Review Paper

Developing students' use of English vocabulary in second language learning

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Abstract

English has always been used in Kenya as the official language of communication as well as the medium of instruction in schools, colleges and universities. It is also the pre-eminent language of international communication. In Kenyan education system proficiency in English makes the learning of other subjects much easier. Proficiency is tested through essay writing. Kenyan secondary syllabus adopts an integrated approach to the teaching of language. Integration means merging two autonomous but related entities in order to strengthen and enrich both. Kenyan secondary syllabus has integrated English and literature. Through exposure to literature the learners are expected to improve their language skills. They not only enrich their vocabulary but also learn to use language in a variety of ways. Similarly, an improved knowledge of the language enhances the learner's appreciation of literary material. Therefore integration means that no language skill should be taught in isolation. Listening, speaking, reading and writing skills should complement each other. High school essay writing is divided into two parts: imaginative and functional skills. Imaginative essay tests learners' creativity while functional composition tests learners' ability to follow given formats. Appropriate vocabulary used in the two types of compositions determines whether the learner has a mastery of the skill being tested or not. Assisting learners develop the right vocabulary for a given topic helps learners to express themselves clearly and correctly. Ellis's theory of instructed second language acquisition shows that instructed learners develop the ability to use their linguistic and pragmatic knowledge in the production of correct and appropriate sentences. Krashen's input hypothesis asserts that learners' linguistic competence is built up through comprehension of the input available for acquisition.

Introduction

Background to the problem: English language, which is the focus of this article, is recognized as the most widely used international language in the world. In Kenya, it is used as the official language and is taught as a compulsory and examinable subject at all levels in primary and secondary level.

Language has four skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing. Speaking and writing are productive skills requiring the user to produce language while listening and reading are receptive skills. Writing is an advance language skill that has wide - ranging implications for the way we think and present our ideas.

Writing skills, unlike speaking cannot be picked from the environment through exposure. Though reading influences writing, to a large extent writing skills are taught.

Conscious efforts must be made to equip language learners with writing skills more so in building apt vocabulary.

Definition of operational terms: The following terms whenever used in this study will assume the operational definition given below:

Mock examination: An exam done by form fours in the district in preparation for Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) examination. Its results are shown in terms of marks and grades.

Composition writing: Writing skill that implies the ability to tell or retell pieces of information in the form of narratives or description. Writing skill that tests learners' ability to provide information in different forms of texts such as telegrams, memoranda and advertisements.

Literature Review

Composition writing: Composition writing is a technical skill that cannot be acquired by chance or by some innate ability. Writing as a skill has to be learnt.

There are a number of factors that influence achievement in writing. The choice of lexical items is important for the overall meaning of a text. Apart from lexical items, there are other factors. Firstly, what is taught and to whom is the teaching directed to. This has to do with the writing curriculum and the content to be taught. The content is expected to be carefully graded according to the psychological needs of the learner. Writing tasks must be appropriate for an age group because

writing calls for imagination and this depends on previous experience. Tomori[1] says that the higher the quality and quantity of our perceptual experiences about an object or class of objects, the sharper our concepts of them are likely to be.

Secondly, how composition writing is taught. Writing is a skill that is distinct from the other language skills, with its own complexities that can be resolved only by using methods that involves learners' participation.

Thirdly, what are the criteria of good performance? In evaluation, a number of issues are looked into. A learner should communicate clearly, and use a variety of lexical items appropriately. Since writing is a social behaviour learners are expected to have communicative competence so that they are able to pass information and ideas to others.

Mitchell[2] asserts that communication is the art of passing onto others the information they need in a form they can understand.

The teaching of vocabulary: Traditionally, the teaching of vocabulary has mostly been incidental, limited to presenting new items as they appeared in reading or sometimes listening texts. This indirect teaching of vocabulary assumes that vocabulary expansion will happen through the practice of other language skills. This practice is not enough to ensure vocabulary expansion. Lewis[3] argues that vocabulary should be at the center of language teaching, because language consists of grammaticalised lexis not lexicalised grammar. There are several aspects of lexis that need to be taken into account when teaching vocabulary. Gains and Redman[4] suggests the following aspects of vocabulary which should be considered: polysemy, homonymy, synonymy, affective meaning, style, register, and dialect. Gairns[5] goes further to suggest ways to teach vocabulary considering how our memory works. It is noted that learning involves storing new items in our short-term memory and afterwards in long-term memory. We do not control this process consciously but there seem to be some important clues to consider. Retention in short-term memory is not effective if the number of chunks of information exceeds seven. Therefore in a single lesson (40 minutes) we should not aim at teaching more than this number. However our long-term memory can hold any amount of information.

