

## **Inside the Classroom: Utilization of Communicative Language Teaching in Teaching of Oral Skills in English in Secondary Schools in Kenya**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines the classroom practice of teachers of English in the utilization of the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach in secondary school in Kenya. These ideas are a product of a research study carried out in 2009-2010 in Lugari District, Western Province of Kenya. Important to note is that academic research plays a pivotal role in curriculum implementation and evaluation. A curriculum can be perceived from different angles: an instructional programme, a course of study or a plan for the education of learners. Conceived as an instructional programme, then it is an instrument for facilitating learning. Indeed, findings from research contribute immensely to decision-making, informing, evaluating and providing the way forward. Therefore, the results presented in this paper expose the situation as it is in practice, acting as an eye-opener regarding the pedagogical practice in English classrooms in Kenya based on the use of CLT. Grounded on Hymes theory of communicative competence, the study sought to establish the use of CLT in the teaching of oral skills and the challenges facing the use of CLT in language classrooms in secondary schools in Kenya. CLT advocates for provision of adequate opportunities for language practice, a prerequisite for achievement of fluency in language use. Founded on varied opportunities offered through learning tasks and activities in CLT, oral competence can be achieved. The findings revealed that CLT approach was used very minimally used in teaching of oral skills and teachers face a number of challenges that impede the use of CLT in the instruction of English. The findings contribute information necessary for curriculum implementation of the English language course in secondary schools in Kenya. This study therefore recognizes the teacher and classroom context as fundamental elements of curriculum implementation and evaluation, particularly based on the nature of pedagogical practices they engage in.*

**Key Words:** Oral Skills, Curriculum Implementation, Communicative Language Teaching Approach, Communicative Competence

### **INTRODUCTION**

Research into the pedagogical practice of English language is justified by various reasons. English is the pre-eminent language of international communication, the World's lingua franca among people of diverse linguistic, geographical, social and religious backgrounds. It is a language used in information communication and technology, science, technology and innovations, tourism and other Industries. Due to the role it plays in the world, English is a language that fosters the achievement of both the MDGs and Vision 2030. In Kenya, English is an official language of communication as well as the medium of instruction in schools, colleges and universities. It is used as a

second Language (L2) as well as an official language in government and business transactions (Kembo-Sure, 1997). As an official language, it is used for teaching, writing of teaching materials and examination in all subjects in the school curriculum except other languages that is, Kiswahili and the foreign languages like French and German offered in the school curriculum; thus treated as a service language. It is the language widely used as the language of the media and print. Although attitudes towards the English language vary, there is a general consensus that English is a useful language especially in terms of bringing about socio-economic mobility. As a second language, many educated Kenyans use English for their day to day interactions in social, economic and political matters (Whiteley, 1974).

From the educational point of view, one of the National goals of Education in Kenya is to promote international consciousness and foster positive attitudes towards other nations (KIE, 2006). To do this, the English course in secondary school aims at enabling the learner to communicate clearly, confidently and appropriately in different contexts; demonstrate acceptable communication skills; and demonstrate awareness of contemporary issues in society. Therefore, competence in both spoken and written language is emphasized in the revised English language syllabus which was inceptioned in 2005. In this way, learners are expected to perform better in the subject. This is the minimum requirement of secondary school learners by higher education institutions and by employers. Indeed a credit in English is a requirement to using all courses at the university. The grade a candidate gets in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Examination (KCSE) will determine the overall grade a learner scores. This is because English is mandatory in the computation of the final grade as a compulsory subject in the curriculum. This way, the learners are compelled to view English learning as a challenging experience that enables them to inquire into and control their world through language competence. This brings in the role of language pedagogy and especially appropriate approaches to teaching English. In the teaching of English, the emphasis should be on the acquisition of communicative competence and not just in the passing of examination. In fact becoming proficient in English is a desirable life-long goal, it is essential to achieve grammatical, oral, reading and writing competencies.

