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## Adopting the child-centred pedagogy for teaching reading and writing in Local Language

Akello, Lucy Dora

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# **Chapter 5**

## **Children's stories: a tool for teaching reading and writing within a Participatory Action Research framework**

## **Abstract**

Learning to read and write is an important educational goal all over the world. The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, it documents the practice of using written children's stories for teaching reading and writing in grades one to four in three primary schools in Northern Uganda. Secondly, it reports on how the written stories contributed to children's learning to read and write. The teachers, children and the researcher guided by Vygotsky's principles of socio-cultural theory, engaged in a participatory action research. Findings through class observation, interview and review of pupils' exercise books, revealed that the written stories contribute to improving children's writing and reading. However, the 'animal language', the humour, gesture and voice variations that were ingrained in the oral stories, did not feature in the written stories and this affected the beauty and meaning that came with the written stories. While we recommend the continued use of written children's stories for reinforcing reading and writing, we propose that the stories be accompanied with audio-visuals in order to maintain the humour, tone variations and 'animal language'.

Key words: Children's stories, reading, writing, Participatory Action Research

## 5.0 Introduction

The study was conducted in three rural primary schools in Gulu and Amuru districts in Northern Uganda during a period when Northern Uganda was recovering from the 25 years of civil war led by the Lord's Resistant Army (LRA). As a consequence of the civil war, a number of schools were abandoned, the infrastructures were destroyed, and the instructional materials were either vandalised or destroyed (UNESCO, 2011; McCormac & Benjamin, 2008). After the civil war, the Government of Uganda embarked on the renovating of school and restocking of the instructional materials in phases but the facilities and in particular the reading materials were not adequate.

Apart from Government efforts to develop instructional materials, Literacy and Adult Basic Education (LABE) also developed and printed sets of story books in five local languages, namely: Aringa, Kakwa, Madi, Lugbara and Acholi. The main challenge however is that while the story books were only intended to be sample and supplementary materials, in the absence of other reading and instructional materials for learners in primary one to three, the books became the only reading texts for children and adults (Heugh and Mathias, 2013). The scarcity of reading materials has resulted into children learning to recite stories off by heart rather than learning to read (Akello & Timmerman, 2017; Akello, Timmerman & Namusisi, 2015; Heugh and Mathias, 2014; 2013; Chatry-Komerek, 2003).

The need for developing instructional materials to support children in learning reading and writing first emerged in 2012 during a preliminary study that was intended to establish why children who were taught in the local language had difficulties in

reading and writing (Akello & Timmerman, 2017) and secondly in 2013 during the evaluation of a study on using the child-centred pedagogy for teaching reading and writing (Akello, Timmerman & Namusisi, 2015). The lack of reading material was not a new challenge though it was the first time that the teachers went beyond just lamenting about it by taking steps to write the stories with the children within a participatory action research framework. This study therefore is intended to establish how teachers and pupils working within a participatory action research framework and develop reading materials and how the reading materials can be used to improve children's reading and writing in local language.

## **5.1 Background:**

### **5.1.1. Storytelling among the Acoli of Uganda**

Stories were told in the evening around the fireplace when every member of the family has returned home. At that time they would have already had dinner and would be at the fire place. The fireplace among the Acoli is significant in that it is the place where the parents or elders shared the experiences of the day, the children reported how they carried out the different tasks they were assigned for the day. It was a place where adults told stories that had moral lessons for all the members of the family but more especially for the children. It was a place where children learnt to tell stories since they listened to them several times. Listening to whoever was telling the story was the rule of the story telling sessions. Each time the children retold the stories they listened to, the adults could gauge the level of learning the child had reached. In a way this was a means of assessment. And for the stories that they have not mastered, the adult or another child that had mastered it would re-tell it to the children who were still learning. The

children were free to learn at the pace at which they wanted to learn. The idea of retelling the story by the adult and the children who had mastered the story to children who had not learnt the story, shows a lot of similarities to the principles of the Socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978). According to the socio-cultural theory, the adult or the more competent peer offers support or guidance to the less competent peer during an interactive environment in a bid to help them learn. This support or guidance is offered until the moment the adult has gauged that the less competent children have learnt.

The fire place however, was to a great extent destroyed due to the 25 year long civil war that caused practically most of the people in Acoli sub-region to move into Internally Displaced People's Camps (IDPC) (Norris, 2014). The physical space and the insecurity in the IDPCs made it impractical to have the fire place in northern Uganda and this has greatly affected the culture of storytelling among the Acoli. In addition, due to advancement in technology, some adults and children living in and around trading centres converge to watch movies and football. Although the movies are detached from the experience of the children, some learning still takes place (O'Malley, 2010). This does not mean that the fireplace has vanished completely. Deep in the rural areas, families still sit in the evening in the compound or houses and tell children stories.

