

Role-Play Technique as an Antecedent of Performance in English Language: Evidence from Secondary Schools in Wareng District, Uasin Gishu County, Kenya

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Abstract

In Kenya, there is a national concern over English language dismal performance over the years in Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (K.C.S.E). Blame has been put on teachers of English language for relying on techniques that favor them at the expense of their students. This article therefore sought to assess the use of role-play technique as the most appropriate technique to improve performance in K.C.S.E English language. Moreover, it sought to establish the attitude of both teachers and students towards the use of role-play technique. Findings, conclusion and recommendations are presented.

Keywords: Role-play technique, attitude, performance

Introduction

English language has a great importance in the life of every individual in human civilization and can be seen as: a vehicle of thought, a medium of expression, medium of communication with other countries, mental development, basis for education, medium of literature, appreciation and preservation of culture, growth of civilization, and development of peace. Several studies have found out that English language use cannot be undermined (Dash and Dash, 2007; Bogonko, 1992; Mukuria, 1995 and Broughton, 1993).

As a medium of instruction in Kenyan schools, English language is indeed a very important subject both in the construction and development of the curriculum and as a service subject to the school learner who require good English language in a large variety of professional undertaking in commercial and day to day transactions in the Kenyan interaction environment (M.O.E, 1994 and Jeshire, 1999). Due to the role English language plays in the curriculum, the Ministry of Education Science and Technology (M.O.E.S.T) has placed a lot of emphasis in its development. It has placed on the shoulders of the teachers of English language the task of moulding the students so that they can express themselves effectively in both oral and written work. Although Kiswahili and English languages are the two Kenyan official languages, in general, the school system favours English language as the main medium of instruction. Kiswahili language is restricted to the first three years of the primary school education in just a few regions in the country. In the majority of the regions English language remains the only medium of instruction right from the first grade (Jeshire, 1999; Kembo-sure, 1994 and G.O.K, 1975).

However, the Kenya National Examination Council (K.N.E.C) Annual Reports of (1998; 1999; 2006; Abenga, 2005 and Njuguna 2008) noted that, it is not an overstatement that there is a crisis in the teaching of English language in schools. The level of written and spoken English language is dropping each year though it is classified among the core subjects in the curriculum and this means that for one to obtain a better grade in national examinations and therefore gain admission to public university, he/she must pass in English language (K.N.E.C, 2006).

Noticeable is the fact that the Kenyan English language curriculum is integrated and covers broad and diverse topics, which may not be adequately taught by one single technique of instruction. This necessitates the use of different methods because over-reliance on a single method may be detrimental to the students especially where teacher-centered approaches are dominant as it happens in many cases. The value of instructional methods is important in that, the right teaching methods determine the quality of the results since they act as a link in the total teaching and learning chain (Kochar, 1991p.170 and Mukwa, 1993 p.1). Gudu (2010), is of the opinion that over-reliance on a single method of instruction may be detrimental to the students especially where teacher-centered approach is always used. In most cases, the students will over-rely on the teacher and even resort to cramming of facts making it difficult for them to develop insight, ability to apply laws and principles to new situations, discover knowledge, new laws and principles with their help. It is with this in mind that, M.O.E.S.T (2006), recommended use of learner centered methods such as role-play technique which emphasizes active learner participation in the instructional process through participatory learning. Therefore, the researcher was apprehensive of the reason why teachers were not using techniques that are learner-centered as evidenced from studies of scholars like Owino (1991), Monoko (1996), and Otunga (2007) all cited in Gudu (2010); Kaping'ei (2006) and Jeruto (2006) have all raised concern over teachers using techniques that favours them but not their students instead of techniques like role-play which appeals to both teachers and students as proposed by

(Ments,1991; Little John & Hicks,2003).

Role-Play technique and Performance in English Language

Role-play technique is a powerful tool in teaching and learning as it offers holistic education in a multi-level experiential journey of discovery, expression, and mastery where all learners and teachers learn and grow together. It has been observed that role-play technique enhances the teaching and learning process at different levels of education by increasing motivation, retention and active participation (Gathumbi and Masembe, 2005; Rodgers and Evans, 2008; Dick and Carey 2011; Rao and Ravishankar 1982; Collie and Slater 1987 and Broughton 1980). It is also an effective way to develop oral language skills and can be used as an oral examination alternative in foreign language classes to enable learners become good communicators (Zheng, 1993 and Hoecherl & Boyce, 1994; Gathumbi and Masembe, 2005 and Ments, 1999). It can also be used by the teachers to reinforce language items and grammatical structures that were earlier taught in previous lessons (Hong 2010; Gathumbi and Masembe, 2005).

In a role-play, students can 'learn by doing', for example in legal matters, can integrate legal doctrine, their values and beliefs, and practical skills such as negotiating, drafting, arguing and investigating. Among other things, role-play can be used to introduce topics by illustrating for example how a transaction or process takes place; teach the practical implications of legal rules; expose students to ethical dilemmas; and enable students to develop practical legal skills (Johnstone, 1996; Lowenstein, 2011, Gilgannon 1985 cited in Bradshaw and Lowenstein, 2011; Joyce, 2009 all cited in Starko 2010); and it is also useful in development of positive emotions (Partin, 2009; Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2008 p. 47).

