

Summary

Pilot project

Goal of the pilot project 'Kusambira kwizira mumasebero', which was developed and facilitated by Continuous Professional Development Facilitator (CPDF) Mariska Westdijk, was to support Primary Education Advisors (PEAs), head teachers and teachers of four pilot schools in Mzimba North Education District in the design, production and use of tools & games for English in standards 1 and 2 and Mathematics in standards 2 and 3.

For as well English as Mathematics the pilot project contained three workshops, homework assignments, classroom visits and a storage boxes competition, which took place between November 2009 and May 2010. The proposal was approved by VSO Malawi and funding came via DFID.

The participants for the English project, which focused on the initial reading process of learners, defined the concept 'Educative game', described advantages and disadvantages of educative games, explored challenges in English in standards 1 and 2, created top-15 lists of the most difficult topics in English in standards 1 and 2, developed educative games, demonstrated local games & songs and newly developed games and how to use these in teaching English in infant classes, practiced segmenting and blending phonetic words, explored several tools & games for reading English, wrote lesson plans for demonstration lessons, facilitated demonstration lessons English using educative games, reflected on these demonstration lessons via the sandwich feedback model and continued practicing pronouncing phonemes.

Based on the findings of the pilot project the CPDF wrote a one-day training 'English in infant classes', which she facilitated in three Teacher Development Centres (TDCs) to orient other PEAs and teachers in the Mzimba North District on phonics instructions and tools & games for reading English.

Conclusions

- I. The most relevant conclusion is that PEAs and teachers have insufficient knowledge and practical skills in relation to the initial reading process of standards 1 and 2 learners, especially with regards to phonemic awareness and phonics. Participants (of as well the pilot project as the one-day trainings) were not able to explain the concept 'phonemes', demonstrate what it means to identify initial sounds in words or use phoneme-grapheme correspondence to read words. They confused *sounds* of letters (phonemes) with *names* of these letters (like in the alphabet song). Teachers were not using curriculum materials the way they are meant to. Where the teacher's guide speaks about 'phonics' – the relation between the smallest units of sounds, like /l/ in 'leg' and /p/ in 'pen' and graphemes – written letters - the teachers treat the sounds like alphabet letters in the ABC-song: /l/ becomes /ɛl/ and /p/ gets /pi:/. This means learners are not able to read words using the relation between sounds and signs.

Phonemic awareness and phonics

Phonemic awareness is '*the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate the individual sounds – phonemes- in spoken words*' (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001, p.3). A phoneme is '*the smallest part of spoken language that makes a difference in the meaning of words*'. (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001, p.3) Phonemes or sounds are notated between brackets (Hamilton Trust, 2000, p.6), like in the word 'clock' which has four phonemes: /k/ /l/ /ɒ/ /k/ (IPA for English, 2010). The authors describe several types of phonemic awareness activities.

Phonics is '*the understanding that there is a predictable relationship between phonemes (the sounds of spoken language) and graphemes (the letters and spellings that represent those sounds in written language)*' (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001, p.3). A grapheme is '*the smallest part of written language that represents a phoneme in the spelling of a word*' (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001, p.3). This can be one or more letters. If the latter is the case, we have a '*digraph*' (Lloyd, & Wernham, 2000, p. 2). Underlining refers to graphemes (Hamilton Trust, 2000, p. 6). e.a. f i sh.

- II. Although teachers were enthusiastic about the training content they had difficulties to transfer the knowledge and skills gained in the trainings, to day to day teaching in their classrooms. The feedback sessions after the classroom observations in the pilot project gave them practical guidelines for further exploring and implementing the phonics instructions and tools & games.
- III. A good number of tools & educative games, was developed and/or used in this pilot project. These tools & games motivated and assisted as well teachers and learners in their teaching & learning process. Further guidance is needed in the development, demonstration and use of these tools & games.

