

Challenges and Strategies for Teachers and Learners of English as a Second Language: The Case of an Urban Primary School in Kenya

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Abstract

With over 40 spoken tongues in Kenya, English serves as a language of instruction in schools and is taught from the onset of schooling, making the language a significant factor in academic achievement and subsequent social mobility. This article draws on a case study conducted in an urban multilingual primary school in Kenya and focuses on the challenges and strategies for teaching and learning English as a second language (ESL) in primary schools. The findings are based on evidence gathered from teachers, through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, and from pupils, through learner diaries. The data show a strategic approach to teaching and learning English and reveal the tremendous effort invested by teachers and learners in grappling with the challenges of learning English in the context of an unresolved national language policy, interference from regional linguistic heritage languages and an examination-oriented education system. The strategies deployed by teachers to address these challenges include varied instructional approaches and creating a warm classroom climate to provide a non-threatening environment for learning and language acquisition. Data from pupils shows that group based interactions with their peers and individual reinforcement strategies, such as keeping vocabulary notebooks, are the most common learner strategies. The study shows how school-based research can give teachers and learners a voice in the development of successful language teaching and learning strategies for complex and challenging multilingual environments.

Key words: ESL, multilingualism, primary schools, teaching strategies, learner strategies, Kenya

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