

An Evaluation of the English Teaching Methods Implemented at Bujumbura Montessori Primary School: Weaknesses and Achievements

Alfred Irambona

Burundi National University. Institute for Applied Pedagogy (IAP)

irambonaalfred@yahoo.fr

Abstract

The aim of the current case study was likely to highlight possible weaknesses and achievements resulting from the English Teaching Methods implemented at Bujumbura Montessori Primary School, in Burundi. This case study was conducted in one private educational school known as Bujumbura International Montessori School (BIMS) and used mixed methods with a descriptive technique. In this research, the headmaster of the school, teachers, and some selected parents constituted the sample of the study and data was obtained using questionnaires, observations and interviews. The study results showed that Bujumbura International Montessori School has an efficient policy for its teaching of English. Moreover, it has found that the school in question has sufficient and relevant materials to facilitate the work of teachers and learners in their daily activities. Last but not least, the findings revealed also that teachers of the school understudy are trained to teach in their situation.

Keywords: *Evaluation, Teaching Methods, Teaching Material, Montessori system, weakness and achievements.*

Introduction

Until very recently, English was given a rather narrow place in the Burundi educational system. It was just taught as a school subject starting from the second year after primary school, except for University departments where it was a main subject. Nowadays, however, learners study English from kindergarten in some private schools and from first grade in all public schools.

Such a change in the country's policy rests on the government's understanding of the growing place of English in worldwide social, business, political transactions. At the regional level, let us point out that English is the first language of work in the East African Community (EAC) which Burundi is a member of.

However, in the view of most English teaching practitioners, it is still hard for teachers and learners. One of the main reasons is that teachers have not got sufficient and adequate training. How can they efficiently impart knowledge skills of a language they speak and write — that they know in fact — so poorly? How much can they learn about EFL teaching methods in a month or two of their preparation? Is the methodology relevant to the level and needs of the learners? The real question to ask in the present context is whether teachers of

primary schools take into account all these factors while teaching English. It is expected of every teacher to use whichever methods depending on the topic of his lesson as well as on the individuals in his/her class. We insist on teachers because they are the ones called upon to teach English with no prior training as such. To explore the situation in depth, we have chosen to focus on the situation at Montessori School. Our focus is on evaluating the methods implemented while teaching English in this school in order to assess their relevance and achievements. Where weaknesses are thought to exist, suggestions have been made in order to improve the teaching and learning process.

1. Background of the study

To begin with, the school owes its name to a brilliant and polyvalent Italian woman by the name of Maria Montessori. She lived from 1870 to 1952 and was an educator, a doctor as well as a philosopher. Maria Montessori began to develop her philosophy and methods in 1897, attending courses in pedagogy at the University of Rome and reading the educational theory of the previous two hundred years. In 1907, she opened her first classroom, the Casa dei Bambini, or Children's House. Montessori education is fundamentally a model of human development, and an educational approach based on that model. The model has two basic principles. First, children and developing adults engage in psychological self-construction by means of interaction with their environments. Second, children, especially under the age of six, have an innate path of psychological development.

The Montessori school in Bujumbura constitutes an international meeting point for learners attending it. Information obtained from the school authorities in October 2009 indicated that indeed all continents are represented as there are: Burundians, Tanzanians (Zanzibaris), South Africans, Kenyans, Ethiopians, Algerians, French, Belgians, Indonesians, Laotians, Pakistanis, Indians, and Arabs. A total of 18 nationalities are found in the school, which makes the latter a bit of a melting pot. Needless to point out are the different languages spoken by the students during break time for example.

2. Montessori school language policies and goals

Behind Montessori school language teaching lies the principle to teach and develop communication skills among learners. As stated earlier, Montessori school is a very complex school where more than nineteen languages are in regular use; yet, only two of them are taught, that is, English and French. Besides, learners are prepared to face up to the challenges of attending so-called “national and international schools” located in Burundi or abroad, where indeed they have to be competitive when it comes to displaying

intellectual knowledge and creativity. As a matter-of-fact, the academic motto at Montessori is “give your child the very best start on the road of success”. That is probably why teachers are university graduates. Montessori school has also a policy of training teachers who did not attend pedagogical studies. The latter must undergo special training in order to acquire the knowledge necessary to cope with their jobs. This is an opportunity for them to learn about “what to do”, and “how to do it”, as well as on “why to do it”. One draws from this the authorities’ awareness that in whatever they do in language teaching, they have a purpose, an aim to be fulfilled sooner or later. It is after that special training that all teachers are gathered together just to undergo additional training.

