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SELECTED DIGITAL MEDIA TOOLS AND LANGUAGE INSTRUCTIONS AMONG ECDE TEACHERS IN MERU SOUTH SUB-COUNTY, THARAKA-NITHI COUNTY, KENYA

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ABSTRACT

Language is the most important aspect in the life of all beings as it is used to express inner thoughts and emotions, make sense of complex and abstract thought. Teachers are required to ensure ECDE learners are fully prepared and equipped with the literacy skills relevant for them to be independent in learning language for coping with their everyday lives. This has seen most of them struggle to incorporate diverse instructional resources in their language instruction as a teaching strategy. Literature has shown a majority of studies on instructional resources integration in learning and especially Information, Communication and Technology (ICT). However, minimal research relating to digital media use in ECDE language instruction hence the specific focus on types of digital media tools used in ECDE Language instruction. The purpose of this study therefore was to determine types of digital media tools used in language instruction among ECDE teachers in Meru South Sub- County, Tharaka-Nithi county, Kenya. To achieve the objectives descriptive survey research design was adopted. The study subjects included both head-teachers and ECDE teachers proportionately selected to help get the required sample sizes to be involved in the study. A sample of 243 respondents was achieved from a target population of 612 after subjection to Krejcie and Morgan sample determination table. Expert opinion was used to establish validity and reliability. Data was collected via questionnaires. Prior to doing a data analysis, common themes from the respondents' descriptions of their experiences were noted. Quantitative data was evaluated descriptively using frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviation. The findings indicated that YouTube, WhatsApp and Facebook were the most commonly used digital media tools, each tool returning a comparably high extent of use compared to other tools. It is therefore recommended that ECDE teachers enhance the extent of use of media gadgets such as computers and tablets as well as tools such as Twitter and Instagram to enhance their benefits in language instruction. School administration should enhance digital resource base of their ECDE centres with adequate digital media gadgets and tools to promote their utilization.

Keywords: Digital media tools, YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, ECDE, Integration, Language Instruction.

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood development is a multifaceted stage, requiring a lot of inputs before the child may reach an ideal stage. It is the time when children start learning about themselves and the world around them (Heckman, 2004). As a matter of fact, they start to learn about the world around them through first-hand encounters as a part of their lifelong learning process. Therefore, to be able to offer them an optimal learning experience, caregivers need to make available to them all factors and elements that have an impact on human existence from birth with a precise balancing of hereditary and

environmental influences (Irwansyah & Alia Tesa, 2018). This is the whole essence of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). In recognition of its significance, the World Bank (2014) and the European Union (2018) both state that "participation in high-quality ECEC is a fundamental step in children's development and their success in later life. In emerging economies such as Kenya, any form of education at this stage that spans 4 to 9 years in a child's life is what entails Early Childhood Development and Education (ECDE).

The fundamental goal of ECDE in Kenya is to assist the child in developing language and communication abilities, manipulative and quantitative skills in idea management, reading and writing abilities (ECDE Policy Guidelines, 2006). Additionally, the child should develop favorable attitudes toward schooling as well as physical, moral, spiritual, and emotional development. The child is anticipated to discover how to react favorably to different circumstances and should learn to respond well to natural cues as well as develop necessary social skills (KIE, 2006). Language, according to Rizqiningsih and Hadi (2019) in a study done in Thailand is a medium of communication which is inseparable from a people's culture. According to the researchers, it is developed early in the life of a child as they go about interacting with their immediate social environment. Therefore, the significance of this development is that children become enculturated into a given language early in life because such a language is part of the way of life of their society (Shrum, 2015). Language learning within the ECDE setting is critical to a child's learning and development. It essentially revolves around transmitting the skills of listening, speaking, writing and reading. In confirming this observation, KIE (1990) contend that Preschool language activities play an important role in the development of a child's vocabulary, listening skills, and communication skills. Such skills are significant for the child's overall wellbeing and imply that all factors necessary for their acquisition should be put in place.

Learning environment is key in helping learners acquire required language skills. It includes the availability and efficient utilization of instructional resources (Gather and Lawson, 2004). Such resources could either be standard, improvised or community based. Previously, it has been shown that learners gain more if their teaching and learning environment is resource rich (Ministry of Education, 2003). These resources would offer learners an optimum opportunity to interact with the resources as well as the concept to be learnt. The resources make learning process to be active by enabling the learner to be active participants rather than passive recipients of knowledge (Adipo, 2015). Such learning environment, research show is the most preferred for young children in ECDE.

