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TEACHER COGNITION: A NOSTRUM AND EXIGENCY ON THE TEACHING OF FUNCTIONAL WRITING SKILLS IN KENYAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract: This paper examines how and what English language teachers think in their practice of teaching functional writing skills. It looks at the planning practices of teachers, both in preparation for the classroom and during the moment-by-moment decision-making that occurs in the classroom. It tries to establish how these cognitions influence the teacher in teaching functional writing as a system of communication. This was a descriptive research and data was collected using observation, students' self evaluation schedule and interview schedule to capture the actual teaching and learning of writing in the classrooms. During the entire study 720 students and 18 teachers of English language participated. The analysis of data was done descriptively. From the research, it was found that teachers have different cognitions, knowledge, beliefs and understanding about the teaching of functional writing skills. A strong recommendation is that the teacher should be left to identify what works for him and his learners in their own particular context.

Keywords: Teacher cognition, planning practices, functional writing, communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is guided into teacher cognition analysis by Borg (2003), who states that;

Teacher cognition is concerned with the understanding of what teachers, think, know and believe. Its primary concern, therefore, lies with the unobservable dimension of teaching-teachers' mental lives pg. 163

A key factor in the growth of teacher cognition research has been the realization that we cannot properly understand teachers and teaching without understanding the thoughts, knowledge and beliefs that influence what teachers do. (Borg, 2003: 163)

The term teacher cognition as used by Borg (2003) refers to the unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching – what teachers know, believe and think. Teachers are active thinking decision-makers who make instructional choices by drawing on complex, practically-oriented, personalized and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts and beliefs. What is basic to this study is what teachers know, believe and think about the teaching of functional writing skills as a tool for effective communication. Holt (1992) opines that there is ample evidence that teachers' experiences as learners can inform cognitions about teaching and learning which continue to exert an influence on teachers throughout their career; (Kettle and Sellars, 1996); Weinstein (1990). Similarly, Borg (2006) notes that teacher cognition can be seen to involve four major sources; schooling, professional coursework, contextual factors and classroom practice including

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practice teaching. These views are evidence of what informs the teachers as they face their daily challenges in teaching functional writing skills. This chapter has considered the significance of schooling, professional coursework, content and classroom practice as crucial for effective teaching and thus effective communication.

Writing skills are important to learners who need them in their every day communications in school and even after school. When writing skills are needed in everyday communications be it in school or after school, they take an instrumental or a functional role and are therefore referred to as functional writing skills. The functional writing skills (KIE 2006:82) are defined to include writing of minutes, agenda and notifications, reports, e-mail, memoranda, notices, advertisements, business letters diaries and completion of forms, packing lists, shopping lists, journals, recipes, directions, instructions, thank you notes, posters among others.

Much of the world's commerce is today known to be conducted to a significant extent in the written medium of communication. To be able to operate effectively in commerce and any other industry, one has to be equipped with functional writing skills (Lunsford and Connors, 1989).

From the foregoing, it should be evident that functional writing ability is not an artistic talent that is a preserve of only a lucky few, but it is an essential and powerful tool needed by many people for practical purposes in their daily lives.

Ability in functional writing skills in English should therefore appear to be more crucial to the secondary school leavers and university graduates who are supposed to be equipped with adequate skills that can enable them fit in the job market, be it salaried or self employment. Nonetheless, in spite of the importance of skills in writing, e.g. letters, memos etc, an entry has been expressed by educationists and ordinary citizens to the effect that most of the secondary school leavers and university graduates have not been fully equipped with these basic skills for writing that they need in their lives especially after school (Tuiyot, 2002; Otieno, 2010)

KNEC has also admitted that students have inabilities in writing C.Vs, reports and letters of application for jobs in English. Reporting on the writing of a letter of application for a job (KCSE, 2012) KNEC reports indicated:

Most candidates did not use the formal format or layout. Most times, there was only the senders' address, salutations were inappropriate and the endings did not conform to the accepted ones... The feeling one got is that little was done on language. KNEC asserts that: judging by some of the exam scripts that land in the council marking rooms, one can say that some of the candidates are virtually functionally illiterate as they can hardly communicate.