Additional competence for the primary school teacher lies with the ability to display a good model of what he is advocating. He must be able to put theory into practice himself. He should be able to reflect on the use of different learning techniques and styles of teaching so that he can try to develop his own teaching approaches.

3. Children’s learning styles

3.1. Differences between a child’s mind and an adult’s one

During the very early times of the world, there were a lot of researches on the best ways how children learn languages. The researchers were interested to know the nature of a child’s mind. Some thought that all human beings have the same nature regardless of their ages and therefore concluded that all existing methods were applicable to all kinds of learners. With time, it became clear that the way children learn is quite different from the way of adults. This understanding had to innovate the teaching methods and techniques so far used.

Another view that was widely held was that a child’s mind is just smaller than the adult’s, for they may consider children as adults in miniature. During the industrial revolution of the eighteenth century, this attitude about children started changing. Some philosophers began to study the nature of children and the best methods for their learning. They discovered that the child’s mind is quite different from that of an adult. This is the view of Montessori in her book entitled *The Absorbent Mind* (1949) when she says that the learning capacity of a young child is fundamentally different from that of an adult. To realise this ourselves, we need only to think of one learning task attempted by both adults and children - learning to speak a new language (internet source accessed on March 17th, 2010 from <https://archive.org/stream/absorbentmind031961mbp#page/n17/mode/2up>).

By absorbent mind, one can understand that children are able “to absorb”, i.e. to record everything they see or hear in their surroundings through activity, not only unconsciously but also effortlessly, something an adult cannot even conceive of.

4.2. Pedagogical techniques in the teaching of children

Commonly known methods of teaching children include: demonstration, field trips, recitation, experimenting, and audio visual aids. Basically, they are all applicable to a language teaching although they vary according to the subject under discussion or to what kind of learners one has. But he must have love for children. He must be trained in the teaching of young children; he should be a child-oriented teacher rather than a subject-oriented one. He should also bear in mind the different stages that a child has to go through in order to determine which method is suitable to his learning.

According to Vincent R. Rogers (1972: 130), he mentioned that:

In the British primary school, the children begin their explorations with simple experiences that involve the senses: listening to a plop of bricks in the water tray, touching the roughness of bark or tasting the saltiness of a shell. In that sense, they feel the rhythms of life around them and become aware that their own bodies can respond sympathetically... and where a skilled teacher creates an environment delicious to the senses, a child's speech and writing patterns can change radically.

From the above quotation, it is important for the teacher to know if the learners in question are sensitive or not as senses play a great role in language learning. John W. Hug and Phyllis J. Wilson in *curriculum enrichment outdoors* (1965: 3) agree wholeheartedly that children can learn using all of the senses. They point out that:

“Multi-sensory experience can be so directed in the outdoors that, through practice, the learner develops something of the keenness of senses that was so useful to the pioneers in knowing and using their surroundings. He develops the acuteness that helps a person really to save each minute of living. From that, the child is provided unlimited opportunities to practice the precise seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting and smelling that but also leads to more effective multi-sensory learning”.

From the statement above, one can deduce that senses play a great role in the learning activity in that they assist children in learning with understanding and interest. From this point of view, senses become prerequisites for learning. Without them, no learning can happen and be successful.

In all cases, teaching a language to children is an activity which requires special methods and techniques. The teacher of primary school should know all aspects of child's learning including the natural order of acquiring language. Once factors of success are understood, the teacher's job would be to stimulate and capitalize on them. In the same lines of thoughts, Nida (1957:1920) points out to the natural order of learning a language arguing that it is not random, but rather systematic. That is: listening - speaking - reading, and writing.

What methods are suitable for teaching English to children? This is a question that has haunted the minds of many researchers. Naturally, all normal children play and want to play. Children learn through playing. The play-way method may include recitation, demonstration, field trip, experimenting, discriminatory methods, and so on. In playing together, children interact and in interacting they develop both cooperation and language skills. Results reached in most studies suggest that efficiency in the art of teaching young children basically stems from play-centred methodology.

Therefore, there seems to be agreements on the fact that children learn a great deal through playing. As implication, the teacher of primary school ought to be very dynamic and able to motivate children into learning something using many different play ways. "Different" here is important and implies that young children soon get tired of learning through one way. It is equally important for the teacher to have an ability to communicate with children. Of course for some people, this is like an instinctive skill, whereas for some others, it is a skill they have to learn.