Although there are many other types of digital media tools, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, WeChat, Google+, Instagram, Daily Motion, WhatsApp, etc. are the most widely used worldwide (Jinadasa, 2016). According to Best Start Resource Centre (2014) and Weerasendera (2014) widespread use of digital media is currently a national phenomenon, and its expansion is exponential. According to (Weerasendera, 2014) there were 2.3 million digital media users identified in 2014, and the typical person spends about 30 minutes per day on digital media. However, as time goes on, digital media's continued evolution laid the groundwork for their evolutionary process (Jinadasa, 2016) which has created a notion of multi-purpose digital media utilization, from entertainment to education, science and knowledge extension, politics, news media, religious events, sports and games, music, etc. In South Africa, Oke and Fernandez (2020) avers that technology transformations, particularly the birth of digital media platforms like Facebook has fundamentally disrupted the known pattern of academic instruction and learning with its effects leading to the socialization of learning. The study argues that such digital media platforms like YouTube have largely transformed the delivery of information within areas of professional knowledge sharing such as educational institutions which continue witnessing far-reaching changes in curriculum instruction including the rise in Massive Open Online Courses.

In Kenya, according to a study in Machakos county to evaluate the impact of using digital media in teaching and developing reading abilities among preschool learners (Mwangi & Marima, 2022). The survey found that PCs and tablets accounted for a sizable portion of the digital media utilized in ECDE teaching and learning. The findings showed that learners in ECDE centers were taught and learned to read by using digital media in a significant and beneficial way. The study came to the conclusion that using digital instructional material significantly and favorably impacts how reading skills are taught and acquired by learners in ECDE Centers.

The use of new media is expanding into a variety of new fields, one of which is using it to instruct and teach pupils. Wikis, virtual worlds, blogs, online social networking, and other web-based communication tools are all included in the category of "new media" (Linda & Friedman, Hershey) (2008). According to Oberiri and Greg (2017), children in secondary schools who use digital media are frequently exposed to offensive remarks, posts, pictures, and videos. According to the study, most students felt under pressure to be, look, and act ideal, and be a part of a clique of peers regarded to be flawless, having many likes and followers. This was because trending on digital media had become a trend to be admired. This also conforms with the study by Nair (2016) on global use of digital media tools in language learning and teaching in India that found that digital media had the potential to enhance student engagement and motivation. The current study sought to investigate the types of digital media used in early years and what challenges teachers have while

using them in language instruction

According to Dearstyne (2007) these digital media tools users are able to undertake the transference of exclusively audio-oriented, text-based and audio-visual content across the world and among many individuals. Moreover, Siddig (2020) in a study conducted within the Middle East posit that these Web 2.0 platforms have specifically initiated a paradigm shift in language instruction and learning that underscores a considerable shift from teaching and the teacher to learning and the learners. Computers, projectors, the internet, and audiovisuals are the primary instructional media used in the teaching and learning process in early childhood center, Boadu, Awuah, Ababio, and Eduaquah (2014). Adding on Frigolé, Gesa Vidal, & Suárez, (2022) insinuates that introduction of Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube as mediums for language instruction initiated a new model of language instruction that is more student-centered than it is instructor-centered. In the process, these digital media tools platforms have institutionalized a phenomenon known as 'student-centered learning'. The study did not investigate on ECDE language instructions which the current study sought to investigate.

One of the most widely used Web 2.0 technology applications in providing language learners with ample opportunities for acquiring, practicing and sharing information is YouTube. According to a study undertaken in the United States by Balcikanli (2010), YouTube is defined as an interaction-oriented Web 2.0 technology application that complements this manner of opportunities for online learning. It is widely known for its video-oriented content. According to a study in U.S.A, Strangelove (2020), it provides language learners, especially those seeking to learn English language as a second or foreign language with the opportunity to build their vocabulary and English language expression and proficiency through captions or subtitles attached below the created video content. This agrees to Kasanga (2016) who found that YouTube was an effective tool for teaching English as a second language to young children in South Africa. Even though the studies addressed digital media use in language learning, these studies presented a contextual gap which the present study sought to fill as well as establishing whether YouTube influences language instruction.