Considering the values accrued to proficiency in English, there is need to give prominence to oral language in secondary schools classroom in Kenya. As an official language, it is the language of instruction and many societal situations call for fluency in its use. Barasa (2005) points out that the poor language proficiency in English by learners in secondary schools in the 1990's and the preceding years has turned the spotlight on the teaching and learning of English language. Many areas of the syllabus were not covered adequately and in some cases some parts of the syllabus had been ignored completely (KNEC, 1994). It was recommended that the entire syllabus should be covered adequately. These views still obtain in current reports of Kenya National Examinations Council (KNEC). Furthermore, universities have voiced concern about receiving first year students who can hardly write, read or hold a discussion in English. School leavers joining the university at that time were functionally illiterate in so far as English language grammar is concerned (Indangasi, 1991). Kenya being a multilingual society, Sheng, vernacular, Kiswahili and English compete in that order for attention, and eventually English is the loser. A study carried out by Kembo-Sure (1996) on 'language attitudes, use and proficiency' established that majority of the secondary schools learners reflected

a clear shift in their attitudes towards Kiswahili. In a study by Omulando (2002) on 'the effect of Kiswahili on the use of English as a medium of instruction and language in Kenyan secondary schools' established that as regards general language use in school, use of Kiswahili was preferred most of the time. Sheng is mostly used alongside Kiswahili, especially outside class. English was the second most used language while mother tongue was the least used language in school settings.

There was nationwide concern that the performance in the English language examination both at primary and secondary school level is low and this trend has gone on for some years. This concern was raised through press statements by the Ministry of Education after the 2001 KCSE results release. The Minister lamented over the poor grades in English and Mathematics. He noted that there was declining performance in English and yet it is a key subject (Mugumo, 2002). The learners cannot express themselves effectively and efficiently in the English language, both in written and spoken forms. Most recent concerns were raised by the Education Minister in 2012 while releasing the 2011 KCSE examination results. This was attributed to some 'mysterious language' use.

The observation about the state of English arises not only because it is an official language but also compulsory subject in school curriculum and a medium of instruction in all subjects except in other languages. Therefore it was against the backdrop of the status of English vis a vis the actual performance by learners that this study set out to investigate how one of the recommended approaches to teaching English, specifically oral skills, was utilised. Oral skills are very important in achieving communicative competence. How they are taught, especially at secondary school level is very crucial.

The secondary school English Teacher's Handbook (KIE, 2006), points out that wrong forms of spoken English have over time, become institutionalized in society. They advise that the teacher should therefore endeavour to provide the learner with adequate opportunities to listen to good models of spoken language. The learners should also be provided with ample opportunities to speak English. The teacher needs to ensure that appropriate opportunities are provided for a learner to develop listening and speaking skills. They recommend that reciting poems, telling stories, discussing contemporary issues, debating, dramatizing, performing riddles, role playing, speech drills, minimal pair drills, dictation, listening tests, dialogue and public speaking can facilitate the acquisitions of these two skills in meaningful context. The teacher of English has responsibility to the learners beyond the examination. Increasing demands on learners creates the need for learners to be able to exchange their ideas and information, communicate their feelings, express themselves logically, and discuss the meanings of their utterances effectively (Savignon, 1987). Communication should enable learners to negotiate meanings effectively and efficiently. In today's business and job market, the importance of communicative skills has increased tremendously. The scope of CLT in social context has expanded to all countries over the last four decades.

From the foregoing analysis, it is evident that learners lack mastery of spoken skills. Fluency may be lacking because learners are not given adequate opportunities to put language learnt in the classroom into practice. Observations from research obtain that as teachers of English, effort should be put to make English more acceptable through appropriate teaching modes. This can be done through CLT, which makes the language

come alive and so can attract the learners. The teaching techniques recommended by KICD for teaching English content are characteristic of CLT approach. According to Hardly (2001) it advocates for activities that would generate a classroom atmosphere conducive to the development of communicative competence in all skill areas; more so listening and speaking. Indeed these are the activities that the study sought to establish how they were used in development of oral skills; CLT offers learners opportunity to use language in the classroom as they learn it.

### **Communicative Language Teaching Approach**

Nunan (1991) points out that in recent years, CLT has grown in importance in language teaching methodology. It grew in popularity among language teachers when they realized that traditional teaching methods were unsatisfactory and inefficient in enhancing the communicative ability of the second language learners. As an extension of the notional–functional syllabus, CLT also places great emphasis on helping learners use the target language in a variety of contexts and places great emphasis on learning language functions. The primary focus of CLT is to expand and implement programmes and methods that help develop the functional aspects of language by encouraging and motivating learners to participate in different types of communicative activities in their classes. Savignon (1991) defines communication as interpretation, expression and negotiation of meaning because it helps integrate competence in grammar forms with pragmatics.

