

Development of pre-reading skills through the implementation of a competency-based approach among pre-primary children in Tanzania: The case of Songea Municipality

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Abstract. Despite numerous initiatives by the government and non-governmental organisations aimed at eradicating illiteracy in Tanzania, a significant proportion of primary students continue to struggle with reading. This study explored the strategies adopted by teachers to enhance pre-reading skills among pre-primary students within the framework of the competency-based approach, as well as the values they associated with these strategies. The study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design. The study involved twenty-three participants, including 15 pre-primary teachers and eight headteachers. Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews and were analysed using thematic analysis. The teachers used pictures, songs, plays, dances, roleplaying, flashcards, grouping and talking classrooms to develop pre-reading skills. It was revealed that the values they put on these strategies include the development of creativity and confidence, connecting sounds and meaning, embodying social roles, fostering active participation and retention, and improving independent learning skills. Pictures, songs, roleplay, and interactive classroom discussions were used to develop pre-reading skills. They associated these strategies with benefits such as developing confidence through independent learning, connecting sounds and meanings, enhancing understanding of the text through imitation of social roles, fostering participation, making learning interactive, increasing vocabulary, and developing creativity. However, most activities involved the whole class, with less attention given to the individual needs of learners, who could benefit from paired and individualised activities. The teachers generally expressed a positive attitude towards the competency-based approach, suggesting that it fosters curiosity and participation; however, their knowledge of competency-based approaches was limited. Teacher training for early childhood education programmes should include modules on inclusive and differentiated teaching strategies. In collaboration with NGOs and the private sector, the government should provide schools with more teaching and learning resources tailored to pre-reading development. There is a need to invest in affordable and accessible novel technologies to support early childhood education.

Keywords: competency-based approach, early childhood education, early literacy, pre-primary education, pre-reading skills

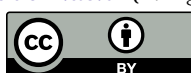
1. Introduction

Reading skills are fundamental to children's academic success and overall life competency. Numerous studies have established that proficiency in reading significantly influences students' performance across various subjects, as many educational activities rely heavily on reading comprehension [45, 56]. Students who excel in reading are better equipped to engage in classroom discussions and complete assignments effectively [37]. Pre-primary education is considered to contribute to children's literacy skills development in primary schools [4]. Thus, children well-equipped with reading

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*Educational
Dimension*



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skills progress faster in reading than those without such skills. Letter knowledge, phonological awareness and rapid naming have been reported to be key predictors of decoding and reading fluency among children [25].

In Tanzania, the Education and Training Policy (ETP) of 2014 underscores the importance of enhancing educational quality and access at all levels. This policy mandates that children aged three to five be enrolled in pre-primary education, with one year of compulsory attendance. It emphasises delivering high-quality pre-primary education through effective teaching methods, appropriate learning materials, and a relevant curriculum delivered by well-trained educators [59].

The shift from a content-based to a competency-based curriculum in 2005 marked a significant transformation in Tanzania's educational landscape, promoting a learner-centred approach [29]. Under this framework, students are encouraged to take active roles in their learning, fostering ownership of their educational journeys. In 2016, the Tanzania Institute of Education released a teacher's guide to facilitate the implementation of this competency-based curriculum, defining pre-reading skills as essential competencies children should develop prior to formal reading [58]. These skills include recognising and analysing images, naming objects, pronouncing vowels and consonants, and connecting sounds to letters. According to Aboagye et al. [1], activities like properly turning pages, relating pictures to real-life experiences, phonological awareness and oral language are among the important targets of pre-primary education.

The new curriculum emphasises the development of foundational language and literacy skills, encompassing phonological awareness, print knowledge, oral language, alphabet knowledge, listening comprehension, and name writing [3]. Despite various initiatives by the government and non-governmental organisations to enhance literacy instruction among pre-primary and primary students in Tanzania, significant challenges remain. For instance, the Tanzania 21st Century Basic Education Programme (TZ21), funded by USAID, aimed to improve reading instruction in Mtwara and the islands of Unguja and Pemba from 2011 to 2015. Similarly, the Education Quality Improvement Programme in Tanzania (EQUIP-T), conducted between 2013 and 2016, focused on enhancing learning outcomes for girls in 47 districts [47].

Despite these efforts, many students complete primary education without adequate reading skills [51, 60]. Kafyulilo [14] highlights that many teachers lack the competencies to effectively implement the competency-based curriculum in early education, presenting a significant barrier to improving pre-reading skills. The global adoption of competency-based curricula since the 1960s has influenced educational reforms across Africa, with countries like South Africa, Zambia, and Rwanda implementing similar frameworks to promote skills development and lifelong learning [35].

