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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE SELECTION OF APPROPRIATE LEARNING ACTIVITIES AND THE CONVEYANCE OF THE MEANING OF NEW LANGUAGE ITEMS DURING ENGLISH ORAL WORK LESSONS

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ABSTRACT

Oral work lessons which encompass the teaching of listening and speaking skills are central in the teaching of English and all other languages in general. This paper is a report on a study on the teaching of oral work lessons in English that was undertaken in Nandi North District in Kenya in the year 2009. The study investigated teacher competences in the selection of appropriate learning activities and the conveyance of the meaning of new language items during oral work lessons. The study adopted a theoretical framework based on Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social interaction. It utilized a qualitative research approach with a heuristic methodology. An exploratory research design was used. The research population consisted of primary school teachers teaching English in upper primary classes and standard six pupils. Data was collected using structured and focused group interview schedules, observation checklists and document analysis. The study delved on two objectives: To find out the kind of learning activities that the teachers selected for oral work lessons; To find out the methods that teachers used to convey the meaning of new language items during oral work lessons. This paper is a discussion of the findings, conclusions and recommendations of this study.

INTRODUCTION

Language in very important in our lives as it is the means by which people communicate. In the school curriculum, language plays a vital role in the learning process in that all aspects of the curriculum depend to a greater or lesser extent on learners' proficiency in all the language skills. In the school curriculum in Kenya, English language is vital in that it is the medium of instruction in all subjects (except in other languages) from upper primary school and beyond. The four main language skills usually develop in the order thus: listening, speaking, reading, and writing (KIE, 2006; Kisilu and Lelei, 2008). This order means that reading and writing skills greatly rely on listening and speaking skills in that pupils will only be able to read and write what they can understand and speak. Consequently, oral work lessons which comprise the teaching of listening and speaking skills form the backbone to the teaching of English. However, despite the importance attached to English in Kenya, cries have been heard over the falling standards in English in both primary schools and secondary schools. In the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education Examination (K.C.P.E) results of the year 2005, the performance in English was poor. English recorded a mean score of 39.3.

On releasing the KCPE results of the year 2006, the then Minister for Education Professor George Saitoti lamented that English was the worst performed subject in the examination recording a mean score of 40.68 (Daily Nation, December 29, 2006). He added that this trend had persisted. There was an improvement in the national mean grade in English in the KCPE results of the year 2007 from 40.68 to 43.35 respectively (Daily Nation, December 22, 2007). However it is important to note that the performance in English was still below average. At the time of this study, the performance in English in Nandi North district had been persistently poor. In the KCPE results of the year 2005, 2006 and 2007, English was the poorest performed subject recording a mean score of 48.82, 49.86 and 48.84 respectively (DEO's office, Nandi North District, 19th May, 2008). Table 1 below

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summarizes the performance in KCPE examination in Nandi North district in the years 2005, 2006 and 2007.

Table 1. Performance in KCPE Examination in Nandi North district in the years 2005, 2006 and 2007

Year/Subject	2005	2006	2007
English	48.82	49.86	48.84
Kiswahili	50.36	51.70	51.71
Mathematics	52.96	53.78	53.27
Science	51.95	53.65	53.35
Social Studies and Religious Education	52.58	51.82	52.01

(DEO's office, Nandi North District 19th May, 2008)

Scholars have argued that the classroom teacher is responsible for developing learner's proficiency in the language (Perrot, 1982; Ryanga, 1986). Specifically, Perrot (1982:5) asserts that "as is the teacher, so is the teaching". This is because it is the teacher who determines the mode of presentation of content, the extent of learner participation, the choice of learning activities and learning material. Accordingly, teachers have a central role to play in the teaching of English and this calls for their efficiency. Moreover, it has been argued that listening is a skill that has been neglected in the Kenyan classroom (Kembo-Sure, 1996; MOE, 1992). This is partly due to the fact that there's no listening (or speaking test) in both KCPE and KCSE examinations. This is alarming in that any flaws in the teaching of listening and speaking skills can lead to flaws in the teaching of reading and writing skills and generally in pupils' proficiency in English. This research was a response to this need.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of this study were:
To explore:

- The kind of learning activities that the teachers selected for oral work lessons in English.
- The methods that teachers used to convey the meaning of new language items during oral work lessons in English.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this study was based on Vygotsky's (1978) social development and interaction theory. Vygotsky (1978) social development model asserts that interactions with the surrounding culture and social agents such as parents, teachers and more competent peers contribute significantly to a child's intellectual development. Cognitive development therefore is as a result of interaction. Cognitive development results from a dialectical process whereby a child learns through problem solving experiences shared with someone else, usually, a parent, a peer or a sibling. Initially, the person interacting with the child assumes most of the responsibility for guiding the problem solving but gradually the responsibility transfers to the child. Based on this theory, Vygotsky advanced the concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). This is the difference between what a child can do on his/her own and what the child can do with help. In other words, it is the difference between the child's capacity to solve problems on his/her own and his/her capacity to solve them with assistance. It is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by individual problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.

