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The pedagogical hindrances to oral communication skills in English in Kenya: a case of secondary schools in Kisii County

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ABSTRACT

Oral communication has been included in the compulsory and examinable integrated English secondary school curriculum to help students acquire fluency in English. However, the teaching of oral skills is the most neglected area in the English programme for secondary schools. Therefore, the present study investigated the factors perceived by teachers of English that affect the teaching of oral communication in the secondary school English language classroom. This study employed a descriptive survey design focusing on the secondary school teachers of English and their learners. The results revealed that most teachers use lecture and Question/ Answer methods more than any other technique. Thus, the teacher played an active role while the learners remained passive. The study also revealed that teachers do not make efforts to provide opportunities for learners to practice oral skills in the class. Language teacher trainers need to emphasize the teaching of oral skills in schools. It is also necessary that the language syllabus be reviewed from time to time and that classroom teachers should be involved in syllabus design so as to suggest practical tasks. The study recommends testing of oral skills at the end of form four.

Keywords: Oral communication, oral skills, language classroom, School curriculum

INTRODUCTION

The Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education School curriculum by the Kenya Institute of Education (KIE) emphasizes the importance of English language as both a compulsory and examinable subject. The secondary school English syllabus postulates that fluency in all aspects of the English language will enable students to perform better in all other subjects whose medium of instruction is English (KIE, 2006). English Language is the most widely used Language in our schools today. It is the Language of instruction and assessment in all subjects except Kiswahili especially in upper primary and secondary school, yet the performance in the subject is still far below the expected standard Kenya National Examination Council (KNEC, 2011). The need to raise the standard of English is therefore very urgent as the learning and teaching process depends very much on this Language. A student whose standard of English Language is very low cannot excel in school because he

can neither understand the teacher's instructions nor respond to examination questions efficiently. Since the importance of language is both functional and systematic, an individual who is able to speak in the language both functionally and systematically for communication purposes can be said to be competent in speech. Hence, competence in speech leads to competence in writing as one can write competently what he can speak competently. But it appears that spoken English by many secondary school students and subsequent graduates in Kenya is wanting, Ministry of Education (MOE, 2012).

Oral communication skills, is a pertinent component of the KIE Revised edition (1992) syllabus from form one to form four. This depicts its importance in the teaching of English language. The main goal of teaching oral skills to students is to improve their fluency in English language and to enable them meet the social, commercial and political challenges after school (KIE, 2006). The purpose

of this study was to examine the key factors that affect the teaching of oral communication in the integrated English curriculum in Kenyan secondary schools.

Study Objectives

The objectives of the study were: to determine the nature of instructional planning for oral skills in terms of Assessment, Instructional resources and Lesson planning, to examine assessment strategies in oral skills, to establish teachers' individual speech problems and identify the factors inhibiting the teaching of oral skills.

Related Literature

Communicative Language Teaching

Ong'ondo (2003) in his study "Impact of Drama on Communicative Competence of Secondary School Students in English Language" observes that English textbooks and syllabi as well as observation of actual teaching in the Kenyan Secondary school classrooms, indicates that the teaching of language is mostly done for linguistic competence and not communicative competence. Most books and teachers tend to concentrate more on reading comprehension and grammar because these areas carry the highest marks in English examinations. Writing is allocated only twenty percent of marks while speaking is not examined at all. There seems to be an apparent failure that communicative skills are adequately represented in language courses. There are numerous learning activities that the teachers can use in the CLT, which unfortunately are in many Kenyan Schools. Ong'ondo's study gives some insight to the current research especially in looking at what influences learner participation in the classroom.