Initiated in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg as a digital media tool site with the propensity to allow for student interaction, communication and information exchange, Facebook presents as arguably the most widely used digital media tools site in contemporary times. In a study conducted in the Philippines, Fuente (2021) noted that this digital media tools also provides users with an arena for language instruction. Facebook's capacity to support language teaching and learning among learners was given impetus by the launching of its chat-enabling application christened, the "Facebook Messenger App" which attracted over 1.2 billion active users following its inception in 2017. Akr and Atmaca (2015) looked into the views of 221 aspiring English First Language instructors on the usage of Facebook in the classroom. The researcher also had face-to-face conversations with 21 prospective teachers, which helped get a fuller picture. The findings revealed that a substantial majority of participants were in support of using Facebook in English classrooms. Numerous students believed that using Facebook to teach English was more suited for intermediate and advanced students than for beginners, according to the research findings. The current study sought to find out if Facebook is a digital media tool utilized in ECDE language instruction in Meru South subcounty.

WhatsApp is another critical Web 2.0 application that is increasingly gaining power among student users despite being an invention that was birthed much later following the advent of Facebook and YouTube. The use of new media is expanding into a variety of new fields, one of which is using it to instruct and teach pupils. Wikis, virtual worlds, blogs, online social networking, and other web-based communication tools are all included in the category of "new media" (Linda & Friedman, Hershey) (2008). In East Africa, WhatsApp has been found to be an effective tool for promoting early literacy skills in young children. A study conducted in Uganda found that the use of WhatsApp in early childhood education resulted in improved reading and writing skills (Kagoya et al., 2017). In Tanzania, Mwakapina and Mhandeni (2016) looked into the potentials, difficulties, and opportunities in institution of higher learning (IHL) when examining the WhatsApp tools for second language acquisition. The study used descriptive research methods. The results suggest that WhatsApp might be completely utilized for educational goals. The government is being asked to provide loans to students at IHL for online mobile learning devices as part of their specific faculty needs. The app is also recommended for instructors to utilize in their synchronous classes because it fosters an active learning environment. Most of these studies was done in higher learning institutions and addressed second language acquisition offering a conceptual gap for the current study.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted descriptive survey research design. Study sampled consisted of 243 grade 1, 2 and 3 teachers and their head teachers sampled from 612 respondents. Sample size was determined using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table of determining sample size. Data was collected using questionnaires for both the ECDE teachers and their head teachers. Data obtained was analyzed quantitatively using descriptive statistics with the help of SPSS software 25.0 version.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study sought to explore the types of digital media tools used in ECDE language instruction among ECDE teachers in Meru South sub-county. Views of ECDE teachers and headteachers was sort on a set of four different categorical issues. The issues included whether they had had access to any digital media platforms, which gadgets they used in accessing digital media tools, the digital media tools they accessed and the types of digital media tools they used in language instructions. Table 1 presents information on respondents' access to digital media platform

Table 1: Access to any Digital Media Platforms

	Teachers		Headteachers	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Yes	153	84.5	57	93.4
No	28	15.5	4	6.6
Total	181	100.0	61	100.0

The findings obtained show that a majority of teachers (84.5%) acknowledged having had access to digital media platforms compared to those who had not (15.5%). Similar observation was made with regard to head teachers, a majority (93.4%) acknowledging that their ECDE teachers had access to digital media platforms. The findings mean that almost all the teachers sampled had access to digital media platforms at a given time in their teaching career. This agrees to a study conducted by Plowman and McPake (2013) that found that while teachers were enthusiastic about use of digital media tools in early years' education, they lacked the necessary skills and gadgets to use the effectively. This is also in line with previous research that showed that teachers tend to use digital media tools that they are familiar with and comfortable using (Kirshner & Karpinski, 2010). The study also sought to establish gadgets used in accessing digital media tools. Table 2 presents a summary of findings.

Table 2: Gadget Used in Accessing Digital Media Tools

Statement	Teachers (N=181)		Head Teachers(N=61)	
	Yes(%)	No(%)	Yes(%)	No(%)
Computer	26.5	73.5	34.4	65.6
Tablet	22.7	77.3	34.4	65.6
Smartphone	89.5	10.5	91.8	8.2

The data obtained from teachers show that a majority of them (89.5%) used smartphone to access digital media tools compared to those who accessed computer (26.5%) and Tablet (22.7%). Their observation was corroborated by sampled Headteachers, with 91.8% of them indicating that their teachers mostly used their smartphones to access digital media tools with an equal access (34.4%) to computer and tablets. This could imply that digital media tools were accessed by teachers mostly through smartphone which implies greater use of digital media tools in language instructions. This is in line with previous research that shown that teachers tend to use digital media tools that they are already familiar with and comfortable using (Kirshner & Karpinski, 2010).