The actual development level refers to all the functions and activities that a child can perform on his/her own, independently and without the help of anyone else. According to Vygotsky (1978) full development of ZPD depends upon full social interaction. Scaffolding is an important concept in Vygotsky's theory too. This involves the instructor or advanced peer working to support the development of the learner. The instructor should guide the learner in such a way that the gap is bridged between the learner's current skill levels and the desired skill levels. As learners become more proficient and able to complete tasks on their own, they can certainly do without assistance and the guidance can be withdrawn. Scaffolding requires that the teacher provides the students with the opportunity to extend their current skills and knowledge. The teacher must engage students' interest, simplify tasks so that they are manageable and motivate students to pursue the instructional goal. The implications of Vygotsky's theory for this study is that effective teaching of oral communication skills is dependent on interaction between the teacher, the pupils and the learning tasks. This study was an investigation the selection of learning activities and the choice of methods of conveying the meaning of new language items during oral work lessons. Based on Vygotsky's theory, the two variables should be geared to enhancing interaction between the teacher, the pupils and the learning tasks. This way, the teacher can help or guide pupils to attain the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

Literature Review

Below is a discussion of the literature review on the two research objectives that the study explored.

Selecting appropriate learning activities for oral work lessons

Learning activities are constituents of learning experiences. Learning experiences can be described as the external conditions in the environment which the learner reacts to (Tyler, 1949). They include learning activities and teaching methods among others. On the other hand, learning activities are the activities that the teacher and the students are engaged in during the lesson. The appropriate learning activities for oral work lessons should be those that foster interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). English Language is a skill subject in which the learner can only be successful if s/he actively participates in the teaching/learning process. Chomsky (1986) argues that Language Acquisition Device (LAD) can only be realized in an interactive environment. Consequently, the interaction between the teacher and the learning situation is fundamental in oral work lessons. According to Chomsky (1986) the stimulation given to the child through their interaction with the world around them is what kicks starts their

language acquisition ability by providing them with an interactive environment and meaningful activities. Similarly, teachers should kick start the LAD in their pupils by providing them with an interactive environment and meaningful activities. Communication is vital in oral work lessons and all language lessons in general. Krashen and Terrel (1988) discourage language teachers from using methods in which students are not engaged in real communication, as they cannot be expected to produce students able to communicate in the language they study. Long (1990) agrees with this and comments that language acquisition is strongly facilitated by the use of the target language in interaction. The major approach is the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Krashen and Terrel, 1988; Richards and Theodore, 2001; Belchamber, 2007). CLT is an approach to the teaching of second or foreign languages that emphasizes interaction as both the means and the ultimate goal of learning a language. It focuses on helping learners create meaning. By implication, CLT involves equipping students with vocabulary, structures and functions, as well as strategies to enable them to interact successfully (Richards and Theodore, 2001; Belchamber, 2007).

Teachers in communicative classrooms should talk less but listen more. They are active facilitators of their students' learning. In a communicative classroom, students do most of the talking and the scene of the classroom is active with students taking the responsibility to participate. Since the teacher already knows more English than the students, s/he should talk less and allow the students to have more speaking practice. This way the students will learn to communicate well. Communicative approach calls on teachers to abandon teacher centered frontally controlled classrooms in favor of learner centeredness. It makes use of real life situations that necessitate communication. In a nut shell, a communicative language learning approach emphasizes on the student having a central role in the teaching learning process. It draws from the social constructivist view point which stresses on the importance of the learner being actively involved in the learning process (Gredler, 1997). The emphasis is on the learner and not on the instructor or the content. The primary goal is the ability to communicate. In addition, meaning is paramount and language learning is contextualized. It is an active learning approach. The principal goal of communicative language learning is to develop communicative competence. Communicative competence is a broad concept, encompassing grammatical (syntactical) competence, semantic competence, which includes competence with lexical items and idioms, phonological competence, strategic competence (social appropriateness) and fluency (Richards and Theodore, 2001; Belchamber, 2007).