In communicative classrooms, language learners are active participants; they exchange information, transmit meanings and indulge in competent communication (Celce–Muscia, Dornyei & Thurrell, 1997). Savignon (1991) emphasizes that CLT helps in improving the communicative competence of learners; unlike traditional teaching methods that are teacher-centred, CLT is student-led. It is commonly referred to as a learner-centred approach. The learning activities are selected according to how well the learners use language rather than the mechanical practice of language patterns (Littlewood, 1981).

The CLT makes use of real life situations that necessitate communication. The teacher sets up a situation that learners are likely to encounter in real life. Unlike the audio-lingual method of language teaching, which relies on repetition and drills, CLT approach leaves learners in suspense as to the outcome of a class activity which will vary according to their reactions and responses. The real life simulations change from day to day. Learners' motivation to learn comes from their desire to communicate in meaningful ways about meaningful topics. Berns (1984, p. 5) observes that, —language is interaction is an interpersonal activity and has a clear relationship with society. In this light, language study has to look at the use (function) of language in context, both its linguistic form and context (what is uttered before and after a given piece of discourse) and its social, or situational, context (who is speaking, what their social roles are, why they have come together to speak)l.

According to Widdowson (1978), language learning is not merely acquiring the knowledge of the rules of grammar, but also acquiring the ability to use language to communicate. He adds that knowing a language is more than how to understand, speak,

read, and write sentences, but how sentences are used to communicate. Learners should learn how to use sentences to achieve communicative purposes. He suggests that communicative abilities have to be developed at the same time as the linguistic skills. This idea seems to be influenced by Hymes's (1972) thought that children acquire not only the knowledge of grammar but also the knowledge of appropriateness. Hymes points out that, children acquire knowledge of socio-cultural rules such as when to speak, when not to speak, what to talk about, with whom and in what manner, at the same time as they acquire grammatical rules. Children develop a general theory of speaking appropriately in their community from a finite experience of speech acts and their interdependence with socio-cultural features. Taking this into account, Widdowson (1978) strongly suggests that what we need to teach communicative competence along with linguistic competence. He further adds that the classroom presentation of language use must ensure the acquisition of both linguistic and communicative competence. According to him the content should be prepared according to its potential occurrence as an example of use in the communicative act, rather than as an example of usage in terms of linguistic structure. Grammar must be based on semantic concept and must help a learner to acquire a practical mastery of language for the natural communicative use of language.

Halliwell (1998) talking about teaching English in the primary classroom, observes that children should be allowed to make jokes in the foreign language classroom. This enables them make language a tool for what they want to say. Learners should dare to use language for their own purposes. They should use it accurately if possible, inaccurately if necessary, but above all they should make it theirs. A teacher can help children make language theirs by among other things, making sure that various forms of real language use are set up as part of the process of learning and not just as the intended product. He further notes that learners already have great skill in using limited language creatively, so all the teacher needs to do is to provide them with occasions when the urge to communicate makes them find some way of expressing themselves. Children also have an instinct for interaction and talk. Its persistence and strength is very much the advantage of the teacher in the language. It is one of the most powerful motivators for using the language. Teachers should therefore build on this and not complain when the learners are talking to each other. They need to talk. Without talking they cannot become good at the talking. They can learn about the language, but the only way to use it is to use it. The teacher's job therefore is to make sure that the desire to talk is working for learning and not against learning. This study sought to find out how classrooms were offering students a chance to talk in class. CLT approach advocates for students' need to talk, so does Halliwell (1998).