In Tanzania, the competency-based curriculum aims to foster self-reliance in education, emphasising the development of knowledge, skills, and values relevant to real-life problem-solving [31]. While implementing this curriculum has been positively received for its potential to enhance children's curiosity and cognitive development, various challenges persist. These include overcrowded classrooms, insufficient teacher training, and inadequate educational infrastructure [5, 24].

A competency-based curriculum focuses on bringing meaningful learning and enhancing creativity and critical thinking by involving a child in the teaching and learning process as the key actor [24]. This could arouse the child's interest to learn and become inquisitive to acquire the key knowledge and skills of reading [58]. However, Mkonongwa [31] asserts that the implementation of competency-based teaching and learning in Tanzania is faced with a number of problems, including overcrowded classrooms, poor infrastructure, overloaded curriculum, lack of flexibility among teachers to adopt new paradigms, teachers lack knowledge about competency-based teaching,

lack of career choices at early stages of education, inadequate teaching and learning facilities, lack of motivation among teachers, and rigidity of the education policies and guidelines.

Several studies have been conducted on the CBA in pre-primary children, such as Ntumi [38], Ondimu [40], Thongyon and Chiramanee [56]. In Tanzania, a few studies have been conducted to explore implementing a competency-based curriculum. Most studies have focussed on secondary education [17, 22, 23, 41]. A study on primary education [48]; a few other studies in teacher colleges [14] and some few in technical colleges [16, 52]. Research has been conducted on pre-primary education [21, 28, 32, 53]. However, it has been rare in Tanzania to find a study on competency-based education in pre-primary education, particularly in developing pre-reading skills. This research explores the strategies used to enhance pre-reading skills for pre-primary school students under the competency-based approach as stipulated in the curriculum.

1.1. Research purpose

This study aims to investigate the strategies employed by pre-primary teachers in Tanzania to foster pre-reading skills among young children while assessing the perceived value of these strategies within a competency-based approach. Additionally, the study aims to explore teachers' perceptions regarding the significance of the competency-based framework in enhancing pre-reading development. The following objectives guided the study:

1. To analyse pre-primary teachers' strategies to enhance pre-reading skills in young children and the values they associate with these strategies.
2. To examine teachers' perceptions of the role of competency-based teaching approach in promoting pre-reading skills among pre-primary children.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical framework

The Competency-Based Approach (CBA) is fundamentally rooted in constructivist theory, emphasising that learners develop knowledge through active interaction with their environment. This contrasts sharply with traditional educational methods, where the teacher is seen as the primary source of knowledge transfer [9, 31]. Constructivist pedagogy in early childhood education is underpinned by two primary theories: cognitive constructivism and sociocultural constructivism. Cognitive constructivism, influenced by the work of Jean Piaget [44], posits that children behave like explorers or scientists, actively investigating their surroundings to develop their understanding and intellectually structure their experiences [30]. On the other hand, sociocultural constructivism, rooted in Lev Vygotsky's research, highlights the critical role of society, culture, and language in knowledge construction. Vygotsky [62] emphasised that children derive meaning from their social interactions and that their prior experiences significantly shape their learning.

This perspective suggests that knowledge is not merely accumulated but is constructed through active engagement with peers, teachers, and parents. Key assumptions of constructivism include collaboration, individual experience, and active learning. Effective knowledge construction occurs through collaboration among students, teachers, and educational materials. The theory shows the importance of relationships and interactions among peers, teachers, and parents in building knowledge. Secondly, knowledge is an individual experience rather than the experiences of others. Knowledge is seen as a unique, individual experience rather than a reflection of others' experiences. Learning is an active process where students continuously

develop meaning through engagement with new and prior knowledge [62]. Third, learning is an active process of developing meaning [62]. Therefore, under constructivism, teachers and students should collaborate with materials to help them construct ideas in the classroom and facilitate teaching and learning. Teachers should prepare a good environment and use appropriate methods to support learners. A competency-based curriculum focuses on bringing meaningful learning and enhancing creativity and critical thinking by involving a child in the teaching and learning process as the key actor [24]. This could arouse the child's interest to learn and become inquisitive to develop the key basic skills for reading [58].

In light of these principles, teachers are tasked with creating supportive learning environments and employing appropriate pedagogical strategies that facilitate meaningful interactions. The CBA aims to foster creativity and critical thinking and positions the child as an active participant in their learning journey [24]. This engagement is crucial for sparking curiosity and developing essential foundational skills, particularly in reading [54, 58]. By integrating these constructivist principles, the CBA endeavours to create a holistic educational approach that nurtures inquisitive learners with the necessary skills to navigate their educational paths effectively.

2.2. Characteristic features of competency-based approach

According to Byrne, Downey and Souza [7], the competency-based approach emphasises a holistic approach to teaching and learning that encourages students to think and apply the skills they learn in different authentic contexts through integrating various subjects. The following are the features of a competency-based curriculum as extracted from the literature:

Clarity of intended learning outcomes: Competency-based education entails teachers defining clear goals, standards and evaluation criteria [49]. Sudsomboon [50] adds that instruction should be developed around stated objectives that can be observed or measured. Hence, competency-based education requires transparency with clear intended learning outcomes, the organisation of what is to be learned, the degree of performance for mastery and evaluation of how students are progressing [49].