### **5.1.2. Children's reading and writing**

Literacy is an important educational goal all over the world. This is because the success of a society depends on the innovation of the next generation. Employees in the 21st century need to have greater literacy skills than in other time periods, as the average job requires literacy in the area of technology, as well as traditional forms of reading, writing, and communicating (Miller & Pennycuff, 2008). According to Chatry-

Komarek (2003), literacy is the key to successful learning in school for any child. Later on, it is a basic element for active participation in social, economic, cultural, and political life.

Ogili and Nzeneri (2011) further argue that to achieve modernization, accelerated transformation of the economic and democratization of development institutions, meaningful and sustainable literacy activities are the keys. This is because, no democratic government can thrive in the midst of illiteracy, and no economy has space for illiteracy in the 21st century due to high technological changes as occasioned by globalization. Chatry-Komarek (2003) however, contends that although literacy alone does not guarantee personal success and national development, it is nevertheless a pre-condition for achieving both. For this reason, literacy has become a priority objective around the world. African government therefore have no alternative other than to join the global pursuit in creating schools in which children learn to read and write like all children. For both children and adults, the ability to read and write opens up new worlds and opportunities in life. Literacy enables children to gain new knowledge, enjoy literature, and to do everyday things that are part and parcel of modern life, such as, reading the newspapers, job listings, and instruction manuals, maps and so on with ease (Aina, Ogungbeni, Adigun & Ogundipe, 2011).

Currently teachers and stakeholders in education are pushing for the learning process that makes a child able to read right from the kindergarten level and yet this can only happen when children have books that they can read in school and at home. Carter (2003) emphasizes that the need for rich language experiences is critical to the cognitive and language development of young children, and while this must be encouraged in

homes, teachers also need to continue to provide these experiences for children when they start their formal education.

Chatry-Komerek (2003) on the contrary noted that most parents in Africa deal with daily matters on an oral basis, therefore many children arrive at school without any kind of print awareness. Moreover, there is complete lack of suitable reading books in their environment. At school, the luckiest of the children have one reading textbook per grade, and that is insufficient for them to become skilled readers (Heugh & Mathias, 2014; Chatry-Komerek, 2003). These children need more significant, enjoyable, exciting reading material. Village and city Libraries may provide them with some books in English but rarely with access to meaningful texts written in their own language and dealing with familiar realities of their daily experiences. Chatry-Komerek (2003) noted that the general lack of active support for the acquisition of literacy both at home and in school, is a challenge that many African teachers have to grapple with. Ideally, children learn reading by reading and writing by writing, although many African children have few opportunities to do so.

Many children learn to read and write both the local language and second languages at an early age. Some children and adults need additional help in reading and writing, while most people learn languages without difficulty (Aina, et al., 2011), yet others learn to read and write a second, third or additional language, with or without having learned to read in their first language. Research has shown that children who have had earlier meaningful experiences with print, including being read to often, seeing print in their daily lives, and experimenting with writing, are better prepared for literacy learning than those who lack such experiences (Carter, 2003). Carter argues that young



children's literacy concepts develop from experiences with print. He adds that children remember what is written in texts, and their experiments in writing and drawing support development in understanding about reading, writing and print. Hladíková (2014) pointed out that it is essential for children's books to have illustration since it contributes to children's further development and ability to perform well both in school and later in life.

Beck, McKeown and Kucan (2002) found that storybook reading expose children to vocabulary not used in everyday conversations and that children's familiarity with words and grammar permits them to discuss concepts better within decontextualized context. Carter (2003) emphasised that the teacher can, depending on the children's experiences, read the text, pausing before a word that can be determined by the picture and the text, to encourage children's participation and their reading with the teacher. The children should be encouraged to ask questions and make comments. Another important advantage of the book is that it permits a group of children to read a single book together.

In learning to read and write the teachers or peers need to take into account the different types of learners and their needs. Carter (2003) noted that if beginning reading instruction is to be effective, there must be a balance of activities designed to improve word recognition. These should include: opportunities to use the oral language, rapid recognition of the letters of the alphabet through association, the association of sound patterns in speech, and phonics teaching provided in a connected, formative manner, often engaging in the use of text.