Gairns[5] postulates that our mental lexicon is highly organized and efficient and semantic related items are stored together. Word frequency is another factor that affects storage, as the most frequently used items are easier to retrieve. Learning activities should aim at giving learners opportunities to analyse and process language more deeply, which should help them, retain information in long-term memory. Learners should be encouraged to turn their receptive vocabulary items into productive ones. A lexical item is most likely to be learned when a learner feels a personal need to know it or when there is a need to express something to accomplish the learner's own purpose. The decision to incorporate a word in productive

vocabulary is entirely personal and varies according to each student's motivation and needs. Task-based learning should help teachers to provide authentic, meaningful tasks in which students engage to achieve a concrete output, using appropriate language for the context.

Learning activities: Students might have a receptive knowledge of a wider range of vocabulary, which means they can recognize the item and recognize its meaning. Nevertheless, their productive use of vocabulary is normally limited. This is an area that needs greater attention. Class activities such as role play, drama, group work, debates and discussion help learners in using vocabulary productively. Learning activities help learners connect form and meaning of words. Brown and Hatch[6] noted that learning vocabulary is a complex process consisting of a number of different stages. They suggest a model of learning vocabulary which includes the following five stages.

Firstly, having sources for encountering new words. Secondly, getting a clear image of words, both visual and auditory. The next stage is learning the meaning of words and then making strong memory connections between form and meaning of words before finally using the words in one's output.

Brown and Payne[7] in their article learning vocabulary, say that the sources of *words to* be learnt are often prescribed; teachers have to teach the words in the course text book and the final stage, being able to use the word is arguably a result of the preceding stages. They suggest an activity where by one word is associated with another word to create a word pair which are more or less synonymous, for example, stimulating means interesting. This activity is appropriate for lower classes when they are still learning lexical items for receptive purposes rather than productive use. Learning activities have a motivation power on the learners. As compared to individualistic environment, the feelings of togetherness in group learning activities produce positive energy and make writing lessons more interesting.

Studies on Second Language Writing Process: There are three dimensions of assessing vocabulary in essay writing.

Reads[8] proposes that vocabulary knowledge can be assessed as part of the assessment of other language skills instead of being assessed in isolation. This is the first dimension.

The second dimension, selective-comprehensive, deals with vocabulary range and considers whether or not a vocabulary measure should be selective, where only specific word items are assessed or comprehensive, where the measure covers the whole vocabulary content of the input material in the case of listening and reading tasks or candidates response data in the case of writing and speaking tasks. The third dimension, context-dependent examines the necessity of context in vocabulary assessment and considers whether or not a candidate should be expected to respond to a vocabulary measure with reference to any contextual information.

The third dimension is considered an appropriate way of assessing vocabulary because learners are always expected to base their writing on a given topic. The title or topic sentence should dictate the type of lexical items to be used in writing.

Learners need to be given contextual information regarding given topics they are expected to write on. Teacher's language can help in giving contextual information through, firstly, error correction which has to do with feedback regarding the correctness or appropriateness of learners' responses. Secondly, input, these are target language samples which a learner is exposed. Thirdly through interaction, this is instruction in the classroom. Instruction involves a process of interpersonal communication which needs the efforts of both learner and teacher.

Learners' Anxiety/Motivation in Language Learning: Allwright and Bailey[9] in quoting Kleinmann[10] say that despite the unpleasant associations we may have with anxiety, it is not necessarily a bad thing in itself. Researchers distinguish between "debilitating anxiety' which gets in the way and facilitating anxiety' which actually helps people do better than they might otherwise. Teachers should find ways of minimizing the source of debilitating anxiety and optimising the source of facilitating anxiety so that learners can work with what Allwright and Bailey[9], calls relaxed concentration. Allwright and Bailey[9] makes a distinction between trait anxiety (a relatively permanent personality feature) and the less stable, state anxiety.

