

The Influence of Motivation on Acquisition of English Language Skills among Day Secondary School Students in Imenti South District, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

English is the official language of communication in Kenya as well as the medium of instruction in schools, colleges and universities. This aspect dates back to colonial times. It is also the language of international communication. Consequently, those who master English language reap many academic, social and professional benefits. In the school setting, proficiency in English will make the learning of other subjects much easier for English language cuts across the curriculum. Therefore, right approaches to teaching and learning of English language should be put in place in order to incorporate the learners' needs and interests. The learner therefore needs to broaden their linguistic competence as well as communication skills to fit well in the society as far as education is concerned. In Imenti South District Day Secondary Schools, little is done to ensure that students are motivated to excel in English language. The study established that motivation influenced the acquisition of English language skills in day secondary schools. Since motivation is critical to the excelling in English among day secondary schools students, the study recommends that teachers of English should devise proper ways and methods of motivating students to excel in English. Other programs like debates and discussions should be rolled out to build confidence in students. Teaching methods that are learner based should also be used as they encourage learner participation and consequently enhance motivation levels.

Keywords: motivation, acquisition of English language skills, day secondary school students

INTRODUCTION

English language is widely spoken in the world to a point of being referred to as a world language and while it is not an official language in most countries, it is currently the language most often taught as a foreign language. It is, by international treaty, the official language for aeronautical and maritime communications (Crystal, 1985). English a second language for most of the people of the world, has increasingly become the international language for business and commerce, science and technology and international relations and diplomacy. In fact, it is estimated that although there are only 325 million people who speak English as a native language in the world's 4.7 billion population, there is an additional 1.4 billion people who use English as their official language (Crystal, 1985). This revelation has prompted researchers to ask how much assistance is being provided to learners of English as a second language in order for proper acquisition to take place. Wesche and Ready (1985) point out that second language acquisition is subject to individual variation. This was detected in linguistic modification made by two English native speaker teachers teaching English to non-native speaker students. Hawkins (1985) however warns that a learner's response might not be reliable because non-native speakers can give signals that they understand the items they are receiving when in fact they do not understand. These are some of the unique problems that are associated with acquisition of a second language.

In Kenya, English is the official language of communication together with Kiswahili. It is taught in schools as a compulsory subject. It also functions as a language of instruction in education as well as an international language for various tasks of economic development. It is also largely used for communication in the judiciary, parliamentary debates and in public administration. English language is taught in secondary schools in order to enhance communication during and also life after school.

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However, in day secondary schools little is done to motivate students to excel in English which impacts negatively on the acquisition of what is taught by the teachers of English to students during English lessons hence hindering the realization of expected communication skills. Pozzi (2001) points out that in Kenya, education is taken as the foundation of economic as well as individual development. One of the goals of education in Kenya is to produce citizens with skills, knowledge and personal qualities that are required to support a growing economy. Kenya aims at building her modern economy to meet employment of her people and provide resources for human development. Since fluency in English is a basic requirement in Kenya’s quest for modern development and technology, caution must be taken in order to counter anything that might hamper the proper teaching and reception of English language skills in secondary schools.

Learning of second language is characterized by many varying factors that create different impacts on different language components that include syntax, semantics, phonology, and morphology that affect the nature and the time period for the L2 acquisition, (Birdsong, 1999). This underscores the fact that efforts to motivate learners should be upheld for this can greatly affect the acquisition of English speaking and writing skills (Njoroge, 2000).

The acquisition and learning of English skills in relation to students’ individual considerations is very important at the moment, because at times a learner factor can be ignored or even frustrated during language classes. The students even if they are eager to master the language they cannot under some conditions as they are heavily influenced by factors like poor motivation methods that impact negatively on their endeavors (Vilnensia, 2004). In order to acquire a second language successfully, they should be ready to overcome all the collisions and difficulties that hinder them from the English language in its complexity.

Poor performance in English language writing and speaking skills especially in day secondary schools could be attributed to their attitude towards it. Learning language is closely related to the attitudes towards the language and this sheds light to the underlying issues related to acquisition and learning of English. The Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics (1992) defines “languages attitudes” as “the attitude which speakers of different languages or language varieties have towards each other’s language or to their own language”. Expressions of positive or negative feelings towards a language may reflect impressions of linguistic difficulty or simplicity, ease or difficulty of learning, degree of importance, elegance and social status. Attitudes towards a language may also show what people feel about the speakers of that language. Therefore this may lead to poor performance in English due to the wrong perceptions with which they regard it during their study of English in school.

