Monitoring Strategies Teachers of English Use with Visually Impaired Learners in Integrated Schools in Nairobi City County, Kenya

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Abstract

This study explored monitoring strategies teachers of English use with learners with visual impairment (LWVI) in integrated secondary schools in Nairobi City County, Kenya. English contains concepts that build on each other, underscoring the need to understand initial ideas as a foundation for comprehending subsequent concepts. Thus, the study was based on Lev Vygotsky's Cognitive Development Theory (1934). The study objective was to identify monitoring strategies. Learners' performance in English was the dependent variable, while progress monitoring was the independent variable. The researcher sampled sixty-four participants in two schools including deputy principals, teachers of English and Heads of Department (HoD), LWVI, and regular learners. Simple random sampling was used to select participants from among learners, while purposive sampling was used to select teachers. As a qualitative research, data was collected through interviews, observation, and focus groups. The researcher used thematic analysis by coding the data into subsets to capture the major themes. The results revealed that verbal communication and use of sighted deskmates were predominantly used to monitor progress due to the teachers' incompetence in braille. The following recommendations were drawn from these inferences: The Teachers Service Commission (TSC) should employ SNE-trained teachers in integrated schools, and the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) should provide braille learning materials.

Keywords: Monitoring strategies, learners with visual impairment, integrated schools, Braille, Teacher of learners with visual impairment (TVI), Special Needs Education

1.0 Introduction

English is a key subject in the Kenyan secondary school curriculum since all other subjects except Kiswahili and foreign languages are taught and examined in English. Moreover, it is a language that is sensitive to grammatical rules, spelling, punctuation, expression, legibility, speed, and surface appeal of examinable work. As a medium of communication, English contributes immensely to learners' academic performance. Thus, the current study investigated how teachers monitor progress of LWVI to identify mistakes and make timely remediation during the lesson. Failure to provide such instantaneous corrections often has debilitating impacts on the performance of LWVI. Such learners carry on errors that could have been instantly addressed during the lesson, impacting their classroom participation and performance.

Previous studies have outlined communication breakdown due to lack of braille skills by teachers in integrated schools as the fundamental challenge in integration of LWVI from which most other challenges emanate such as those related to competent monitoring of learners' progress. Scholars have also asserted the indispensable significance of instructors being more knowledgeable and skillful in their content areas than the learners as a primary prerequisite for good performance and class participation. This assertion conforms to the concept of a More Knowledgeable Other as implicit in the Cognitive Development Theory by Lev Vygotsky (1934).

However, these studies failed to delve into the coping mechanisms adopted by teachers in integrated schools admitting LWVI to monitor progress in spite of their glaring inadequacies in Braille and pedagogical skills for such learners. Therefore, this study sought to explore the strategies used by such teachers to monitor progress to facilitate the identification and initiate timely remediation of mistakes and enhance learners' performance and classroom participation.

1.1 Objective and Research Question

The objective of the current study is to identify monitoring strategies used by teachers of English to monitor the learning progress of LWVI in integrated secondary school in Nairobi City County during English lessons. Thus, the research question is; what strategies do teachers of English use to monitor learners' progress in integrated secondary schools in Nairobi City County classrooms during English lessons?

2.0 Literature Review

Fuchs and Fuchs (2001) described progress monitoring as the teachers regularly evaluating students' academic performance. In their article titled "What is Scientifically-Based Research on Progress Monitoring?" the scholars asserted that progress monitoring serves numerous purposes. For instance, it enables the teacher to collect valuable and informative data about the student's level of comprehension and performance in specific classroom tasks. Teachers use the data collected to track students' progress across various learning areas over a stipulated period vis-à-vis the targeted benchmarks (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2001). Additionally, progress monitoring helps teachers evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching and make necessary adjustments. A teacher may have to re-evaluate their delivery method for a specific concept to tailor it to better meet the learner's needs (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2001). Finally, the practice also enhances differentiation opportunities. It allows teachers to identify at-risk students and initiate timely intervention. It exposes areas that need to be retaught and students who need extra help in specific sections. However, the study failed to highlight the strategies employed by teachers to monitor progress.