Whether a learner is anxious or not she/he needs motivation. Most motivated learners are likely to be the most receptive ones.

There are two types of motivation. Allwright and Bailey[9] says integrative motivation makes a learner wish to learn in order to relate better and integrate with the speakers of the target language. Instrumentally motivated learners just want academic success or perhaps to get a job for which there is a language requirement.

Motivated learners would aim at improving their written work.

The Role of Instruction: A majority of researchers agree that formal instruction has a positive effect on the accuracy with which learners produce the target language. According to Ellis[11], instruction involves direct pedagogic intervention which aims at accelerating the learner's inter language. Krashen et al.[12], measured statistically the relationship between the amount of instruction experienced by learners on one hand and proficiency scores on the other hand. They found a positive relationship between instruction and proficiency. Instructions precipitate proficiency.

Theoretical framework

Ellis[13] explain how instructed learners' develop the ability to use their linguistic and pragmatic knowledge in the production of correct and appropriate sentences.

The theory mainly relates to the kind of opportunities provided in the classroom context and the learning outcomes that these opportunities result in.

Ellis[11] identifies two types of instruction: code oriented instruction and communicative oriented instruction. Code oriented instruction is instructions aimed at teaching specific linguistic aspects. Communicative oriented instruction on the other hand, is aimed at providing learners with opportunities to communicate naturally.

Ellis R[13] further notes that other important aspects that may affect the comprehensibility of input are variables such as the source of explanation (the teacher, the students, textbooks) and manner of presentation (oral or written). In describing input in the writing lesson, our study looked at such aspects as the source of input, input elaboration and the modifications the teacher makes in order to make input in the vocabulary development comprehensible.

Types of second language knowledge: The theory of instructed second language acquisition distinguishes two types of knowledge internalized by the learner-explicit and implicit knowledge.

Ellis[13] notes that in the case of language, explicit knowledge refers to knowledge that is analyzed (in the sense that it exists independently of the actual instances of its use), abstract (it takes the form of some underlying generalizations of the actual linguistic behavior) and explanatory (the logical basis of the knowledge is understood independently of its application). Explicit knowledge is available to the learner as a conscious representation. The learner can say what he knows about the language.

Explicit knowledge may help the learner to notice features in the input that would otherwise be ignored. For example, when a learner knows that homophones have same pronunciation but different meaning he is likely to notice this in essays he reads.

Implicit knowledge is of two types; formulaic knowledge and rule-based knowledge. These two types are intuitive. The learner may not tell when he learnt them. Formulaic knowledge constitutes formulas- fixed and semi fixed expressions, which have been internalized as unanalyzed unit and are accessed in expressions such as "as happy as a lark" "as proud as a peacock," "the early bird catches the worm". Rule-based knowledge has to do with the ability of a speaker to judge the grammatical or ungrammatical sentences. Native speakers of a language will often provide such judgments though they may not explain the basis of their judgments. In writing, implicit knowledge enables the learner to use idioms and other fixed expressions which helps to improve his/her writing and his/her ability to express himself/herself creatively. Formal aspects of writing such as paragraphing and sentence structures may rely on explicit knowledge. Vocabulary development was noted to be aided by both implicit and explicit knowledge.

Changing input to knowledge: The learner plays an active role in converting input into stored knowledge (intake). Both explicit and implicit knowledge can be learned and converted into intake. This can be achieved in various ways such as memorization and problem-solving. Memorization occurs when the learner attempts to consciously consign information to memory.

Problem solving is seen when learners attempt to induce explicit information about the second language from the input data they are exposed to.

Data presentation, analysis and discussion

How learners develop vocabulary in essay writing: The way learners developed vocabulary is closely related to the learning activities. There are learner-dependent factors which influence development of vocabulary. When a learner finds a new word which she/he cannot easily guess the meaning she/he adopts certain strategies to solve the problem. This problem - solving process is controlled by the learning context where the problem is tackled. Language learning in general and vocabulary acquisition in particular are such problem - solving tasks at different levels of complexity. The strategies a learner uses and the effectiveness of these strategies depend on three factors. Firstly, the learner him/herself. (For example, his/her attitude, motivation and prior knowledge). Secondly the learning task at hand (for example, type, complexity, difficult and generality), and thirdly, learning environment (for example, the learning culture, the richness of input and output opportunities). The learner brings to the language learning situation a wide spectrum of individual differences that will influence the learning rate and the ultimate learning result.