It emphasises the development of life skills: Competency-based curriculum is a functional approach to education as it emphasises life skills necessary for an individual to function proficiently in a given society. Mosha [34] elaborates that a competency-based curriculum seeks to develop in learners the ability to know, learn and learn how to learn, do things, and work with others. Hence, competency-based education emphasises helping students build lifelong learning skills that enhance learners' experience and knowledge in their lives [19].

Practice oriented: Students must demonstrate practical skills and tangible outcomes to determine competence and not just the possession of theoretical knowledge [31].

Emphasises the culture of inclusion: Sturgis and Casey [49] assert that equity lies at the heart of competency education. Competency-based education ensures that all students benefit, irrespective of their diversity, in terms of their abilities and needs, not just some. It also emphasises safety and a sense of belonging, promoting active learning, developing skills to manage learning, and intrinsic motivation [49]. Therefore, all learners have the opportunity to succeed [50].

Emphasise cooperative and collaborative learning: Students must cooperate and communicate with others in constructing knowledge. Students can enlarge their views in a cooperation and communication environment instead of receiving knowledge passively

[13]. The competency-based curriculum requires the active participation of the learners in constructing knowledge from the learning environment in collaboration with the teachers and peers. It requires the involvement of learners with active learning methods [64]. The study of Ku, Tseng and Akarasriworn [18] concluded that students who worked in collaborative learning groups capitulated the best results, and the learning environment was proven to be the preferred group. Therefore, the students could work together to activate each other's knowledge, resulting in discussions that led to higher knowledge.

It is student-centred: The learner is the focus of the learning process. Individual learners' needs and learning styles are given priority. Teachers are required to structure learning in accordance with the interests of the students; students are encouraged to take responsibility for their learning, [49]. Learning requires students' prior experiences, initiatives and participation to make learning meaningful. According to Sturgis and Casey [49], with competency-based education, students must demonstrate mastery of learning, while schools monitor their pace and offer additional support to meet time-bound targets. Pace depends on student mastery of the learning targets, not the teacher pacing guide to deliver the curriculum.

Students' prior learning experiences are integrated with new experiences to develop new learnings: Learners experience new situations and match new experiences with the previous ones [19]. Jia [13] asserts that the former knowledge and techniques stored in the long-term memory are important internal conditions for generating study activities and developing new knowledge. According to sociocultural theory, learning occurs through participation in social, cultural, and historical contexts that are mediated by interaction [62]. Thus, children learn by participating in sociocultural activity in formal and informal contexts of culturally relevant situations [20]. Specifically, children learn the meaning of written language in both contexts of culturally relevant situations in and out of school.

Therefore, the competency-based teaching and learning approach has to reflect the learners' needs, interests, and capabilities, be relevant to life skills and lifelong learning skills, and require active and collaborative engagement of the learners in the teaching and learning process.

2.3. Strategies for developing pre-reading skills to children

The literature reviewed reveals that the following strategies have been used to develop pre-reading skills:

Reflection of home environment: Marinaccio [26] argues that as students use the knowledge from home and bring it into the school setting, teachers must draw out this acquired knowledge to engage readers. Activating students' prior knowledge while reading will allow students to become engaged with the text, and that will lead to student comprehension [26].

Using singing and movement to teach pre-reading skills: According to Moritz et al. [33], a song is basically words put to rhythm. Learning to sing a song is quite easy for children if the ending words rhyme, if there is a strong rhythm or beat, and if there are few words to remember. Children have been reported to learn new words more easily and remember the words longer when jingles were used to teach the reading of words that rhymed [33]. For example, showing pre-readers the printed words rat and sat and having them sing the words as a jingle (rat sat, rat, rat sat) was an effective method to teach phonological skills and word reading and was an experience that the

children appeared to enjoy.

Activating background knowledge/schema: According to Thuraisingam et al. [57], teaching pre-reading can start with introducing a keyword, concept or picture to stimulate a discussion. Then, the students can say anything that initially comes to mind and have that information recorded on the whiteboard. Then, the teacher asks about the association. Teaching background information about a topic can improve students' text comprehension.

Vocabulary pre-teaching: New vocabulary should be taught before reading as the reader will spend too much time figuring out the new words and cannot comprehend the entire reading passage. Pellicer-Sánchez [42] argues that words are organised into an intricate, interlocking system. Therefore, they cannot be learned in isolation without considering their related context. McKeown and Curtis [27] have observed strong correlations between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension.