Brown and Sanford (2011) delved into the significance of progress monitoring in their study titled "Response-to-Intervention for English Language Learners: Appropriately Using Screening and Progress Monitoring Tools to Improve Instructional Outcomes." The study participants were primarily English Language Learners (ELL) of Hispanic descent in states such as California and Texas in the United States. The study provided a formula for using Response to Intervention (RTI) with ELLs studying English as a second language (L2). Brown and Sanford (2011) claimed that student characteristics such as the cultural, linguistic, and experiential background of L2 learners determined their level and speed of learning English. Concepts in English build upon each other, hence the need for learners to be well-grounded in one concept to enhance their chances of comprehending the next. The study asserted the significance of teachers having a fair understanding of the learners' native languages to identify

and comprehend the specific challenges they face based on the differences and similarities between their native language (L1) and English (L2).

However, the study failed to outline the specific strategies to use in progress monitoring to improve instructional outcomes. Instead, it focused on the response-to-intervention framework (Brown & Sanford, 2011). The study also focused on English as a mode of communication (2nd language) and not as an examinable subject in a school curriculum, as in Kenya. Additionally, the research did not address progress monitoring for LWVI. Dodd and Conn (2000) discussed how visual impairment adversely affects learners' comprehension of English concepts such as spelling and pronunciation. For instance, their lack of visual feedback and the complexity of English braille, such as the contractions, impact their ability to spell, pronounce, or comprehend specific words correctly. Thus, the focus by Brown and Sanford (2011) on learning English as L2 limited its scope and hence failed to address progress monitoring and its impact on LWVI.

Jepketer et al. (2015), in their study titled "Teachers' Classroom Strategy for Enhancing Students' Performance in Public Secondary Schools in Nandi County, Kenya," examined instructional strategies that influence learners' performance in secondary schools. The researchers used simple random sampling to select 30 schools to participate in the study and used descriptive survey design in data analysis. The study results revealed that strategies employed by teachers in classroom management, including teaching methods, assessment, and constant provision of feedback, considerably impact learners' performance.

However, the study primarily focused on summative assessment and its role in learners' performance. Even though summative assessments are one method of progress monitoring, the long intervals/time frame between such assessments is a loophole that could potentially be detrimental to learners' performance. Learners who fail to understand specific concepts in class require immediate remediation. Such remediation is only possible with a consistent monitoring plan, including classroom vigilance on learners' behavior, activities, participation, and formative and summative assessments. There was a need to conduct an all-encompassing study that delves into all these progress monitoring strategies. The study was also indiscriminate in its approach to the learners, failing to focus on learners with disabilities. Jepketer et al. (2015) researched public schools in Nandi County. Despite the immense value of the study results to teachers in Kenya, the results could not be extrapolated to integrated schools. Progress monitoring for LWVI alongside their non-disabled counterparts in an integrated setting requires special skills. While the teacher might use sight to monitor learners' progress using standard print, as was the case in the study by Jepketer et al. (2015), they need a special set of skills to monitor the progress of learners using braille and large print within an integrated classroom. Thus, there was a need for this current study to address this research gap.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study employed thematic analysis to systematically organize code and analyze the complex data sets. Dawadi (2020) applauded the design for its transparency, accessibility, and flexibility. The researcher contends that the identified themes are always strongly linked to the data without regard to the researcher's theoretical interest or themes from previous studies. The method enhances the identification of themes on account of the data sets as extracted from the focus groups and interview transcripts leading to valid inference. This research sought to explore the techniques used by English teachers in regular schools to monitor progress and provide timely feedback to LWVI. It was exploratory research where the researcher had no idea about the strategies used in these schools and wholly depended on the data sets as

transcribed and coded from the research instruments to provide the strategies. Every single strategy for progress monitoring, feedback provision or the associated challenges arose from the coded data sets.