Consequently, this study recommended that oral work lessons should be characterized by the following classroom activities:

- The students speaking and listening for most of the lesson.
- The students participating intensively in the class.
- A focus on comprehensible and meaningful input and output.
- Involving the students in different kinds of roles, necessitating the use of different styles of speaking.
- Students practice using conversational routines and expressions and use authentic English communicatively.
- Information sharing.
- The students developing meaning collaboratively by peer interaction.
- The students manipulating language in a substantial and meaningful way.
- The teacher providing information about language usage.
- The teacher providing timely and meaningful feedback.
- A positive and supportive environment that encourages language manipulation and exploration.
- A learner-centered environment, with the teacher acting as a facilitator.

Methods of conveying the meaning of new language items during oral work lessons

Long (1990) argues that the understanding of meaning has been shown to contribute greatly to the acquisition of vocabulary in Second Language teaching. Learning the meaning of any new word involves learning how it is used to talk about relevant objects, actions or relations in the world of experience. One way through which teachers can convey the meaning of new language items is through explanations. Teachers should provide explicit explanations and the explanations should not have grammatical complexity (Perrot, 1986; Lile, 2002). In other words, the sentences used should have short constructions and the vocabulary should be within the learners' experiences. Teachers should thoroughly understand what they explain, understand needs and concerns of the students, use common language and clear structure in making explanations and to make the explanations interesting. In addition, the explanations should be brief and to the point. They should be clear, simple and explicit (Perrot, 1982; Lile, 2002). Teachers should accompany their explanations with examples. Doff (1988) asserts that language teachers should give one or two examples to show what the structure means, say the structure and ask students to repeat it, write an example on the board and give other situations and examples. On the other hand, Perrot (1982) contends that examples are used to clarify explanations and are basic to teaching. They are used to illustrate, clarify or substantiate a principle, generalization or rule and they draw a link between the known example and the unknown grammatical structure being learnt. Similarly, Perrot (1982) stresses that the examples used should be familiar to the learner's experiences.

Teaching aids are helpful in conveying the meaning of new language items. Teaching aids are things used in the classroom to aid teaching and learning. A well designed aid should promote perception, promote understanding, help reinforce the spoken word, aid memory retention, motivate and arouse interest through requiring students to use different senses to learn and make effective use of the teaching time available to learn. Flash cards and charts can be used as teaching aids. A flash card is a piece of paper or a card with a word written on it or a picture drawn on it which is large enough for all students to read (Doff, 1988; Baker and Westrup, 2000). Flash cards are useful in prompting drills, asking for suggestions about the characters or the process of a story, asking for thoughts about a picture or a situation as well as prompting yes or no answers to questions. On the other hand, charts are larger sheets of paper or card. The teacher can hold them up or display them on the wall or the blackboard (Doff, 1988). In teaching the meaning of new words, teachers should establish a direct link between the word and the meaning using real things such as tables, desks, drawings and photographs. Real objects are things that the teacher and/or the students bring into the classroom (Doff, 1988). By using real objects, learners are able to conceptualize teacher's explanations of abstract ideas. In addition, real objects add interest and relate language to the real world.

Pictures and drawings can be used as well. Pictures can be obtained from magazines, newspapers or photographs (Doff, 1988). The teacher can devise questions based on the pictures to practice a particular structure. The pictures used should be clear, recognizable and if are to be shown to all pupils must be visible from the back of the class. Krashen and Terrel (1988) postulates that pictures supply the "here and now" for the Second Language learner. They supply the extra linguistic context that helps the acquirer to understand and thereby to acquire. Williams (1987) proposes that actions and demonstrations can be used to convey the meanings of verbs, prepositions, adjectives and adverbs. Whenever a new language item is introduced it should be accompanied by gestures and demonstrations to make the meaning as clear as possible. It is a generally accepted learning theory that the greater the degree of active participation and sensory involvement by the learner, the more effective learning will be. Demonstration can lead to increased

attentiveness, learning, and performance. Making translations into Mother Tongue as a way of conveying the meaning of new language items should be avoided at all costs (Baker and Westrup, 2000; KIE, 2006; Kisilu and Lelei, 2008). This method reduces pupils' exposure to the target language and confuses them as well (Baker and Westrup, 2000; KIE, 2006). Teachers should provide a continuous and consistent exposure to the language being learned. Beeby (1996) provides various disadvantages of making translations into Mother tongue when teaching L2. These are that translation into L2 forces learners to view the foreign language always through the prism of their Mother tongue thereby causing interferences and a dependence on L1 that inhibits free expression in L2. Secondly, translation into L2 is a wholly purposeless exercise that has no application in the real world, since translators normally operate into and not out of their Mother tongue. Thirdly, translation into L2 is frustrating and de-motivating in that the student can never attain the level of accuracy or stylistic polish of the version presented to them by their teacher. It seems an exercise designed to elicit mistakes, rather than achieving an accurate use of the language. It is appropriate for the teacher to give an example of a sentence containing the new word then the class can guess what the word means instead of making a translation (Doff, 1988).

