



CHALLENGES TEACHERS AND LEARNERS EXPERIENCE IN THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at finding out various factors that impact on learners' achievement of communicative competence in English at St. Kevin's secondary school in Lodwar. The following questions guided the research: What challenges do teachers and learners experience in the teaching and learning of English as a second language. The study, a qualitative case study, involved 30 purposively sampled participants. A target population of four teachers and one head of English department; eleven form four and fourteen form three students was sampled. Data were generated using interview guides for the head of department and teachers, group focused discussion guides and classroom observation schedules. Interview guides were administered to four teachers and the head of department by the researcher. Thematic analysis of data from the various sources yielded an in-depth descriptive analysis of the factors that affect learners' communicative competence in English. The findings revealed that high number of students in classes affects the development of communicative competence in English since most teachers are unable to give exercises and evaluate the progress of their learners. Basing the teaching and learning processes to the learners' experiences help them to develop the ability to communicate in English. The conclusion of the research findings reiterates the importance of the goal of English language teaching and learning in Kenya to empower the learner to communicate effectively. Teachers on one hand develop their lesson methodology depend on the learners' dispositions and perceptions that shape their reception and retention of knowledge. The head of department emphasised the need for school language policies that do not negate the value of other languages to make students practise the learned knowledge. The recommendations outlined are to help learners to develop communicative competence in English. Such approaches as teacher discipline in language use to help learners to have role models, developing school, enough teaching and learning materials, encouraging the use of library for extensive reading among other areas are ways through which learners can be assisted to develop communicative competence skills.

Key Words: Challenges, Teaching and learning of English

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INTRODUCTION

English is a language spoken in many parts of the world. It has its foundations among the Germanic languages of the middle Ages and brought to England by the Germanic settlers who came during early days of civilization (Mydan, 2007). It then spread from England to other parts of the world, including parts of Africa, as a language of communication in the colonies.

In Africa, English was introduced by Christian missionaries and the colonizers. Kioko (2010) notes that during the coming of these groups of people there was need for the colonizers to communicate with the native people. As a result, the British in Kenya taught Africans how to read and write in English as a way of communication with indigenous people. This eventually led to the introduction of a formal education system.

In the aftermath of the Second World War (1939-1945), Kioko (2010) describes how the need for independence and African participation in the administration and leadership of the country led to a shift in the role of English language in Kenya. With the struggle for independence motivating the Africans to learn the language, its use became widespread and many Kenyans started using it for social, political and economic gains. Hence, the education system accommodated English and it was embraced as a medium of instruction. The Ominde Commission (1964) came up with ways in which English was to be included in the curriculum. It sought to reform colonial education by proposing a system and curriculum that would foster unity and create human resources for national development (Gachie, 2013). In the Ominde report, English was proposed as a subject to be taught at all levels of education from primary to university and as a medium of instruction. The Commission affirmed its proposal stating the advantages of English medium to the whole educational process and was to be embraced. From then, language policy in Kenya has favored English. Subsequent commissions have re-emphasized the supremacy of English language over

vernacular and the Kiswahili language in the long run (Nabea, 2009).

Other commissions that included an element on language policy in post-colonial Kenya were The Gachathi (1976) report which proposed mother tongue instruction from primary to university while the Mackay (1981) report emphasized what the proposal in the Ominde report to make English the medium of instruction and a subject to be taught at all levels of learning. Other relevant reports included the Wamalwa report (1972), which proposed training review to enable language teachers acquire skills necessary for the teaching of the subject, the Kamunge (1988) report, which proposed a more learner-centred approach to language teaching and, lastly, the Koech (2000) report, which emphasized importance of English language as a medium of instruction. Currently, English has the status of co-official language in Kenya and is viewed as an important vehicle for future opportunities beyond school (KIE 2002).