The role of motivation in SLA has been the subject of extensive scholarship, closely influenced by work in motivational psychology. Gardner and Lambert (as cited in Ellis, 1985) introduced the concept of instrumental and integrative motivation. A learner is said to be integratively motivated when the learner wishes to identify with another ethnolinguistic group. Instrumental motivation is where the learner is motivated to learn an L2 for utilitarian purposes such as furthering a career, improving social status or meeting an educational requirement. Studies have not consistently shown either form of motivation to be more effective than the other, and the role of each is probably conditioned by various personality and cultural factors. Indeed, in a study of newly arrived foreign student at US Universities, Spolsky (1989) discovered that the students’ greater desire to be like speakers of English than like speakers of their own language was significantly correlated with the students’ English proficiency. This led Spolsky to conclude that learning a second language is a key to possible membership of a secondary society. This finding shows that motivation correlates strongly with proficiency, indicating both that successful learners are motivated and that success improves motivation. Thus motivation is not fixed, but is strongly affected by feedback from the environment. The study of motivation in SLA also examines many of the learner external factors such as the effect of instructional techniques like praising those who are doing well and paying close attention to those who are not doing well on motivation.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The study investigated the influence of motivation on the acquisition of English language skills among day secondary school students in Imenti South District.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study utilized a descriptive survey method of research. The goal was to find, to investigate and describe the influence of motivation on the acquisition of English language skills in the location of the study. The description was based on the written/oral tests like conversation and an investigation of the opinions, feelings, attitudes and perceptions of the students. Good (as cited in Mugenda, & Mugenda, 1999) observes that the purpose of descriptive survey research is to secure evidence concerning existing or current conditions, identify standards or norms with which to compare present conditions in order to plan the next step and determine how to take the next step having determined where we are and where we wish to go.

LOCATION OF THE STUDY

The research was carried out in day secondary schools in Imenti South District. This area was chosen because it has a diversity of day secondary schools. Some are in and close to the District headquarters while others are in the interior rural set-ups. The selection of this District for the study was prompted by the fact that it is relatively new and no related research has been carried out in it. The researcher wanted to find out the influence of motivation in the acquisition of the English language skills among day secondary school students.

POPULATION AND SAMPLE

The population comprised form two day secondary school students within Imenti South District. The form two students were used because they are already one year old in their school and therefore it was expected that they can interact freely. Form three and four students are normally busy preparing for their examinations, while form one students are still very new in the school.

According to Imenti South District Education Officer, there are 35 day secondary schools with a total population of 1954 form two students. In Imenti South District there are 45 English teachers who were targeted in the study and it was from this number that the researcher did the sampling.

In sampling a small group is selected from the big group or population of the study (Begi, 2009). Purposive sampling was used to select the eight schools from the population of 35 day secondary schools in Imenti South district. The main objective of purposive sampling is to pick cases that are typical of the population being studied (Kathuri and Pals, 1998). All eight English form two teachers one from each selected school were involved in the study. According to Begi (2009), when a population is very small, one may study the whole population. All form two teachers from the purposively selected eight day secondary schools were involved in the study due to their number which was relatively small.

The researcher further used stratified random sampling. In stratified random sampling the researcher divided the population into different strata or categories (Begi, 2009). The day schools in Imenti South district were divided into two homogenous subgroups and then a simple random sample was taken from each subgroup. Simple random sampling is a procedure in which all the individuals in the defined population have an equal and independent chance of being selected as member of the sample (Kombo and Tromp, 2006). The day secondary schools in the district were classified into two: Category A: Rural – oriented day secondary school and Category B: Urban – oriented day secondary schools

Rural-oriented day secondary schools are those found in the remote areas of the district, where access to some facilities like libraries and proper roads are lacking. Urban- oriented day secondary schools are those situated in towns as well as near the tarmac. These schools have access to facilities like Kenya National Library Services and other well established boarding secondary schools, where exchange of ideas through symposia is possible. These categories assisted the researcher in data analysis. To ensure better representation for every category, two lists were prepared representing each category after obtaining the list of the day secondary schools from the District Education Officer. There were 18 day secondary schools under category A and 17 schools under category B. In each category each school was assigned a number based on the distance from the school to the town centre, in order to avoid selecting schools that are neighbors. This was guided by purposive sampling whose main objective is to pick cases that are typical of the population being studied (Kathuri and Pals, 1998). Then the researcher picked four schools purposively from each category thus making a sample

of eight schools. Since there were 1954 form two students in the 35 day secondary schools in Imenti South district and a population of 399 form two students in the selected 8 day secondary schools, a representative sample of 25% of the population of form two students was used in the study. A useful sample should be large enough to allow generalization. It should be above 10% of the total population (Begi, 2009). This enabled the researcher to get a sample of 100 students in total. According to Fraenkel and Wallen (2000) a sample size of 100 respondents is acceptable for a descriptive research. Also Anderson (1990) attests to this where he claims samples in the 100 to 200 range are rarely brought into question on the basis of size.