Role-play in reading: Roleplaying has a communicative aspect that helps students acquire new knowledge and engage through non-threatening experiences [57, 65]. Using role-play and drama as pedagogical tools helps students learn new vocabulary while building their confidence and interest in using the English language [11]. Myrset [36] adds that role-play in the form of Readers Theatre is another way role-play can be used in the classroom for students to practice oral interpretation, expression, vocabulary development, and interest and comprehension in reading lessons, overall reading comprehension, as well as improve fluency.

The use of artificial intelligence: Artificial intelligence (AI) is becoming an important topic of interest in education. AI has been used as a coach in language learning for speaking and listening [12]. It teaches vocabulary regarding words, pronunciation, sentences, and meaning. Huang [12] developed an educational robot for teaching English Language. AI has engaged students in roleplaying, questions and answer sessions, classroom interactions, group discussions, cooperative gaming, and knowledge carding [6, 12]. Students and robots play different roles in deepening the understanding of the text in role-play [39].

Use of educational apps: Among the contemporary technologies are mobile technologies, including tablets and smartphones. The tablets and smartphones enable children to use various educational apps for learning. Preschool children may use educational apps for reading and literacy development [61].

2.4. Conceptual framework

Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework for developing pre-reading skills through the competency-based approach (CBA).

The framework shows that teaching strategies are derived from the principles of CBA that influence the outcomes related to pre-reading skills.

3. Methods

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological design to examine CBA implementation for pre-reading skills in Songea Municipality, covering ten schools across three wards. Twenty-three participants (15 teachers and 8 headteachers) were involved. Teachers' qualifications included 13 with a Certificate of primary teacher education and two with bachelor's degrees; six had attended in-service training on pre-primary education. Headteachers (four male, four female) held bachelor's or master's degrees. These schools were located across three wards in Songea municipality, in the Ruvuma

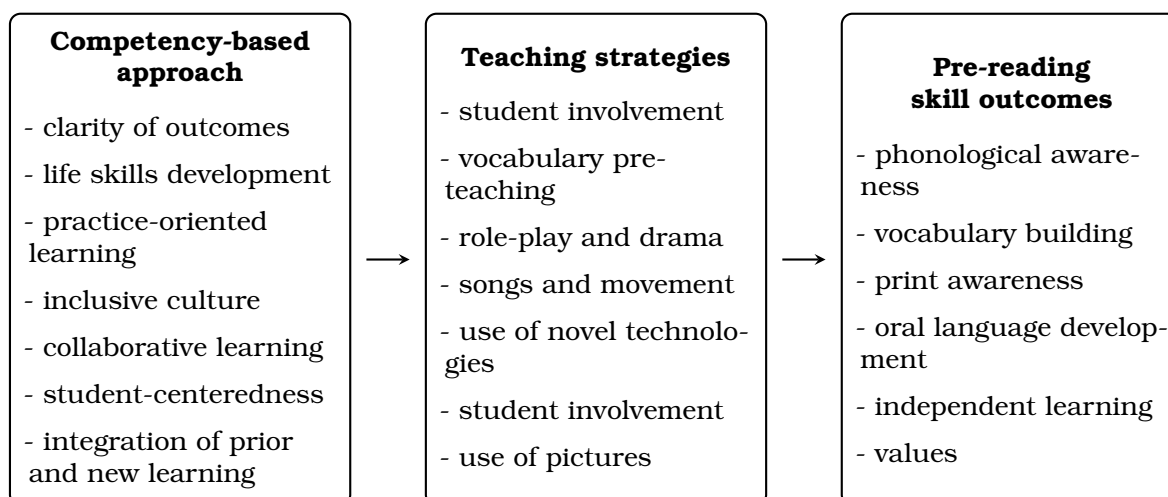


Figure 1: Conceptual framework for developing pre-reading skills through the competency-based approach.

region of southern Tanzania. A total of 23 participants were involved in the study, comprising 15 pre-primary teachers and 8 headteachers. Among the pre-primary teachers, 11 were female, and 4 were male. Of the 15 teachers, 13 held Certificates in primary teacher education, while two possessed bachelor's degrees, demonstrating that the majority met the minimum educational qualifications for primary school teachers. Notably, six (6) teachers had attended short courses (in-service training) on teaching pre-primary students, while nine had not received such training. As for the headteachers, there was an equal gender representation, with 4 males and 4 females. Seven headteachers held bachelor's degrees, and one had a master's degree, indicating that headship appointments reflected ongoing educational reforms. Overall, the findings highlighted a higher representation of women among the participants.