Statement of the Problem

The English taught in Kenya is intended to be a variety of the British Standard English which is the acceptable English of the Commonwealth countries (KIE, 2002;3). The Kenya Secondary education syllabus Vol.1 (2002) affirms that teaching of English should emphasize the acquisition of communicative competence and not simply the passing of exams ‘... becoming proficient in the language is a desirable life-long goal.’ Many people who learn or teach English are charged with a responsibility to learn the rules that govern its spoken and written skills and use them to communicate. Learners are generally expected to develop the capacity to communicate in English through interaction with one another. This expectation has not been forthcoming due to learners’ preference to communicate in other languages rather than English, hence, the use of English tends to be limited to the practice of what has been learned. Thus, despite the emphasis on communicative competence in English language, there are

challenges teachers and learners face and this was the focus of this study.

Research Objective

The following objective guided the study;

- What challenges do teachers and learners experience in the teaching and learning of English as a second language?

The following question guided the study

- What challenges do teachers and learners experience in the teaching and learning of English as a second language?

Significance of the Study

This study seeks to outline a number of challenges that teachers and learners face in teaching English as a second language. A great deal of research has been done on communicative competence and communicative language teaching, yet it is not exhaustive and has not as yet received detailed study within the Kenyan context. As a consequence, this study will offer suggestions that will be beneficial to the development of communicative competence to students during and after their studies. Secondly, these studies will highlight the methodologies used by teachers and thereby provide a basis for the development of appropriate teaching methodology in order to inculcate communicative competence in learners. Thirdly, it

will propose ways in which curriculum developers can develop better resources to aid in teaching or promoting development of communicative competence in English.

Scope and Delimitations of the Study

This study focused on one particular secondary school within Turkana County. The findings may be useful to schools in similar settings, but are not necessarily generalizable in all contexts. The study sampled teachers and learners population from form three and forms four. The study focused on communicative competence because people need to communicate effectively in English in a variety of contexts. Communicative competence therefore was considered to capture the social function of a language necessary for interaction and understanding among people, and it was the communicative function of the language that this study focused on. While many factors may influence communicative competence among learners, this study focused on factors to teaching, learning and methodology.

Conceptual framework

English language communicative competence is the independent variable being acted upon. These variables were investigated to find out their effects on the communicative competence learners of English at St. Kevin's secondary school.

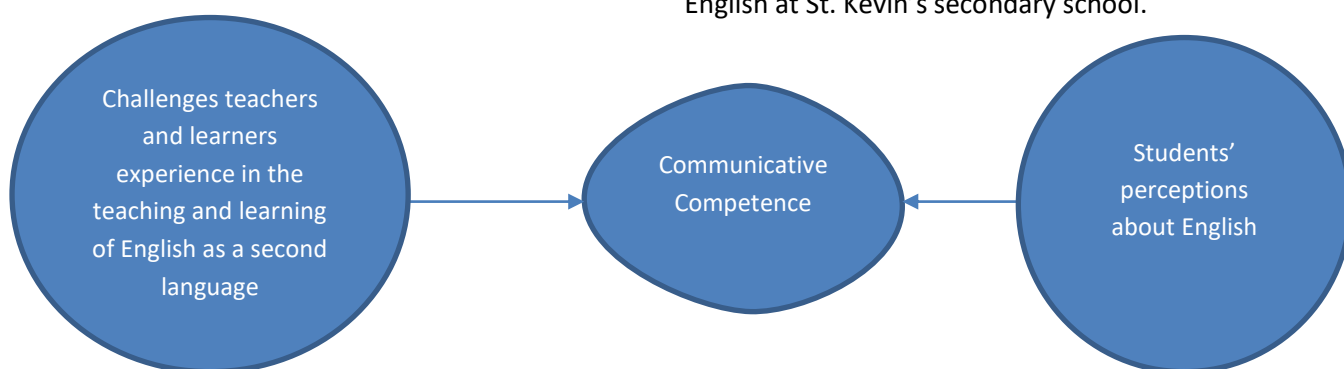


Figure 1: Relationship between variables

The above diagram represents relationship between dependent and independent variables. The study's conceptualization was that in teaching and learning communicative competence, the stakeholders at the classroom interaction level are mainly teachers

and students. There is need to examine the perceptions of these stakeholders towards the teaching, learning and use of English and to observe the methodologies used in the classroom. In view of the above representation, each part has a role to

play in realizing the goals of the curriculum. Hence, as indicated by the arrows, each of the variables under study acts on the independent variable, English communicative competences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

English language Curriculum development

Curriculum is the basis of all a learning process. Its objectives can only be achieved through thorough reviews and criticism to develop its relevance. It also aids in coming up with proper resources for its implementation. Hence, various post-colonial commissions recommended the use of English as a medium of instruction and as a compulsory subject to be taught in Kenya.

