

What Does it Mean to Learn Oral and Written English Language: A Case Study of a Rural Kenyan Classroom

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Abstract

This study was an ethnographic case study that investigated oral and written language learning in a first grade classroom in Kenya. The languages used in this classroom were Swahili and English only. Kamba the mother tongue of the majority of the children, was banned in the entire school. In this classroom there were 89 children with two teachers, one a teacher of English, the other a teacher of Swahili. The children's ages ranged from five to eight years. The main participants were six focal children with their parents, the two teachers, and the school administrator. Data collection took place over a two and half month period and employed classroom participant observations, audio recording, interviewing, and collection of official documents and children's writings. The study was guided by a sociocultural and dialogic framework which maintains that social interactions and cultural institutions (e.g. societies, schools, and classrooms) have important roles to play in a child's literacy and language development. Thus, the social life of this classroom was central to the children's literacy and language learning. The physical, institutional, and policy contexts of this school influenced the nature of social interaction and, thereby, of the language teaching and learning that occurred. To begin, in this classroom, there was a great shortage of literacy and educational materials and space. Moreover, the school's language policy--that is, English as the language of instruction, Swahili as language of communication, and the banning of Kamba--combined with the physical context shaped the classroom's practices to a great extent. As the teacher and the students or students interacted with each other in the classroom, they were involved in different practices or genres and this is what marked the culture of this classroom. There were both official (i.e. teacher controlled) and unofficial practices (i.e. children controlled). On one hand, during the daily English official writing, the teacher followed the mandated curriculum, making adjustments for the lack of the textbooks (i.e., having children copy excerpts on the board). The interaction structure was traditional recitation involving much repetition of the teacher's words. On the other hand, during the Swahili official writing, reading, and speaking practices, the teacher taught with the same space and text limitations but involved the children in dialogues with her and other students through storytelling, peer guided reading, classroom talk, and drawing. In the Swahili classroom through the teacher's dialogic instruction and mediation, the children's voices were recognized and acknowledged. During writing practices the children went beyond copying off the board and drew and colored. Moreover, during unofficial curriculum, the children drew and played together. They drew, wrote, played, or sang songs which focused on their community practices or experiences, identities, and imaginations. Thus, the English conventional practices did not provide insights into the children's experiences and imaginations as the drawing, storytelling, singing, recitation of poems, and play did during Swahili lessons and during unofficial times. Therefore, drawing, storytelling, singing, recitation of poems, and play should be included in the official English curriculum. In conclusion, this study manifested that language learning cannot be separated from its ideological, social, and physical contexts. These contexts shape language learning. Also, meaningful dialogues are important for meaningful

language learning to occur. And, oral and written language develops simultaneously in a classroom setting. Lastly, written language development is supported by other media such as drawing, play, singing, etc.

Keywords: Oral and Written language, English language, Rural classroom, Kenya

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