

An Analysis of Characteristics and Students' Understanding of Integrated Skills Approach in Teaching English Language in Selected Secondary Schools in Nairobi County

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Abstract

The field of integrated skills teaching in English has continued to attract attention among scholars. While a number of studies have looked into the field, it appears little attention has been accorded to the characteristics and students' understanding of the approach. The main purpose of this study was to analyze the characteristics and students' understanding of integrated skills approach in teaching English language in selected secondary schools in Nairobi County. The target population was teachers of English, form four students and the heads of English Department in Nairobi County from both private and public schools. The researcher employed a cross-sectional survey research design that was conducted in 6 selected secondary schools in Nairobi County. The sample of this study included 120 form four students and 18 teachers of English with over three years of teaching experience. The main tools for data collection were questionnaires for students and teachers and semi structured interview guide for the English heads of department. Quantitative data was analyzed and presented in percentages, frequencies and pie charts. Qualitative data was analyzed and discussed guided by the research questions and reported in a narrative form. The findings of this study indicated that most of the English lessons were teacher centered and not Student centered. Further, they show that it was not possible to integrate receptive language skills (RS) and productive language skills (PS) in a 40-minute lesson mainly due to large class sizes and limited time. The findings also show that teachers of English used very few activities in their teaching while lecture method was the most commonly used in teaching. The study concluded that teachers of English don't integrate the four language skills when teaching. Forty minutes lessons and large class size don't allow

integration in the development of language skills. Moreover, teachers of English concentrate more on teaching the students to pass examinations. Emanating from the findings and conclusions the following recommendations were made: teachers should use different methods that allow them to incorporate receptive and productive skills to enhance a student's communicative competence. Teachers should also choose tasks and activities that will allow them to use the skills in an integrated manner and avoid teaching the skills in isolation. Lastly the ministry of education should come up with in service courses to help teachers gain skills to help teach skills in an integrated manner.

Keywords: *Communicative competence, integrated skills approach, language skills, Receptive Skills, Productive Skills*

INTRODUCTION

In Kenya, English is taught and used as a second language. This elevates English to a higher status than other local languages since it is a national and also an official language at the same time. English is used in government and public sector, it is taught as a compulsory subject in the education sector where it is used as a language of instruction from primary schools, secondary schools, colleges and universities (Ongondo, 2009). English holds a prestigious position in Kenya and in the whole world with so many people learning it as a second or a foreign language and used as a language of media, travel and tourism, commerce, medicine, science and innovation, technology, language of internet, legal language among others.

Despite the roles that English is playing as an international language across the world and as a second language in Kenya, most of the students who complete schools are not able to communicate fluently using English (Abenga, 2005). Many students in the secondary schools are not able to communicate and pass across information in such a way that they are not in a position to communicate especially with regard to the four skills of English. These skills include speech; they cannot hold a conversation without becoming dry or lacking what to say to their interlocutors. To make matters even worse, after completing form four, these students cannot communicate well while in the university during their first years and this places their university performance at risk (Barasa, 2005).

Communication is said to be fruitful when the communicator's goal or intention is achieved through interaction using language. This goal cannot be achieved when the participants involved in a conversation are communicatively incompetent. According to Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983) CC (Communicative Context) is a synthesis of an underlying system of knowledge and skill needed for communication in which one has knowledge regarding language and how to use the language. For an individual to communicate well, he/she needs to be aware of the communicative context, proper choice of diction, knowledge of the participants and the context in which a communicative event is taking place and the language skills of that particular language because language needs skills.

Language skills are the building blocks, effective and key elements of any given language which are very crucial in the process of language teaching and learning. English language has four basic language skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing; two of these skills; listening and reading are referred to as receptive skills (RS) while the remaining two skills writing and

speaking are known as productive skills (PS). For proper language learning and language proficiency, these four language skills should be taught together and not in isolation because language is a system of elements and for success and for proper language learning to occur, the elements of this system should work together jointly and not each element on its own accord (Hinkel, 2010).

Despite the efforts made by the teachers to teach the skills in connection, majority of the students still make no progress when it comes to their competence in using the language particularly the four skills. In Kenya some of the students in our secondary schools, colleges and universities are very poor in one skill or the other and they cannot communicate competently. Very few students are competent in using all the four language skills. Some students are very fluent in speaking but very poor in writing, others are very good in writing but poor in listening, others are good in reading but poor in writing. This is because teachers fail to integrate the four skills of language while teaching students because these teachers have got theoretical orientations but lack practical skills of implementing integrated skills teaching in the classroom (Alemayehu, 2008). Most of the teachers in Kenya are aware that the four skills are to be taught concurrently but they are not able to put this knowledge into practice because they lack adequate knowledge and skills on how to integrate these skills so the knowledge remains with them. In addition Teachers seem not to have been trained to teach the four skills together in an integrated manner and that is why they have the knowledge but they cannot put that knowledge into practice in a practical manner in the classroom while teaching English.