One of the main objectives is set out in the English syllabus is that at the end of the learning process, the ability to use language in whatever situation should be achieved (Secondary Education Syllabus 2012). Syllabus design is usually informed by theories of language and theories of language learning which are examined in section 2.4 and 2.5 respectively. Okwara (2009) decries the falling standards in both written and spoken English since the late 1950s in Kenya. This outcry is far from over as the standards have persistently continued to dwindle especially in performance of English in National examination. In the Secondary Education Syllabus (2002) it is stated that English is of importance beyond the examination; communicative competence is the desirable goal for learning of English in Kenyan secondary schools: *in teaching of English, the emphasis should be on the acquisition of communicative competence and not simply on passing of examinations*. However, sufficient research has not been done on whether and how the teaching and learning of English helps in focusing on achieving this.

This study therefore focused on development of communicative competence in English. A number of factors inhibit this cause. The research sought to establish point at the need to re-evaluating the implementation of the curriculum to capture the teaching methods of teaching and learning

communicative competence in English despite the challenges it faces in a Kenyan school.

METHODOLOGY

The study, a qualitative case study, involved 30 purposively sampled participants. A target population of four teachers and one head of English department; eleven form four and fourteen form three students was sampled. Data were generated using interview guides for the head of department and teachers, group focused discussion guides and classroom observation schedules. Interview guides were administered to four teachers and the head of department by the researcher. Classroom observation was done by the researcher using observation schedules. Data was recorded by writing and by way of a tape recorder. Group discussion guides were administered by group leaders and in-attended by the researcher. Interview data was recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis of data from the various sources yielded an in-depth descriptive analysis of the factors that affect learners' communicative competence in English.

FINDINGS

Challenges of teaching and learning English

Both teachers and learners expressed their challenges faced in teaching and learning of English. Such challenges affect their ability to meet their goal of communicative competence in English. Teachers' perspectives are explored first, followed by the learners.

Teachers described their challenging experiences as curriculum implementers. They pointed out that most students did not practice communicating in English outside of class. They reported that this translated to even lack of motivation to teach. Teacher T1 Interview 8/10/2014) expressed the concern that, "whenever I teach students, I expect them to practice what I teach but I cannot say that of my students. Immediately I leave class, they start talking in their mother tongue. This at times is frustrating". Therefore according to the teacher,

failure of learners to perform tasks that are meant to help them inculcate language skills makes it difficult for teachers to teach students.

In the interview with teachers, they pointed out that learners were reluctant in participating in class activities. On observation, this was evident as some learners in all classes never bothered to participate in class, even after being asked to share with a friend their thoughts, or engage with the teacher. On the other hand, some of the learners who were asked to go up to the board to attempt an exercise had no clue of what was being asked of them. This prompted the research to affirm that due to the congested classes, some learners take advantage of the high learner population and do not pay attention since the teacher is unlikely to see them.

Lack of enough teachers who encourage learners to speak in English was found to be an impediment in achieving communicative competence. Teacher T2 (Interview 10/10/2014) expressed concern that some colleagues take English use in their classes for granted and for this reason some students do not feel compelled to use it. Teacher T2 posed, "if a colleague is the one teaching an English related subject in mother tongue, then what do you expect of learners?" Therefore, lack of role models in communicating to the students poses a great challenge to the teaching of English for communication. This is a factor because the learners are easily influenced by their environment and the temptation to converse in mother tongue is great when teachers allow it.

Given the high population, teachers reported that they are strained to the extent that they cannot give their best. Teacher T3 shared how one of the teachers complained that one of the form one classes he was teaching had a population of 110 students who were so huddled together that one could not imagine these students learning anything. Above all, the teacher stated that it was difficult to teach such a class, give an assignment and mark books overnight then get the books back to students in time.