According to the National Curriculum Development Centre [NCDC] (2008) having a rich learning environment is very important in stimulating children's mind to read and write. Instructional materials such as charts and flash cards contribute greatly in making a rich learning environment. Instructional materials are items that do not only support the teaching-learning process (NCDC, 2008) but also facilitate and make learners more active. While NCDC (2012) noted that instructional materials aid use of multi-sense and provide essential textual and visual input; NCDC (2008) emphasised that most of the materials for teaching local language can either be bought or made by the teacher. Teacher-made materials are specific and tend to answer the needs of the lesson more accurately (Carter, 2003).

NCDC (2012) encourages the teachers to use non textbook materials such as charts and flash cards which are language free for easy adaptation at lower primary (Primary one to three). From Primary four to seven teachers use textbooks to support the teaching of different subjects. In addition there should be stories, riddles, poetry local proverbs and song lyrics written by teachers and students, and which can be sung to familiar tunes (NCDC, 2012). Teachers are further advised to tailor their materials to the ability of the learner, the concepts and the competencies to be developed and the learning situation at hand. Together with their children, teachers can create 'book boxes' and reading corners, where children are able to read from charts and read to each other (NCDC, 2008).

Carter (2003) suggests that, wherever feasible, the creative work in writing and art should reflect all areas of the curriculum, and the use of local materials should be encouraged. According to Ghosn (2002) a curriculum that is based, or that draws

heavily on authentic children's stories, provides a motivating medium for language learning while fostering the development of the thinking skills that are needed for academic literacy. Carter insists that the materials should include a variety of narrative and expository books of varying levels of difficulty, and those which meet the interest of the individuals, and the selection of the stories be made by the children.

Chatry-Komarek (2003) pointed out that the most suitable teaching and learning aids is textbooks when it comes to reading and writing in African schools. He, however, argues that textbooks alone are not enough to solve the very challenging reading and writing puzzle in schools today. This is because even when there are textbooks in African languages, their distribution to schools are sometimes erratic (Charey-Komarek, 2003). For example, in studies elsewhere it was found out that approximately 10 pupils read from one reader and so because they were not able to read, most learners recited from memory (Heugh & Mathias, 2014; Oketcho 2014).

Carter (2003) note that most of the teaching materials could be got from the local environment and so urge teachers to participate in providing locally produced materials which are relevant, low/no cost and appropriate to the teaching-learning process. This justifies the need for additional reading materials in the child's own language. The goal of the study therefore is to involve teachers and children in developing materials that can be used not only in the classroom for teaching structures, new words and reading; but also as reading materials that children can take home and read.

### **5.1.3. Thematic curriculum and development of instructional materials**

The education sector, especially in primary school level, has undergone major transformations and innovations; for example, the review of the curriculum, the

introduction of the thematic curriculum and the training of primary school teachers in pedagogical skills (NCDC, 2006). The arrangement for the implementation of the thematic curriculum was that teachers were to use locally-made materials in the classroom and children should be provided with both text books and readers to help boost children's reading skills (NCDC, 2006). The situation in the schools, however, was different. Research showed that the teachers had the guide but the pupils' books were missing (Akello & Timmerman, 2017; Heugh & Mathias, 2014; Oketcho, 2014). And so in order to address the need for instructional materials during the learning process, the teachers wrote the stories on the chalkboard for the pupils to copy in their exercise books (Akello & Timmerman, 2017). The same study again noted that children could not practice reading because the text books were not available. This situation is not unique to the schools in Uganda alone, many classrooms in developing countries, especially in poor and rural areas possess one textbook, typically in the hands of the teacher. Consequently, the pupils spent most of their time copying the content from chalkboards to notebooks, and then memorizing it (UNESCO, 2008a).

#### **5.1.4. Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory**

The study adopted Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) in order to be able to understand better how children can learn by getting involved in the story telling, reading and writing processes. Vygotsky believed that learning occurs through socially mediated interactions in which an experienced peer or adult guides the child to explore a new concept slightly above the child's current level of development. Shared reading provides children with this opportunity when teacher or adult emphasizes skills that children have not yet developed, rather than focusing on

concepts that are already understood. This is best done in the context of relationships with an adult that is responsive and sensitive to the child's involvement in storytelling and story reading.

To facilitate interaction, the pupils with mixed abilities told and wrote stories in groups with their teachers. The mixing of pupils made it possible for the more competent peers to mentor the less competent peers. According to Nordlof (2014) learning through collaboration enables pupils to gradually attain a state of competence in which they could complete a similar task independently and pick on another task that is slightly difficult.

