

A WEAK READING FOUNDATION:  
Some Inadequacies of Tanzanian Primary School  
Language Textbooks

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### Introduction

Section 3.4 of Roy-Campbell and Qorro's report shows that in the reading skills tests the students performed badly in Kiswahili (Grand Mean 45.57) though slightly better than in English (Grand Mean 41.59). The correlation coefficient is significant (+0.531). This means that the target population is almost as incompetent in reading Kiswahili as in reading English. In section 3.3 the report says the greatest difficulty identified by the respondents was long and difficult words followed by long sentences.

The respondents were from Forms 2 and 4. It seems the problems are not particular to these two levels. An examination of reading programmes at pre-secondary levels seems to be in order here to investigate the roots of the problem without confining ourselves to the materials at hand at secondary level. This paper examines primary school textbooks in order to see whether the reading of these textbooks provide a good foundation for further reading. The paper examines the content by looking at the topics which are in the language textbooks; it also looks at the form by analysing the levels of difficulty.

### Problems at the Root

The thesis of our paper is that at primary level in Tanzania, pupils do not build permanent reading interest and habit. The failure to build reading interest is derived

particularly on the issue of language in education during the last 15 years, has been shelved. It was high time, they said, that teachers and educationists in general knew what researchers had done or were doing in the education field so that they in turn could contribute by giving their views or comments on such research. It was emphasized that this debate on the language issue should be kept alive; one way of doing this, for instance, would be to conduct further research on the impact of the English language Support Project. To this effect therefore a call was made to other external and internal agencies to support more educational research to emulate the example of the International Development Research Centre of Canada who have funded this research project and the dissemination seminar.

partly from the design of language textbooks currently in use. The books, Tujifunze Lugha Yetu (TLY) series for Kiswahili and Primary English for Tanzania (PET) series for English, do not adequately take into consideration the cognitive development of children. The stories in the textbooks are not written for pleasure and apparently ignore the role of interest in learning.

The role of interest in learning is presented succinctly by Mussen et. al. (1969:558):

It appears reasonable to hypothesize that the desire to learn to read and to continue reading will be influenced by interest aroused by elementary readers, and that the degree of such interest will be the function of age- and sex-appropriateness of the content of the readers, its meaningfulness, in relation to the child's everyday life experiences, and its appeal to his personal needs system, including fantasy needs.

We can deduce that materials designed without taking into consideration children's interests are likely to be unattractive to the children. The children might ultimately lose interest in the whole language programme and discourage independent reading.

For reading, primary school children in Tanzania get only the mentioned textbooks. No supplementary readers are systematically supplied. The textbooks are a typical product of post-Arusha Declaration curriculum innovations.

We hypothesize that the majority of the stories in the textbooks are uninteresting. Two things stand out clearly: (1) the topics of the stories are not among the topics preferred by children; (2) the stories are not carefully

graded so as to cater for the different levels of the learners. These two inadequacies are among the factors of the hypothesized problem.

### Uninteresting Topics

The two series of textbooks are used in Standards 3 to 7. This means the pupils are between 9 and 15 years of age. What are the typical interests of children at this age? And what are the topics contained in the textbooks?

It cannot be overemphasized that to consider children as small adults is erroneous. The topics which adults would like the young ones to learn may not be the things that children like to read about. Research in other parts of the world shows that children of 10 - 15 years are interested in mystery stories, animal stories, adventures, romance, inventions, sports and science (Thorndike, 1941; Edman, 1967; Beta Upsilon Chapter, 1974).

In considering what kind of stories are contained in the language textbooks we have grouped them into 13 broad categories (Table 1 below). The areas of interest cited above are included.

Table 1: Content areas percentage in the primary language textbooks.

	P E T			T L Y			
	4	5	5	6	7	8	9
Adventure	13.3	12.5	6.6	0	13.4	0	0
Biography	0	0	0	3.3	0	0	4
Education	13.3	6.25	0	0	3.3	0	4
Excursions	6.6	6.25	3.3	16.6	3.3	8	8
Family life							
& health	33.3	18.75	20	23.3	3.3	0	4
Folklore	6.6	12.5	13.3	0	6.6	4	4
Inventions &							
Discoveries	0	0	0	0	0	4	0
Occupations &							
Professions	0	0	0	0	0	4	0
Our history	13.3	0	0	0	3.3	0	0
Our policy	6.6	18.75	46.6	46.6	56.6	72	66
Romance	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Science &							
Technology	0	25	9.9	9.9	9.9	8	4
Sports &							
Recreation	6.6	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total No. of							
Chapters	25	16	30	30	30	25	25