The role of the teacher is to be facilitator of his students' learning, Littlewood (1981). He is the manager of classroom activities. The teacher is charged with the responsibility of establishing situations likely to promote communication. The learners are communicators. They learn to communicate by communicating. In CLT, learning activities are selected according to the interests and abilities of the learner(s). It is observed that the CLT puts emphasis on listening, which implies an active will to try to understand others. As pointed out by Gerngross and Pucha (1984) in summary, the role of the teacher as a listener rather than a speaker comes out in CLT. The teacher as a patient listener is the basic requirement. Since the teacher talks less and listens more, he

becomes an active facilitator of his learners learning (Larsen–Freeman, 1986). The teacher sets up the exercise, but because the learners' performance is the goal, the teacher must step back and observe, sometimes acting as referee or monitor. A classroom during a communicative activity is far from quiet. The learners do most of the speaking, and frequently the scene of a classroom during a communicative exercise is active. The learners should be taught that mistakes are learning opportunities. When their errors interfere with their ability to communicate, they must develop strategies for handling the misunderstanding that results. The attitude that mistakes are a natural part of learning should be maintained.

### **Related Studies**

Studies conducted in language pedagogy in Kenya show that although the government is committed to train its teachers, as noted by Oluoch (1992), the attainment of oral communication objectives in institutions of learning is still questionable. Secondary school learners for example tend to face speech problems. This undermines the relevance of training given in speech work. Barasa and Ong'ondo (2003) reported in their study *'Impact of Drama on English Language Teaching'* that despite the clear objectives of English, most Kenyan secondary school leavers cannot speak nor write competently in English. According to them, this fact has been expressed by a number of scholars, educators, government officials, employers, politicians and journalists. KNEC has confirmed this general incompetence in communication. In paper 1, which tests listening and speaking, KNEC reports that in 2006 exam, out of the maximum score of 60, the mean score was 30.71, which is an average mark. They also commented that learners of language be exposed to varied situations of language creative enough to manipulate language to suit different situations. Barasa and Ong'ondo, (2003) quote Mbiti a one-time chief inspector of schools as saying that the development of competence depends to a large extent on whether the learners are given sufficient opportunity to become productively involved in practical language-using situations. Many schools in Kenya fail to provide such opportunities.

Bigambo (2000), in a study in the role of speaking and writing in communicative competence revealed that communicative competence could be achieved through guided practice in speaking and writing. However he notes that in secondary school classrooms in Kenya, learning language for examination purposes seems to be the only reality. His study revealed that communicative competence could be achieved through guided practice, thus advocated for learner practice. Therefore based on CLT, the teacher will act as the facilitator or guide leading learners through language practice in a bid to achieve communicative competence.

Mak'obila (2005) in his study *'Theoretical Concepts and Approaches to Teaching English'* revealed that a wide range of learning activities were available for teachers to select and use. The activities ranged from role plays, language games, simulations, debates, discussions to dramatization as activities that offered practical methods of teaching English language. This study wished to establish the use of various activities in classrooms and teachers' awareness of their application. In addition, Makhulo (1984), Wamakonnjio (1986), Theuri (1985) and Juma (1991) from their studies of classroom verbal interactions in English confirmed teacher dominance was a common practice.

These findings justify the call for learner-centred approaches to instruction in English, thus focusing on CLT in English classrooms.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This study was carried out in Lugari District of Kenya in the public secondary schools within the region. This was a qualitative research and yielded qualitative data. Fourteen schools were sampled using the stratified and simple random techniques. They were stratified into provincial and district boys, girls and mixed schools. Observation and interview schedules were used to collect data on the teacher's awareness of CLT and how they utilized it during the instructional process to enhance development of oral skills. Data on the challenges teachers of English faced when using CLT was also gathered. Fourteen listening and speaking lessons in progress, one from each school, were observed and the teaching and learning activities and classroom events recorded. Fourteen teachers of English who were purposively and randomly selected, one from each school, were later interviewed. Data was analysed qualitatively using descriptive statistics and presented thematically based on the study objectives.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

Based on the classroom observations and interviews carried out it was ascertained that very minimal CLT activity went on in English classrooms in Lugari District. There was more teacher talk than learner talk, and teachers did not act as facilitators in the oral lessons, learning was generally teacher-centred. Findings revealed that very few learners were given chance to participate during the lesson. Moreover very little time was spent on oral skills. What was meant to be learner-centred was found to be a teacher-centred type of learning situation. Many learners therefore were not offered adequate time to productively use language. Achievement of communicative competence would therefore not be accomplished. The teachers did not offer learners opportunity to speak so that their errors could be identified. This therefore denied the learner adequate opportunity to become productively involved in practical language use situations, thus lack of enough time to practice oral language.