Adopting the ZPD for this study was appropriate since storytelling, story writing and drawing illustrations are social activities that the teachers and pupils collaboratively embark on in order to learn oral language and vocabulary (Thiel, Love & McDonald, 2011). This means that after narrating and writing the stories jointly, the younger children especially would likely be able to narrate and write the same story independently the next time (Vygotsky, 1978), and through that process, the learner's ZPD for storytelling and writing would have been raised. This process is repeated at the higher level of task difficulty that the learner's new ZPD requires. The collaborative aspects of Vygotsky's ZPD are in line with the principles of PAR.

## **5.2. Methodology**

The study was conducted within a participatory action research (PAR) framework. PAR is a highly collaborative process between expert researchers and the members of the organisation under study (Greenwood, Whyte & Harkavy, 1993). PAR emphasises teamwork and active collaboration, where researchers and participants

work together to analyse a problem situation and generate actions to solve the problem (Chatterton et al., 2007). In adopting PAR framework for the study, the teachers and pupil had three levels of participation. The first level of participation was among teachers and teachers, secondly, among teachers and pupils, and lastly among pupils and pupils. The teachers collaborated in identifying the themes in the curriculum under which the stories told could fit. At the second level of participation, the teachers listened to the pupils' oral stories and either wrote it or corrected it with the pupils. In the third and last level of collaboration the pupils told and wrote the stories and drew the illustrations. These levels of collaboration involved moments of reflections, learning and decision making by the participants in order to accomplish the tasks successfully.

The collaborative nature of PAR was important in this study as it provided space for the teachers and children to work with each other in identifying and reflecting on the challenges of lack of reading materials and planning the story writing process. Involving children in identifying the problem and seeking possible solutions according to Mitra (2004) was appropriate since they are part of a school community and they have knowledge about the issues affecting the school. He adds that school reforms can be more successful if learners actively participate in shaping it.

### **5.2.1. The study**

The need to undertake this study on children's stories was prompted by the outcome of two earlier studies (Akello & Timmerman, 2017, Akello, et al., 2015). As part of the participatory action research process, the two studies were validated and evaluated during workshop sessions in order to establish the authenticity of the findings. The findings of the preliminary study were shared with the participants during

a feedback workshop. The practice of engaging in feedback workshop was adopted from earlier studies (Angucia, 2010; Tukundane, 2014) as the means of offering the participants the occasion of confirming authenticity of the findings or lack of it (Tukundane, 2014) and also for obtaining feedback from the participants (Burton & Bartlett, 2005; Akello, et al., 2015; Akello & Timmerman, 2017). In each workshop, the lack of reading materials featured as a challenge affecting children's learning to read and write. It was therefore imperative that ways to address the lack of reading materials had to be spelt out. A teacher proposed that children's stories could be written to address the challenge of lack of reading texts from grade one to four. The teachers in unison said, 'We can write the stories' (Akello & Timmerman, 2017). As the discussion went on it emerged that some of the teachers already had ideas of how to address the issue of lack of reading text for the children. At this point the participants went into four groups according to the classes they teach, while the other participants consisting of Head teachers, Deputy Head teachers, the tutors joined the different groups based on their preferences. The groupings provided moments for reflecting and discussing how practically they would go about the writing process. During a plenary session the participants, guided by their experiences in teaching literacy, made a number of suggestions that are in line with recommendations made in earlier studies.

### **5.2.2. Participants**

Twelve teachers and 720 pupils of lower primary classes from three primary schools were purposively selected. Involving children in the study provided a channel through which their voices can be heard (Alderson & Marrow, 2004) directly in matters that relate to the development of the reading text. Nine teachers taught reading and

writing in the local language from grades one to three while three teachers taught English in grade four. The teachers' background knowledge of the curriculum at the lower primary level and their willingness to improve their teaching practices and children's learning, made them principal participants in this study. The twelve teachers and the researcher collaborated with the pupils in telling, writing and rewriting the stories that were eventually printed into small booklet for the grades one to four pupils in three schools. The booklets were the main output of this study. Therefore through the collaborative input of the teachers, pupils and the researcher, it was possible to establish the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the story writing plan in promoting learning to read and write. In this paper, the teachers, pupils, researcher, Centre Coordinating tutor make the participants.

### **5.2.3. Children's story writing process**

The story writing process went through five stages: planning, storytelling, story writing, selection and vetting. In order to prepare for the story writing exercise, the participants during a workshop session came up with the following suggestions:

- i. Children in grade one and two are to tell the stories and the teachers are to write the stories down for them, while the children in grades three and four can write the stories and the teachers support them in improving the stories. The teachers' suggestions of making children in grade three and four write the stories tallies with Carter's (2003) proposal that older learners should be encouraged to write on their own and then share their stories with the class and Vygotsky's (1978) principles of mentorship in which the more competent peers offer support in a collaborative manner to the less competent peers.