3.2 Variables

Learners' performance in English is the dependent variable, while progress monitoring the independent variable.

3.3 Target Population, Sampling Size and Techniques

The target population included 10 teachers of English (both TVIs and regular teachers), 2 deputy principals, and 2 HoDs of the languages department. The study also targeted 5 LWVI and 20 regular learners in each school. The research used simple random sampling to select participants from among the learners (both LWVI and regular) in the integrated schools. Purposive sampling was used to select participants among the teachers of English and school administrators in the two schools. The research sampled responses from 64 participants including deputy principals, teachers of English, LWVI, and regular learners in the two integrated schools.

3.4 Research Instruments

The researcher used interview schedules, observation checklists and focus groups to gather information on the study objective.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data was qualitatively analyzed. Thematic analysis categorized behavioral and verbal data for classification, summary, and mapping. The researcher used the MAXQDA software to sort and analyze texts and audio files from the interviews and focus groups. It allowed the researcher to compare responses to similar objectives or themes to determine how they differ or concur. The study objective guided the sorting of qualitative data based on codes. The data was then thematically analyzed with a detailed description and evaluation of each variable and theme, and the findings were presented in a narrative format. The researcher provided verbatim quotations of critical extracts to elucidate key discussion points in the research topic.

4.0 Result and Discussion

4.1 Progress Monitoring Strategies for LWVI in Integrated Classrooms during English Lessons

The researcher coded keywords based on interview transcript to generate a word tag. The researcher joined some words together to form unified terms. Some of these unified terms included "verbal-communication," "question & answer," "limited-braille-proficiency," "sighted-guide," and "audible-reading." Grouping the words into one unit was critical to avoid breaking off individual words and losing meaning of the strategy. The researcher used free word cloud software to generate the word tag for ease of identifying the most used progress monitoring strategies by copy-pasting the interview transcript into the software. Progress monitoring strategies most commonly mentioned by the interviewees were bigger in font and appeared closest to the middle of the tag. Those least used appeared at the periphery and were smaller in font.
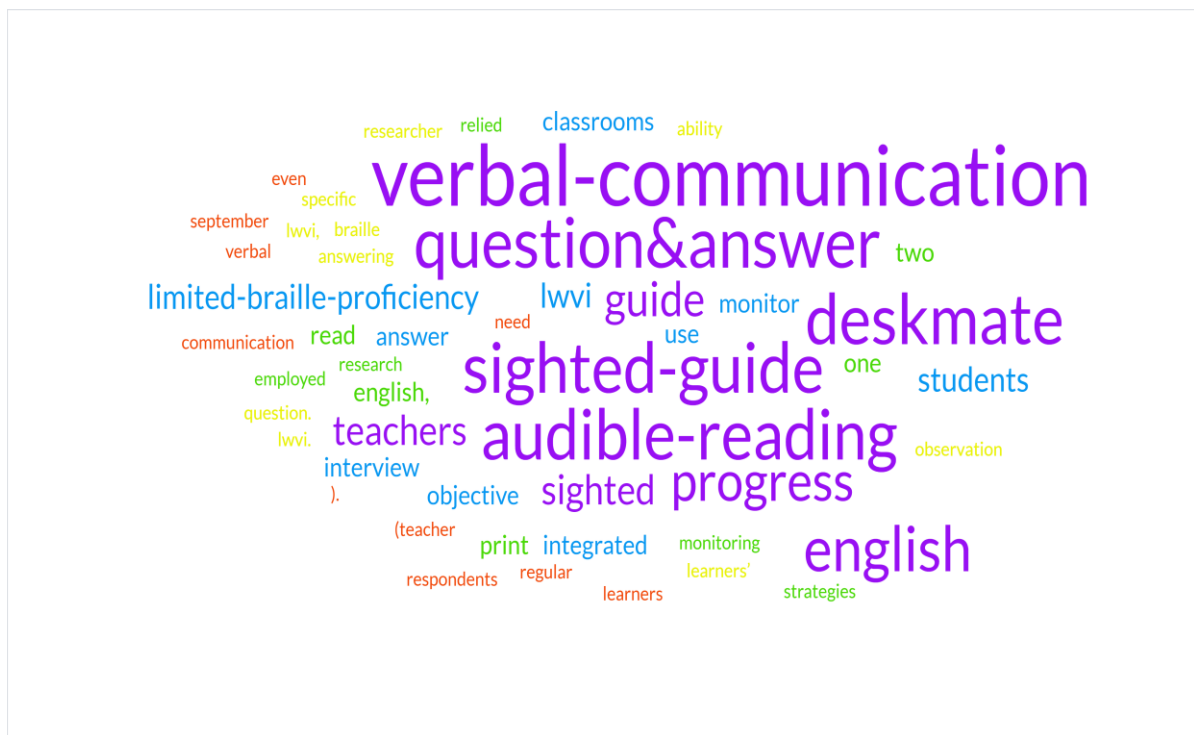
Figure 1: Word Cloud on Most Preferred Progress Monitoring Strategies

