The Practice of New Oral Language Structures by Learners in the Teaching of the English Language Curriculum in the Primary School Education in Kenya

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between all authors. Author AS designed the study and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Author PLB managed the literature searches. Author JNK managed the research methodology section. All authors participated in data collection and analysis. Also, all authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Original Research Article

ABSTRACT

Language is very important in our lives as it is the means by which people communicate. Effectiveness in language learning can greatly be achieved through the practice of new language structures. This paper is a report on a study that investigated the practice of new language structures by learners in the teaching of the English language curriculum. The study was undertaken in Nandi North district, Kenya in the year 2009. The study adopted Vygotsky's [4] 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. The data was collected using structured and focused group interviews and observations. This paper is a discussion of the findings, conclusions and recommendations of this study.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language is 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 [1]. 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 [2,1].

Cashden and Lyn [3] contend that language plays a vital part in children's learning. In the curriculum, all aspects of the curriculum depend to a greater or lesser extent on language skills. For children such skills as the ability to answer questions, offer opinions and follow instructions are as important for the social life of the curriculum as they are for formal learning and they apply in all subjects.

The objective of teaching oral communication skills in the primary schools in Kenya is to develop in pupils the ability to listen, understand and respond to information and instructions. The pupils should be able to listen, understand and express themselves orally in English using correctly constructed sentences, appropriate vocabulary, intelligible pronunciation, stress and intonation [2,1]. The achievement of this objective calls for intensive practice of the oral language structures learnt. This paper is a discussion of a research that was undertaken in primary schools in Nandi North District on the practice of new oral language structures by learners in the teaching of the English language curriculum.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The objective of this study was: to explore the methods that teachers used in the practice of new oral language structures by pupils during English language lessons.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for this study was based on Vygotsky's [4] social development and interaction theory. Vygotsky [4] 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 [4,1]. 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 [4,1]. The actual development level refers to all the functions and activities that a child can perform on his or her own, independently and without the help of anyone else. According to Vygotsky [4] full development of ZPD depends upon full social interaction.

The implication of Vygotsky's theory for this study is that practice of new oral language structures by learners is dependent on interaction between the teacher, the pupils and the learning tasks.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Behaviourists argue that repetition of stimulus-response habits strengthen those habits. If responses to particular stimuli are to be learned thoroughly, then practice is essential [5]. This section provides some literature review on the practice of new language structures during English language lessons.

Practice incorporates Vygotsky's [4] idea of scaffolding. Scaffolding requires that the teacher provides the students with the opportunity to extend their current skills and knowledge. The significance of practice in the learning process can best be understood by considering the words of Gabler et al. [6]. These authors argue that the

constructivist learning perspective is best conveyed through an ancient Chinese proverb that "I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand". According to Baker and Westrup [7] all students of English need to have a lot of practice in using English freely in the classroom to practise using the language they have learnt.

To be able to achieve fluency in communication, new words should be introduced and then used many times before the learners are expected to use them in their responses [8]. Wright, Betteridge and Buckby [9] in agreement postulate that language learning requires hard work. One must make an effort to understand, to repeat accurately, to manipulate newly understood language and to use a whole range of known language in conversation. Effort is required at every moment and must be maintained over a long period of time.

It is also important to note that learners cannot make responses unless they have heard the structures correctly. The teacher should provide the correct language output for pupils to imitate [8]. The teacher has to use the words and structures repeatedly so that pupils can learn them and reproduce them correctly [2]. According to Doff [10] the teacher should give the students a chance to hear how the word is used. After repeating the teacher's model several times, the pupils should be given the opportunity to use the language items learnt in sentences of their own [2]. The main aim at the practice stage is to encourage them to use what they have learnt in English even if it is not completely accurate [11].

Providing the pupils with a variety of practice activities offers them plenty of opportunities to play an active part in communicative situations, ranging from simple imitation to conscious exchange and internalization of certain vocabulary items, pronunciation styles, grammatical points and communicative techniques. At the same time, it builds in the students the strategies that will help them later on when their knowledge of English has advanced and moved to a higher level [12].

