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Effect of social skills in cooperative learning on preschoolers' achievement in English language activities in Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated the effect of social skills in cooperative learning on preschoolers' achievement in English language activities in Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya. The study was anchored on Constructivism theory. Utilising a quasi-experimental research design with a non-equivalent control group pre-test and post-test design, the study collected data through questionnaires for teachers and observation schedule for preschool children. The target population for the study was 411 public preschool headteachers, 508 teachers and 24000 preschoolers. From the preschools, 24 headteachers and 110 preschool teachers were sampled using purposive sampling. The researcher sampled 462 PP2 learners from all preschools. The researcher pre-tested instruments in five preschools, which were excluded from the final sample. Research instruments were developed under guidance from the University of Nairobi's Department of Educational, Communication, Technology and Pedagogical Studies to ensure validity. Reliability was assessed using the test-retest method and Cronbach's Alpha, and a reliability coefficient of 0, 72 was obtained. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data were examined using a thematic approach. Key findings include the positive impact of learning components such as the social skills of an individual. The study concludes that the cooperative learning approach, encompassing social skills, positively affects pre-primary schoolchildren's achievement in English language activities. The government, the Ministry of Education, and curriculum developers may develop a curriculum design that will focus on cooperative learning strategies and integrate social skill-building exercises. A longitudinal Study on the Long-Term Impact of Cooperative Learning may be designed to investigate the long-term effect of cooperative learning approaches on the English language.

Key words: Achievement, cooperative learning, language activities, preschooler, social skills.



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INTRODUCTION

Language is defined as a system of signs and words which individuals use to express feelings and thoughts to one another. Language can be viewed as a medium of communication that people use to express desires, excitements, ideas, disappointments, and amusements, as well as exchange information. Proficiency in the English language has become increasingly vital for learners in today's globalised society. As the dominant language of international communication, English serves as a bridge for diverse cultures and communities, facilitating understanding in various domains, including business, education, and technology. Moreover, English proficiency enables learners to access online resources and digital content, which are predominantly available in English, enhancing the learning experience and broadening their knowledge base (Thorne et al., 2022).

Cooperative learning is a teaching strategy that involves arranging activities in a classroom into social and academic learning experiences (Siddique et al., 2020). Learners are organised to work and learn in groups while they accomplish learning tasks. However, the reality in Tharaka Nithi County is that many pre-primary learners struggle to meet these expected milestones in English language proficiency. Data from recent Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) results indicated lower English language scores compared to other regions, suggesting a disconnect between the instructional methods used and the learners' ability to acquire foundational English language skills. Reports and assessments from the Ministry of Education indicated gaps in English language proficiency among pre-primary school children in Tharaka Nithi (Njeru & Kirimi, 2023). This made the county an ideal location to examine whether the cooperative learning approach could improve achievement levels in English language activities. In addition, the choice of preschool learners for this study is informed by several critical factors that make early childhood a pivotal stage for language acquisition and cognitive development. Neuroscientific research has established that early childhood is a critical period for language acquisition.

The recent introduction of the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) in Kenya places a strong

emphasis on learner-centred approaches and the development of communication skills from an early age. Preschool learners are at the forefront of this shift, as the CBC aims to nurture competencies such as collaboration, problem-solving, and communication (KICD, 2018). Focusing on preschoolers aligns with the national education agenda and provides an opportunity to assess the impact of cooperative learning in the context of the CBC. This study, therefore, sought to investigate the effects of cooperative learning on pre-primary school children's English language activities, aiming to provide evidence-based recommendations for enhancing early childhood English pedagogy in the Kenyan context. The choice of preschool learners was justified by the critical nature of early childhood for language development and the need to establish a strong foundation for future learning. Early interventions at this stage can have a profound and lasting impact on learners' language proficiency and overall academic success.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cooperative learning is a comprehensive approach that institutions use during teaching where the learners are sectioned into small groups to ensure that the success of the group is contributed highly by each student's participation (Al Mubireek, 2021; Chakyarkandiyil & Prakasha, 2023; Zhou et al., 2023). This cooperative learning technique promotes the well-being of the students in a way that the success of the group promotes both the individual and the success of the classroom as a whole (Erbil, 2020). This type of learning promotes the learning goals of the learner. The approach allows learners to play an active role in forming their questions as well as the ability to collaborate to find answers rather than the one given by the teacher. It usually aligns well with a constructivist learning approach that emphasises the importance of learners' interactions and explorations into solving a problem (Ndebil & Ali, 2024).