A systematic random sampling was carried out to select students who were used in the study. A systematic random sampling is the process of selecting a sample following a system (Begi, 2009). This was done by giving numbers to the students and numbering pieces of paper ‘E’ (for even) ‘P’ (prime) and ‘O’ (for odd), E was picked randomly to form the scale factor. The odd and the prime numbers were skipped and students with even numbers were included. All form two English teachers in the 8 selected schools were involved in the study. The eight teachers were purposively selected because they were typical of the population which was being studied that is form two English students. The teachers were eight in total for six of the selected schools were single streamed hence with a single English teacher. The other two double streamed schools had a single English teacher teaching the two form two classes.

INSTRUMENTS

The researcher prepared and administered a writing test in form of a dialogue between the student and his/her friend. This was given to the students to test their oral and writing skills. Students wrote a conversation that displayed their level of language. There was a questionnaire for form two students and another for form two English teachers.

The research instruments were carefully checked to ensure they actually measured the stated objective. The content validity of the research was achieved by involving supervisors who are knowledgeable in this field of study. The researcher also subjected the instruments to piloting before the actual study was done. Before the actual data collection, the researcher tested the instruments in the neighboring Imenti Central district which has similar characteristics with the study area. Piloting was aimed at estimating reliability coefficient of the research instruments. Reliability is a measure of the degree to which a research instrument yields consistent results after repeated trials (Mugenda 2003). The Spearman’s split half (K-R) 21 formula was used for it to be considered reliable for research purposes. The pilot questionnaires were divided into two equivalent halves and then a correlation co-efficient for two halves computed. A correlation co-efficient of 0.860 was attained, which is acceptable as recommended by Fraenkel and wallen. A reliability co-efficient of at least 0.7 is considered acceptable (Fraenkel and Wallen, 2000).

DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected in this research was analyzed using descriptive statistics, which includes bar graphs, frequency tables, percentage, and pie charts. Microsoft excel was employed in the entry and analysis of data. This enabled the researcher to get pie charts and bar graphs to the analyzed data.

INFLUENCE OF MOTIVATION

In regard to the claim made by Spolky (1969), motivation correlates strongly with proficiency indicating both that successful learners are motivated and that success improves motivation. The findings from this study supported this statement in that most of the teachers (35%) rewarded performers only, as opposed to getting a way of motivating the whole class. Other teachers argued that they encourage students to speak in English (20%) and they also take them out on academic tours (20%). They also argued that they encourage students to finish their assignments promptly (25%). The analysis of the questionnaires administered indicated that students in day schools are not fully motivated to excel in the English language. Teachers therefore should look for more appropriate ways of motivating students as opposed to those they mentioned in the questionnaire. Table 1 presents data on ways of motivating students to excel in English.

Table1. Ways of motivating students to excel in English language

Ways	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Rewards	7	35
Assignments	5	25
Speaking in English	4	20
Academic Tours	4	20
Totals	20	100

Pronunciation Errors Caused by Lack of Practice

In order to get a clear picture of the classroom situation of the day school learners, information was sought from English teachers on whether their students make pronunciation errors while reading aloud or participating in class discussions. The results indicated that (87.5%) of the students make pronunciation errors, when reading aloud in class, whereas a small percentage of just (12.5%) of the students do not often make these errors.

Further to this finding, the study sought information on the reaction of both the teacher and other learners to the pronunciation problem. The analysis indicated that while the teacher endeavored to correct the learner instantly and use the pronunciation mistake as an opportunity to teach oral skills, (75%) of the students treat it with indifference as well as making fun of it. This can result to serious setbacks like anxiety to the affected learner. Gardner and Maclyre (1991) argued that anxiety is typified by self-belittling feeling of apprehension, and even bodily responses such as a faster heartbeat; the anxious learner is also less willing to speak in class, or to engage target language speakers in formal interaction. It is in this light that teachers are supposed to treat this case with a lot of caution because laughing at the individual can cause permanent damage to learner’s aspirations, self-esteem and confidence due to embarrassment.