4.1 Practice Activities that can be Utilized for New Language Structures

Many practice activities can be utilized for new oral language structures in English to promote learners' understanding. These include:

4.1.1 Pair and group work

A teacher using pair work divides the whole class into pairs and all the pairs work at the same time. In group work, the teacher divides the class into small groups to work together [7]. Pair and group work have various advantages: They give the students more opportunities to speak English, all the students actively participate in the lesson, shy students feel more secure and are more willing to speak, students learn from one another and that students get independent from the teacher [10,2].

Likewise, pair and group work encourages cooperative learning [7]. In the cooperative learning classroom, competition among groups is encouraged, and students work together to solve a common problem. Working in these groups is an excellent way to overcome silence in the classroom. Pair and group work in a good way to manage large classes with mixed abilities and it can improve motivation and students' use of English. It also allows the quieter students to speak to a partner instead of speaking to the whole class [7].

The disadvantages of pair and group work are that there's less supervision of language output by the teacher and the risk of noise making [10,2,7]. However, these problems can be overcome by the teacher preparing pupils before the activity and by checking for mistakes afterwards through asking them what they said. The teacher should also give clear instructions about what to do and when to start and stop. The task should be clearly defined and should not take too long [10]. Although some mistakes of grammar or pronunciation may be made in pair and group work, the price is worth paying because they provide opportunities for intensive listening and speaking practice [9]. Cheng [13] highlights other difficulties associated with pair and group work. These are the size and furniture of the classroom, the problem of noise, the possibility of mistakes being undetected and uncorrected and a few more assertive students dominating the groups.

According to Wright et al. [9] pair work is better than group work if there are discipline problems in the class. However, some tasks like games require four to six members. In these cases group work is essential. It is vital for the teacher to choose a group leader. The group leader should be one of the more able pupils. The role of the leader is to ensure that the game or

activity is properly organized and to act as an intermediary between learners and the teacher. Less able learners should occasionally be given the responsibility for encouragement. The role of the teacher once the groups are in action is to go from group to group listening, contributing and if necessary, correcting [9].

4.1.2 Use of minimal pairs

Teachers can use minimal pairs to elicit practice of the new oral language structures. Minimal pairs involve contrasting at least two words which are generally similar but have one contrasting sound which is in the same position in each word [8,14]. Examples of minimal pairs in English are like *r*ead & lead; cup & cap. Fryer [14] argues that before setting the students to any minimal pair learning related task it is important to first increase the students' awareness of what minimal pairs are, why they are difficult and what kind of problems they cause. Next the students must be reassured that with practice that these difficulties can be overcome. Minimal pairs are advantageous in that they help the learner to see the role of sounds in meaning [8]. If the learner realizes that it is the sound that makes the difference in meaning s/he is bound to begin paying attention to his/her pronunciation.

4.1.3 Tongue twisters

Tongue twisters can also be used during in the practice of new oral language structures. Actually, as Brown [15] observes that tongue twisters are great pronunciation exercises. Many of the rhyming words in a tongue twister show how some words can sound the same but be spelled very differently. An example is a tongue twister like *"Which witch wished which wish?* Saying tongue twisters is enjoyable and frequent practice helps learners to learn the right articulation and to get rid of pronunciation errors in a relaxed atmosphere without tension when mistakes are made [16].

4.1.4 Dictation

Dictation can be used in leading the pupils to differentiate different sounds. However, the passage should not too long and the language level should be appropriate to the level of the pupils [2]. Alkire [17] asserts that in all cases, dictations must be selected according to the students' abilities and the usage and style should be similar to what the students are expected to produce on their own both verbally and in writing.

Dictations are essential in that they make the students and the teacher aware of the students' phonological and grammatical errors. They also involve the whole class, no matter how large it is [17].

4.1.5 Drama

Drama is an important element in oral practice of language [18,19]. Drama is:

> A social (interactive) way of creating and interpreting human meanings through imagined action and language that stimulates and corresponds to real life actions and language [20].