Recent empirical studies from Europe, the United States of America (USA) and Asia highlight the positive impact of cooperative learning on learners' achievement in English language skills in pre-primary settings but also reveal areas where research gaps remain. A study conducted in Spain demonstrated that cooperative learning improved

English language fluency and increased learner engagement among preschoolers. The collaborative activities enabled students to practice speaking and listening more frequently, leading to improved vocabulary retention. However, a noted gap is the lack of focus on how cooperative learning impacts learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds, which remains a challenge in increasingly multicultural classrooms in Europe (Rodríguez et al., 2021). In the United Kingdom, a study showed that cooperative learning boosted children's confidence in using English, especially in oral communication. This approach also reduced teacher talk time, allowing students more opportunities to interact with peers. However, the study lacked long-term follow-up to assess the retention of English skills over time (Smith & Jackson, 2022). Empirical studies across Africa have explored the impact of cooperative learning (CL) on learners' achievement in English language activities, especially in pre-primary education settings. The findings indicated positive results, though there are notable gaps in consistent implementation and assessment methods (Adejimi et al., 2021). For instance, a study in Lagos State examined the use of CL in improving students' comprehension and language skills. It was found that learners involved in cooperative learning groups outperformed those in traditional teaching setups in both oral and written English activities. However, the study noted that teachers faced challenges in managing group dynamics, especially with larger class sizes, indicating the need for strategies that cater to group composition and task allocation for optimal results (Johnson et al., 2020). The study did not explore the long-term retention of skills gained through cooperative learning.

In Mombasa, a study explored the effect of cooperative learning on English language vocabulary acquisition in pre-primary learners. The research found that learners who engaged in peer-to-peer interactions in cooperative groups demonstrated higher vocabulary retention and usage compared to those in traditional learning setups. Learners were more engaged and participative, benefiting from the collaborative environment. However, the study highlighted the lack of teacher training in CL methods, which affected the consistency of its application. There is a need for teacher development

programs focused on CL techniques and their effective integration into the curriculum.

In Nairobi, Kenya, a study examined how cooperative learning that fostered social skills such as collaboration, empathy, and peer support influenced English language proficiency among pre-primary learners. The study indicated that learners in cooperative groups exhibited stronger oral communication skills and were more confident in using English. However, teachers reported difficulties in facilitating group activities, especially in large classes where some learners tended to dominate (Mwangi & Karanja, 2022). The study highlighted the need for additional research on strategies to ensure equitable participation in cooperative learning environments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study utilised a quasi-experimental research design with a non-equivalent control group pre-test and post-test design. This design was appropriate since the objective of the study was to compare the learners' acquisition of English language skills on the pre-test and that on the post-test. The target population for this study was 411 public preschool headteachers, 508 teachers and 24000 preschoolers aged 5 years in early childhood in PP2 Classes in the County. Auma and Charles (2023) assert that a sample of between 10-30 per cent of the targeted population is adequate for an experimental research design. The researcher sampled 24 headteachers and 110 teachers of the PP2 class. The researcher used purposive sampling to get 462 PP2 learners from all preschools; half (12) of them were classified as the experimental group, and the other half as the control group. The instruments for data collection included questionnaires for teachers, document analysis, and observation schedules for preschool children.

The researcher administered data collection instruments both at the pilot and main study. One intact class was selected as the control group and another as the experimental group. The dependent variable was measured by comparing the learners' acquisition of English skills in the pre-test with the learners' English skills based on Cooperative learning. The learners of the control group were not exposed to treatment but to regular ways of teaching followed in preschools. Both groups were given

equal opportunities to share the same learning materials, schedule and tests. The study interviewed the head teachers on a face-to-face basis. Interviews enabled the study to understand the feelings of the interviewee. The study used a questionnaire with preschool teachers. The investigator sat in a class and observed the participation of the pre-scholars during an English lesson. Documents on the learner's performance were obtained from the head teachers' office. This study generated both qualitative and quantitative data. Quantitative data was analysed using both descriptive and Inferential Statistics. Descriptive statistics summarised the characteristics of the experimental and control groups during the pre-test and post-test. Inferential statistics were used to test hypotheses about the impact of the intervention on learner acquisition of English language skills.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions: Based on the data generated, the study concludes that the cooperative learning approach,

encompassing social skills, positively affects pre-primary school children's achievement in English language activities.

Recommendations: The Government, through policymakers, the Ministry of Education, and curriculum developers, may design a curriculum that integrates social skill-building exercises into daily lessons. Focus on cooperation, empathy, and conflict resolution as key components. Teachers should establish clear individual and group goals with accountability measures. Assign roles within groups to ensure each child contributes to the collective task. A longitudinal study on cooperative learning should be designed to investigate the long-term effect of cooperative learning approaches on language proficiency and social development of children as they transit through different educational stages.

This suggests that implementing cooperative learning strategies can be beneficial in enhancing language skills among preschoolers in Tharaka Nithi County.

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