It is for this reason that this paper assesses English language teachers' cognition on functional writing skills for effective communication in secondary schools in Kenya.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher cognition and prior language learning experience:

Nisbett and Ross (1980) notes that beliefs about teaching are established early in life and these beliefs are resistant to change even in the face of contradictory evidence. These views are shared by Lortie (1975) who, also says that teachers learn a lot about teaching through their vast experience as learners, what he calls 'apprenticeship of observation', (Holt, 1992; Farrel, 1999; urmston, 2003; Warford & Reeves, 2003) all suggest that initial concepts of teaching are extensively shaped by prior language learning.

Bailey et al. (1996) present findings of a study in which seven MA candidates and a teacher educator, investigated the role of their language learning histories in shaping their current teaching philosophies and practices. The writers identified several factors related to teaching and learning situations which had made their own language learning positive: (1) teacher personality and style (2) teachers were caring and committed (3) teachers respected and were respected by their students (4) as students, their motivation to learn enabled them to overcome inadequacies in the teaching (5) positive classroom environment. These findings made the authors of the study feel that they were able to begin to articulate their own theories of teaching. They felt that "the memories of instruction gained through their 'apprenticeship of observation' formed the basis for teachers as they approach what they do in the classroom, (Freeman, 1992:11). The present study is technically, focused on leaning history in shaping current teaching approaches, philosophies and practices of functional writing skills.

Bailey and the co-authors are not alone. Johnson (1994:450), Numrich (1996) too shed light on how prior experience relates to classroom practice. Johnson found that pre-service teachers' instructional decisions during a practicum were based on images of teachers, materials, activities and classroom organization generated by their own experiences as learners, she concludes:

Pre-service ESL teachers' beliefs may be based largely on images from their formal language learning experiences, and in all likelihood, will represent their dominant model of action during the practicum teaching experience. (P 450)

It can be discerned from this conclusion that some teachers tend to rely so much on their prior experience in the teaching of language in the classrooms. Numrich (1996) working with novice teachers, found that teachers decided to promote or to avoid specific instructional strategies on the basis of their positive or negative experiences of these respective strategies as learners. There are teachers who employ certain approaches because they feel that the approaches had worked well for them as learners while the ones that were not enjoyed are totally discarded.

Teacher cognition and teacher education:

Educational research has shown that at the beginning of teacher education programmes, students may have inappropriate, unrealistic or naïve understanding of teaching and learning, (Brookhart and Freeman 1992). A study conducted by Cumming (1989) on student teachers' conception of curriculum revealed that the charts produced by the student teachers were generally inadequate in terms of the relationships they posited between theoretical and practical issues, the way different components of the curriculum were related and sequenced and the relative emphasis they placed on particular components. In most researches Kagan 1992; Dunkin 1995; 1996; Brown and McGannon (1998); note that teacher education did impact on trainees' cognitions, though the precise nature of this impact varies across studies and indeed amongst trainees in the same study.

Richards, Ho and Giblin (1996:248) note that:

By the end of the course the trainees had completely internalized the discourse and metalanguage of the course and were able to talk spontaneously and thoughtfully about their own and others' lessons, to compare and contrast performances, and to discuss causes and effects of teaching behaviour using appropriate technical terminology.

The implication of this view for this study is that teachers handling functional writing skills during their training had variation in the extent to which each mastered the principles underlying the course, with each interpreting the course in individual ways on the basis of their teaching experiences and their own beliefs and assumptions about themselves, teachers, teaching and learning (Ibid). Almarza (1996) observes that although teacher education plays a powerful role in shaping the student teachers' behavior during teaching practice, it does not alter significantly the cognitions the students bring to the course. For example, on completion of her teaching practice one of the student teachers, 'saw herself free from the constraints imposed by the context of the classroom, she was back in a position in which she could continue to explore the ideas she had about language prior to the beginning of the course (pg 69). This view equally had profound influence of how teachers feel that prior experience and not teacher education has more influence to the teaching of writing.

