

DO PICTURES HAVE AN EFFECT ON LEARNER PERFORMANCE IN COMPOSITION WRITING?

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Instruction using a variety of learning resources has been heralded as a most promising activity that can engage students into academic language and literacy skills. There are few studies investigating approaches in teaching English composition in primary school. Furthermore emphasis on learner foundations in writing is lacking in most African countries. The purpose behind this review is to establish whether using pictures could reinforce composition writing in upper primary schools. There is scanty research on picture-based instruction in general and on its effect on composition writing and language achievement in particular. The objective of this review is to examine the effectiveness of using pictures on learner performance in composition writing. Preliminary studies have established that pictures have an increasing effect on both composition writing and general attitude of learners towards English. On the basis of the findings of the study, the following conclusions were made: Most teachers do not use pictures to teach composition since it is time wasting because it requires a lot of time in preparation and acquisition of pictures. However, from various studies, when learners were exposed to pictures during composition writing lessons and eventually in examinations, their performance was significantly better than before. It is imperative that, a study be carried out on role played by the school administration and the community in the effective teaching of English and also, the relevance of the English language curriculum used at teacher training colleges in relation to the new trends in English Composition. Furthermore it would be necessary to evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of Ministry of Education in English language assessment by Quality Assurance and Standards Officers.

Key words: Pictures, Motivation, Composition Writing

Background

Kenya has an education system commonly known as the 8-4-4 system. The system comprises of 8 years of primary education, 4 years of secondary education and a minimum of 4 years of university education. Progression from primary to secondary school and from secondary to university is through selection on the basis of performance in the national examinations for the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) and the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE), which are tested in English, apart from the Swahili examinations that is tested in Swahili. The selective manner of progression between levels is a clear indication that not all students who complete the primary course have the opportunity to pursue further education. For instance, according to the Ministry of Education's (1999) statistics, only an average of 45% of the primary school pupils who take the KCPE examination are selected for entry into high school. Among the students who are not selected for high school entry, some join village polytechnics, repeat or drop out of school. Poor KCPE examinations scores at the end of Standard 8 also create a barrier in accessing Secondary School. 2004 KCPE results show that a much higher percentage of students from private schools qualify for secondary school than public school, which has led to an overrepresentation of private school graduates attending top Kenyan Secondary Schools (Glennister & Kremer, 2011)

The early development of language enables a child to develop effective and orderly reasoning that is important in composition writing (Adoyo, 2008). In 2001, Jim Ackers and Frank Hardman conducted a study on classroom interactions in primary schools in Kenya and found that the predominant teaching style was characterized by the ‘transmission of knowledge’ and was teacher centered in nature. Acker and Hardman point out those impediments to learning also include a lack of teaching resources and poor physical conditions of classroom spaces. However prevalent classroom interaction in most classrooms in many parts of the world including Kenya (Acker & Hardman, 2001; Pontefract & Hardman, 2005) is the teacher- student interaction pattern, commonly known as IRE (Initiate – Respond – Evaluate) discourse pattern, Lisanza (2011) Evidence shows that students in public primary schools are achieving significantly lower than their private school counterparts. There are a number of factors that can account for this disparity, which directly relate to the quality of primary education and the interactions between teacher and pupil.

Despite the significant role played by writing in the school curriculum, studies point out that secondary school students lack basic skills of writing. Studies in Australia have shown that there is low quality of writing in middle and upper primary schools, which has led to on-going problems in the secondary years (Ferris, & Hedgcock, 2013). The study suggested that teacher knowledge is critical in enabling educators to provide support for students to further develop their writing after the initial years of school. (Zeichner & Liston, 1987, Borkho, 2004)

Performance in writing continues to be unsatisfactory as evidenced by school leavers’ lack of communicative competence. Luchters et al. (2008) assert that universities have voiced concern about “fresher’s, who are unable to speak, read, write or hold discussions in English”. KNEC Report (2002) shows that students are weak in both mechanical and stylistic skills of writing. They are also weak at punctuation, word choice and make frequent construction errors. This therefore made it necessary to probe the challenges in teaching and learning of composition writing in primary schools.

Teaching language as an activity is important especially where learners lack the expected writing proficiency. In Kenya, it has been observed that many upper primary learners at class eight, especially those from public schools, do not have the required writing proficiency. This could be because of several factors such; as inadequate writing practice in the classroom, poor vocabulary, examination oriented writing, and teacher dictated writing, lack of exposure to English, lack of a homogenous English speaking community, limited reading habits and so on. Andiemma (2014) investigated the use of process approach in teaching writing skills and observed that most teachers find it difficult to teach writing. They used poor approaches and majority lectured students on how to write.