Communicative Competence

Okumu-Bigambo (2000) in "The Role of Speaking and Writing in Communicative Competence" reveals that communicative competence could be achieved through guided practice in speaking and writing. However, in many Kenyan Secondary school classrooms, such guided practice in speaking and writing is lacking (Barasa, 2005). To many teachers and learners in such classrooms, learning language for examination purposes seems to be the only reality. Language for communication is usually relegated to the background simply because its role in examinations is not visible. In the same study, it was established that the crucial role of speaking and writing in relation to the CPE subject matter has been largely neglected by the lecturers (ibid). On the other hand, the science and technical text book used in

the course are deliberately written in an abstract and passive style. The lecturers tend to emulate this style of exposition and questioning. Therefore, the students have little opportunity to bridge the gap between the abstract language and the language of communication used to describe real tasks in life. Suffice to say that communicative language used in teaching and learning should be articulated through a cognitive and lecturer-directed methodology. For example the CPE lecturer has the responsibility to re-design the teaching material to reveal the communicative character of scientific speaking and writing. This approach will help emphasize the communicative value of the linguistic forms. And given that scientific textbooks are known to communicate by visual as well as verbal means the lecturer should ensure that both media are exploited to create more challenge in the classroom and increase communicative information transfer. This was of great interest to the current study which wished to find out the causes of this trend in language classrooms. However, its main difference is that the study was conducted on university students while the current study dealt with secondary school setting.

Classroom Interaction

Citing Barnes (1969), Wamakonjio (1986) in his study "English Across the Curriculum", observes that seventy-five percent of the talking time in the class room is dominated by the teacher either by directly piping out his knowledge or by asking the learners questions which do not give them the opportunity to carry out a discussion (Onchera et al, 2009). It would be agreed with Barnes (1969) in that in most classrooms the student is a mere passive recipient of the teacher's mind. He is rarely given a chance to express himself in complete statements. Also, not many teachers listen to learner's answers in the classroom. Barnes continues to say that many teachers listen half-heartedly to learners, with a conviction that learners' answers are automatically wrong.

Hutchcroft (1981) points out that much that is designated 'discussion' by teachers is far from this as many tape recordings show. Frequently, so called "class discussion lessons" are nothing more than question and answer sessions dominated by the teacher and shared in a small way by a few learners. This, she says, is particularly true of the type of lesson in which the teacher is asking for replies to close-ended questions whose answers have been pre-determined or have been previously taught. The teacher here has a clear view of the answer he requires, and is prone to dismiss, to ignore and so to underestimate any answer that does not appear to conform. Barnes' study supports the research problem of the current study that learners are given inadequate opportunities to orally participate in their learning.

STUDY DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out in selected secondary schools in Kisii county of Kenya. Like many other parts of the country, its performance in English language at the national examination level has been worrying (KNEC Reports, from 2002 to 2012) and this guaranteed the selection of the county for this study. The study employed a descriptive survey research design to investigate pertinent and precise information concerning the current status of the teaching of oral communication skills in English in secondary schools in Kisii County. The design was chosen as dictated by the nature of the study which primarily involved gathering of facts. Mutai (2000) says that a survey is a small pointed and specific research undertaken for a specific purpose and that it focuses on many instances of a particular phenomenon with a view of providing an in-depth account of events.

The population from which the sample for this study was drawn consisted of 115 registered secondary schools both in the public and private categories. Purposeful sampling was used to select 35 schools. Respondents were selected from form three class students, one teacher of English teaching oral communication skills in the form three classes in each of the 35 schools.

The research instruments included: Questionnaire for teachers of English, an observation checklist to observe and record classroom interaction between the teacher and the learners, an interview guide used for heads of English departments. All the instruments were tested for validity and reliability before administration.

DISCUSSIONS OF STUDY FINDINGS

The nature of instructional planning

The purpose of this study was to examine the key factors that affect the teaching of oral communication in the integrated English curriculum in Kenyan secondary schools. As such, the study found it paramount to observe, interview and question information from teachers of English and their students. The revelation was that teachers of English mainly rely on the schemes of work and the syllabus book but not lesson plans in teaching of oral communication skills. This is an indication of inadequate planning which may affect the teaching of oral communication (MOE, 1992). The findings seem to negate Malamah – Thomas' (1991) observation that a lesson plan is a plan of action that shows a teacher knows what he wants to achieve in a given lesson.

