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WHAT DID CRIOPEG CLASSROOM RESEARCH REVEAL ABOUT  
FACTORS AFFECTING LANGUAGE LEARNING?

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Background

The Improving Educational Quality Project (IEQ) funded by USAID focuses on classroom-based research to achieve effective teaching and learning. Thus, for the past four years the IEQ Project in Ghana has carried out three phases of classroom-based studies at the primary level. During the first phase the research examined the availability, source and utilization of instructional materials in English, Mathematics and Science lessons in eighteen primary school classrooms. In addition, teacher-pupil, and pupil-pupil interactions in the classrooms were observed. The second and third phases of the research concentrated on improving the teaching and learning of English Language of Ghanaian Children in fourteen primary schools

Why focus on English Language

During the first phase of the project it was discovered that a good number of primary school pupils could not read, write or speak the English Language. This was confirmed by the poor performance of level 6 pupils on the Criterion Referenced Test in English, administered as part of the PREP project during the same year. Furthermore, poor performance of students on the Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination in that year was attributed mainly to the students inability to communicate in the English Language. Lack of skills in the English Language displayed by most Ghanaian school children therefore became a national concern for the following reasons:

1. English is the official language for the nation since no single language has been identified among over 50 languages that are spoken in the country.
2. English is the medium of instruction from level 4 onward.
3. All textbooks apart from those for the local languages are written in English.

With the above reasons it became clear that Ghanaian children cannot achieve much in their academic pursuit if they are unable to acquire the necessary skills in English Language. To address the situation, a consensus was reached by policy makers and other stake holders in education that CRIQPEG's classroom-based research which was being conducted in 14 primary schools in the Central and Western regions should focus on improving the teaching and learning of the English Language. In order to determine the intervention that would improve upon the teaching and learning of English in Ghanaian schools, there was the need to among other things identify factors that contributed to the low performance of students in the subject.

### Data collection

Data on the factors affecting the teaching and learning of the English Language were obtained through a series of classroom observations. For example, the teaching of English Language and other subjects in all the grade levels were observed by the research team to determine teaching strategies employed by the teachers and also the use of English language in the teaching and learning of other subjects. In addition, interviews were held with teachers, students, headteachers, circuit supervisors, parents and members of the executive of the Parent Teacher Associations of the schools as well as some opinion leaders in the community. The Findings from the observations and interviews are presented below.

### Time Allotted for the Teaching of Reading & Exposure to print

From the classroom observations it was evident that teachers allotted insufficient time to the teaching of reading, that is actual decoding during each class session. In levels 2 and 3 for instance, English sessions lasted for 21 minutes on the average, and during this time the children did not have much opportunity to read from the English textbooks. Coupled with insufficient time allotted for reading in class, was the inadequate exposure to print. This means that the children neither had access to the textbook nor any other print material in the classroom. Level 2 pupils read from flashcards only once during the whole period of observation. The walls in all the classrooms were bare

and children read passages that had been copied from the textbook onto the chalkboard.

In level 3 classrooms, the chalkboard was the source of reading in 80% of the observation period. The students were observed reading supplementary readers and flashcards in 16% and 4% respectively of the time they were observed. When the teachers were interviewed on the use of flashcards most of them indicated that they seldom used flashcards because they could not follow up the flashcards with either textbooks or supplementary readers because they were not available.

### Unavailability of Textbooks

Another factor identified was the unavailability of textbooks in the classrooms. Through the observations and interviews it was revealed that there was insufficient number of textbooks for the students' use in the classrooms. For level 2, out of 14 classes observed, 3 of them did not have any English textbooks. Those classes which had them had the following ratios: two classes had the ratio of one textbook to one student, one class had a ratio of 1:2, five had 1:3, and three had 1:4 or more. In P3, there were no textbooks for 5 out of the 14 schools; two classrooms had a ratio of 1:2, three had 1:3 and four schools had 1:4 or more. For level 4, in about 98% of the classrooms observed, the pupils textbook ratio was 1:4 or more. In some cases, only the teacher possessed a copy. In P5, no textbooks were found in 7 out of the 14 schools. The ratio of textbooks to pupils for the classes which had them were as follows: two schools had 1:1, two other schools had 1:2, one school had 1:3 and two schools had a ratio of 1:4 or more.

When the teachers were interviewed on the inadequate supply of textbooks they complained that, that situation actually made them copy passages from the textbook onto the chalkboard in order for all the children to get access to the passages. The ultimate effect of this practice of students reading only from the chalkboard was that they became used to it so that they could not recognize some of the letters in print. This ultimately affected their performance on the Criterion-referenced test.

### Ineffective teaching strategies.

The unavailability of textbooks affected the teaching strategies used by the teachers to some extent. Because the teachers were used to copying whole passages on the chalkboard when teaching the pupils to read they adopted the same strategy for the teaching of comprehension. Teachers were observed copying whole composition passages on chalkboard for students to copy out right into their exercise books. They were not encouraged to generate their own composition.

When the teachers were interviewed on the teaching strategies they used they could not name them. At best, they described the procedures and incidentally they were the same procedures the teachers used each time English was taught. A few of the teachers indicated that they used model reading and that meant the students were usually encouraged to repeat words and sentences after the teacher. Whether they understood the words and sentences they repeated was another issue. All the teachers taught new and unfamiliar words by writing them on the chalkboard and the students repeating the words after the teacher. They were then encouraged to read directly from the textbooks when they were available. Where there was insufficient number of textbooks, the passages were copied on the chalkboard.