Data were collected via participatory classroom observations and semi-structured interviews and analysed through thematic analysis. Observations identified strategies, while interviews explored rationales. Triangulation enhanced credibility, and sampling across wards ensured dependability [15]. Ethical approval, informed consent, and anonymity were maintained. The raw data collected from the field were transcribed, organised into a manageable format, coded, and categorised to identify key themes and sub-themes. This approach allowed the study to assess the influence of the school environment on the information provided by participants. This study adhered to ethical research principles, ensuring participant confidentiality, informed consent, and voluntary participation. Research clearance was obtained from the University of Dodoma (UDOM) and presented to the Regional Administrative Secretary (RAS) of the Ruvuma region, the District Executive Director (DED), the District Educational Officer (DEO), and headteachers of target schools for data collection permission. Participants' privacy and safety were prioritised, with anonymity protected through pseudonyms. The study aligns with societal goals of improving literacy for sustainable development [43]. Risks of research misconduct were mitigated through rigorous data triangulation and transparent reporting [43].

4. Results

4.1. The strategies used by pre-primary teachers in enhancing pre-reading skills and the associated values

The first theme from the research was pre-primary teachers' strategies to enhance pre-reading skills through a competency-based curriculum. Data were collected

through participant classroom observation and interviews with classroom teachers and headteachers. The analysis is structured around two main themes: the strategies utilised by teachers and the associated values within the competency-based approach.

The primary theme emerging from the data is the various strategies pre-primary teachers employ to foster pre-reading skills. Teachers were asked about their specific strategies and the rationale behind their choices. The findings revealed several key strategies:

4.1.1. Use of pictures

Teachers reported integrating pictures into their lessons to facilitate pre-reading skill development. For example, during classroom observations, a teacher guided students to identify a picture of a cup in their books and connect it to the corresponding letter 'c'. The use of pictures was associated with several benefits:

Creativity development: Teachers indicated that pictures help stimulate creativity in children, enabling them to learn pronunciation through visual aids. The use of pictures was noted to help pre-primary children get the opportunity to learn how to pronounce words by seeing different pictures inside or outside the classroom. This finding was revealed by one teacher from school A, who, during the interview, said:

Using pictures while teaching young children is very important. Using pictures during teaching pre-primary students makes them creative, which helps them to add knowledge about what they have learned. It also makes it easier for pre-primary students to get a concept of what they are learning. Not only that, but it also strengthens their memory, and they use the same strategy to learn even at home when they see pictures of the things they can relate to. (Interview with a pre-primary teacher III from school A, May 2021)

Vocabulary expansion: Another contribution of pictures is increased student vocabulary. During the interview, one teacher had these to say:

I understand the outcome of using pictures in all my teaching. A picture as a teaching strategy helps children increase their vocabulary. You know, when I guide them to mention other words containing the letter taught, it helps them to increase the vocabulary in their mind. (Interview with pre-primary teacher VIII from school H, May 2021)

In the same regard, the headteacher from school E had these to say:

In my school, I advise pre-primary teachers to use pictures as a teaching strategy because children like pictures and pages with colours. Pictures are a teaching strategy that makes children creative and helps them become fluent readers and speakers. These skills are created by images in the classroom. (Interview with the headteacher from school E, May 2021)

The pictures were reported to help children pronounce letters and words related to them, conceptualise what the pictures represent, and increase vocabulary. Children were also reported to be interested in the use of coloured pictures.

4.1.2. Incorporation of songs

Songs were another prevalent strategy observed in the classroom. The teachers were observed using songs to teach pre-reading skills to the pre-primary children. During classroom observation in school E, the teachers guided the students to learn the letter name for the alphabet 'h' through the following song in Swahili: "Wazee wa zamani,

Walicheka ha, ha, haaa!! Wakafuga ndevu, Hadi wakafa!” English translation: “Our ancestors, were laughing ha, ha, haaa! They stayed with beard, till death!” Children were then asked to give examples of familiar words, starting with those which started with the letter ‘h’. However, the song portrays some stereotyping connotations for the elderly. For instance, one teacher used a song to teach the letter ‘h’, engaging students in a lively manner. The teachers associated the use of pictures with the following benefits:

Retention enhancement: Teachers believed that songs aid memory retention. The use of songs makes the students practice what they learn to enhance retention. One teacher from school A remarked:

Using songs while teaching children is very important. This is because it makes students practise in different environments what they have learned. This also strengthens their memory, making them remember specific topics faster through songs that they sing even at home. (Interview with pre-primary teacher I from school G, May 2021)

Singing songs enhances students’ retention of what they learned as they practised, even outside the classroom and at home.

Engagement and participation: The musical approach also fosters active participation, making learning more interactive. Through songs, the pre-primary school students get the opportunity to learn how to pronounce letters and words through singing different songs. Thus, through songs, the students could easily learn letter naming and vocabulary. In the same regard, the other teacher from school B said:

Oooh, I usually use songs in teaching reading to pre-primary students as I believe that singing simplifies the development of literacy skills by pronouncing letter sounds and letter names, eeeh, and also words and vocabulary. It makes them participate fully in learning by using all sense organs, thus doing things practically. In my view, different songs can be used to get rid of boredom caused by using the same song often. For instance, a song like:

“M,” sauti yake ni “mmm,”
Kama mama, kama mlima.
“A,” sauti yake ni “aaa,”
Kama baba, kama maji.
Sauti za maneno, tunazisikia,
Tunaziunganisha, tunasoma sasa.
“Mmm,” “aaa,” “ma!” (Mmm, aaa, ma!)
Tunasoma “mama!”