Teachers and students in a classroom set up have got diverse and different roles which they are expected to play well to enhance smooth learning failure to which, learning becomes difficult and challenging. For instance, in a classroom set up, teachers are facilitators, organizers, monitors, initiators, managers and custodians of knowledge. In case the teachers fail to exercise these roles effectively teaching the four skills in an integrated manner may not take place and these teachers will find themselves teaching the skills in in a segregated manner (Alemayehu, 2008). Students also need to show enthusiasm and interest in learning language. According to Oxford (2001) and Alemayehu (2008) lack of motivation among students is another factor hindering teachers from integrating the four skills while teaching. While teaching language skills teachers use diverse tasks and activities to help the students to interact and work together.

According to Lightbown and Spada (2006), positive motivation is associated with the willingness of an individual to learn while negative motivation is associated with unwillingness to learn. If the students have self-motivation that they can learn all the four skills together in an integrated manner, then they will learn the four skills but when they have negative motivation then they will not learn and this makes it hard for the teachers to teach the skills together.

Another factor that blocks teachers from integrating the four skills according to Lewis-Moreno (2007) is the assumption made by the teachers that students do not need any additional help in regard to English skills especially when the students are not yet proficient in English language. While still in schools students still need accompaniment and support from the teachers to enable them to continue learning language. It is at times true that the students may possess all the skills of language but putting them into use practically in conversations becomes a problem and this is where the students need the presence, accompaniment and encouragement from the teachers for them to know how the skills are used. When the teachers assume that the students know the

language very well and they need no assistance from the teachers, this then blocks the teachers from integrating the four skills because the teachers may not plan for activities and tasks that will help the students learn the language properly.

Kunnan (2005) affirms that, the tendency of teaching for the sake of tests makes teachers lack time to teach and use other activities that are not part of the test as they find using non exam related activities useless. More than often the four skills of language are well taught through the activities and tasks provided by the teachers to the students in which they interact and accomplish the tasks together using language. Failure to provide students with real world activities and tasks means failure to utilize the four language skills hence failure to learn how they are used in an integrated manner thus incompetency in communication.

A number of studies (Ongondo, 2009; Alemayehu, 2008; Lewis-Moreno, 2007; Kunnan, 2005), have been conducted on integrated teaching approach in English language. Despite the effort made in emphasis put on this approach, students appear not to have a clear understanding of integrated teaching approach used in teaching English language. Given this gap, this study intended to analyze the characteristics and students understanding of integrated skills approach in teaching English language in selected secondary schools in Nairobi County.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a cross-sectional survey research design to analyze the characteristics and students understanding of integrated skills approach in teaching English language in selected secondary schools in Nairobi County. Data were first generated using the quantitative approach by administering questionnaires to the teachers and students from the six selected schools. Cross-sectional survey research design enabled the researcher to collect enough data from the respondents which greatly assisted in responding to the research question. The target population of the study comprised of 18 English teachers of six secondary schools selected from Nairobi County. Three teachers were selected from each school to form the sample that was used in this study, 120 form four students; 20 students from each school. A questionnaire was used to collect data on the analysis of characteristics and students understanding of integrated skills approach in teaching English language in selected secondary schools in Nairobi County.

In the study, six secondary schools were selected using probability sampling technique following their geographical location, accessibility, availability and cost efficiency. To come up with a group of students who could participate in the study from the six secondary schools selected, the researcher used simple random technique. Simple random technique was used because this technique guaranteed that each of the students would have a known chance of being selected to participate in the study.

Non- probability sampling method was used in selecting the teachers who participated in the study. To come up with 18 teachers, both male and female who participated in the study, the study employed purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling, a type of non-probability sampling was used to select the teachers of English who formed part of the sample because the researcher knew that these teachers had knowledge with regard to the research problem under study.

In regards to instruments, semi-structured questionnaires were administered to the selected teachers and students. From the data collected, quantitative information was analyzed with the help of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 19. On the other hand, content analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data.

RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Demographic Characteristics of Teachers

Teachers' demographic information was categorized as follows: gender, age, teaching experience, highest level of education and their level of experience in using English as a language in communication.

During the survey, more than two thirds of the English teachers who participated in this study were female 12 (66.7%) compared to the male teachers who were 6 (33.33%) This implies that female teachers in English are more than the male teachers.

Teachers from the six selected schools who participated in the study had different ages. Almost average 8 (44.4%) of the teachers were in the age gap of 41-55, 6 (33.3%) of the remaining teachers were aged 26-40 years while few of the remaining teachers 4 (22.2%) were 56 and above years of age. This indicates that a vast majority of the teachers were within their productive age (26-55 years) while few were above 56 years.