- ii. Encourage children to tell and write stories in line with the themes in the curriculum so that later the stories can easily be incorporated in the teaching and learning sessions. This suggestion is in line with the proposal of Cater (2003) who noted that where possible creative work in writing and art should reflect all areas of the curriculum. According to Berardo (2006) students often find it very boring when dealing with only one subject area.
- iii. To work at class level with teachers from other schools to improve the stories especially during translation of stories from Acoli to English in grade four;
- iv. To make the children draw illustrations to help them have vivid pictures of the stories. The children who cannot read would see the illustrations and interpret them. This suggestion is in agreement with Carter's (2003) view that in writing stories, children should be made to draw illustrations to match the story as part of their contribution and the story should be placed in the classroom to enable children to try to read independently. In confirmation of Carter's views Berardo (2006) argues that variety in presentation also influences the choice of text and that presentation through the use of pictures, diagrams, photographs, helps to put the text into context. Appropriate presentation helps readers not only to understand the meaning of the text better but also to know how it would be used. A more 'attractive' text will appeal to the students and motivate them into reading.
- v. To ensure that the contexts of the stories are specific to the communities where the children come from, so that they can understand and identify with the stories

- vi. To mix up children with different abilities for purpose of promoting peer learning.

Storytelling in each of the classes was done during the last hour before lunch.

This was because towards lunch hours the pupils' level of concentration goes low and one of the activities that can help to keep them alert is storytelling. In this study, children took turns in telling the stories that lasted three to five minutes to their peers and the teacher. The stories were about animal characters such as the Leopard, Hare, Lion, Cock, Cattle, Dog; and fictitious characters like Ogre and 'Kiliti'. Involving children in the study helped them to identify and voice out the issues that were affecting their own learning to read and write and to contribute in solving the challenges from their perspective.

The story telling process depended on the grade the children were in. In grades one and two, children told stories two to three times in order to come up with a complete story. This is because they were not well versed with the stories and so they had to tell and retell it in order to come up with a complete story. Telling and retelling the story until children have learnt it, is a reflection of their growth within their zone of proximal development. Involving children in the story telling and writing was a means by which they realised their rights (Reddy & Ratna, 2002) to participate in solving problems that affected their learning to read and write. As the children told the stories, the teachers in primary one and two kept writing them down until they had at least four complete stories. In grades three and four, the children wrote out the stories because they had mastered them. The teacher playing the role of the 'adult and more knowledgeable peer' (Vygotsky, 1978) worked with the children to complete the

sentences and correct the spelling. The pupils however had challenges in selecting the stories to be presented at the feedback workshop for further scrutiny. Coincidentally, the stories were the same across the three schools involved in the study except that they were of different versions.

The process of selecting stories to be developed further for use in the classroom was carried out at two levels. First, each teacher and the pupils from the three schools made the selection of the stories at class levels and they agreed on four stories per class. The involvement of the children from the different schools in selecting the stories made it possible to have a variety of stories that were presented during the second phase of selecting the stories. This selection exercise is in line with Carter's (2003) proposal that materials should include a variety of narratives of varying levels of difficulty and the stories should meet the interest of the individuals and selection should be done by the children.

The second phase of selection was during a one day workshop in Gulu, in which the teachers from the different schools grouped themselves with the teachers of the same class from other school and shared their stories with each other. During the workshop, each group came up with four stories that were presented to the entire research team for evaluation. The evaluation was guided by criterion agreed upon by all the participants (see 5.2.4 below).

#### **5.2.4. Evaluation of the written stories**

At this stage of the story writing process the stories were subjected to a review by the Centre Coordinating Tutor and a member of the Acoli Language Board in order to ensure that they depicted the themes in the curriculum and could be used for teaching

reading and writing in the classroom. This was in line with Gravoso, et al. (2008) proposal that in order to ensure technical accuracy, reading materials needed to be reviewed by subject matter specialist prior to production for use. Nuttall (1996 cited in Berardo 2006) proposed three criteria for choosing texts that can be used in the classroom: suitability of content, exploitability and readability. Suitability of content can be the most important of the three, in that the reading material should motivate and interest the student as well as be relevant to their needs. Secondly, the text should be used to develop students' competences in reading. He adds that a text that cannot be exploited for teaching purposes has no use in the classroom. Thirdly, a text must be readable in terms of structure and lexical difficulty. Berardo (2006) proposed other factors worth taking into consideration when choosing materials for the classroom. It is important to check whether the reading text challenges the students' intelligence without making unreasonable linguistic demands; or whether the language in the text is natural or has been distorted in order to try and include examples of a particular teaching point. He also argues that it is important to establish whether the text lends itself to being studied, or questions can be asked about it or tasks based on it can be created. Above all he contends that it is necessary to check whether the text makes the students want to read for themselves or introduce new and relevant ideas to them.