Teaching and learning of functional writing skills:

Winer (1992), Barasa (2005), Tin (2006), Canagarajah, (2006) demonstrate the importance of teacher education and teacher training in teaching writing in the second and foreign language classroom. Throughout Winer's paper she supplies information from student journals in her TESL writing practicum, a methodology course required for graduate students in the ESL/EFL program. She traces how the students' awareness of and attitudes toward writing changed throughout the course. At the outset of the course, students' attitudes towards writing were predominantly negative. The author addressed four student concerns in particular: 1) a dread of writing, 2) boredom and/or intimidation with composition topics, 3) insecurity about their writing skills, and 4) insecurity about their teaching skills and ability to provide adequate and accurate feedback to their students' writing. Winer lists five strategies that she found helpful in changing student teachers' negative attitudes toward their own writing as well as their attitudes about teaching writing. Based on course components of her writing methodology practicum, Winer suggests, first, having student teachers design writing tasks and requiring the class to complete them, second, requiring student teachers to revise these tasks, third, providing guided peer coaching

and feedback, fourth, providing guided practice in topic development, and fifth, helping student teachers develop an understanding of the writing process through journal writing. This study is particularly interested in the teacher cognition and attitude towards the teaching of writing skills and how all these influence their own teaching of functional writing skills.

Study Design and Methodology:

The research was carried out in the then Nyanza Province. Schools in the country, specifically in Nyanza have performed variedly in English KCSE examination. Communicative competence in a language in academic circles is largely judged by performance in the examinations. While a number of schools in this area have shown performance consistently above a mean of 7.000, a majority has shown a mean below 4.000 (PDE Reports-Nyanza, 2009). The significance of this study area to this study is that it has all the required sample size that represents different performance categories.

To obtain a representative sample for this study, the stratified sampling and purposive sampling methods were used to sample out the required schools in the Province. These methods were used because the researcher wished to include specific categories of schools in the study. The researcher hoped that by using these methods, every category of the required schools were to be represented. Given that this research is qualitative, a limited number of schools were used so that enough time was used to collect data.

Six secondary schools in Nyanza Province were used in the study. The schools were sampled as follows: 2 schools whose English language subject mean is above 7.900, 2 schools whose mean is between 6.000-7.800 and 2 schools whose subject mean is below 6.000. In each of the schools, the teachers of English handling forms 2 – 4 became automatic respondents. Three lessons of English were selected from each school for observation; this made a total of 18 lessons. In all the schools, where there was more than one stream, only one stream was observed and the teacher handling the stream became an automatic respondent, thus 18 teachers were interviewed. All students whose lessons were observed also participated in responding to the students self evaluation schedule.

The schools were selected in three categories using the stratified sampling; these are:

- a) Schools with a subject mean above 7.9
- b) Schools with a subject mean between 6.0-7.8
- c) Schools with a subject mean below 6.0

From each of the above groups, 2 schools were randomly selected to make a total of 6 schools, using the list of secondary schools available from the PDE's office Nyanza. As Kerlinger (1978:79) observes:

A sample drawn at random is unbiased in the sense that no member of the population has any more chance of being selected than any other member.pg 79

Second, with regard to the observation method, three lessons were observed in each sampled school; 1 form 2 class, 1 form 3 class and 1 form 4 class. In all the schools we had more than one stream thus; random sampling was used to have one stream of every class selected for observation.