This research also took into consideration the teachers' educational level. This study revealed that more than half of the teachers 10 (55.55%) had a Bachelor's degree in education, 6 (33.33%) held Masters Degrees while the remaining few 2 (11.11%) had diploma in education. This indicates that a vast majority (88.88%) of the teachers had at least a bachelor's degree in education while only few (11.11%) had a diploma.

On the level of experience, half of the teachers 9 (50%) had been in the teaching career for 10 and above years, 4 (22.2 %) had been teaching for at least 7- 9 years, 3 (16.6%) had taught for 4-6 years while the remaining 2 (11.1%) had taught for about 1-3 years. This indicates that a majority (72.22%) had a longer period of experience (seven years and above).

Demographic Characteristics of Students

This section looked into the students' demographic information which comprised of, gender and age. This is to ensure that the students were well represented. Three schools were selected; one boys school, one girls school and one mixed school each with forty students to represent the sample.

During the survey there was a balance between the male and the female students. The number of the male students who participated in this study was 60 (50%) while that of the female students was also 60 (50%). This was to ensure that both genders were well represented.

The age of the students who participated in this study were more than half of the students representing the sample were 17 years 70 (58.33%) ,18 years 30 (25%), and 16 years 20 (16.66%). This implies that majority (83.33%) of the students in the sample were 17 to 18 years of age.

They could also define and differentiate between listening and speaking skills which are RS (receptive skills) writing and speaking skills from the PS (productive skills) of language and they were also in a position to say whether teachers integrate RS and PS of language or not when teaching them language. In addition these students could also identify, explain and differentiate between the methods used by the teachers of English to teach English in the classroom and they could also tell whether these methods were student friendly and whether these methods allowed students to gain CC or not when used by the teachers of English to teach English.

Students' Understanding of Receptive and Productive Skills

The Study Sought to establish the students understanding of receptive and productive skills in the learning of English language. Respondents were asked to define RS and PS giving examples in each case. Figure 1 shows the distribution of students' understanding of receptive and productive skills.

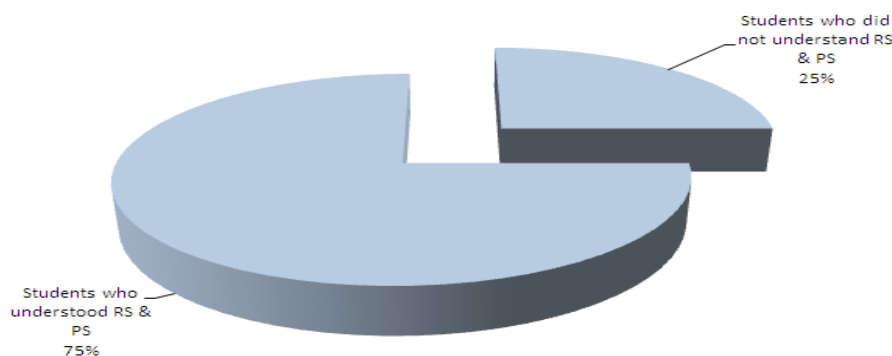


Figure 1 Students' understanding of receptive and productive skills

During the survey on the definition of RS and PS majority of the students 90 (75%) were not able to define and give relevant examples of RS and PS. However 30(25%) able to define and give examples RS and PS. This indicates that the larger percentage of there of the selected sample did not have a clear understanding of these two categories of language skills.

Characteristics of Integrated Skills Teaching

The study was interested in investigating from the students the typical characteristics of an English lesson including the activities done by teachers and those done by the students. The teachers and students from the selected schools were asked to give the typical characteristics of English lesson and the activities that take place during the English lessons.

All the students 120 (100%) expressed that their English lessons looked similar with the teacher teaching and the students listening and responding to questions asked by the teachers or fellow students depending on the nature of the topic being taught. These students expressed that during an English lesson, a teacher comes to the classroom and stands in front of the class, introduces the lesson and begins to teach according to his/her lesson plan.

In a lesson in which the teacher had planned to teach listening skills as a topic, the teacher would read a short comprehension passage from the teacher's guide book or any other book and ask the students to respond to the questions asked by the teacher after reading the passage. The student would then answer the questions and the teacher would give some comments.

Some of the students also stated that English lessons had the same routine each day since the teachers would come to class and lecture to them as they make some notes or dictate to them as they take notes. The teachers would then ask the students to read about a given language aspect and thereafter answer some questions in their exercise books which the teachers would mark in the classroom or in the staffroom depending on the time remaining for the lesson to end.

Other students said that at times, during a lesson, the students would be asked to do different exercises, exchange their books and mark them guided by the teachers.