Despite the fact that teachers indirectly referred to CLT, they did not use it to a large extent. Those who used it spent very short periods of time with very few learners participating. Majority of teachers said they preferred a mode of teaching that was participatory. They said that this ensured that all learners got involved in the lesson and hence their errors were discovered and corrected. This preference alludes to the fact that they supported CLT approach. However in practice, very few of them used learner-centred approaches. They said in the examination of paper 1, one needed not a practical approach to teaching listening and speaking. This therefore explains why learners still speak poor English and even perform poorly in examinations. This is evidenced by the fact that in the two lessons where discussions were held, the learners used a mixture of English, Shen'g and Kiswahili, a practice that is supported by the finding of Omulando (2002).

Another finding from the study was that while learners were passive participants in the process of learning the listening and speaking skills, the teachers played a very active

role. They took centre stage. The teachers concentrated on instructing the learners. They planned the lesson alone, and while in class talked, asked questions, demonstrated, gave notes, answered questions, explained, narrated, described, responded and even read extracts. The learners were hardly involved.

The teachers did cite some challenges they faced in the use of CLT. These included time and wide syllabus, large classes and the pressure for formal examinations. The teachers then chose to concentrate on training and drilling the learners on how to pass the exams at the expense of the development of communicative competence. The teachers chose to teach the learners how to pass exams and not how to use English in different situations. The result of this is that the learner will not be able to speak English both in school and after school. A teacher whose aim is to cover the syllabus will be unwilling to follow an approach that does not recognize that second language learning in a class room set- up is guided by what has already been prescribed. To such a teacher the use of CLT is a waste of time.

Another revelation was that some teachers did not like teaching listening and speaking. While making prior arrangement for the studies, the longer serving teachers refused to be observed in class giving the excuse that they did not teach the two skills. Indeed one Head of Department directed the researcher to the younger teachers. She said she was out of touch with that area. In addition, in other institutions involved in the study, the situation was the same where the willing teachers to be observed were those who had served for less than six years. Nine out fourteen teachers actually fell into this category.

### **THE WAY FORWARD**

The findings of this study provide impetus for the teacher of English to reflect upon his own, and other colleagues' choice of methodology in the teaching of not only oral skills but also reading and writing. This indeed will boost the performance of English language and make it more acceptable as a language of communication. Sheng has grown tremendously among young people (Barasa, 2005). This shift is due to inadequacies in English. We do believe that the findings will help teachers and policy makers adopt and advocate for the effective methodology in the teaching of oral skills in English. These findings will also be used in the preparation of practical guidelines and policies for educationists, curriculum developers, book publishers, policy makers, researchers and professional organizations. Based on the findings of the study, how best then can we enable learners to become competent speakers of English?

1. Teachers should encourage active learner participation. The successful process involves a gradual handover of control from teacher to learner as the learner becomes independent in the learning process. For communicative competence to be achieved there needs to be less teacher control and more learner centeredness in any oral task.
2. Teachers need to reflect upon their practice. A reflective teacher needs to investigate how much time is spent in talking and listening in a whole class teaching session. Thus the need for active and responsive action research in English language classrooms.

3. Teachers of English should be made aware of the importance of the learners not only passing the exams but also being able to communicate proficiently in English even after school.
4. Resources such as audio and visual stimuli should be used to provoke communication in oral English language lessons.
5. Learning tasks should be formulated by learners themselves because learner-initiated tasks and activities have the advantage that will lead learner to develop strategies for oral language processing which will ultimately take him beyond the tutelage of the teacher. These tasks should be solved by fellow learners.
6. Teachers should be taken through refresher courses, workshops and seminars to update them on current language teaching methodology and their relevance in improving development of communicative competence among learners.
7. The Ministry of Education, KICD and other education stakeholders should take cognizance of the complaints raised by teachers on the wide syllabus, large classes and the pressure on formal examinations as an impediment to development of proficiency in English among learners.
8. Learners should be encouraged to habitually use oral language while in and out of school.
9. Schools should deliberately set aside time for oral oriented activities in schools like: debates, public speaking, drama activities and poetry recitations for competitions.

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