent and the child are needed to sustain receptive and promote expressive vocabulary. Teachers reported that parent child interactive storybook reading when given as an assignment to children and a follow up by responsive interaction from teachers confirms that the strategy is an effective tool to improve vocabulary knowledge. Parent child conversation skills due to storybook reading thus enhance vocabulary knowledge in children with low vocabulary skills.

Parent child dialogues

Another strategy that may enhance parent child conversation activities is dialogue. The teachers reported that home environment may provide the learner with different settings that may provide opportunities for the child to build their vocabularies. For instance, when sharing a meal parents may engage in a multiparty dialogue. Such a setting may be considered to provide a warm and encouraging setting for discourses to take place. Home environment thus provides an environment that support vocabulary and oral language development.

For example, in this context a child may be probed to use expressive language skills to describe the meal. The parent on the other hand may use a diversity of words in the dialogue. Dialogues provide opportunities for children to talk and use language in meaningful contexts which consequently promote vocabulary development in preschoolers for children. Home environment therefore provides learners with to hear words in meaningful context so they can begin to solidify the association between a word and its meaning and how the word can be used in communicating with others. Another context that may provide a context for meaning conversation between child and parent is when they engage in activities such as cooking. Cooking may provide parents an opportunity to give instruction which may in turn promote active listening.

Storytelling

Storytelling is another conversational activity that was reported as a mean of enhancing vocabulary growth. In quest to measure the influence rate of storytelling on vocabulary development 90% of teachers reported that it greatly impacts on vocabulary development while 10% agreed that it has an influence as shown in Table 3 below:

Table 3: The rate of influence rate of storytelling on vocabulary development

	No influence	Influence	Great influence
Teachers' response	0	3	21
Percentage	0	10	99

The above table clearly shows that the use of parent child story may have a significant impact on vocabulary development. The teachers reported that increased conversational features such narrative storytelling and responsive turn taking may have positive effects on children’s vocabulary use.

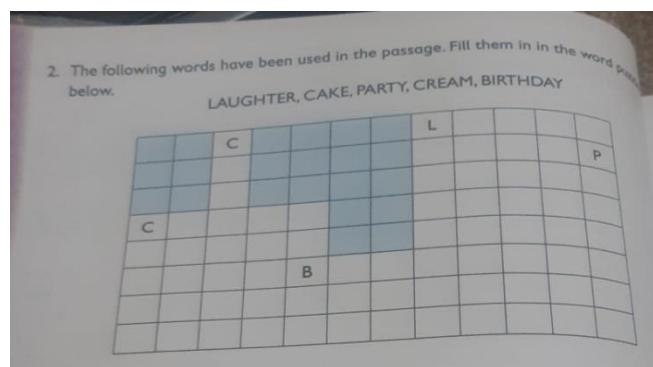
In summary, intensive parent child conversations are a means of improving and supporting vocabulary development. Parents should be made aware of their role in facilitating children’s expressive vocabularies. The parent child conversational activities clearly show that the more the child receives input of the English language through parent child conversational activities the more the child advances in terms of vocabulary development. Moreover, vocabulary learning entails item learning hence vocabulary learning may vary from child to child. Hoff et al (2013) argue that children’s language skills are highly varied due to the variability in their language skills. Therefore, in Kenyan context there is a likely hood that children in private schools may have more word density as compared to public schools due to socio-economic factors.

CBC emphasizes on the growth of literacy skills. The results in this section clearly show that early development of vocabulary knowledge play a significant role. This is because language development in oral language skills leads to growth in reading skills. Moreover, storybooks with emotional content may promote socioemotional skills by focusing on emotional vocabularies that may evoke emotional responses from children. The schools should therefore be involved in book choices that may enhance development of emotional vocabularies. This is because a well mediated home environment that provides linguistic abilities may enhance the development of socioemotional competencies.

Playing games and puzzles

The study established that another important activity that may enhance parent child interaction is puzzle playing. The teachers noted that currently Grade 4 to 6 books have inclusion of games and puzzles. The teachers reported that sometimes to involve parents in the learning of English language they give puzzles as assignment where the guardian may be the one reading the question as the child responds. The teachers reported that puzzles both at school and home promote interaction, thinking, learning, and enhance the development of problem-solving strategies. Moreover, puzzles and games provide students a hypothetical environment where they learn to strategize by providing alternatives.

A sample of a puzzle for grade 5 pupils is given below:



Picture 7: A sample of a puzzle assignment for grade 5 (Assignment 4)

The assignment above is a sample of puzzle activity that may be done both at home with the help of parental guidance or at school with the help of the teacher. Puzzles help improve communication. Puzzles and games require both verbal and nonverbal communication. They are an excellent choice for promoting parent-child interaction, as they allow parents to provide

instruction and guidance while children work on solving the puzzle independently. Moreover, they provide children an opportunity to think flexibly.

Other games that teachers reported that may lead to vocabulary development at home are card games. Card games develop social interaction and vocabulary associated with the game. Card games promote conversations between the child and the parent. They also encourage the use of a language. However, the construction of cards should be aided by the teacher to allow for strategic conversation between the child and parent or siblings that focus on explicit development of vocabularies through multiple activities and experiences.

Puzzles and games therefore are one of the home environment activities that should be enhanced since they encourage growth of collaboration and interactivity skills. Collaborative and interactive skills have both performance and social benefits. They are also good for holding memory since the learner is encouraged to use the language spontaneously. They also enhance development of creative and cooperation skills.

Talking and song activities

The findings of the study reveal that talking and song singing activities are literacy activities that children can be exposed to while at home. At preprimary level talking and singing with young children helps them to develop listening and speaking skills. Parents are encouraged to sing with their children since it is fun and also prepares children to read. Through music children hear the smaller sounds of words and builds vocabulary. For example, parents in private schools reported that they are guided on songs that they can listen to and sing along with their children. Mostly, the songs that are emphasized on are songs with rhymes commonly known as nursery rhymes.

Nursery rhymes utilize the use of rhyme, repetition and rhythm. Such songs include:

Song 1: Baa baa black sheep

Baa baa black sheep

Have you any wool?

Yes, sir Yes sir

Three bags full

One for the master

One for the dame

And one for the little boy

Who lives down the lane.

The song above introduces children to smaller sounds. The song above helps children to develop language through repetition. Parents are also encouraged to use talking to help children to develop listening and speaking skills. In the home environment talking can occur at mealtimes and vocabularies about how the food tastes can be use or to talk about the food they are preparing and how they are doing to it. Parents may also talk about objects inside and outside the house – for example, the rustling of leaves, or the sounds of the birds or traffic as they introduce vocabularies in meaningful context.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated home language practices that support children's English language learning. The findings of the study shows that among the language literacy practices that may be in the home environment include; parent child shared reading, parent child conversational skills, puzzles/games and talking and song singing activities. The findings of the study indicate a close relation between language literacy activities and language development especially reading and vocabulary development. The study revealed that language literacy activities impact on communication and collaboration competencies, imagination and creativity and socio-emotional competencies. The study concludes that one aspect of language literacy activity may not be associated with language development but a combination of literacy

activities. The findings of the study however indicated that the provisions of home literacy activities closely correlate with the socio-economic family background.

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