To evaluate the stories the participants in addition to their background knowledge on children's stories, borrowed from Nuttall (1996) and Berardo (2006) and developed a check list to establish the suitability of the stories for learning purposes. The checklist focused on the following aspects of the stories:

- i. The appropriateness of the language used to the level of learners

- ii. The length/size of the story
- iii. Content of the story in relation to the level of the learner
- iv. The lesson(s) learnt or the moral implication
- v. The story's contribution to character formation of the children
- vi. Acceptable dialect
- vii. Use of descriptive language to build a vivid or lively picture/story/image in the mind of the child
- viii. The likelihood of using the story as a supplementary text
- ix. Are there flows of actions that can be illustrated in drawing?
- x. Do the illustrations tell the stories?
- xi. Does the story motivate the child to read and enjoy reading?
- xii. Under which theme does it fall in the lower primary school curriculum?

The Centre Coordinating Tutor (CCT) was involved in evaluating the stories because he monitors the teaching and implementation of the local language as a MoI and offers support supervision to teachers; while a member of the Acoli Language Board was involved because he plays the role of vetting children's stories in order to establish if it is written in the correct dialect; if it reflects the curriculum and if the appropriate illustrations were used. The guidelines that the participants generated for evaluating children's stories were in line with Nuttall (1996) proposal.

#### **5.2.5. Outcome of the evaluation process**

During evaluation of the stories the participants kept noting that a number of aspects needed to be adjusted or added in order to improve the quality of the stories. For example, in all stories illustrations were lacking. Secondly the stories from the different

schools were slightly different either in characters involved or in length. One particular story had a character that was hard to mentally visualize by the teachers and children, for example, ‘Kiliti’, in the story of grade four. Some thought it is an animal, others thought it was a giant or a human being or a bird. The difficulty in visualizing the character posed a challenge in drawing the illustration. The teachers and children, however through discussions and listening to the story figured out that ‘Kiliti’ could be a human being that is scaring, huge with a hairy body and one big eye. In some stories it was hard to track the flow of events, while in all of them, there was need to edit for spelling, paragraphing and to identify in which class the stories best fitted.

After the workshop, the participants had a number of activities to engage in order to improve the stories. The participants agreed to do the following:

- i. draw illustrations
- ii. check if the illustrations really were put in the right place in the story
- iii. edit the stories
- iv. use Century Gothic font since the print is similar to the hand written text to which the children have been introduced
- v. submit the stories to the local language board for vetting and approval for use in school
- vi. print the stories

The participants in groups accomplished the agreed tasks and submitted the written stories to the Acoli Language Board (ALD) for vetting and possible areas for improvement.

### **5.3. The contribution of the written stories to children's reading and writing**

#### **5.3.1. Children's experiences in using the written stories**

In order to establish how the written stories contributed to children's learning to read and write, after six months of using the written stories, the participants observed lessons, reviewed children's exercise books and conducted interviews with the teachers and pupils. Children were asked how the written stories had helped them to read and write. The responses varied from one class to another. The responses from the pupils in grade three were in connection with learning spelling and articulating words. A child in grade three shared how the book had helped her to read. 'Now I am able to see how the words are written and so I am learning the spelling. I can also hear the teacher and my group members read and I learn to read too'. Another child in grade three shared a similar experience:

Before the books were brought, I could say many of the words orally but did not know the spelling of some of them and if the teacher asked me to write them, I made a lot of spelling mistakes. But now I have the book and so I can see the way the words are spelt and I can pronounce and write the big words like 'promise' and 'burial'.

One of the pupils in grade three pointed out that he had another story book at home but some letters were written differently. The font that was used for the printed stories was Century Gothic. He expressed his relief:

I like this story because letter 'a' and 'g' are written is the same way as the one the teacher writes on the chart. Now it

makes it easy for me to read and even to write what I did not know before.

A child in grade three was happy with the level of competency she had gained in reading the story in the local language and expressed the desire of having a variety of stories.

I have learnt to read the story in Acoli easily and even when I get other writings in Acoli, I can read them well. I think I will one day read in church. Now I want to read new stories since I have known this one already.