On the question regarding typical characteristics of an English lesson and activities taking place, one of the students (respondent 11) stated the following:

During a composition writing lesson, a teacher would come to class and say, today we are writing a composition, he/she would move on and say, the composition should be written well with a good handwriting and well punctuated, there after she could write the topic on the chalk board and tell us to begin writing. After writing the teacher usually collects books or papers goes to the staff room and marks them. After a week or so, she would bring the books or papers back to us and say the composition was well written, most of you tried their level best apart from a few who seemed not to have understood what I was asking them to write. After these comments the teacher would say, let us move on to the topic of today and as usual, we would begin learning a new topic or complete what we had left the previous day.

The teachers from the selected schools were also asked to describe the characteristics of an English lesson and all the 18 (100%) teachers explained that during an English lesson they preferred using lecture method because it was time saving and teacher friendly especially when it comes to completing the syllabus. All the teacher respondents used lecture method because most of the lessons in Kenyan secondary schools take 40 minutes and these minutes are not enough to teach, discuss, allow students to work in groups and even have one on one interaction with the students. Most of the teachers expressed that they could use variety of methods that would help their students attain the required skills but because of the limited time and the congested school teaching timetables in Kenya, they were forced to choose a method that would be economical and time saving for both the teacher and the students to use in teaching the content that the syllabus stipulated.

Additionally, this research also revealed that the ratio of the teachers to students in Kenyan secondary schools was not proportional because most the schools had a minimum of forty five students per class and a maximum of fifty five students per class. These numbers of students per class made it very challenging for the teachers to think of taking into consideration the needs of every individual student and especially when it came to helping the students attain common cores in using English as a language while communicating. Still on the same issue regarding the number of students per class, one of the teacher respondents (respondent 7) stated that:

It is very hard for us teachers especially in the public schools to reach out to all the students during the class lesson because our classes are rather big and as teachers we may not be in a position to take care of each and every student especially when it comes to knowledge and use of the skills. For example during a comprehension lesson, the class being too large to handle, it may be challenging to ask each of the students to read out a paragraph as the others listen because the paragraphs may be few and not each and everybody will get a paragraph to read, this therefore forces us to ask the students to read in groups or alternatively following their sitting arrangements or in rows and as they read out the passage all together, we as teachers find it hard to identify which student has a problem with this kind of skill because as the students read, the teacher and the other student who are not reading listens and the one who is not reading properly may not be noticed. Because of these great numbers, most of the students especially the students who have a challenge in one or two skills are not helped because the teachers may go by majority and if the majority have understood the content and read very well, those who have not mastered or understood it may be locked out unless if they come out and express themselves through seeking clarity.

DISCUSSION

This study indicates that majority of the students do not have a clear understanding of receptive and productive skills in the teaching of English language. This is attributed to the use of inefficient teaching method since most teachers prefer to use the lecture method so as to save time. This is in contrast with MOE (2006), which proposes that a skilled teacher of integrated English curriculum is supposed to apply a variety of student centered teaching methods like role plays, group discussions, simulation debates , hot seating ,flow charts techniques and brain storming.

Student centered methods of teaching are also rarely used in the selected schools and these impacts affect the understanding of the RS and PS. This agrees with Moseti (2007), who found out that student centered methods of teaching are rarely used in Kenya. This is because majority of the teachers are in a hurry to complete the syllabus on time due to limited time allocated for English lessons. It is also evident that the students from the selected sample lacked real life experiences on the use of the four language skills in English and hence failure to learn how they are used in an integrated manner. This is due to the tendency to teach for the sake of tests and this makes teachers lack time to teach and use other activities that are not part of the test as they find using non exam related activities useless. The result in this study agrees with Kunnan (2005) who observed the same.

During the survey the student also revealed that the teaching of English lessons depended on both the teacher and the student and the role that each played to ensure smooth learning process failure to which, learning becomes challenging. Students should show interest during the teaching process and also the teacher should motivate the students. These findings are found relevant by Lightbown and Spada (2006), who noted that positive motivation is associated with the willingness of an individual to learn while negative motivation is associated with unwillingness to learn.

CONCLUSION

From the findings conducted, it is evident that language skills cannot be taught in isolation whatever the circumstances. The four skills: reading, listening, writing and speaking should be integrated in order to enhance the understanding of students. Moreover, the characteristics of integrated skills approach of teaching English language affects the students' understanding of different skills taught in English. To help teachers to teach the four skills in an integrated manner, the challenges blocking the teachers from teaching the four skills together should be handled so as to enable the teachers teach these skills in an integrated manner.

From the study there is need to ensure that the teaching method used should be student centered so as to enhance their understanding. Therefore, many teaching activities and tasks used by the teachers of English as they integrate receptive and productive skills must be improved and tailored towards the needs of the students. Furthermore, these activities and tasks should take into consideration the context and current needs of teaching English.

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