However, viewing lesson plans as duplicates of schemes of work by some teachers was surprising and unconvincing. The impression that lesson plans are not an issue in teaching oral communication because other

skills are taught without lesson plans cannot be a justification to limit the use of lesson plans in teaching. Although teachers include oral skills in the schemes of work, once a week, not all of them are taught. Table 1.1 below demonstrates this.

Table 1.1 Teacher's planning for instruction

Aspect	No. of responses	%
Planning available	8	33.3
Planning not available	16	66.7
TOTAL	24	100

It can also be noted from table 1.1 above that many teachers of English do not rely on planning for the oral skills that they teach. In an interview with some teachers and heads of departments, it was noted that planning (especially lesson plans) is not critical in the teaching of oral communication because they felt that other skills could be taught effectively where lesson plans are not used.

Lack of assessment of oral skills

The most likely interpretation of the findings on lack of assessment of oral communication is the role examinations play in the school curriculum. The admission that lack of assessment of oral skills at the national level affects the teaching of oral communication is not surprising. This is because the Kenya education system has been and is largely examination oriented (NT, 2001). Therefore, the probability that teachers of English are likely to neglect the teaching of oral communication skills is not unrelated to the lack of examination of this skill. This supports Nkosana's (1988) argument that the non-inclusion of assessment of oral skills in the secondary school examinations could have a negative effect on the teaching of English and on oral skills in particular. The findings further suggest that the heads of English departments and teachers of English concur that the lack of assessment of oral skills at the national level affects the teaching of oral communication. This agrees with MOE's (1992) indication that the perception of most teachers of English is that oral skills may be learned naturally. They also said that the absence of continuous assessment tests affect both the teaching and formative evaluation of oral skills. This is because teachers develop the tendency of disregarding continuous evaluation of the curriculum objectives and concentrate on terminal evaluation of oral skills. These findings seem to corroborate other observations on the impact of examinations on unexamined skills (KNEC, 1997; Love, 1997; Nkosana, 1988).

It is unfortunate that teachers tend to perceive the role of examination in oral skills as more important than the objectives of teaching the same skills. Teachers tend to suggest that no skill should be included in the curriculum unless it is going to be examined. It is true that examinations help teachers to get feedback of whatever they have taught in isolation with other language skills like reading and writing. Instead, the communication skills used during English language instruction should positively carry the objectives of oral skills. After all, the basic form of communication in our classes is oral communication. Besides, the principle objective of teaching oral skills is for effective communication. Therefore, the role of examinations in oral communication should be understood as one of the ways used to get feedback but not the reason for teaching oral skills.

Lack of variety of instructional resources

The impact of variety of instructional resources in teaching can be far reaching. The lack of a variety of instructional resources can limit the means of interpreting and implementing oral communication objectives in English. The results on the lack of variety of instructional resources are appalling, in that, more than 80 percent of teachers of English reported absence of these resources in schools. Yet, several authors concur that with a variety of resources, the education system can produce graduates who are intellectually alert, able to explore and benefit from what their education environment offers them (Bishop, 1995; Peresuh, 1996; Thondhlana, 1998). Although this is a general observation, there is no evidence elsewhere showing that the teaching of oral skills does not require variety of resources.

The absence of a variety of instructional resources in oral communication is not a new development in Kenya. In English as in any other compulsory subjects like mathematics and practical subjects such as Chemistry and physics, there is lack of adequate and variety of instructional resources. The data has shown that language laboratories are not available in our schools for effective teaching of oral skills. Perhaps, the teachers' suggestions of the use of audio-visual cassettes instead of language laboratories should be emphasized in the teaching of oral communication. This also reflects the teachers' understanding of their schools' economic difficulties.

Although language laboratories are not necessarily the basic resources in our English syllabus, their use at least in teacher training colleges and certain schools in particular regions as centres of reference should not be ignored. However, the absence of language laboratories, audio and audiovisual resources should not be taken as the excuse for not teaching the oral skills. In any case, these resources are meant to assist the teacher and learners to realize their objectives in oral communication.

But they should not necessarily determine the teaching or lack of it.