Writing sentences using given words and use of dictionary: This is a method of learning vocabulary which enable learners to turn passive vocabulary into active ones. Passive vocabularies are words which learners can recognize but cannot remember when they actually have to produce it. These words are easily forgotten since the connection between them and their memory is weak. Writing sentences enables learners to learn vocabulary based on word groups. These are nouns, pronouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs.

Dictionary in second language learning is a useful tool that helps learners gain further understanding of the range of use of new words leading eventually to accurate production, mainly in writing.

In the recent years there has been use of electronic dictionaries, on line dictionaries or vocabulary glosses integrated into language learning software or web pages. This offers the learners a quick access to the information they need which in turn help learners develop vocabulary faster.

Use of discussion groups: In discussion groups learners are given an opportunity to express themselves verbally before writing their findings.

Use of class presentation: It is an effective method that is preceded by group discussion. It encourages thinking and creativity, lets students develop and practice new language and behavioral skills in a relatively non-threatening setting, and creates the motivation and involvement necessary for learning to occur.

One of the principles of Ellis[13] theory - changing input to knowledge - states that a number of factors may induce a learner to notice something in the input. One of the factors is that task demand can force the learner to heed specific features because they are important for the completion of a task. Ellis[13] theory of instructed second language acquisition notes that knowledge becomes intake through practice. One of the problems a second language learner encounters is how to commit a massive amount of foreign words to memory. Repeating newly learnt words verbally help sin retention. Kelly[14] research showed that repeating words a loud helps retention far better than silent repetition. It is important to note that individual differences play a crucial role in determining a person's memorization capacities. There are other strategies that learners can use to aid vocabulary learning. The first method is use of mnemonics. Mnemonics focuses on memory. Based on the research done by Nation[15], mnemonic devices in foreign language boost memory. Vocabulary learning is essentially a memory issue therefore mnemonics help in vocabulary building. One of the most studied mnemonics is the keyword method, in which the foreign word is remembered by being linked to a keyword, a sound - like native word (acoustic link). Mnemonic approaches to vocabulary development in second language learning suffer from the following limitations, firstly, mnemonic devices mainly aim for the retention of paired - associates. However, the vocabulary of an L2 is far more than a collection of LI - L2 word pairs. Secondly mnemonic approach to vocabulary development emphasize on a fixed one to one relationship between form and meaning. However, a key notion in the applied linguist's conception of vocabulary is multiple meanings and multiple dimensions of meaning (referential, syntactic, pragmatic, and emotional). Vocabulary learning is normally done with contextual, i.e. words have slightly different meaning depending on the context in which that word appears. Learning new words from context helps learners encode the new word together with the context where it appears. This implies that a word is remembered together with the surrounding words/phrases. Constructing a sentence using a newly learnt word means putting a word in a context.

Factors which influence the way learners' develop vocabulary in essay writing: There are factors which influence the learning of writing skills and specifically the development of apt vocabulary.

Assistance from teachers: Assistance from teachers is an integral part of the ways learners build vocabulary. This enables learners to express themselves but also use the right words and format.

Teachers' source of guidance in vocabulary building: Teachers are normally expected to use some teaching resources in their lesson.

All classes in Kenyan setting use prescribed course text books. Course text acts as a guide to both learners and teachers. This is in line with Brown and Payne[7] who noted that the source of words to be learnt are often prescribed, teachers are expected to teach the words in the course text book.

Common errors in the use of vocabulary: Formal and Informal Language: The choice of words used in any communication should be appropriate and acceptable. Informal (spoken) English contains a number of colloquialisms (conversational expressions) that are inappropriate in formal written English.

The following forms of writing were identified among the errors made by students: i. Contractions, ii. Hesitations fillers, iii. Personal pronouns, iv. Use of passive active voice, iv. Colloquial word vi. Slang.