It is an activity in which learners portray either themselves or other people in an imaginary situation [21]. It usually involves verbal communication, an activity that helps learners in the development of the speaking skills. The learner is expected to adopt the role of a character and to project the characters way of dressing, physical features and behaviour. According to Baker and Westrup [7] students improvise and create a drama for themselves, using language that they have learned. According to Chauhan [22], using drama to teach English results in real communication involving ideas, emotions, feelings, appropriateness and adaptability.

Drama carries various strengths in that it stimulates reality, develops self-expression and allows for experiments with language [18]. Drama activities can provide a framework in which students learn best by doing things through the target language. It enables children to develop their thinking and understanding of issues that are important to them [3]. Drama also provides the physical release from the constraints of having to sit in a chair for long. Students become more confident in their use of language by allowing them to experience the language in operation. It also has a motivating purpose. Effectiveness in the use of drama material will have an inherent motivation. In dramatizing, the children act out a play or a story [21]. Needlands [20] argues that drama in the classroom should not be based on transmission of theatre skills but to the construction of imagined experience. It allows children to experiment with new ideas, concepts, values, roles and language in action in the situational context in which they would naturally occur. Drama should be to do with child performing. It is

practical, immediate and engages the emotion as well as intellect.

4.1.6 Role play

Another way of getting students to practice new oral language structures is through role play [21,7,23]. This requires the students to pretend that they are in various social contexts and have a variety of social roles. In role play activities, the teacher gives information to the learners such as who they are and what they think or feel. The learners can think and act as the people in a story would think and act [21,7]. They are given a part or a character to play in a fictional situation. It involves a degree of pretence. Students imagine a role like that of a police officer or a shop assistant or a situation like buying food [10]. The participants either interact as themselves or other people in imaginary situations. In role play, learners can act out emotions, actions and situations.

Role play should be improvised [24]. Students decide exactly what to say as they go along. The objective of role play is for the class to think about the subject in a real life situation. Role play can be controlled or free. Controlled role play is based on a dialogue in the course book. Free role play is prepared in class or outside the class then performed in class. According to Huang [24] role play is really a worthwhile learning experience for both the students and the teacher. Not only can students have more opportunities to act and interact with their peers trying to use the English language, but also students' English speaking, listening, and understanding will improve. Role play lightens up the atmospheres and brings liveliness in the classes. Students learn to use the language in a more realistic and practical way. Thus they can become more aware of the usefulness and practicality of English.

4.1.7 Debates

Debates are important oral practice activities as well. Teacher using debates are advised to choose topics that can develop into arguments like gender issues, school administration, and love matters among others. They should assure learners that they will not be victimized for their views and that whatever they say will not leave the classroom. Such an assurance helps to allay their fears and they open up and express their views.

4.1.8 Interviews

According to Krashen and Terrel [8] in interviews, students are divided into pairs and are given a series of questions to ask their partner. Kayi [23] observes that conducting interviews with people gives students a chance to practice their speaking ability not only in class but also outside and helps them becoming socialized. Interviews are useful not only because they force learners to listen carefully but also because they are so versatile in their subject matter or content. The success of the interview depends on the skill of the interviewer, on his or her ability to ask the right kind of questions and on the willingness to talk on the part of the person being interviewed. Both partners in an interview should be good at listening so that a question answer sequence develops into a conversation. The dialogue should be interesting and should focus on interesting events in the pupils' own lives [8].

4.1.9 Language games

Similarly, the use of games can be a powerful language learning tool [25,26]. A game consists of a play governed by rules [27]. Game playing encourages students to use language to some purpose. Language games are used to reinforce specific patterns and structures [2]. Children enjoy playing language games in class [28]. These are used to foster authentic, natural and creative language use. They are also based on an information or opinion gap which has to be bridged. According to Wright et al. [9] games help and encourage many learners to sustain their interest and work. Games also help the teacher to create contents in which the language is useful and meaningful. This happens because the learners want to take part and in order to do so, they must understand what others are saying or have written and they must speak or write in order to express their own point of view or give information.