Language should also be taught in meaningful contexts (Krashen and Terrel, 1988; Belchamber, 2007). Actually, the social constructivist paradigm views the context in which learning occurs as central to the learning itself (Gredler, 1997). The context in which the learning occurs as well as the social contexts that the learners bring to their learning environment are thus critical to the learning itself. Teachers should not expect learners to acquire difficult words in the same way a young child acquires its first language but should help learners arouse their learning monitor by providing them with rich contexts containing the target language and by giving them time to reflect on what the language item means (Krashen and Terrel, 1988). If pupils are taught an item of a language in an appropriate situation they will associate the piece of language with that situation and language will become more meaningful to them, quickly and successfully. Words seldom occur in isolation and should thus be taught in spoken and written contexts. Teachers should think of clear contexts when a word is used and either describe it to the learners or give them examples of sentences to clarify the meaning (KIE, 2006).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative approach with a heuristic methodology. The epistemological position of constructivism was adopted. An exploratory research design was used too.

Research Population and sample

The research population consisted of primary school teachers teaching English in upper primary classes and standard six pupils. Stratified sampling method was used to divide the schools in the district into their respective divisions and in terms of whether they were private or public. From each of the groups obtained, the schools to participate in the study were selected purposively depending on accessibility. The total number of schools that were selected was 31. In addition, all the 31 schools were of mixed sexes. Out of the 31 schools, 25 were public and 6 were private. The teachers to participate in the study were selected using purposive sampling technique too. The teachers selected were those that were teaching English in upper primary classes. Two teachers from each school were selected giving a total of 62 teachers. Out of the 62 teachers, 28 were females and 34 were males. To select the pupils, the stratified random sampling method was used. The pupils were first divided into two groups: males and females. Simple random sampling method was then used to select four pupils from each category giving a total of eight pupils from each school. In total, three hundred and ten respondents (310) participated in the study. These included sixty two (62) teachers and two hundred and forty eight (248) pupils.

Instrumentation and data analysis

Data was collected using structured and focused group interview schedules, observation checklists and document analysis. The structured interview schedules were administered to the teachers while the focused group interview schedules were administered to the pupils. The researcher also observed ten oral work lessons in progress. In addition, an analysis of the teachers' English schemes of work and lesson plans was undertaken. Data was then analyzed qualitatively by discussing the emerging themes.

Findings and conclusions

The first research objective was dealing with the kind of learning activities that teachers selected for oral work lessons. It was found out that teachers would engage pupils in activities like pronouncing new words and answering questions by the pupils which are appealing in the teaching of oral communication skills in English. In addition, the teachers would sometimes incorporate activities that did not emphasize on listening and speaking but reading and writing. We find that, although the four skills should be integrated, during oral work lessons, pupils should spend maximum time during the lesson listening and speaking in English. Consequently, this study concluded that the learning activities selected by the teachers though appropriate were inadequate in enhancing interaction in oral lessons. Teachers would avoid some interactive learning activities like pronouncing sounds, constructing sentences using the new language items by the pupils, asking questions by the pupils, practicing differentiating stress patterns in words and/or sentences as well as practicing differentiating intonation patterns in sentences which are equally vital in the teaching of oral communication skills. Such activities provide an interaction between the learners, the teacher and the learning tasks.

The second research objective was dealing with the methods that teachers used to convey the meaning of new language items during oral work lessons. It was found out that although the teachers utilized intriguing methods like explanations, use of pictures, examples of sentences and contextual clues, they avoided others which are equally effective like demonstrations and use of real objects. Apart from that, the teachers would code switch into mother tongue a method that should be avoided. Consequently, it was concluded that the methods of conveying the meaning of new language items that the teachers used were inadequate in enhancing interaction between the learner and the learning tasks. Similarly, code switching into mother tongue was an ineffective method.

Recommendations

Concerning the two research objectives, the study recommended that:

i)   The learning activities selected for oral work lessons should reflect actual listening and speaking by the pupils. Such learning activities foster interaction between the learner and the learning tasks by allowing the pupils to engage in real communication. A variety should also be provided.

ii) In conveying the meaning of new language items, teachers should strive to avoid code switching into mother tongue. This study recommended the use of such methods as explanations, use of pictures, examples of sentences, contextual clues, demonstrations and use of real objects.

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