The child's demand for new stories showed that learners can be more interested in reading if they have a variety of text in use (Berardo, 2006). Much as the children prided in being able to read, majority of those in grade three could read mostly two syllable word; they still had challenges with three and four syllable words.

Children were asked to mention a story that they liked most and state why they liked it most. The children had different reasons for liking one story or the other. For example, most of the children liked the story in the book of grade four, 'How Okeny became Rich'. One interesting scenario was of a child in grade two called Okeny. He shared his views:

I like the story about Okeny because the name is the same as mine. I like Okeny because he was obedient and hardworking. I like to be rich just as Okeny is. I have even learnt to write my name because I saw how it is written in that book. I want us to write another story with my name.



I like the story because Okeny listened to instruction and followed it well. And because he listened and followed instructions he received wealth. That means if we listen and follow instruction, then they will become rich with many cows.

From the responses of the children, it is clear that stories do not only help children to learn reading and writing; but they also act as a means of inculcating values in them. The children admired how the Okeny in the story became rich because of obedience and hard work. The children's changed attitude is in line with what Ghosn (2002) noted that literature can function as a change agent.

The children in grades one and two were attracted by the illustrations in the books. A child in grade two was excited about the illustrations. She said,

I like the story on how the 'Dove became friends with the Owl'. The pictures showing people who were dancing is nice. I saw another girl dancing like this (she imitated the dance) near the Dove. I like pictures very much.

Although the children in grades one and two indicated that they liked pictures, they expressed disappointment because the pictures were made in black and white. They preferred coloured pictures, especially those that are red and yellow.

Children's appreciation of the values in the different stories and demand for a variety of stories are already a pointer to what the participants should focus on in the next level of the study. In fact they are shaping and making a substantial contribution to the next research process.

### **5.3.2. Teachers' experiences in using the written stories**

In order to establish how the written stories contributed to children's learning to read and write, after six months of using the written stories, the researcher observed lessons, reviewed children's exercise book and conducted interviews with the teachers and pupils. During interview sessions the teachers were asked to share their experience on how they used the reading text in class and how it has contributed children's learning to read and write. A teacher reported:

In order to help the children gain fluency in reading each child was given a storybook to read aloud a number of times either as an individual or in pairs or small groups of three to five. This has helped the children to improve in the reading skills since they could see the words that they were reading and also hear how they were being read.

The teachers' approach to using the written stories are in line with Carter's (2003) suggestion that providing opportunities for children to listen to stories read to them, or for them to read to the teacher, and reading individually and in groups, will encourage progress in literacy, and stimulate an interest in learning the language at school. He adds that reading aloud helps to familiarise children with the language of books and patterns and fosters listening habits and provides a model for children to emulate. Other scholars emphasised that repeated reading and paired reading are examples of activities that promote fluency in reading (Pang et al, 2003) and enable children to identify words, and to read on their own (Carter, 2003).

The teachers were also asked what effect illustrations had on children's learning to read and write. The teachers had different experiences with illustrations. One of them said,

They are very helpful to children, especially those in grade one and two who are not yet proficient in reading. They look at the illustrations and can be able to build up stories around it that are similar to the stories in the book.

Another teacher reported that:

Illustrations are very useful to children since it helped to boost up their mental ability to think and be creative and interpret illustrations. Eventually these categories of children learn to read by association since the illustrations present images that are within their experiences.

The children's experiences are in line with Hladikova's (2014) observation that pictures introduce and explain the world to children in a comprehensive way even before they are able to read. It allows the children to get accustomed to new words and build up their vocabulary through both verbal and visual references provided by the book. According to Reading Is Fundamental (2010), picture books and their illustrations 'can hook children into a lifelong love of reading'. Hladikova (2014) stated that illustrations are essential for children's development and their ability to perform well both in school and later in life.

Picture books and illustrations broaden general knowledge and enable children to get a better understanding of themselves and their integration within society

(Reading In Fundamental, 2010). Picture books and illustrations often trigger children's imaginations, which aid children to think of new ideas and bring new possibilities into their lives, both immediately and up-coming (Hladikova, 2014). In fact teachers observed that children who were less active during the class time were more active during the storytelling time and during drawing illustrations; an indication that they had understood the stories and were able to translate them into drawings.

The children's improvement in reading and writing was confirmed during lesson observation and review of exercise books. During observation, we saw pupils participate in writing word that the teacher read aloud to them. Some of them were able to fill in the missing letters in a word or a missing word in a sentence. In reading other children read words that were written on the chalkboard. Some of the children too responded to questions asked on the story they had read in class.