Many games provide the repeated use of a language form and are a way of getting the learner to use the language in the course of the game [25]. They provide drill in the language items. Games must thus be regarded as central to a teacher's repertoire because they provide intense and meaningful practice. Cooperation during games is more important than competition [2]. A goal has to be set and the challenge of achieving it should encourage unrestrained communication behaviour [25]. While playing

games, students have fun, relax, exercise, and tease their friends. Apart from having fun, students learn at the same time. They acquire new vocabulary along with its spelling and pronunciation. They realize that they have to speak or pronounce the words clearly if they want others to understand what they are saying [25].

4.1.10 Discussions

Bakhtin [29] contends that a discussion is an oral exploration of a topic, object, concept or experience. All learners need frequent opportunities to generate and share their questions and ideas in small and whole class settings. Teachers who encourage and accept students' questions and comments without judgement and clarify understandings by paraphrasing difficult terms stimulate the exchange of ideas.

Kayi [23] argues that for efficient group discussions, it is always better not to form large groups, because quiet students may avoid contributing in large groups. The group members can be either assigned by the teacher or the students may determine it by themselves, but groups should be rearranged in every discussion activity so that students can work with various people and learn to be open to different ideas. The teacher should also encourage the students to ask questions, paraphrase ideas, express support and check for clarification.

According to Ogunniyi [30] discussions are simple communication devices which the teacher can use to stimulate students' interest as well as to evaluate their levels of conceptions in a given subject. They provide unlimited opportunities for classroom teacher-student and material interactions. They involve any exchange of ideas and opinions either on class basis, with the teacher as the mediator and to some extent as the participator or within the context of a group with the learners talking amongst themselves. The main purpose of discussions is to increase pupils' self-confidence, fluency and skills in oral expression [31]. During discussions, it should be the pupils and not the teacher to do most of the talking.

4.1.11 Dialogues

In addition, dialogues can be used as practice activities during oral work lessons. Dialogues involve people listening to what others are saying, answering or asking questions and adding information to what has been said [28]. They are short conversations in which the new language items are integrated with items they have already learnt [2]. In the conversations, the participants have interaction purposes of various kinds to fulfil and it is the negotiation of these purposes which creates the structure of particular conversations within a turn taking framework [32]. Krashen and Terrel [8] postulate that dialogues give students the means to produce speech that is somewhat beyond their acquired capacity in early production stages. The dialogues should be short and interesting too. They should also contain material that is useful in conversation. Their function is to:

> Smooth the conversation by helping students to sound more natural and more fluent with commonly discussed topics and to help them regulate input and manage conversations [8].

4.1.12 Use of stories

On the other hand, stories have always played a significant role in children's growth. Stories are an asset to any ESL classroom [15]. Using them to teach ESL students can be fun and educational for everyone involved. Vocabulary, intonation patterns and sentence structure can be taught through stories. Stories not only help in stimulating children's imagination and understanding of the world, but also in developing children's language ability and appreciating literature [33]. Learners can be asked to prepare to narrate to the class folk tales and other creative stories during oral work lessons. The teacher can also narrate a story to the pupils. According to Jianing [33] the lively atmosphere and real life environment created by stories encourages the students to talk and discuss with each other.

4.1.13 Use of songs

Like stories, songs add fun to the teaching of oral communication skills. Brown [15] argues that by using music in the ESL classroom, students practice their listening skills and increase their cultural knowledge. Songs help the pupils to subconsciously absorb the patterns [2]. They may also learn correct stress and intonation. The structures being taught are also learnt in a relaxed manner. The teacher should look for a song that has the grammatical structure that has been taught and needs to be reinforced. KIE [2] argues that poems, songs and rhymes are

important because they arouse the interest and imagination of the pupils. Klancar [12] agrees with this and states that using songs, poems, rhymes and chants is a wonderful way of making students sing and talk and at the same time unconsciously work at their grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation. Rhymes and songs may be used in pronunciation practice as well. The rhymes can help a student compare how words that do not look the same can be homophonic [15]. The repetitive nature of most songs and rhymes help students learn vocabulary and the rhythm of the language.