In this study, three instruments were used. These are: Students self-evaluation schedule, Interview schedule for Teachers of English and Observation schedule

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The relationship that exists between teachers' cognition on functional writing skills and teachers' attitude towards teaching the same, approaches used to teaching functional writing skills as revealed by the findings are discussed in the following paragraphs. The information from the results is presented thematically in 3 main parts.

- a) Teacher cognition/knowledge and understanding of functional writing skills
- b) Teacher attitude towards teaching functional writing skills
- c) Approaches employed in teaching functional writing skills and syllabus coverage

Teacher cognition, knowledge and understanding of functional writing skills:

The data on teacher cognition of functional writing skills revealed that teachers have information, confidence and necessary skills and approaches in relation to the teaching of functional writing. Most of them who were interviewed indicated that it is a practical and useful skill used for special purposes. This understanding did not lead the teachers to help the students do the actual functional writing. The study revealed that there is a gap between teacher cognition and how these cognitions influence teachers in helping learners to grasp the same concept, (Borg, 2003). This finding is similar to that of Burns (1992) who examined teachers' cognitions and practices in the context of writing instruction. Burns found out an extremely complex and interrelated network of underlying beliefs which appeared to influence instructional approaches adopted by teachers. Differences in the beliefs teachers held about these issues were reflected in differences in their approaches in teaching writing. If functional writing skill is a practical skill then teachers should stop dominating classes, giving explanations while the role of the learner is relegated to that of listening and taking notes. The students' self-evaluation revealed that students are not given enough exercises and examples and that the teachers should change their approaches to teaching functional writing skills. Similarly, the evidence gathered from the classroom during observation, revealed that students don't actually do exercises on the CVs, letters etc but rather take notes on the formats thus making them passive partakers when they are supposed to be active. This is what Tsui(1996) calls product approach than process approach.

This study has established a very crucial implication. Much as the teachers show understanding of what functional writing skills is, they don't use this knowledge/ understanding to adequately teach it. The student's ability to imagine and be independent is nipped in the bud. These findings are similar to those of Eisenstein-Ebsworth and Swheers (1997) who in their study of teachers' perspectives on grammar teaching, found that teachers generally had well defined approaches to teaching grammar. However Andrews (1994) in his study about the teachers' knowledge of grammar found out that majority of teachers he encountered had inadequate levels of grammatical knowledge. Most other studies in English education contexts in the UK have highlighted inadequacies of language of prospective and practicing language teachers (Chandler, Robinson & Noyes, 1988; Williamson & Hardman, 1995; Wray, 1993). But this is not the case in the present study. Perhaps the problem is with the approaches the teachers use and these approaches would be influenced by the teachers' prior language learning experiences (Borg, 2003).

Teacher attitude to teaching functional writing skills:

The findings from the teachers interviewed revealed that to the teachers, teaching functional writing skills is not quite a challenging task; it is an area that is not demanding, teaching it does not require so much preparation. The implication of the results of the present study point to the teachers' lack of a positive attitude towards the teaching of functional writing skills. If teaching functional writing is easy then teachers do not plan. Clark and Peterson (1956) proposed 3 major categories of teacher's thought processes: a) teacher planning b) teacher's interactive thoughts and decisions c) teacher's theories and beliefs. It is the teacher's cognition in relation to the classroom practice that is the focus of this study. This therefore leads to insufficient teaching of the skill and lack of in-depth exploration of the area in class. Yet, the implication of the results point to the need to alleviate this condescending attitude towards the teaching of functional writing skills. Johnson (1992) has the same view about teacher attitude. In her study on the extent to which ESL teachers possess theoretical beliefs which reflect the methodological divisions towards L2 teaching, she finds that teacher's beliefs are resistant to theoretical shifts in the field of teaching reading. And she further finds out that the sources of ESL teachers' theoretical beliefs may stem from the methodological approaches that were prominent when they began teaching. Thus, it implies that teachers have fixed minds based on their prior experience and this will forever not change their approaches.