The teachers also mentioned pattern reading, as another teaching strategy they used in their teaching. This strategy also required the students to repeat after the teacher without being given the opportunity to identify and sound out words themselves. Another strategy the teachers mentioned which is similar to those mentioned above was Chorus reading which involved reading after the teacher, and this was almost always the case when English was taught in the fourteen schools.

### Lack of Teaching Aids

Lack of teaching aids to motivate pupils to express themselves in the language was also found to be a problem. However, a few of the

teachers used flashcards, picture description, phonic method and conversation method. These methods had been suggested in the syllabus prepared by the Ghana Education Service (GES) however, most of the teachers did not use these strategies effectively. The teachers indicated that conversation, chain drill, and question and answer methods were used by them because there were no teaching aids available to be used alternatively. Furthermore, they indicated that these methods, were easy for them to use.

### Lack of reading at Home

Another factor identified as having affected the learning of the English language is lack of reading by the students at home. It is well established that the more children read the better they become with their English language skills. These students who had very little practice in reading at school did not do any reading at all at home. When interviewed as to whether they read at home, the majority of the students indicated that they did no reading at home. They assigned various reasons to this. First and foremost they did not read at home due to lack of reading materials at home. Secondly, even if they had reading materials, they had no time to read since they were often engaged in household chores, such as cooking, selling, running errands etc. Others also indicated that they could not read anyway and there were no other people in their homes who could help them read since their parents were illiterates.

In fact, when all the pupils in the 14 schools were interviewed, they indicated that they had no books at home for reading and most often they were not allowed to take their textbooks home. However, it is interesting to note that when the books were available, and the teachers allowed the children to take them home, some of the pupils did not read these textbooks for fear of damaging them, an act which merited replacement or paying for the cost of the book.

When parents of these students were interviewed they confirmed what their children had said. They attributed this to lack of adequate funds to buy books for the children to study.

Lack of library facilities in most of the communities also contributed to the students lack of reading at home. About 97% of students from both rural and urban/semi urban schools indicated that there were no libraries in their communities. Only two urban communities had libraries.

### Lack of practice of the oral language

Another problem area that was identified by the researchers was on oral language. Pupils experienced the most difficulty on questions requiring them to express themselves orally. For example, 85% of pupils at all grade levels assessed performed at the non-mastery level, meaning that they could not express themselves in the English Language. Only a few (less than 2% overall) of the children could express themselves meaningfully.

When the classrooms were observed it came to light that there was lack of constant practice of oral language skills. On the average 21 minutes were used during each oral English session in level 2, and during these sessions students were found mixing English with Ghanaian language most of the time (89.1% of the oral English lessons). English was used throughout during only one session and that was a conversation lesson. In level 3, the local language was mostly used in conversations which were supposed to be oral English lessons. Moreover, some of the teachers were found to be using the local language in teaching oral English. In level 4, the mixture of English and Ghanaian language was observed 50% of the observation period time and for the rest of the time there was 100% use of the Ghanaian language.

No oral English language was taught at level 5 classrooms in 8 out of the 14 schools during the period of observation. For the other 6 schools, the aspects taught were sentence construction and conversation. Strangely, the students did not ask questions in English at all in all the classrooms during the whole period of the observation.

When the pupils were interviewed on their oral language skills, 83.1% of the P4 pupils admitted that they did not enjoy speaking or

telling stories in English because they feared they would make mistakes and they would be laughed at by their peers. Thus, they felt shy to speak the language. They indicated that they lacked sufficient vocabulary and also they were unable to pronounce English words.

About 78.8% of the P4 pupils also indicated that they did not speak English at home because their parents and siblings were illiterates. The same reason for not speaking English at home was given by pupils in P2, P3 and P5 .

Majority (75%) of the parents interviewed confirmed the responses given by the students. The teachers also agreed with what the students said by remarking that shyness and forgetfulness on the part of the students were the factors that prevented them from speaking the language.

#### Lack of practice in Written Expression

Again, the researchers identified lack of constant practice in written expression both at school and at home as one of the factors that affected the students acquisition of written language skills. The data revealed that while most Ghanaian children could copy letters (93% by grade 3 and 99% by grade 4) and write their names, (60% by grade 3; 79.1% by grade 4; 95% by grade 5) they had more difficulty when asked to write words.

Classroom observations by the research team revealed that the students were not encouraged by their teachers to write. Even when written expression was taught the teaching strategies used by most of the teachers were ineffective. An example is when teachers wrote whole compositions on the chalkboard for students to copy into their exercise books.

When the students were interviewed on their writing skills they intimated that lack of exercise books prevented some of them from practicing their written expression constantly. Some of the students also indicated that they did not do written assignments at home because their teachers did not give them any. Others said their parents were illiterates so they were not in the position to assist them do their written assignments.

### INTERVENTIONS

Based on the above factors, various interventions were introduced in the schools to improve upon the teaching and learning of the English Language. Some of the interventions are the supply of textbooks and other reading materials to the schools, in-service training of the teachers to improve their teaching strategies and acquire new skills, training of the Circuit Supervisors to empower them to offer instructional support to the teachers, provision of instructional support for the teachers, monitoring the use of the teaching strategies and feedback sessions held with the teachers. A more detailed description of the interventions is provided in another paper.

No other follow up work.