1. Verbal Communication in the form of Question and Answer

The data collected concerning this objective exposed "verbal communication" in the form of question and answer as the primary progress monitoring technique employed by teachers of English to LWVI. All the teachers of English interviewed and observed used this strategy as the primary means to monitor progress. In the two schools, no member of the English Departments was braille proficient, limiting their ability to monitor the progress of LWVI, who fundamentally use braille to write. Dodd and Conn (2000) acknowledge that visual impairment severely impacts learners' ability to comprehend specific concepts in English, such as pronunciation and spelling, underscoring the need for progress monitoring. One respondent decried the situation, acknowledging that verbal communication is the only way to assess the learners' progress.

We are regular teachers with no knowledge of special needs education, yet we find ourselves here with these learners and can only try. For instance, personally, I can't even tell a letter in braille, let alone read a sentence; hence, I wholly rely on verbal communication to determine if the learners understand the concept (Teacher of English, Interview 12th September 2023).

This strategy aids the teacher collect valuable and informative data concerning the students' level of comprehension and performance during the lesson. It also sets the stage for feedback provision having known the areas of concern. This perspective is supported by Fuchs and Fuchs (2001) who noted the critical role of data collected to track student progress vis-à-vis the targeted benchmarks. For instance, the scholars stated that this evaluation strategy helps the teachers to re-evaluate their delivery method and re-design it to better meet their learners' need informed by the information collected during the progress monitoring (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2001). The teachers in this study acknowledged collection of valuable feedback from the LWVI during the lesson using the verbal communication strategy.

"Necessity is the mother of invention." We had to find a common means of communication now that majority of us are not braille-literate, and which better way to communicate than verbally? We ask questions in class and any student who knows the answer carries up their hands and is picked to share their response with the rest of the class. This strategy is not specific to blind learners but is a general strategy used the world over by teachers during lessons (Teacher of English, Interview 12th September 2023).

The teachers also expressed confidence in this strategy's ability to address concerns arising from the breakdown in written communication due to the complexity of written braille. It underscored the need for grounding in written concepts in English such as spelling, pronunciation, and surface appeal of work through aspects like good handwriting. Dodd and Conn (2000) expressed reservations with verbal communication as the sole technique used by regular teachers in teaching LWVI in integrated settings citing the limitations imposed by their disability and braille complexity in learning specific concepts such as spelling and pronunciation due to braille contractions. Despite such isolated challenges, the teachers expressed confidence in this strategy and admitted to using it alongside other complementing techniques to ensure quality progress monitoring for the benefit of the learners. Among the strategies they employed to overcome this challenge was the use of a visiting braille transcriber who addressed areas of complexities between braille and English concepts such as braille contractions and their effect on pronunciation and spelling.