The realization that most of the audio and audio-visual cassettes available in schools are used to supplement the teaching of literature shows that there is less emphasis on the unexamined skills than the examined ones. Therefore, audio and audio-visual cassettes for literature set books should be developed to serve dual purposes for both literature and other skills like oral communication. This is likely to help schools cut down on expenses used in acquiring instructional resources. Teacher accessibility to variety resources for their classes is getting more difficult. In order for schools to see student performance increase, a shift in how resources are used must take effect. If teachers do not have enough resources to make activities beneficial for their students no new information will be learned. (Kumaravadivelu, 1993; Hammond, 2009:1)

The Nature of training background in speech work

The differences in the findings on whether teacher training and preparation in speech work is adequate or not to teach oral communication may be attributed to the disparities in the levels of training and/or lack of training (Kinyua, 2001). For example, it is evident from the results that the untrained teachers feel that their lack of training in speech work affects the teaching of oral communication compared to their trained counterparts. Perhaps the disparities in responses among trained teachers may be attributed to the shortcomings in the teacher education programmes. For example, lack of facilities and equipment used to train teachers impact negatively on the teachers' training (Kinyua, 2001; Waihenya, 2001).

Although trained teachers with degree and diploma certificates lamented about the relevance and adequacy of their training in speech work, the untrained teachers had more serious disadvantages. This indicates a need by the government of Kenya to train teachers of specific subjects in communication skills before they are posted to implement the curriculum. But the training given to teachers might not necessarily be the problem for not teaching oral skills. In fact, the high responses given by trained teachers on the adequacy and relevance of their training is a testimony of a level of satisfaction of their training. The reasons as to why they do not give full emphasis to oral skills should, thus be sought outside the margin of training. Besides, the majority of the respondents who participated in the study were trained teachers.

However, this did not mean that teacher-training programmes have no shortcomings that need to be addressed. To address the problem of irrelevant and inadequate training, Heads of English departments suggested that the teacher training curriculum be harmo-

nized with the school curriculum and be made more practical than before. This calls for harmonization of the curriculum, facilities, equipment, materials and human resources at both the diploma and university levels. However, this does not necessarily mean that the whole curriculum at the teacher training colleges is not relevant to the school needs. These are only teachers' views as per the study. To determine whether or not the curriculum is relevant needs a more comprehensive study on this matter alone.

Teachers' individual speech problems

The most possible interpretation of more trained teachers with diploma certificates compared to trained degree holders experiencing individual speech problems would be the varied qualifications at each level and the nature of their training. For example, according to the Kenya National Examinations Council (KNEC, 2010), the English grades for degree courses are higher than diploma courses. Although the trained teachers of English with certificates in diploma did not fail in English, the differences in their entry marks tend to suggest that most of them did not train to teach English because it was their favorite subject. Rather, they had no much choice compared to their degree certificate counterparts. That is, besides having passed highly, degree holders had a wide scope of subjects to make a choice from, of what they were convinced to do and liked.

Furthermore, the argument that more untrained teachers than trained ones experienced individual speech problems shows that the training in speech work has a positive impact on a teacher's speech. This argument seems to be in line with Oluoch's (1992) assertion that the training of teachers is a vital responsibility. Since English is a second language to nearly all teachers of English in Kenya, the effects of their first languages to English cannot be avoided easily. In essence, while individual speech problems can be a stumbling block in teaching, they should not be an issue in secondary schools where most teachers specialize in teaching English.

Factors inhibiting the teaching of oral skills

From the teachers' responses, it was revealed that several factors hindered the teaching of oral communication skills and learners participation during lessons. A majority of teachers cited learners' shy disposition as a major hindrance in the teaching of these skills. Most of the learners preferred to remain quiet allowing only the articulate ones to dominate. This happened to most learners who when selected by the teacher, knew the correct answer to the question asked but chose to keep quiet pretending not to know. Teachers

also confessed that Mother Tongue interference was another crucial factor hindering the teaching of oral skills alongside the learners' shyness. The majority of the learners in most of the schools spoke the same local language (Ekegusii) and this highly impacted on their performance in spoken English. Every time they attempted to answer a teacher's question, their accent was heavily loaded with the local language so that in certain cases they were laughed at. This hindered learning, since those with this problem lacked confidence and refused to participate further. This showed that these learners lacked practice in English language and hence its expressive qualities.