Poor word formation: The basic part of any word is the root. To it, you can add a prefix at the beginning and/or a suffix at the end to change the meaning. For example, the word 'unflattering'. The root is flatter, while the prefix "un" makes the word negative, and the suffix "ing' changes it from a verb into an adjective. Learners can build their vocabulary by learning the use of prefixes and suffixes.

A prefix is a syllable placed before a word to qualify its meaning, for example. Contra - contraception, contradict. Be - befriend, belittle, bemoan. Arch - archbishop. Dis - disbelieve, disorder, disagree The prefix 'dis' means the negative, reverse, opposite of, as in disbelieve, disorder and disagree. It modifies or changes the meanings of the original words: believe, order and agree A suffix is a syllable placed after a word to qualify its meaning for example: age - breakage, postage, stoppage. Ic - poetic, romantic, ity - validity, activity, humidity, en - broken, eaten, hidden, golden, wards-backwards, eastwards, homeward. Suffixes change the grammatical function of a word rather than their meanings.

Teachers' further explanation on this showed that learners do not have sufficient knowledge on how to form words, for example, adjectives from nouns or verbs from adjectives. There are many adjectives that are formed by the addition of a suffix to a noun.

There are a number of grammar lessons in which word formation is taught. There are three skills that a learner needs in order to do well in word formation. Firstly, breaking a new word into parts so that the affixes and roots are revealed. Secondly knowing the meanings of the parts and finally being able to connect the meaning of the parts with the meaning of the word, Nation[16].

Graphical Features: In grammar, learners are taught the use of punctuation which is supposed to be applied in writing. Students make errors on the use of punctuation marks, as follows: parenthesis, dashes commas and brackets. Students make errors in punctuating the following; i. Titles of people for example, Miss Sina, ii. Pronoun of the first person: I, iii. Names of particular places for example, Nakuru, iv. Names of days of the week, months and holidays.

Mother tongue translation: Teachers noted that learners construct wrong sentence when they translate words and phrases direct from mother tongue. This is mainly seen in euphemisms. Fluency in English cannot be achieved without a reasonable command of English euphemisms. Euphemisms represent a part of English largely untaught.

Choice of words: i. Use of pompous words: When students use pompous words they end up using words indiscriminately and out of context. Another area noted by teachers as area of difficulty is phrasal verbs and idioms. The meaning of the phrasal verb is not a sum of the meaning of the verb plus that of the particles (adverbs). ii. Use of jargon: Students use unnecessary technical words. This interferes with the flow of a composition. It should be noted that technical words save writers the problem of using too many words. However students must be cautioned against unnecessary use of technical terms. The following are a few examples of jargon words. Nasal corza (medical)- a cold. Cognizance (legal)-awareness, iii. Synonyms: They enable learners to use the right word for a particular context, hence expressing herself/himself accurately and concisely. iv. use of cliché; This is the use of expressions that have lost their communication punch. v. Homophones; The study showed that a lot of students are unable to use homophones correctly. Contextual information helps learners differentiate words. vi. Dramatization, role play, group work and debate.

The following activities: dramatization, role plays and group work were used to enhance vocabulary development. Their value in building vocabulary was determined by how far they enhanced the productive use of new words. Integrating experiential learning activities in class increases interest and enable learners to notice new words because there is demand to complete a task.

Class presentation as a learning activity enables learners to engage other learning activities such as group discussion and use of dictionary.

Encountering a word, knowing its meaning, its pronunciation and using the word productively demand metacognitive

judgement, choice and deployment of cognitive strategies for vocabulary learning. Each strategy a learner uses will determine to a large extent how well a new word is learned.

Learning: The affective filter hypothesis by Krashen[17] states that comprehensive input is necessary for successful acquisition. According to this hypothesis, comprehensive input may not be utilized by second language learners if there is a mental block that prevents them from fully profiting from it. High affective filter acts as a barrier to acquisition.

From our research on writing process motivation among learners occurs when they feel that their efforts to use appropriate vocabulary is rewarded by either getting higher marks or being complimented by teachers. Motivated learners are ready to learner new words, they pay more attention to collocation and spelling and are more conscious of contextual learning. Learners who don't care what they achieve in writing process rarely use dictionary and always ignore unknown word.