“P,” sauti yake ni “ppp,”
Kama papa, kama paka.
“I,” sauti yake ni “iii,”
Kama pipi, kama simba.
Sauti za maneno, tunazisikia,
Tunaziunganisha, tunasoma sasa.
“Ppp,” “iii,” “pi!” (Ppp, iii, pi!)
Tunasoma “pipi!”

A song like this can help students to pronounce letters and words. (Interview with the pre-primary teacher XII from school B, May 2021)

English translation of the song:

*The sound of "M" is "mmm,"
Like mother, like mountain.
The sound of "A" is "aaa,"
Like father, like water.
Sounds of words, we hear them,
We connect them, we read now.
"Mmm," "aaa," "ma!" (Mmm, aaa, ma!)
We read "mother!"*

*The sound of "P" is "ppp,"
Like shark, like cat.
The sound of "I" is "iii,"
Like candy, like lion.
Sounds of words, we hear them,
We connect them, we read now.
"Ppp," "iii," "pi!" (Ppp, iii, pi!)
We read "candy!"*

Therefore, using songs helped the learners practise what they had to learn in varied environments. It also simplified the learning of letter sounds and vocabulary. Singing songs was also perceived to be useful in motivating student participation.

4.1.3. Role-plays

Role-play emerged as a dynamic strategy for engaging students. Teachers encouraged students to act out scenarios relevant to their everyday lives. Through role-play, students were guided to perform some activities, actions, occupations, and family roles practised within society. For instance, one student could act out as a thief, and another police officer could attempt to arrest the thief. Alternatively, one student could act out to be a patient, and another could act out as a nurse. A teacher explained:

Role-play helps the learners to act in some roles played by people in the society in which they live in relation to the text in which they are engaged. For instance, they can imitate family roles and other occupations in society, such as farming, fishing, ironing, cooking, and others. (Interview with the pre-primary teacher XIV school D, May 2021)

Therefore, role-play allows children to embody various societal roles, enhancing their understanding of the text they engage with.

4.1.4. Use of play and dance

Teachers reported utilising play and dance to create an enjoyable learning environment. Activities that combined movement with learning were found to enhance pre-reading skills. Play and dance were reported to prepare the student's minds for developing pre-reading skills and make them happy and active. The students could be guided to emulate the action represented by the words found in the form of text. In connection to this, through interview, a teacher from school A described:

Some of my fellow teachers and I used songs while dancing with students during the lesson. The use of songs with dancing helps in the development

of sounds and meanings of words. Dancing helps children develop motor skills that allow them to express themselves and retain what they learn in their memory. (Interview with a pre-primary teacher II from school A, May 2021)

Integrating dance with lessons helps children connect sounds and meanings while promoting motor skills, which were reported to be important in a child's progress in controlling their own body. The use of play and dance engaged students in reading skills. For instance, during classroom observation at school E, the students were guided to jump and touch some body parts while pronouncing the names of the parts and the initial letters for the body parts.

4.1.5. Use of talking classroom

Talking in the classroom was highlighted as an effective strategy. This involved displaying various educational materials around the classroom, enabling independent learning. Talking classroom refers to different materials pasted on the walls and classroom corners, such as the tree of consonants and vowels. During classroom observation, the researcher found a classroom with differently arranged images and text on the wall inside and outside the classes. Talking classroom was associated with the following benefits:

Developing confidence through independent learning: During the interview, the pre-primary teacher from school A had these to say:

As you can see, this is my classroom, which has many materials, including coloured pictures, charts, vowel trees, and numbers, which help students practice reading even when the teacher is not around. That is the reason for calling it a talking class. In addition, there are classroom corners like the language corner and mathematics corner that create a space for an independent learning environment that builds confidence in pre-primary children by keeping them busy talking in the classroom about what they see in the drawings and pictures. (Interview with pre-primary teacher V from school E, May 2021)

It was revealed that using a talking classroom as a teaching strategy gives the students a chance to read on their own, which helps them develop confidence in their learning. It was observed that the talking classroom allowed pre-primary children to read loudly even in the absence of the teachers. Figure 2 shows some materials in the talking classroom in school H.