It is quite conceivable that the interests of children may have changed since the work cited above. Nevertheless, children's love for adventure, folktales, romance and sports have not changed. All these are poorly represented. From the table, two things emerge: One, it is doubtful if the writers of the textbooks ever did a research to find out what children are interested in. Two, the categories which obviously form the interest areas do not form the bulk of the stories. In other words, no deliberate design has been

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Family life & health	33.3	18.75	20	23.3	3.3	0	4
Folklore	6.6	12.5	13.3	0	6.6	4	4
Inventions & Discoveries	0	0	0	0	0	4	0
Occupations & Professions	0	0	0	0	0	4	0
Our history	13.3	0	0	0	3.3	0	0
Our policy	6.6	18.75	46.6	46.6	56.6	72	66
Romance	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
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Piaget further says that the real source of interest is 'moderate novelty' i.e. the child becomes interested in something neither too difficult nor too simple for his current cognitive structures. In simpler terms it can be said that a child identifies a new concept with the existing conceptual network. In the process he finds differences that distinguish particular concepts. When this task is too difficult, it frustrates the child. If the task is too simple the probability of developing an inclination is low. When an inclination develops, ie the child becomes interested, the child learns better.

A lot of studies have been carried out to investigate how interest contributes to learning. Shirey and Reynolds (1988) provide an up to date synthesis of findings in this area. Their own findings show that interest causes selective attention and this attention leads to learning. It is therefore imperative to take the learner's interests into consideration when designing textbooks.

### Grading

Piaget's structuralist approach to cognitive development, in particular, the concept of moderate novelty can be used in the analysis of form of the textbooks. Both PET and TLV aim at teaching language. As an individual learns a language he increases his vocabulary and uses increasingly complex grammatical structures. If a learner is presented with texts with too many words which he does not know or too difficult sentences it means the texts fall outside his moderate novelty. If, on the other hand, everything is too easy, the learner is not learning.

The grading of books aims at placing reading materials in appropriate levels for the readers according to vocabulary

range, structural complexity and sentence length. Different methods have been developed to determine readability. They include Flesch Reading Ease Formula, The FOG formula and Fry's Readability Graph. The validity of the formulae in actual grading is controversial. However, rank-ordering, contends Stokes (1978), is the main use of readability formulae. The formulae place each text in a certain grade or class of readers. Rank-ordering simply arranges the texts in terms of the order of difficulty not necessarily the actual grades.

Let us see what the Fry Readability estimates (Fry, 1977) can tell us about the grading of the textbooks.

Table 2a: Fry's Readability Estimates for PET.

	B O O K			
	2	3	4	5
Number of sentences per 100 words	13.7	11.3	10.1	8.1
Number of syllables per 100 words	134	132	150	140

Table 2b: Fry's Readability Estimates for TLY.

	5	6	7	8	9
Number of sentences per 100 words	12.7	10.0	9.1	9.7	9.1
Number of syllables per 100 words	266	283	258	264	273



Sentence length as indicated by the average number of sentences per 100 words in PET is appropriately ordered, starting from short sentences to slightly longer sentence. However, the grading of vocabulary is not properly done. The figures for average number of syllables per 100 words in PET 4, for example, is 150. According to Fry's Readability Graph, this falls in the region of long words. The vocabulary level is therefore too high for third year primary English for non native speakers. This may lead to frustration. It is at this point that we notice the problem of difficult vocabulary which learners continue to face even at secondary level. It is one factor which makes the texts uninteresting.

We cannot comment very well on Kiswahili texts by using the same criteria because the readability formulae were worked for English. Kiswahili and Bantu languages in general have a great degree of agglutination. To use the same estimates of word difficulty in terms of syllable count in Kiswahili as in English is not proper. Nevertheless, two points can be made. One is that the figures for sentence length show that in terms of sentence complexity the texts are according to the target classes and gradually increase in complexity. The second point concerns vocabulary. One notices in TLY 5, the first chapters contain such heavily loaded terms as **kimapinduzi** (revolutionary), **maonyesho** (exhibition), **beji** (badge), **unyonyaji** (exploitation), **tekeleza** (execute some task). One hardly needs a readability test to see that that is too much for 10 year olds of Tanzania.