In role-play, constructivist theorists lay emphasis on the part played by instruction in enabling the children to learn (Gardner, 2001). Brunner (1966) posits that the learner selects and transforms information, constructs hypothesis and makes decisions relying on a cognitive structure. He felt that knowledge was best acquired when students were allowed to discover it on their own. Good methods of structuring knowledge should result in simplifying; generating new propositions and increasing the manipulation of information which means that students should be provided with conditions that would allow them construct their own interpretation of key information and experiences. It is the open-minded discussions that are instrumental in helping individuals create personal views. This indicates that when constructivism is applied, learners acquire new experiences with their classmates which will lead to development of non-linear process of collecting information. However, it has been noted by the critics of this approach like Hirsch (2000), Westwood (1996) and Cobb (1994) cited in Westwood (2004) who refers to the fact that justification for constructivism is often reduced to the mantra-like slogan (students construct their own knowledge) and there is no hard evidence to support the claim that all students are effective in 'making meaning' for themselves. 'Learning by doing' does not enhance learning as they have argued that there is little empirical evidence existing to support the statement given novice learners. Also, Mayer, (2004) and Kirshner, Sweller & Clark (2006) suggested that fifty years of empirical survey do not support pure comparative teaching techniques to pure discovery, in those situations requiring discovery, they argued for guided discovery instead. They suggested that many educators have misapplied constructivism to use teaching techniques that require learners to be behaviorally active. They also describe this as appropriate use of the 'constructivist teaching fallacy' because it equates 'active learning with active teaching.' Instead, he suggests 'cognitive activity' during learning and the instructors to use 'guided practice.' The implications from the foregoing discussion are that the technique under study encourages the learners to actively engage in learning activities that lead to development of their own ideas through the guidance of a teacher.

Role of Attitude in Teaching and Learning Processes.

According to Baker (1992), attitudes are crucial in language growth or decay, restoration or destruction: the status and importance of a language in society and within an individual derives largely from adopted or learned attitudes. Attitude is something an individual has which defines or promotes certain behaviors. Although an attitude is a hypothetical psychological construct, it touches the reality of language life. He also stresses the importance of attitudes in the bilingualism. Attitudes are learned dispositions, not inherited and are likely to be relatively stable; they have a tendency to persist. However, attitudes are affected by experience; thus, attitude change is an important notion in bilingualism. Attitudes vary from favorability to un-favorability and are complex constructs; that is, they may be both positive and negative feelings attached to a language situation.

Attitude is attributed to one's values developed by experiences, and that which one has acquired from parents or peers, media, country, from reading books and are not often easily identified, measured or studied (Evans, 1985). The basic characteristic of attitude is the disposition to react to favorably or unfavorably towards something. Teachers may react favorably or unfavorably towards their work based on the experiences they go through while at work which may be influenced by controllable or uncontrollable circumstances. These reactions may in one way or another affect the quality of teaching and technique used which results in the subject being dull or boring (Were, 1982). Another observation by Galton and Williamson (1992) averred that, the teachers'

attitude towards a certain strategy affects their efficiency in teaching. In agreement with this assertion, Oyugi (1992) claims that teacher attitude influences the behavior of students towards the learning of a particular subject. According to him, attitude has some direct influence on behavior and behavior is a function of attitude. He uses the term attitude to refer to a relatively conceded mechanism representing the remains or more technically expressed the residue of interaction with objects; people and situations. Teacher attitudes are seen in language policy that they adopt.

For effective teaching, role-play technique is necessary on the side of teachers. This includes having professional knowledge and commitment, good and positive attitude, caring about the learners, having confidence in them, understanding, acknowledging the students ideas, accepting their feelings and providing them with an opportunity to learn and use instructional materials and procedures as required. Teachers in the process of teaching are required to be enthusiastic, empathize with learners, conceptualize the topic clearly and manage classroom activities well (Santrock, 2004).

Ford (1984) cited in Chen, Wang & Caij (2010) investigated teacher attitudes towards students with Spanish language influence in their speech found that, regardless of the student composition, the teachers in the study gave a lower grade to the compositions of children who spoke English with a Spanish accent. The teachers' negative attitude towards the group of students with Spanish accent resulted in the students taking on similarly negative attitudes. Language learning ultimately becomes inefficient as the learners' and teachers' negative attitudes each feedback into each other. For example, after receiving such unfair grading, the students might not have felt the need to make more of an effort to learn the target language since they never received positive feedback from their teachers. As a result, knowing students' language attitudes and fostering positive language attitudes will help to ensure better language learning.

According to Starks and Paltridge (1996 p.218), learning a language is closely related to attitudes that people have towards language. In the Longman dictionary of applied statistics (1992 P.199), language attitudes are defined as the attitude which speakers of different language or language varieties have towards each other's language or their own language. Expression of positive or negative feelings towards a language may reflect impressions of linguistic difficulty of learning, degree of importance, elegance, and social status. Attitudes towards language may also show that people feel about speakers of the language.