Approaches employed in teaching functional writing skills:**Syllabus:**

In responding to the adequacy of the present syllabus in preparing learners in terms of functional writing, teachers reported that the syllabus was adequate. Although many inadequacies in students and school learners' work can be attributed to various factors such as unavailability of reading materials, carelessness from the learners, the syllabus as a point of reference and direction has a role to play. In exploring the syllabus for teaching English, a lot is mentioned on writing in general but very little is said about the teaching of functional writing in the 'introduction'. A close scrutiny

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reveals a lot of topics on functional writing and not a single demonstration is given. Perhaps this is left for the teachers' own cognition. K.I.E (2006) while trying to demonstrate how functional writing should be taught tries to emphasize on the teaching of the format.

“The teacher can use the minutes below to teach the format of writing minutes” ... “The learners should be reminded to adhere to the correct format of date, the receivers address, salutation, body and signing off ...”

What the above statement demonstrates from the syllabus is emphasis on format and not the process of teaching functional writing. The findings reveal that the teachers have not had a critical look at the syllabus in terms of functional writing skills. This leaves the teacher at the cross roads. Each of them therefore uses his prior experience (Holt, 1992; Farrel, 1999) and cognition to teach this area of functional writing skills.

Approaches:

It is worthwhile to note that syllabus gives birth to the approaches that the teachers will use to teach functional writing. The present study began by questioning teacher cognition and the approaches to teaching writing, especially their applicability to the future needs of students in terms of effective communication. This study wanted to know how cognition and the types of approaches that were being used, how effective and how could the student's chance be improved to succeed in writing in class and beyond school life. The findings revealed that most teachers taught functional writing skills in isolation during most of the lessons. The syllabus states that language structures should not be taught in isolation because it is not only boring but also tends to produce learners who lack communicative competence. The implication of this to the present study is that teachers need to move in haste and integrate functional writing every time they are teaching it. In functional writing the language must be straight forward and clear in order to meet the standard. Examples of clear language should be demonstrated through the whole class writings. Concrete language as well as specific language should also be showed to the students to help to meet this standard. Teachers have to use pictures just as an example and any other learning resources to illustrate steps in the procedure. The findings are supported by the views of Hinkel (2006) who says that as with L2 reading, L2 writing pedagogy has to pay increasing attention to the integration of bottom-up and top-down skills because learners need both if they are to become proficient L2 writers. To achieve proficiency in writing, Hinkel argues that it requires explicit pedagogy in grammar and lexis. Also, ones linguistic repertoire and one's writing skills often determine one's social, economic and political choices.

It is on the same note that Celce-Murcia (2001), Christie (1998) and Martin (1992) argue that lack of instruction in L2 grammar and lexis disadvantages L2 learners in their vocational, academic and professional careers and ultimately reduces their options. They have continued to emphasize the importance of language quality in L2 writing because grammar and lexis are inextricable from meaning in written discourse and because L2 writers are ultimately evaluated based on their control of language and text construction in their written discourse.

McKay (1993), Birch (2005), Byrd (2005) point out that curriculum design in L2 writing instruction has to include grammar and vocabulary to enable L2 writers to communicate meaningfully and appropriately. With this objective in mind, prominent current positions advocate the integration of grammar and vocabulary curricula with L2 writing instruction. Thus, approaches should be wholesome.

4. SUMMARY

The main purpose of the study was to examine teacher cognitions on the teaching of functional writing skills. Based on the findings of the study, in this paper we conclude that different teachers have different cognitions on the teaching of functional writing skills. Many teachers look at functional writing as, writing with a layout, writing which is easy to teach, writing with a limiting framework while others look at it as very demanding, has challenging concepts etc. Thus, based on the findings that different teachers have different cognitions in relation to the teaching of functional writing skills, just like the relativists hold that there is no single position or reality and humans construct meanings and behaviour in different ways, so are learners taught differently. Some end up being functionally literate while others are functionally illiterate.

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