Almost all teachers observed that away from class time, the learners' medium of communication was their first language. This attitude was seen to affect their oral fluency when it came to communicating in English during their lessons. This also contributed to their shyness, which was observed to be the major hindrance to their oral participation in class. When the learners were given chances by the teachers to ask questions, none raised any questions due to this obstacle.

Teachers also mentioned time factor as a factor hindering the teaching of oral skills. Teachers battled with this during their lessons and it could not allow them to make enough room for the development of oral skills. The fact that these skills are not tested at the end of the secondary school course made most of them to overlook this in their planning. Most teachers preferred to "save time" by teaching only those areas that were likely to be tested. The examination-oriented syllabus discouraged teachers from giving adequate attention to the spoken language. Most of the teachers observed in this study did not prepare lesson plans. They simply walked into the classrooms with the integrated English textbook (Book Three) and in their content presentations they showed no creativity.

These teachers just went to the classrooms as a routine activity. This trend thus, made them to devote most of their time writing unnecessary items on the chalkboard so that learners were forced to copy them in their exercise books. This was a hindrance that the observer noted in the course of the observation sessions. The broad subject matter stood out as a hindrance to the teaching of oral skills. The integrated approach has made the syllabus too demanding to be covered within the stipulated time. Integration of English means English language which has many aspects and literature which is made up of oral literature, drama, the novel, poetry and the short story put together as English language. These materials are just too much to be covered within the English lessons in a week and thus not all time can be devoted to oral work. This has made teachers emphasize on areas that are likely to be tested than dwelling on any other aspect that the Examination Council does not give attention.

Table 1.2: Problems hindering the teaching of oral skills

Problem	No. of Responses	%
Lack of enough time	7	20
Large class size	5	14.2
Learner's shy disposition	10	28.5
Oral exercises not in text books	2	5.7
Learner's lack of practice	7	20
Syllabus too demanding/lack of learning facilities	5	14.2
Mother Tongue Interference/ Sheng	10	28.5
Lack of motivation	4	11.4

In this study, class size was also mentioned as a factor hindering the teaching of oral communication skills. However, this was discovered not to be a crucial factor since a handful of teachers cited it. During the observation sessions, most of the classes were observed to have the required number of students (40) and some even had less.

Other teachers saw lack of motivation as hindering the development of oral skills. In-service courses that could motivate and help teachers adopt the new approaches of teaching were very rare in the district. Teachers did not enjoy any external motivation, so that classroom work ended up simply being a routine. The Examination Council that did not examine oral skills itself was a factor that de-motivated teachers especially in the teaching of speaking as a skill. Yet, some teachers complained that the lack of oral exercises in the textbooks currently used to teach English was a setback. This problem has also been cited by Nunan (1989) that most general course books for English language neither include segmental nor supra-segmental aspects of the sound system of English. All these factors combined together as captured in table 1.2 above were seen as a hindrance to the teaching and development of oral communication skills.

CONCLUSION

It is apparent that there is a problem in the teaching of oral communication skills and there is need to keep emphasizing its importance. Teachers largely control class speeches as they structure and control activities, appoint whom to speak and sometimes guide them on what to say and how to say it. This study observes that learners are not given adequate opportunities to put language learnt into oral use. There is therefore need to develop oral skills in learners as a pre-requisite to learning other subjects.

Way Forward

In order to improve oral communication skills in English, the following interventions are proposed:

- English Language teacher trainers must emphasize this competence of teaching oral skills in their student teachers.
- Review of the language syllabus is necessary from time to time. Classroom syllabus implementers should be involved so that they can give the practical views of teaching oral skills.
- There is need to think of the nature of testing oral skills and making them examinable at all levels of education.
- Teachers should make use of debates, oral literature, discussions, drama, poem recitations, songs and theatrical performances to enrich learner participation
- They should create a rapport with their learners even outside class activities so that these students do not feel threatened when asked to participate in class.

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