As we reviewed their exercise books we noted that 75% of the children had improved in spelling words correctly and the pupils in grade three and four could write three syllable words correctly and with ease though 25% of them still had difficulties. The teachers however had identified the difficulties as in words that had a combination of /pw/ like in '*apwoyo*'. The pupils confused the /pw/ with /f/ in English and wrote it as '*afoyo*' and yet there is no /f/ in the Acoli sound system. The teachers had planned to give them more practice in differentiating /pw/ from /f/ during remedial classes.

#### **5.4. Challenges in using the written stories**

Through observation and interviews with the teachers on the challenges they faced during the story writing process, the teachers had varied responses. One of them was that sustaining children's interest during the writing process was hard. This was

because children tended to withdraw at three specific moments, namely when it came to writing words that they did not know the spelling of; secondly, in illustrating concepts that they were not able to mentally visualise and lastly in translating the stories written in Acoli to English. This brings in the question, to what extent can children be involved in a study especially when they are expected to play active roles in terms of writing, drawing/illustrating and translating?

The children of grade four found it hard to illustrate specific aspects of their story. For example they had difficulties in visualizing the character 'Kiliti'. Even the teachers found it challenging. This posed a challenge in coming up with the illustration. The children and the teachers however, through discussions and consultation during a feedback workshop were able to come up with an agreed image that was drawn.

Children of grade one and two also found it hard to illustrate specific aspects of their stories and so they had to get help from children in grade four who had better understanding of the concepts of the stories and had developed their skills in making illustrations. Through their experiences they played the role of more competent peers in helping the children in grades one and two to improve their illustrations. It was hard to write the 'animal language' in the stories and so the beauty and humour that comes with it is somehow lost.

Another challenge is that as the story is being read, the humour, gestures, expressions, tone-variations- that were vivid in the oral versions do not come out clearly. The question then is, how does one maintain those features in the stories? Perhaps the stories could be accompanied by audio-visuals.

## **5.5. Conclusions**

Our findings showed that the written stories aided the majority of the children to learn reading and writing. This was made possible because the children could see the letters, words and the sentences that they could learn from. Secondly the illustrations played a significant role in helping the beginners in reading and writing, since they could interpret the illustrations and try to explain what they entailed. Some children, however, still had difficulties in reading words with /pw/ sounds which they mistook for /f/ and yet /f/ does not exist in Acoli sound system. On the whole however, children developed interest in reading and writing and their proficiency in reading and writing improved.

The involvement of teachers and children in the story writing process within a participatory action research process was a worthwhile choice that has contributed not only into changing the teachers' mind-set from not wanting to write reading materials to actually writing stories with children but also into improving children's learning to read and write. It is therefore important to involve teachers in evaluative and collaborative studies so that they can work towards minimising challenges that affect their teaching practices and improve children's learning.

## **5.6. Implications of the study for policy and practice**

The study above adopted a participatory action research framework that facilitated the teachers and children to identifying the challenges to reading and writing, suggesting a possible solution and writing the stories that the teachers have not been able to write for long even if the writing of stories was part of their duties. This therefore means that in order to help teachers and children solve challenges that relate to teaching

and learning, they need to be involved in all the stages of identifying the problem and proposing possible remedies and finally implementing a plan that would lead to solving the problem. Involving them will help them to appreciate the problem, take ownership and work towards finding a remedy.

Illustrations are very useful in helping children, especially those in grade one and some in grade two, who had not learnt how to read in order to be able to learn reading by association. In this study, children liked the illustrations that they drew. This means children should be involved in illustrating their stories or if they are not involved, then the illustrations need to be those that are appealing to children and they should have attractive colours.

The children's stories that the teachers wrote with the children were in line with some of the themes in the school curriculum. This made it possible for the teachers to use the stories as supplementary texts for teaching reading and writing the classroom. And since each child had a book, they were able to read the words that were taught in class and establish the various ways in which they are used. This was the same with sentence structures that they learnt in class. This means that stories and texts that are written for use in class should be in line with the themes in the school curriculum.

One aspect in printing written stories that is generally not taken care of is the type of font that is used. In most cases writers recommend fonts that contain letters that are written in a different way from the hand written text. Some letters like 'a' and 'g' are confusing to children who have not gained proficiency in reading and writing. It is advisable to begin by using fonts that the teacher uses in class, for example, Century Gothic, and they are familiar with and to introduce the other fonts later.

The humour, the songs and 'animal language' that are easily seen and demonstrated in oral presentations are lost in the written stories. The losses of these features affect the beauty and interest in the stories. These features can still be taken care of if the oral stories are recorded in a DVD and played to the children as they read the stories. Other means of preserving those features could also be investigated through another study.