The population of the school is projected at 1200 students in a four-streamed school with an average of 75 students per stream. This literally, according to me is strenuous given that the government has only posted five teachers of English. Each teacher of English then handling around 240 students with this population, I teach with hope that learners will get what I teach. It has even scared me so much that I give assignments that I can afford to mark in time. (Interview T3 22/10/2014)

Teacher T2 felt that most learners are engaged in the social media so much that the reading culture is secondary concern for them. T1 told the story of a student:

I was speaking to one of my students who notoriously used mother tongue. He shattered my efforts by telling me to stop worrying. He told me that he can easily use the internet for instantaneous answers instead of reading a novel or a book. That is a waste of time in the digital era. (T1 interview 8/10/2014)

The teacher reported that the girl had difficulties in expressing herself but was apparently blinded by the fact that social media can aid her instead of spending time reading.

Another challenge was presented as the raise of performing arts that sets the democratic space in terms of language use; some students are reported not to use English learned skills in their interaction for the reason that most of their role models in the society are musicians who seem to thrive in the sub-standard English. These performing arts such as popular music thrive on the common language that suits the audience rather than focus on Standard English. Just like those proponents of learning from the in-put, most students imitate their role models such as popular musicians. They have a poetic license and in turn the youths acquire this as their norm in speech and writing. Teacher T4 gave an example of a student who told the teacher "that I am an artist, singer, who will not need English in my career". The teachers were concerned that such attitudes largely water down the realization of

communicative competence of learners. Since in this context there is no zeal to learn English.

The head of department (HOD interview 18/11/2014) also pointed out that the school is strategically placed. So, all games and sports and other county activities are held in the school. He gave examples of competitions such as science congress, term two A and B balls games and choir that basically affected the school teaching Programme. These interruptions also meant that the syllabus coverage was difficult. It forced teachers to forego classes because of the activities in the school. Thus the English syllabus was not well covered as planned earlier rather teachers rushed through just to 'cover the syllabus'. Although syllabus advocates the development of language skills and competence, teachers and head teachers still focus on syllabus coverage due to the examination oriented system of education

Another form of absenteeism that affects the process of teaching and learning is that of learners dropping out of school, especially girls due to pregnancy. Teacher T1 pointed out:

In one of my classes there were girls who had dropped out of school to go and give birth, nurse the baby before coming back. Within this time, the learner has lost a lot of time and coming back to catch up is a very difficult thing. Also the girls who give birth are unable to dedicate their entire time on studies since they need time to go and attend to the child and this makes them skip other classes. (T1 8/10/2014)

Modernism was mentioned as a challenge to the teaching and learning of English. This is because the young people use non-standard English, where they mix English with other languages to form Sheng in order to gain acceptance among peers. Teacher T3 calls it fashion-type language in communication which has eroded the use of Standard English as outlined in the Secondary school syllabus KIE (2002) that envisions the English used in Kenya should target achieving the norms of Standard English advocated for in the Commonwealth Countries.

Thus English is taken as a purely an academic pursuit, with limited social functions, and of importance only for official purposes such as interviews. To all intents and purposes, English in this educational setting is akin to that of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, despite its use as a medium of instruction in schools. This means that learners do not have the extent of input or opportunities for output that are usually associated with countries where the language policy advocates the use of English as a medium of instruction and above all, English as an official language in Kenya. The learners' perspectives were cited in light of the focused group discussions.

Learners affirmed the argument that most students do not make an effort to use the language beyond the classroom. A member from group C (Discussion 21/10/2014) shared this, that "outside of school, most of us do not generally use English to communicate unless you are faced with circumstances that make you to do so." This is because every day they go back home from school, they rarely find interlocutors to engage them in English thus it is not a norm to use English outside the school environment. Most of the learners attributed lack of English use at home due to the limited number of English users. One of the group members posed a question "who do you expect me to speak English with at home?" The groups shared that the learners will only use English outside the school environment when they are attending to official functions such as interviews.

The learners on the other hand were in agreement with the issues raised by teachers, group D learners (Discussion 6/10/2014) observed, "When a teacher comes to class and orders that the medium of communication is in English, I have seen my colleagues speak in English. But whenever the teacher has not demanded the use of English, most students answer in Swahili". This shows that on one hand the learners have not taken personal interest in developing communicative competence in their interactions. Learners only use English to show politeness to the teacher in what Davies et al.