In his book, *Evaluating and selecting EFL teaching materials* (1984:99), Alan Cunningsworth states that the only way to teach a language to young learners in a childlike fashion is a course full of play; plays combined with structured teaching so that the children are only aware of the play content and learn language almost without noticing. They play and develop sociability and the language at the same time. Through plays, they interact with the nature, experiment many things needed not only for their body development, but also for their intellectual development.

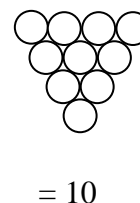
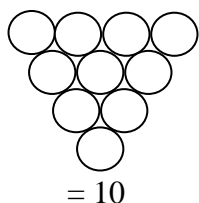
We can understand that when children play, they intermingle with things and people. Indeed, play is so crucial in the child's life. It is a very strong characteristic through which he learns harmoniously. During play, children use play materials which should connect them to things in their environment. Since children learn from concrete to abstract, the teacher may equip students with skills using play. For that he needs to be trained in play-related materials.

As S. Hudspeth (1987: 103) observes that instructional materials aid the children to understand and remember what they have learnt. Therefore, a teacher of primary school should be trained in different skills of using attractive materials in order to create favourable conducive environment of learning.

V. Hildebrand (1972:69) on his part finds that *play is the companion of the young. It gives the sparkle to the home, school or wherever children gather. Children say what they feel and they feel what they say.* So, the teacher of primary school should very much be aware of the values of play in the young children's learning. While at play, children express themselves, gain experience in many things and that play in itself is preparatory for physical and mental growth. In play, children develop their large and fine muscles, they practice sex roles, integrate the rules of society, develop co-operation and love while their full range of feelings are being expressed.

J. Piaget (1971: 51) on this part points out something referring to the working of the child's mind. According to him, the latter is not just a smaller mind than the adult's but quite different altogether. The small child's mind cannot accept that numbers remain the same when they look different.

Eg:



Concerning this example, the child will likely say that the number of the first pile of circles is bigger than the second one because his mind is not yet able to differentiate between size and number. This is to say it is almost impossible for the children to imagine things without seeing, feeling or testing them.

The more they practice, the more effective the learning will be. So, the teacher of young children should be very resourceful and able to collect and use a lot of play-materials in children's learning just to accelerate the development of various skills such as:

- i) concept formation
- ii) logical thinking
- iii) imagination
- iv) association of ideas
- v) vocabulary building

Many other researchers concur with the view on the role of play in the teaching of young children. In L.H. Wario (1989: 38), it is said that:

“Children learn a lot, through play. They engage in activities which in turn help to generate language and learn new words to describe new experiences. The teacher should make it easy for pupils to engage in those games and activities which will help the pupils to express themselves and to experiment with words”.

In addition, teachers ought to remember that schools are built for children not for teachers. To be successful, their teaching styles must be learner-centred and involving enough. Referring to the Chinese proverb according to which:

When I hear, I forget

When I see, I remember

When I do, I understand.

In conducting or practicing the play way method, the teacher should be conscious of what kind of game is being dealt with, and thus consider which games to use, when to use them, how to link them up with the syllabus, textbook or programme and how, more specifically, different games will benefit children in different ways.

4. Place of materials in a language learning process

4.1. Materials: nature and function

In any teaching activity, materials are taken as the way to reaching a given destination. Without them, the teacher may not know what to do and what not to do and how to do it. Thus materials take the place of a guide” in the daily teaching work. By materials, one understands mainly curriculum, syllabus, textbooks (for teachers and for learners) and other teaching facilities such as wall charts, maps, pictures, CDs, tapes, radio, ... which make teaching/learning more meaningful and real to pupils. Alan Cunningsworth, in his book (Op. Cit: 31) says that:

Teaching materials should take the learners forwards as directly as possible towards their objectives already planned which fall in line with the aim of the teaching program. The aim of a teaching program should determine the course materials to be used and not vice-versa.

It is clear that the choice of teaching materials must relate to the teachers’ aims and objectives as established prior to his teaching. It is also important that those materials be exciting and motivating to enhance the learners’ desire to work.

Clarifying the nature of positive/efficient pedagogical materials, A. Wright (1976: 42) observes that:

Whatever other functions the materials may have, providing interest, fun, cultural setting and so on, the main function is that of guiding the student to use his store of foreign language to communicate his ideas and opinions

In the same point of view, Stevens (1983: 164) emphasizes the above idea saying that material can be used in an effective and enjoyable way for teaching or for supporting the teaching of almost every aspect of language. In his words,

as any branch of teaching, the preparation of materials offers scope for ingenuity, innovation and imagination. Materials do not only refer to books, but are meant to refer to and include newspapers, magazines, periodicals, journals, individual articles, short stories, poems, plays, pictures, charts, photographs, maps, films, tapes, tape-recorders, video ... Most materials come from the world of reality rather than from textbooks.