2. Sighted Guide/Classmate

Other respondents admitted using a sighted guide to write down the answers to classroom assignments in print for ease of assessment by the regular teachers. A sighted guide was predominantly used in one of the two schools. Each LWVI was paired with a sighted classmate who served as his desk and dormitory mate. The sighted guide audibly read assignments from the board or a print class text to the LWVI, who provided an answer that was also taken down in print for ease of marking. The respondents justified this method by saying:

That's the only option left. We pair them with their friends with whom they share a lot, such as the same class, stream, dormitory, subject combinations, and religion. These students help translate the work for them and record their responses for the teachers' evaluation. Of course, it has its demerits, but it's the best alternative at the moment (Teacher of English, Interview 12th September 2023).

During the classroom observation of an English lesson, the researcher observed one sighted guide helping an LWVI. The lesson entailed reading specific excerpts from the set book "Blossoms of the Savannah." The LWVI did not have a brailed copy of the text and relied on his guide to read it before they could answer the question. In a later interview with the researcher, the deskmate expressed confidence in the system explaining that he always authentic and honest in presenting the answers to classroom assignments as told by the visually impaired deskmate even in instances where his answer differs from that of his deskmate.

I try to be as honest as possible in presenting his answers as told without altering them even when my answers are different from his which sometimes lands me in trouble when the teacher returns the marked books and wonders "mbona mtu mmoja amescore kila kitu na mwengine akaanguka zote yet tunakaa pamoja" (why has one person scored everything and the other failed everything yet they sit and discuss the assignment together?)

(Regular Learner, Interview 12th September 2023).

The learner's honesty in presenting the LWVI's responses to the prompt unaltered ensures effective progress monitoring as it enables the teacher to identify the areas of weaknesses and provide timely remediation. The sighted peer is under no obligation to correct any mistakes before the teacher's evaluation since he might not be sure his answers are the correct ones. According to the Cognitive Development Theory, Lev Vygotsky (1934) introduced the concept of the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) as one of the prerequisites for learning to happen. The MKO must be an expert or have a better comprehension of the issue under study such as a teacher, lecturer, or someone with more experience in a specific concept (Vygotsky, 1934). In this case, the teacher is the MKO which makes their opinion superior in facilitating learning. The LWVI might not trust the explanation from his peer but will not doubt if the same comes from the subject teacher. Thus, presenting the LWVIs honest response is an effective progress monitoring technique employed by the interviewed teacher.

The teacher and other students showed utmost tolerance to the two of them loudly conversing during the lesson even though the other students were individually responding to the prompt. This indicates that the teachers use the method so regularly that other students have grown accustomed to it. They do not perceive it as unfair to the rest doing individual work. Through this strategy, the teacher monitors the learner's progress without the need to read braille.

5.0 Conclusion

Oral communication in the form of question and answer and use of a sighted deskmate/guide emerged the primary strategy employed by teachers of English to monitor learning of LWVI in integrated classrooms during English lessons. Thus, based on these premises, it is logical to conclude that the Departments of English in the assessed schools lack the capacity, skills, knowledge, and attitude to include LWVI in their lessons in the integrated schools. The teachers are inept in braille, which is the primary means for LWVI to acquire academic skills, particularly in a subject that requires hands-on and ongoing feedback to enhance performance.

6.0 Recommendations

The Teachers Service Commission should employ at least one braille-competent teacher (SNE trained) in each of the departments in secondary schools, such as the English Department, to ensure faster and consistent braille transcription of learners' work, including classroom assignments and homework. This will also facilitate co-teaching incorporating teachers with special pedagogical skills to include LWVI in the lessons. The study revealed that English Departments in the two schools did not have a single teacher trained in SNE (Visual Impairment option). TSC employing a competent Teacher of Learners with Visual Impairment (TVI) who teaches English would benefit the Departments in monitoring the progress of learners who use braille hence improving their English performance. The same concept applies in all other subjects since a English subject TVI might not competently transcribe and monitor progress of LWVI in physics, chemistry, or mathematics. Each of these subjects needs their own TVI specialist.

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