English Teachers’ Comments on Students’ Acquisition of English Language Skills

Teachers of English can easily tell how students respond to reception of English language skills because they are with them in classrooms every day during English lessons and in other interactions. Therefore, the study sought information from the teachers on the manner in which their students receive English language skills. Table 2 presents data on teachers’ comments.

Table2. Teachers’ comments on Students’ acquisition of English Language Skills

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Have Difficulties	4	16
Hampered by Poor Foundation	6	24
Dragged by lack of Practice	4	16
Require Drilling	5	20
Influenced by Motivation	6	24
Total	25	100

The study found out that most of the day school teachers (24%) affirmed that their students’ acquisition of English language skills is greatly hampered by poor foundations right from primary school where much of the instruction is given in vernacular. According to Oluoch (2002), the Phelps Stoke Foundation in 1924 suggested that Kiswahili and other local languages be used as languages of instruction in schools. The same commission recommended that English be taught only in higher grades where teachers were capable of it. In 1925, the East Africa commission led by Hon. William George Arthur Ormsby – Gore M.P as chairman also recommended that local languages be used as a media of instruction at elementary stages. In secondary schools, English alone would be used as the medium of instruction, Great Britain & Ormsby - Gore (1925). This policy affects to a larger extent the foundations on which the acquisition of English language skills is based. Motivation influence and poor foundation takes an equal percentage (24%) of the teachers’ responses. It is further noted that (20%) of the teachers’ responses indicated that these students require thorough drilling in order to acquire the skills. The other response was that students acquire English language skills with difficulties (16%) and the acquisition is dragged by lack of practice (16%). This was further indicated in the composition test given to evaluate their oral and writing skills; students wrote a conversation that displayed their level of language. This actually reviewed that their English language skills are relatively poor hence requiring serious motivation to enable them improve on these skills.

Considering the errors identified from the students’ composition, would give a clear explanation of what might have caused these errors.

Phonological Errors

The phonological errors identified are as a result of wrong pronunciation. Learners tend to write words the way they pronounce them, for example a word like ‘academic’ is wrongly spelt. It should be ‘academc’. The other example is where students wrote ‘leave’ [li:v] as ‘live’ [liv]. These errors could probably be attributed to failure by the students to regularly practice speaking in English. This explains why motivation to embrace the culture of intensive reading should be upheld in day secondary schools to expose students to correct spellings of English words.

Morphological Errors

This was evident in the use of English plurals. Learners failed to learn that not all English words attain their plural forms by adding the morpheme –s at the end of a word, so they had words like ‘advices’ and ‘furnitures’. These are supposed to be ‘pieces of advice’ and ‘pieces of furniture’ This suggests that learners suffered faulty over-generalization and incomplete application of rules and also failed to learn conditions under which rules are applied.

Syntactic Errors

The sample of the learner language revealed students’ wrong use of lexical/syntactic rules. This could probably be attributed inadequate exposure to the English language. For instance, a construction like ‘those are good news?’ possesses the errors of agreement which translates to syntactic errors due to the wrong use of demonstrative ‘those’ instead of ‘that’ and auxiliary ‘are’ instead of ‘is’. This aspect could further be explained by the following data from ki-imentu where singular and plural agreement is different.

English language Ki-imentu language

That is good news (singular/plural)

Buu ni untu bubwega (singular)

Translation: That is good news

Jau ni mantu jameega

Translation: Those are good news

This illustration reveals that learners who write ‘those are good news?’ have both inter-lingual and intra lingual problems, in that since their mother tongue has both singular and plural way of expressing exclamation, English must also have the same rule.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Poor methods of motivating students impacts negatively on the acquisition of English language skills among day secondary school students. Findings from English language teachers in day secondary school affirmed that their students lack communicative command required in English language. Home and school environments of day secondary school students’ impact negatively on the acquisition of English language since they are all from the same locality. Day secondary school students lack proper motivation to be able to learn English language. Teachers mostly pay attention to students who perform well.

Since poor methods of motivating students is a major threat to the advancement of English language among day secondary school students English language teachers should devise ways of motivating students. Learning activities should be varied to maintain interest and to avoid students’ fatigue or boredom. Motivation should be aroused right from the introduction phase of the lesson. Provision of essential resources and facilities in day schools need to be improved, especially in those that are in rural areas to be able to compete favorably with their colleagues who are in urban areas. This is expected to have some positive impact on their proficiency in English. Ministry of education should vigorously inspect day secondary schools and guide them accordingly. This is a very pertinent concern especially with the introduction of free secondary education policy in Kenya. Policy makers and stakeholders urgently need to address the question of resources in these secondary schools if they are to be sustained especially those that are in relatively new districts like Imenti South District.

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