This is to say that teaching/learning process is a demanding task. It requires not only a collection of materials but also a sense of ability and creativity. It is understood that a teacher should be able to use all available materials and vary them according to what he is teaching if he wants to be successful in the teaching of all forms of a language.

4.2. Materials and motivation

Motivation is arguably the most important single factor in success or failure at language learning. J. Harmer (1986) identifies two kinds of motivation namely the intrinsic and the extrinsic motivation, the former coming from within the learner whereas the latter comes from outside the learner. Our concern is not to develop the two in detail, but to underline their role in language teaching/learning.

Insofar as we can see, children do not usually ask to learn a foreign language. That is done by their parents who have a given purpose for them to achieve. In his book, *Teaching English to Children*, C. Brumfit (1979: 97) remarks that children are not motivated to learn another language in the way older people might be. If they are to take part in a foreign language course with success, their motivation has to come from another source, for example from their parents but above all, from the enjoyment and pleasure experienced in the learning situation.

Unfortunately, in the sphere of some schools, teachers do not pay attention on those factors as they may not know their importance in language learning. This is

worrying given that in some teaching situations — and Burundi is not an exception — a number of teachers will complain about the lack of materials, whereas those who have them available are unable to exploit them positively to meet the needs of their learners. That explains why regular training to update teachers' methodological awareness are more that necessary and know how is another requirement for children's success in foreign language learning.

5. Research hypotheses and questions

Before conducting this research, the researcher was guided by a number of questions based on the following hypotheses:

- 1) Montessori primary school must have an efficient policy for teaching English;
- 2) Montessori school must have sufficient and relevant materials to facilitate the work of teachers and learners in their daily activities;
- 3) Montessori school teachers must have been trained to teach in their special situation.

As for the questions to be answered they are:

- 1) Does Montessori school have an efficient policy for teaching English?
- 2) Do the materials in the school facilitate the teachers and students in their daily work?
- 3) Are Montessori School teachers trained to teach in their special situation?

6. Purpose and Significance of the Study

The aim of this work is likely to highlight possible achievements and weaknesses resulting from the methods implemented at Montessori School. In the case weaknesses and achievements are observed, they will both be useful. They will help the school holders to focus on them in their in-service training sessions. Moreover, the school holders will benefit from it as they will know what is said about their school and will take it into account while planning what to be done along the school year for example. Teachers will also gain something from it as long as they will know where to put much emphasis in their teaching/learning activity in order to enhance learners' knowledge.

7. Methodology

The triangulation of instruments was used to gather data. The researcher got information not only from teachers or some parents, but also from the headmaster of the school. There were 4 teachers involved, from the first and second level, two teachers per class, one of them teaches English and the other French. A number of fifteen parents were asked to complete a questionnaire related to their children's learning.

To reinforce the interviews and questionnaires, the observation technique was used as it depicts the teacher in activity and his/her general behaviours during the process. In other words, it gives a lively image of the happening of the teaching activity. The observer was the researcher, who is better positioned to see what is happening in the classroom. It is he who is able to see both the teacher and learners at a time. To get the required data from the observation sessions, the researcher went there two consecutive days, and each class was visited twice for a period of one hour per class.

The data from the observations and the interviews were analysed qualitatively. The questionnaires were analysed quantitatively, using simple statistics, the data was described quantitatively and interpreted qualitatively to make it easy to understand.

8. Findings and Discussion

After confronting all the data, we found out that Montessori School has an efficient policy for its teaching of English. During classroom observation we noticed how actively learners responded to the teaching, how they were highly motivated and how they were interacting actively. We also witnessed their enthusiasm in asking the teachers to clarify a given question once they did not understand it. As far as communication skills are concerned, we noticed that they have a good base since English is taught from the nurse levels, and the teachers had received training in teaching young children. Using these findings we can therefore present our first hypothesis as proven. It was:

“Montessori Primary School must have an efficient policy for teaching English”

The second hypothesis was related to the teaching materials used by both teachers and learners and it was stated as follows: “Montessori School has sufficient and relevant materials to facilitate the work of teachers and learners in their daily activities”

In our investigation, we realised that Montessori School has not only sufficient but also relevant books. Speaking of sufficiency, we found that each textbook had its Teacher’s Guide and that each learner had his own book. Moreover, each skill has its appropriate book. That is a rare situation in the schools of Burundi. The materials are relevant in since the books fit first the learners’ level; then they are well coloured, and full of interesting pictures which excite the learners to explore them. Besides, they are written in accessible English to the children.