#### Ideology and Pedagogy

Table 1 above shows that there is a heavy bias in favour of ideological content. How far is such a bias desirable?

In preparing teaching-materials, the writers/curriculum developers are faced with two broad considerations. On the one hand there are societal considerations such as socialization and what the society would like the pupil to learn. On the other hand there are pedagogic considerations which take into account not only what the pupil has to learn, but also how and when to learn and the whole disposition of the child.

The concern of the society can be seen in its ideology. The Encyclopaedia Britannica (1987: Vol. 20 p. 828) defines an ideology as 'a system of ideas that aspires both to explain the world and to change it;'. Tanzania's political ideology is characterized by a nationalist interpretation of history and society, and a socialist programme of changing the life of Tanzanians through self-reliance. Since the proclamation of the socialist policy in 1967, Tanzania has attempted to interpret her ideology in education through Education for Self-Reliance. The textbooks examined here are specific attempts of educational innovations.

The problem which we must consider now is how much of the ideology should be in the school curriculum in general and textbooks in particular. Obviously the society wishes to bring up children in a particular ideology. At the same time ideological content so expressly presented is normally too difficult for the cognitive structures of the children. Need there be such a conflict? It seems to us that the marrying of the two sides can be done by textbook writers trying to find out the interests of the learners and combining them with societal concerns, keeping in mind also the cognitive development of the learners.

Research on children's interests abounds in other countries. In the United States, for example, interest together with other criteria such as the objectives of the course and the

books, the instructional content, instructional methodology and the reading approach are often used when selecting readers and textbooks for schools (Fry, 1977). Writers of children's books are very much aware of such criteria. For their books to be marketable, they must strive to strike a proper balance.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

We have tried to show that the language textbooks for primary schools are overloaded with ideological content. We have also shown that the reading diet, so to say, is very unbalanced. We argue that the observed reading problems at secondary level are consequences of reading malnutrition. Further, we maintain that by lecturing on politics and by presenting texts that are not properly graded, the books fail to capture the interest of the pupils.

We feel that the majority of the textbooks were conceived in a very unprofessional way, hurriedly compiled by overzealous writers and executed in great confusion by teachers. The books were more politically motivated than pedagogically inspired.

Some changes seem to us to be indispensable. We suggest that at the tender age of primary school pupils language courses should in the main be guided by a wish to entertain and to acquaint pupils with aesthetic quality of the stories. This is not to say that ideological considerations should be thrown overboard. At any rate we can hardly write textbooks completely devoid of any ideological orientation. We suggest that ideological aspects should not be presented in so explicit a manner as to deprive the textbooks of the enjoyment and intellectual challenges which should be typical of children's books.

Before writing and selecting stories, materials writers should take their time to do research. They should find out what children's preferences are. There are many ways this can be accomplished. One way is to draw a diverse list of categories and topics with annotations and then let pupils of different levels choose from the list. Another way is simply to ask the pupils to write their stories and the materials writer will have a pool from which to choose. The child-to-child research done by some scholars today is work along those lines. Folktales from Tanzanian societies as well as from other parts of the world must be one of the most important inputs into the books.

There is a need to determine the actual language levels for the different classes in both English and Kiswahili. Fry's Readability estimates and other readability formulae were designed for English. So levels of difficulty for Kiswahili are not yet known. Research on word usage in Kiswahili should be done so that a word list is drawn showing the frequency of use of each word. This will help in grading Kiswahili vocabulary into different difficulty levels. A list compiled as West's (1963) is for English can be very useful for Kiswahili teaching.

At any rate there should be a lot of materials that can encourage independent reading at the elementary level. There is no need of limiting the children to Tanzanian stories. Experience from all over the world has shown that if children are provided with stories and tales from all over the world their experience is immensely enriched. We must live in a society that permits interaction with world culture. The Ministry of Education should ensure that all primary schools are provided with sets of graded readers in both languages.

Once more, the central idea should be to provide reading materials that encourage reading for pleasure at the primary level. The habit consequent to this will be invaluable not only to those continuing with studies but also to life-long literacy.

It may help to remind ourselves that the greatest minds on socialism, Marx, Engels, Mao, Nyerere, were keen readers of materials written for pleasure. This must have started at the primary level. That is when they started building the love for reading and books. They certainly did not start by memorising ideological credos. Let us not deny our children a balanced reading.

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