Also, were (1982) argued that there is a link between attitude and performance in a subject. Therefore, this means that positive students' attitude towards English language and role-play technique leads to better performance in examination. Language attitude is one of the effective factors influencing second language acquisition. It refers to the language learners' effort, desires and affection towards learning a target language. Attitude is a key factor as to why some students learn more quickly than others. Students with positive language attitudes exhibit efficient learning and high achievements (Baker, 1992). However, McGroarty (1996) cited in Chen & Wang (2010), states "students with positive general attitudes may not be particularly successful if these attitudes are not linked with effective strategies that enable them to take advantage of instructional opportunities presented to them." (p.4). This reflects on The Socio-educational Model (S.E.M) in which ineffective classroom experience such as receiving poor quality instruction or having an instructor with negative attitudes towards a certain group of students, may negatively affect students' originally positive attitudes.

Gardner & Lambert (1972) cited in Chen & Wang (2010) describes a continuous cyclical process in which language attitude related to the outcome of language learning feedback into the model. For example, that classroom experiences may affect attitude which in turn, affects continued classroom experiences. In order to prevent such a negative cycle in learning, knowing and bearing the language attitudes of students in mind while planning effective lessons becomes importance factors in successful language learning.

Harris & Schoeps (1999) cited in Goodykoontz (2008), draws a link between student attitudes and achievement. There are strong relationships between student attitudes and achievement levels. In particular, some studies have suggested that achievement levels have a casual influence on student attitudes (Hannula, 2002; Taia & Marsh, 200) all cited in Goodykoontz (2008). Attitude is central in the education process and either promotes or inhibits students' behavior or influences, choices to attend, respond, value, participate or make commitment to education activities. It is attributed to education, sex, environment, role, stereotyping between teachers and learners interaction and ones values that are developed over time. It differs among boys and girls especially on attainment and abilities as boys tend to have positive attitude than girls. This is mainly attributed in differences in classroom interactions between the teachers and the learners. It also showed that there is a correlation between their ability in the subject and the liking for the subject although there is need to maintain liking as well as performance. It is noted that the teacher's attitude towards the subject is affected by the learners' performance (Gilchrist, 1980).

Were (1982) in his research "An Examination on the Problem Relating to the Teaching of History in Secondary Schools in Kenya," found out that, learners found History and Government dull and boring, an indication of negative attitude which in turn influences performance. He concluded that, a positive attitude towards the subject is likely to help and enable one to do well and adds that failure discourages the learners. In

line with this study, Kemboi (2013) carried out a study on “Use of Role-Play Technique in Teaching English Language in Secondary Schools: A Case of Selected Schools in Wareng District, Uasin Gishu County, Kenya.” And found out that few students agreed that they found learning English language difficult to understand and this could be attributed to Were’s (1982); Strong (1984) and Starks and Paltridge (1996 p.218) arguments that there is a link between attitude and performance in a subject.

Also, Hilgard, and Atkinson (1975), Gardner (1984 P.41) suggest that positive attitude have profound effect on learning. Yet others (Strong, 1984) have suggested that the more satisfaction a learner derives from the achievements of learning a task may influence his/her attitude towards learning a particular subject.

Conclusions

The conclusions presented are drawn from the study findings and summary of the objectives of the study as here below:

Majority of the teachers showed positive attitude towards the use of role-play technique. Students were actively involved in role-play activities as they were motivated. Also, most teachers had positive attitude towards English language and this could be attributed to the relationship between attitude and bilingualism as posed by Baker, (1992).

Majority of the students showed positive attitude towards the use of role-play technique. They realized their mistakes, discovered what they did not know hence developed problem solving skills. While the students became actively involved, they developed intrinsic rewards as the teacher readily offered extrinsic form of reward. Thus students not only gained knowledge but knew how to acquire it independently. A high degree of retention and assimilation resulted after role-playing. This made the students assimilate more of the subject matter. The students were able to present, explain, discuss and justify their own ideas creatively thus role-play is a learner centered technique.

Recommendations

Based on the above discussion, we provide some recommendations particularly to English language curriculum designers, teacher trainers, teachers and students. To teachers and teacher-trainers, they should instill positive attitude to their students since their attitude has profound effect on their students’ learning either positively or negatively. The learner-centered approaches of teaching and learning such as role-play technique should receive increasing emphasis.

Teachers should precede their lessons with sessions of role-play activities to stimulate the learners and ensure free flow of ideas and can use role-play technique to reinforce language items and grammatical structures that had been taught in the previous lessons. This is in line with what Salmon (2002) proposed to be used for warming up the group prior to enactment. Lastly, teachers need to execute their lessons with brainstorming activities to motivate the learners and build positive attitude towards learning.

To English language curriculum designers, they should design curriculum in a way that provides room for student activities since this is the trend of the 21st century where students are expected to be engaged actively in learning activities so as to discover knowledge by themselves through participation in learning activities. Therefore, role-play technique, which is self- initiated learning, should be encouraged since skills of constructive criticism and evaluation are developed. Ideas are manipulated and explored in democratic manner which eventually give rise to successful teaching and learning process.

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