Discussion and recommendations

Based on experiences in the pilot project, literature research and analysis of PCAR curriculum materials for English in infant classes the CPDF formulated the following recommendations:

I. Adjustments to current curriculum materials:

- a. Development of a section 'Characteristics of the initial reading process'
- b. Reviewing the (description of) current activities for initial reading and where necessary adapt or remove these or add activities
- c. Increasing the number and types of *phonemic awareness* activities
- d. Exchanging the sample word 'iron' for a phonetic word, e.g. 'ink'
- e. Including the most common *phoneme-to-grapheme correspondences* of the 17-18 currently missing sounds
- f. Adding descriptions of brief, daily *phonics* activities
- g. Using consequent underlining for *graphemes* and brackets for *phonemes*
- h. Including some high frequency words, rhyme and onset and an explanation of pre-teaching
- i. Investigating what is expected of learners in relation to reading after specific periods of reading instruction and including the findings in the teacher's guides
- j. Development of some national reading assessment tools, linked to initial reading skills of learners
- k. Exploring the usefulness of the five phase model, described by Struiksma et al (2009, p.17) in identifying and helping learners with reading difficulties
- l. Including a sample group plan and descriptions of remedial activities for learners.

II. Development of additional teaching and learning resources

- a. It is important that young, starting readers have sufficient materials to practice and improve reading, via the Learners' Books and other reading materials. Tools and games can be made of locally available resources by teachers, talented senior class learners, parents or community members. It would be good if the Teacher's Guides (or another document, e.g. a manual) gave information on development and use of tools & games for literacy and storing Teaching And Learning Resources Using Locally Available Resources (TALULAR) in a structured way via labeling, preferably in a TALULAR bank. Another option is that some of the tools and games are produced by a professional institute.
- b. Although schools can acquire books via the National Library or the Teacher Development Centre in their zone these books often don't offer many possibilities for learners from the infant classes. Therefore it would be good if additional English books are developed especially for starting readers. Important is that the books contain mostly *phonetic* words plus some high frequency words, like I, you, the, are etc. For the first term of standard 1 it might be an idea to develop some picture books, relevant for Malawian children with words related to their daily life and school life to increase their oral vocabulary and their interest in learning to read.

III Initial teacher training

It is recommended to include 'Early literacy' in the initial teacher training at the Teacher Training Centres. This can be done via the development of a module 'Early literacy' which is compulsory for all trainees and/or developing a specialism 'Early literacy' for teachers with an interest in this area. Transfer of knowledge and skills gained in the TTCs to the classrooms should be focus point.

IV Continuing professional development of in-service teachers

- a. Early literacy training for in-service teachers should stress the difference between the *names* and *sounds* of letters, explain why it is important that learners are familiar with *sounds* of letters, include sufficient time to practice pronouncing the *sounds* of all alphabet letters and digraphs, have a look at activities in the Teacher's Guides, which indicate that teachers should practice the *sounds* of letters with their learners and let teachers demonstrate practical reading activities, which ask teachers to use *sounds* of letters.
- b. Teachers need sufficient time and ongoing support in the initiation, implementation and continuation of this educational change by their primary education advisors and head teachers in their schools. It is crucial that they regularly supervise the involved teachers and help them to try the phonics instructions and the tools & games and reflect on new ways of instructing learners and using unfamiliar teaching & learning resources. It is therefore advisable to provide practical guidelines for literacy supervision in standards 1 and 2 for Primary Education Advisors, Head Teachers and supervisors & mentors of student teachers.

V Involvement of parents & guardians and early childhood development centers

- a. Parents and guardians play an important role in preparing their children for reading, motivating them and helping them in their initial reading process. It is therefore important that the infant class teachers have good contact with the parents of their learners and share with the parents what they can do at home to further practice reading. Teacher's Guides for standards 1 and 2 should contain practical guidelines for schools how to inform and instruct parents about the initial reading process of their children.
- b. It is also relevant for schools to have a good relationship with nearby nurseries and encourage these to prepare children for the reading process. Teacher's Guides for standards 1 and 2 should contain guidelines for contacts/cooperation between schools and nurseries.
- c. A financial injection is needed for the development of early childhood development centres.

VI Research and educational stakeholders working together

Different aspects of the initial reading process of Malawian learners require further research, in order to decide on the best steps to be taken. Various educational stakeholders and projects in Malawi focus on improvement of literacy rates, like the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, the Ministry of Gender and Community Services, DFID, Montford College for Special Needs, The Primary School Support Program: A School Fees Pilot (PSSP: SFP), The American Institutes for Research & Miske Witt and Associates, The Research Triangle Institute International, UNICEF, the University of Malawi, the Malawi Teacher Professional Development Support (MTPDS) project, the Read Malawi project and the CPDF Programme. It would be good to further investigate in which ways diverse stakeholders can work more hand in hand to assist young learners in their initial reading process and learn from previous literacy improvement projects in the country.

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Literature

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