(2011) describes as polite phrases which are superficial to express distance and defense especially when the learner is compelled to use English.

Learners in the process of group discussion seemed to suggest that the number of students was high as compared to learning resources. A member from group A (Discussion on 9/10/2014) shared, “the students seem to be more than the books we have for reading. One book of English is shared by six to ten students. How can I do the assignment then?” This is in agreement that population increase has to a large extent affected access to learning resources essential in improving the teaching and learning of English.

The findings of the research pointed out that absenteeism was a challenge to the teaching and learning of English. Learners have taken advantage of the large population and the high temperatures to skip the lessons. It was found out that due to high population, learners took advantage of the situation to miss class. For example in group D, members shared the fact that (Discussion 6/10/2014) “there are some of our colleagues who miss class and teachers seem not to notice because we are too many. In some classes, teachers take roll-call but still the learners keep disappearing.”

Lack of reading culture among learners was cited as challenge. The learners were categorical that most of them do not read thus they depend entirely on the teacher’s input. This discussion by group B outlined the importance of the idea that for the person to succeed, more effort has to be put in. (Discussion 13/10/2014) “I find it difficult to read at home due to lack of resources; therefore, I feel that my lack of further reading and research inhibits my ability to achieve English communicative competence”. This assertion by the group member affirms the idea of second language theorists like Swain (1980) who advocates that input affects the output of an individual in second language acquisition. Thus the more limited the input the more limited the output and vice versa. It was

reported that most learners do not find time to read anything apart from the assignments.

The research revealed that the attitude towards English was negative. This was because of lack of taking assignments seriously and the view that learners felt forced by circumstance to communicate in English rather than personal initiative. “I look at English speaking as a punishment”. One member of group A (Discussion on 22/10/2014) pointed out during the discussion. In one group A, a student shared “when responding to a question I mix English and Swahili, or if the teacher insists on use of English I keep quiet”. This, they attributed it to lack of positive attitude toward learning a new language since they see it as an imposition.

The above discussed issues thus contribute to responding to the research questions about the factors that make most learners not be able to communicate in English after graduating from form four. These challenges point to some of the areas that need to be addressed if the vision in Kenyan Secondary School Syllabus (2002) is to be achieved

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings revealed that challenges teachers and learners face in the teaching and learning of English also involved the population of the learners. It was affirmed in the findings that the learners surpassed the number of resources available including material for teaching and learning. The space available for a large population was revealed to impact on the teaching and learning. It was noted in the research findings that teachers cannot be able to reach every learner given the space and population. It was also identified in the findings that few number of teachers in the school made it difficult to reach every student in providing adequate support to learners to learn and use English to achieve communicative competence.

From the foregoing findings, it is important to note that indeed the goal of English language teaching and learning in Kenya is to empower the learner to communicate effectively; however, the Ng’aturkan

speaking students at St. Kevin's secondary school experience difficulty in the use English in their interaction. The role of each of the stakeholder in this situation is important to the eventual improvement of communicative competence in English.

The study recommended

- Buying enough teaching and learning materials
- Taking learners for symposiums, debates to schools other than theirs
- Seeking more teachers to assist in the ratio of teacher to learner in order for teachers to reach a larger population
- Having in place a well explained school language policy that facilitates the use of English without negating the value of other languages.
- Taking teachers for in-service courses, seminars and workshops as suggested by the head of department in the findings
- Laying down appropriate punitive measures to discourage absenteeism

- The head of department to initiate dialogue with teachers and learners on the best way to implement school language policy
- Teachers to be role models in using English and calling on students to follow suit. Teachers should be involved in correcting learner errors and encouraging them to speak in English
- The use of the library for extensive reading should encouraged

Recommendations for further research

The research was limited in time to cover more than one area. Therefore further research can be carried out to cover other parts of Kenya. The researcher looked at communicative competence in general; therefore, further research could be done in specific skills of communicative competence such as written or spoken English. On the other hand other dimensions such as grammar competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence should be investigated.

Further research on the appropriate methodology in large classes to ensure effective achievement of communicative competence in English should be essential.

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