Conclusion

Summary: The study set out to investigate how learners develop apt vocabulary for writing skills in secondary schools. It was noted that different methods are used in building apt vocabulary. Learning activities aid a lot in development of vocabulary. The methods used by the teachers assisted in giving concise definition. This included detailed description and illustration. Learners were encouraged to know the contextual meaning of words. Vocabulary learning entails both remembering words and the ability to use them automatically in a wide range of language contexts. Learners practiced using newly learnt words, the goal of _practice was to_ store items in the long-term memory and to turn passive vocabulary into active. Class activities help learners to integrate lexical/semantic information into entries: move words from episodic memory to lexical information which is then integrated into the mental lexicon and can be retrieved automatically for and in natural communication.

Methods Used by Teachers in Building Vocabulary: In evaluating the ways used to build apt vocabulary the use of the following methods were noted: writing sentences, use of dictionary to check meaning of words, use of discussion groups, use of class presentation and matching words and their meaning. The above ways were seen to be appropriate means of building vocabulary use among students. They provided an opportunity for use of other skills such as questions, soliciting and _reacting comments. The teacher could also prompt enabling students to_ participate in class. The practice of writing sentences using new lexical items enable the learner to use the words productively. In language learning, practice plays an important role in the learners' overall performance at a given item.

Practice increases the chances that a given performance will be acquired. No amount of teacher contribution can substitute the

learner's activity in the learning process. It was noted in all the classes that use of writing sentences as a method of teaching vocabulary enabled the learners to be creative and to use words productively. The pressure on the teachers to cover the whole syllabus makes it difficult for them to involve learners in sufficient practice which assist in vocabulary building.

Use of dictionary was noted to be a common method of checking the meaning of words. The learners should be encouraged to know that having dictionary meaning of a word is not enough. A word can have different meaning depending on the contextual meaning.

Use of discussion is helpful. Discussion gives learners an opportunity to express themselves freely. Learners learn from each other. If there are many lexical items to be learnt, a group can handle this better than each individual student.

Use of class presentation was noted to be the most engaging method. Language is learned faster and more enthusiastically in a situation where the learner realizes how urgently he/she needs the knowledge to enable him/her makes a presentation.

It is the teacher's responsibility to maintain interest through reinforcement. Reinforcement provides and consolidates the learners' self-confidence, creating a desire to participate. Another way which was used to build vocabulary was matching words and their meaning. This method relies mainly on the class text. It provided a quicker way of learning the meaning of a word. The problem with this method is that it does not enable learners to use the needed lexical items in different contexts.

Use of role play as a class activity in vocabulary building was seen to be an effective method. Role play introduces problem situation dramatically. It provides opportunity for people to assume roles of others and in the process new words are introduced and used productively. Role play provides opportunity for practice which is useful assigning new words to memory.

Teachers pointed out that in vocabulary learning class activities bring in relaxation and fun for learners, thus help them learn and retain new words easily. It was also noted that they involve friendly competition and they keep learners interested. These create motivation for learners of English to get involved and participate actively in the learning activities. Activities meant to build vocabulary bring real world context into classroom and enhance learners' use of English in a flexible and communicative way.

Comprehensible input is provided in genuine communication. Active involvement stems from participation in worthwhile, absorbing interaction which tends to make students forget they are learning a new language. Students have the opportunity to try out new behaviours in a safe environment, which helps them

develop long term motivation and to master additional language skills.

In our study we noted that learning activities focused solely *on prescriptive themes* emphasizing specific words, this did not capture the spontaneous, real life flow of conversation. Learners should be active, for example, they should help select tasks and provide details of their learning process.

Recommendations: i. Learning activities which aim at developing vocabulary should be used frequently in writing lessons. ii. Focusing on grammar and sentence structure in the teaching of writing skills is not enough. Learners need to be guided on appropriate words and phrases they can use on given topics. iii. Explicit teaching and incidental learning should complement each other in vocabulary teaching. iv. Learners should be encouraged to read widely and use dictionary to check meaning of new words. v. Teachers should use varied instructional materials e.g. newspapers, journals, audio and video tapes, flash cards and posters. vi. Learners should be guided to participate in activities which will give them an opportunity to read, speak, listen and write.

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