The last hypothesis, which related to the training Montessori School teachers receive before beginning to teach, was slated as follows: “Montessori School teachers are trained to teach in their situation”

Concerning this hypothesis, findings have proven that all teachers undergo seminars before starting to teach. Data revealed that young children are difficult to handle. To cater for their needs, trainings are organized in order for teachers to understand what a child is, what he needs for his positive development and how to handle him. So, after a close analysis of all teaching methods implemented at Montessori School, but also keeping in mind that there is no “perfect method”, we conclude that teachers have reached their goal. As a matter-of-fact, most learners are able to express themselves in English, which is the first goal of any language teaching process. That must be facilitated by the training teachers, the availability of modern materials and the teaching methods well adapted to young children.

Besides the achievements mentioned above, some hindrances have also been found in that school. The lack of recorders and magazines was pointed out, which once availed, should contribute and increase success in the language teaching/learning process in general and in English in particular. Moreover, the language transfer is another challenge to be pointed out. Indeed transfer is a big handicap that takes place while learning a second or foreign language. To finish with the section of challenges, the school is very expensive in the sense that it is not open to middle or low-income Burundian children.

9. Conclusion

All along this case study, our goal has been to assess the achievements and weaknesses of the English teaching methods implemented at the Montessori Primary School, a school located in Bujumbura City. It has been found that Bujumbura Montessori International School really follows the Montessori system of teaching kids according to the individual’s pace. The school truly promotes its motto which is stated as “Give your child the very best start on the road of success”. To that end, teachers are trained to teach using play-way methods, as children learn very well through games; and teachers have understood that kids are not adults in miniature as it used to be thought in the past. BIMS teachers have understood the different psychological steps a child passes through, their needs, and thus work with that in the teaching activities. Even if there were some missing teaching aids, the school has availed sufficient teaching materials suitable for the level of its kids. The administration of the school as well as the teachers has succeeded in implementing the Montessori teaching system inside the English lessons.

10. Recommendations

Considering the results of our investigation, we judged it relevant to suggest some recommendations in order to spread out the English teaching methods of Montessori Primary School.

a) To the school managers.

- 1) To avail the missing materials in order to enhance success in the teaching/learning process.
- 2) To review the school fees in order to allow more Burundian children to attend it.
- 3) To open more branches of the Montessori School in other parts of Burundi to allow many teachers across Burundi to learn from the experiences of their counterparts at Montessori School.

b) To teachers.

To keep up their good work but above all, to develop interest in understanding their responsibility to supplement the textbooks where weaknesses may exist. They should also take the interference of mother tongues easy as this is a natural phenomenon in second/foreign language learning situations.

c) To parents

- 1) To encourage their children and look for occasions to speak English with them.
- 2) To incite the Montessori school authority to supply the missing materials such as recorders and magazines.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Brumfit, C. (1979). *Teaching English to Children. From Practice to Principles*. London: A division of Harper Collins publishers.

Cunningsworth, A. (1984). *Evaluating and Selecting EFL teaching materials*. London: Heinemann Educational Books Limited.

Harmer, J. (1986). *The Practice of English Language*. London: New York: Longman

Hilderbrand, V. (1972). *Introduction to Early Childhood Education*. New York, MacMillan Company.

Hudspeth, S. (1987) *What About Children*. Sussex Kings -Way Ltd.

John W. Hug and Phyllis J. Wilson (1965) *Curriculum enrichment Outdoors: N/*

Lindgren, L.C. (1976) *Educational Psychology in the classroom*. New York: Willey.

- Nida, E. (1957). *Learning a Foreign Language*. New York: Friendship Press.
- Piaget, J. (1971) *Science of Education and Psychology of the child*. London, Longman Ltd.
- Stevens, P. (1983). *New Orientations in the Teaching English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Vincent R. Rogers (1972). *Teaching in the British Primary School*. New York, New York: Macmillan Company.
- Maria Montessori. The Absorbent Mind. Retrieved on March 17th, 2010: <https://archive.org/stream/absorbentmind031961mbp#page/n17/mode/2up>
- Wario, L.H. (1989). *Ways of Teaching Primary English*. London: Macmillan
- Wright, A.L. (1976). *Visual Materials for the Language Teacher*. London, Longman.