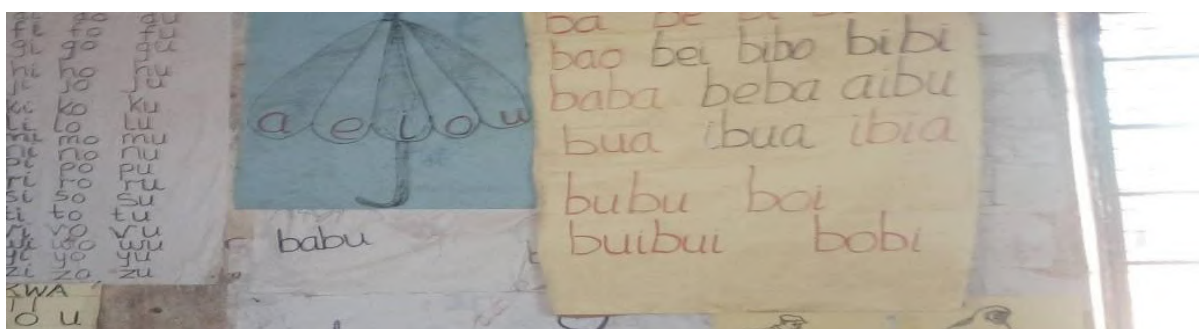


Figure 2: Talking classroom in school H [2, p. 53].

4.1.6. Flash cards and grouping strategy

Teachers sometimes employ grouping strategies. In one instance at school D, the pre-primary teacher organised the children into groups of five and provided them with cards featuring short words such as ubao (board), ufagio (broom), embe (mango), imba (sing), oza (rot), oga (take a shower), and amani (peace). The teacher prompted the pupils to identify the word she read aloud, followed by a request for them to read each word individually. She then guided the students in creating new words, which they presented to the class. Similarly, during an observation at school F, the pre-primary teacher divided the children into small groups of four to five and distributed cards with simple words. Afterwards, she engaged the students by asking questions about the words, such as, “Which card has the picture of a mango?” The children were also encouraged to share examples of words that begin with vowels, fostering an interactive and collaborative learning environment.

The study identified several effective strategies pre-primary teachers employ to enhance pre-reading skills, including using pictures, songs, plays, dances, roleplaying, flashcards, group activities, and interactive classroom discussions. These strategies foster creativity, confidence, sound-meaning connections, social role embodiment, active participation, retention, and independent learning skills. These findings align with those of Wheater [63], who highlighted the role of pictures in developing alphabetic knowledge, print awareness, and phonological awareness. Wheater’s research demonstrated that pictures provide pre-primary children with opportunities to learn word pronunciation by associating them with visual representations inside and outside the classroom. Similarly, Roskos and Burstein [46] emphasised that colourful, pictorial, and labelled teaching materials significantly enhance children’s ability to acquire pre-reading skills. Gabriel [10] study on emergent literacy development in Tanzania further supported these findings, revealing that interactive strategies improve pronunciation, spelling, and speaking abilities. Together, these studies underscore the importance of diverse and engaging teaching methods in developing foundational literacy skills, which are critical for improving oral and written communication. These findings resonate with the competency-based framework, which advocates for interactive and contextually relevant teaching strategies to support holistic child development.

The study’s findings also align with Zephania [66] research on home-based literacy practices, which found that activities like dancing and games effectively develop pre-literacy skills in preschool children. Additionally, Cojocariu and Boghian [8] study on game-based literacy highlighted the role of songs in increasing learners’ situational and personal interest while fostering creativity. Using songs, plays, and dances enhances literacy skills and builds social relationships, problem-solving abilities, creativity, and curiosity among children [55]. These strategies are particularly relevant in Tanzania’s competency-based curriculum, which emphasises education for self-reliance by equipping learners with practical skills applicable to real-life situations [31]. To support this approach, The United Republic of Tanzania and Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [55] has developed a comprehensive Pre-primary Education Curriculum, Syllabus, and Teacher’s Guide to enhance planned competencies. However, the study notes a significant gap in integrating modern technologies, such as artificial intelligence, smartphones, tablets, and educational apps, which could further enrich pre-reading skill development. Incorporating these tools could provide innovative and engaging ways to support early literacy while aligning with global educational trends.

4.2. Teachers perceptions of the role of competency-based approach in developing pre-reading skills among pre-primary children

The second objective of this study was to examine teachers’ perceptions regarding the role of the competency-based approach in enhancing pre-reading skills among

pre-primary children. This theme was explored through the question: What roles does the competency-based approach play in developing pre-reading skills among pre-primary children? The following roles emerged from the findings:

4.2.1. *Fostering curiosity*

Teachers perceived that implementing a competency-based approach significantly enhanced curiosity among pre-primary students. Children were encouraged to use their experiences to make connections by interacting with various materials. One teacher from school A shared:

If I want to teach the concept of the vowels 'a', 'e', 'i', 'o', and 'u', CBA can be used in the following way: I distribute pictures with the shape of 'a' which looks like that letter, the picture of a cat for 'a', a picture of a moon for 'e', a picture of a stick for 'i', ball for 'o' and cup for 'u'. Students have to use their minds properly in order to get the concept of each picture and read it out loud. Then, I provide them with the opportunity to mention other words that contain the letter 'a'. Therefore, they start being curious when they understand the concept of the letters and make connections with real objects and sounds. (Interview with the pre-primary teacher I from school A, May 2021)

A similar response was received from an interview with another teacher from school D, who said that:

I mostly use CBA in the process of teaching and learning. The competency-based approach is very crucial. When pre-primary students learn through pictures, they can develop curiosity by relating what they learn with real objects, even if they are out of the school environment. (Interview with the pre-primary teacher VI from school D, May 2021)

These insights indicate that teachers believed CBA effectively raises curiosity through interaction with materials, enabling students to connect shapes, sounds, and real-life objects.

4.2.2. *Facilitates active participation*

Teachers also noted that CBA promotes active participation among pre-primary children. A teacher from school B remarked:

On my side, every day, I use CBA in teaching by interacting with my students. I share the lesson with them through the teaching and learning materials. When I do this, my students get interested in the lesson because they participate fully in learning by using all their sense organs. They do things 8 practically, which makes it easier for them to remember the topic they were taught. (Interview with pre-primary teacher VIII from school C, May 2021)

Teachers believe that CBA enhances active participation, interest, and retention. The other teacher from school B reported:

I use CBA in my teaching to make my students be free in giving their opinion and sharing knowledge through their experiences. By doing that, they learn by doing, relating what they learnt with their prior knowledge in their real environment. I like using CBC because it helps learners remember something 22 about their prior knowledge. (Interview with a pre-primary teacher III from school B, May 2021)

These testimonials suggest that CBA is perceived as a means to enhance interaction among students, teachers, and learning materials. Teachers observed that this approach encourages students to connect new learning with their existing knowledge and experiences.

The findings reveal that many pre-primary teachers actively utilise interactive strategies, particularly CBA, to teach pre-reading skills. Educators demonstrated a positive attitude toward CBA, acknowledging its potential to foster essential skills in young learners. The researcher observed that teachers effectively integrated CBA into their lessons, creating engaging and interactive learning environments. Through CBA, students enjoyed the learning process and developed a stronger interest in attending school, further enhancing their pre-reading skills. Teachers reported that CBA increased interactivity among students and improved their engagement with teaching and learning materials.

These findings align with the work of Cojocariu and Boghian [8], who explored the relevance of game-based literacy for preschool and primary teachers. Their study highlighted that using songs, for instance, improved memory retention and heightened situational and personal interest among learners. Similarly, the current study found that curiosity was effectively nurtured through CBA strategies, such as using pictures to teach pre-reading skills. Teachers emphasised that pictorial materials sparked curiosity and facilitated learning. This observation resonates with Roskos and Burstein [46] findings, demonstrating that colourful, labelled, and visually appealing teaching materials significantly enhanced children's ability to acquire pre-reading and pre-writing skills.

Additionally, the study identified the role of CBA in incorporating activities like dancing to teach pre-primary children, further enriching their learning experiences. These findings are consistent with the Tanzanian government's guidelines for pre-primary education [55], which advocate for active child participation through hands-on activities such as demonstrations, role-play, storytelling, songs, games, and question-and-answer sessions. In conclusion, the study underscores the effectiveness of CBA in fostering pre-reading skills through interactive and visually stimulating methods, aligning with both academic research and national educational frameworks.

4.3. Conclusion

The findings indicate that teachers employed various strategies, including using pictures, songs, role-plays, and interactive classroom activities to enhance pre-reading skills. Teachers perceived that these methods foster creativity, improve vocabulary, and build student confidence. The competency-based approach was associated with increased curiosity, active participation, and meaningful connections between prior experiences and new learning. Teachers utilised a competency-based approach in that students could participate actively in the lessons through working together. However, most activities involved the whole class, with less attention to the learners' needs, which could require paired and individualised activities.

There is a need for pre-service teacher training colleges to revise and strengthen early childhood education programs by including comprehensive modules on inclusive and differentiated teaching strategies. In-service training seminars and workshops must focus on implementing CBA and strategies for addressing diverse learning needs. In collaboration with NGOs and private sectors, the government should provide schools with more teaching and learning resources, such as textbooks, storybooks, flashcards, and manipulatives, tailored to the development of pre-reading. As it was noted that there was low technology exploitation in teaching, there is a need to invest in affordable and accessible technologies, such as smartphones, tablets, and educational apps, to support interactive and engaging learning experiences. Teachers must also be oriented

on effectively using novel technologies to enhance pre-reading skills. Future research should investigate assessment strategies for pre-reading skills, focusing on better addressing individual learners' needs within the competency-based framework.

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