4.1.14 Use of Poems

During oral work lessons, teachers can use poems as well to initiate practice of language patterns and vocabulary learnt. Poems allow pupils to speak in an interesting manner through rhyme, rhythm and a variety of words and sentence patterns. Okombo et al. [19] argues that children enjoy pleasurable and satisfying experience of poetry. They enjoy the aesthetic beauty of a well-read poem. Some advantages of poetry lessons are that poetry develops the coordination of speech and actions or music and actions and that it develops listening and speaking skills in pupils [2]. In addition, poetry is important as it builds on everyday experiences of many children [3]. Poetry reading and recitation introduces children to specific choices about languages used to express meaning. In helping children to craft their own poetry, the teacher turns their attention to the possibilities of language in expressing feelings and experiences in new forms [3].

Poems can be read for enjoyment and to help pupils improve their pronunciation. The teacher should set the objectives of the lesson and use teaching aids like pictures. S/he should also study the poem and practice reading it before presenting the lesson. The teacher must insist on correct pronunciation, stress and intonation.

4.1.15 Substitution tables and drills

Other useful practice activities for use during oral communication skills are substitution tables and drills. Substitution tables help in practicing the language items learnt. In substitution tables, the learner chooses from different columns to form different sentences starting with the first column that contains the subject of the sentence. Substitution drills on the other hand involve repetition of certain structures usually in a

column which does not change. Other clauses are suggested in the next column(s). Different sentences are formed by combining the structure with different clauses and phrases.

4.1.16 Listening comprehension and giving instructions

In upper primary, pupils can get involved in listening to passages during oral work lessons [2]. The teacher can read a passage or two as pupils listen. Afolayan et al. [28] postulates that the teacher must make sure that the pupils know most of the important words and sentence structures before s/he reads the passage. S/he must also give them the reason for listening like in order to answer oral or written questions. Likewise, the teacher must use correct pronunciation [2]. During oral work lessons, pupils can be asked to follow and give instructions or to describe a process too. According to MOE [34] children enjoy giving instructions on how to do things they know or on things they would like done for them.

5. 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.

5.1 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 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. The pupils who participated in the study were within the age bracket of twelve to fifteen years. 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. All the respondents were Kenyans.

5.2 Instrumentation and Data Analysis

Data was collected using structured and focused group interviews, document analysis as well as observations. 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 and did an analysis of teachers' schemes of work. Data was then analyzed qualitatively by discussing the emerging themes.

6. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The research objective was to find out the methods used by teachers in the practice of new language structures by learners during English lessons. It was found out that the teachers engaged learners in practice activities such as individual repetition, whole class repetition, use of substitution tables and question and answer drills. On the other hand, some of the practice activities like dictation and the use of substitution tables were not effectively used. Teachers used dictation as well but this was mainly used when giving lesson notes to their classes not to practice English sounds as expected. Conversely, teachers avoided such practice activities as pair work, group work, dialogues, poems, minimal pairs, tongue twisters, debates, interviews, communications games, drama, discussions, listening comprehension, describing a process, giving instructions and directions. These activities are vital in the teaching of language in that they provide an interaction between the learners, the teacher and the learning tasks as well. Consequently, it was concluded that teachers used limited practice activities during English lessons. In addition some of the practice activities adopted by the teachers were not effectively used.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

It was recommended that teachers should strive to have the pupils practice using the new language structures during English lessons. On the other hand, the practice activities selected should be efficient in engaging the learners to practice the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. In addition, a variety of the practice activities should be provided.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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Peer-review history:
The peer review history for this paper can be accessed here:
http://www.sciencedomain.org/review-history.php?iid=1129&id=22&aid=9434