Further, the study sought to establish the type of media digital tools they access through the gadgets established. Table 3 presents a summary of their findings.

Table 3: Types of Digital Media Tools Accessed

Statement	Teachers (N=181)		Head Teachers(N=61)	
	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes(%)	No(%)
Facebook	47.0	53.0	72.1	27.9
WhatsApp	65.7	34.3	86.9	13.1
YouTube	58.6	41.4	82.0	18.0
Instagram	11.6	88.4	31.1	68.9
Twitter	14.9	85.1	24.6	75.4

From the findings, WhatsApp (65.7%) was the most accessed digital media tools among teachers in ECDE followed by YouTube (58.6%) then Facebook (47.0%) in decreasing order. Others tools such as Instagram (11.6%) and Twitter (14.9%) have much lower access rates. These could be interpreted to mean more use of WhatsApp and YouTube in ECDE language instruction among teachers.

The sampled headteachers agreed that there is a general trend of higher access rates among teachers for specific digital media tools with WhatsApp (86.9%) followed by YouTube (82.0%) and Facebook (72.1%). Similarly, most of headteachers confirmed a low access rate of Instagram (31.1%) and Twitter (24.6%) from their teachers. This could mean that head teachers are more likely to invest in and promote the use of digital media tools as part of their school's overall strategy for enhancing teaching and learning of language.

These findings are consistent with a study conducted by Martin-Gutierrez, Mora, Anorve, and Raso (2018) which found that WhatsApp was a popular tool among teachers for communication and collaboration, as it allowed for quick and easy sharing of resources and ideas. Similarly, YouTube has been found to be effective in promoting language among young children (Guillen & Pennington, 2017). This in agreement to literature that has found that school leaders play a key role in promoting the integration of technology in Education (Agrist & Lavy, 2017). On the issue of types of digital media tools used in language instructions teachers and head teachers' views were sought and the findings summarized as presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Types of Digital Media Tools Used in Language Instructions

Statement	Teachers (N=181)		Head Teachers(N=61)	
	Yes(%)	No(%)	Yes(%)	No(%)
Facebook	38.7	61.3	57.4	42.6
WhatsApp	50.8	49.2	78.7	21.3
YouTube	65.2	34.8	73.8	26.2
Instagram	9.9	90.1	18.0	82.0
Twitter	7.2	91.8	14.8	85.2

With regards to types of digital media tools used, majority of sampled teachers indicated that YouTube (65.2%) was the most commonly used digital media tool for language instruction followed by WhatsApp (50.8%) and Facebook (38.7%). Other tools such as Instagram (9.9%) and Twitter (7.2%) were used by very few respondents which could either be attributed to their low access or unfamiliarity of most teachers with these tools. This could be explained by the fact that comparatively, Instagram and Twitter are relatively more recent as compared to WhatsApp, Facebook and YouTube which have been in use for some-time.

Data obtained from headteachers was in support of teachers' view, a majority reporting that their teachers mostly use WhatsApp (78.7%) as the mostly used tool closely followed by YouTube (73.8%) and Facebook (57.4%) in decreasing order. Others such as Twitter (18.0%) and Instagram (14.8%) were reportedly being used by considerably fewer teachers. This means that both the sampled class teachers and their headteachers agree that WhatsApp and YouTube were the most commonly used tools whereas Instagram and Twitter were slightly used in low proportions. This agrees to Kasanga (2016) who found that YouTube was an effective tool for teaching English as a second language to young children in South Africa. To add on, a study conducted in East Africa showed that WhatsApp was found to be an effective tool for promoting Early Literacy Skills in young children (Kagoya et. al., 2017).

CONCLUSION

Findings indicated that YouTube, WhatsApp and Facebook were the digital media tools most commonly used while Instagram and Twitter were used by few teachers to facilitate language instruction ECDE language instruction. It can therefore be concluded that YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and were the most commonly used digital media tools in ECDE language instruction in Meru south sub-county.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommended that ECDE teachers integrate a variety of digital media gadgets and tools in language instruction. In the process, specific focus should be given to use of computers and tablets whose use were found to be minimal among a majority of ECDE teachers as well as the most current media tools such as Instagram, Twitter, snapchat and LinkedIn to facilitate better enhancement of language skills.

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