A study by Coxhead and Pat (2007) suggests three main teaching methods that can be used in teaching English composition writing and the activities involved. These were; shared teaching and learning which involves exchanging of letters, sharing journals; cooperative teaching and learning which involves, keeping a class journal, making a class magazine, working together on a project, sharing cultural information and reading together; finally role play which Hedge says involves news casting and peer teaching. Other strategies suggested as effective in teaching and learning English composition writing are shared reading and scaffolding writing (Troia & Graham, 2012; Hedge, 2001). However the resources used may not be at the disposal of teachers in the public primary schools in Kenya hence there is need to diversify. Use of pictures in composition writing is being researched on in this study as an alternative to the methods so far suggested in order to give teachers a variety to pick from.

The learning of English for about six to eight years and still being unable to write a paragraph correctly and coherently calls for an investigation. It has been noticed that a large

percentage of failures from primary schools in KCPE examination occurs especially due to poor performance in English.

Poor performance in composition writing does not only affect the performance in English of these learners in KCPE examination, but also affects their career and further education; therefore, there is an extreme need to help these learners improve their academic writing skill in English language. Use of pictures in English language instruction is one of the many strategies that may be used to reinforce teaching of English composition at elementary level. This study will shed more light on how effective this resource may be in developing better composition writing skills. It is against this backdrop that the current study set out to determine the effectiveness of using pictures in teaching and learning of composition writing in primary schools in order to provide ways forward in improving the writing skills among learners.

Performance in Public and Private Schools

Performance in private schools is much better than that of public schools. This may be due to several factors: One being that English is the common language of transacting business in private schools, unlike in public schools where mother tongue and Kiswahili are the languages of communication, especially outside the classroom. Some private schools are better resourced in terms of finances and materials, including other motivational school facilities. Class sizes in most private schools are mostly much smaller than in public schools where classrooms are congested. Learners in private schools can therefore be given individual attention when need arises, which is not the case in public schools. In most private schools too, there is enough space to practice various teaching techniques like group discussion that promote language learning. It is impossible to use such teaching techniques in congested classrooms like those found in public schools (Gathumbi, 2013).

Writing of Composition

Like speaking, writing is a productive skill. It involves producing language rather than receiving it. Writing involves communicating a message. In order to write, we need to form letters and words, join these together to make words, sentences or a series of sentences that link together to communicate a message. Learning to write in a second language is not merely learning to put down on paper the conventional symbols of the writing system that represents the utterances one has in mind, but it is also purposeful selection and organization of ideas, facts and experiences. In other words, writing is a thinking process and is much more than just copying. Writing aims at compactness and precision in expression as well as grammatical, idiomatic and orthographic accuracy. Therefore, learning to write involves learning to use grammar with ease and present facts in a sequential order. Writing is required to communicate with other people, to understand them, talk to them, read what others have written and to write to them. The sub skills of writing are planning, forming letters, punctuating correctly, linking, using the appropriate layout, paragraphing and so on.

Composition writing is one of the fundamental skills imparted into the pupil at the elementary level as a preparation for future proficiency in writing at higher levels in academia. If pictures can be instrumental in reinforcing the skills of writing, then this may go a long way in increasing such proficiency.

Conventional Methods of Teaching Composition Writing

According to Gathumbi and Masembe (2005), there are many strategies a teacher can choose from in teaching English composition writing namely; field trips, hands on activities, songs, project work, group work, and pair work, story-telling, discussions, poems, debates and presentation. Traditional method used in English composition writing is the write-correct-rewrite method that is still used by a number of teachers of composition writing teachers of today. In this teaching model, the teacher ordinarily either assigns or suggests a topic that the pupils are to write about. The pupils would then write a rough draft that the teacher would

correct. The manner of checking the rough drafts varies from teacher to teacher as some teachers still simply mark the pupils' works with the symbols for correction while others make an outright correction on the draft. As soon as these rough drafts are checked, they are returned to the pupils so that it can be rewritten and resubmitted to the teachers for final grading. The problem with this kind of model for teaching English writing is that some of the topics that are suggested or assigned to the students may be topics that are unfamiliar or even foreign to the pupils. An alternative model of teaching writing should then be implemented.

Another method of teaching English composition is through the use of the Oral Discourse Based Method. This method of class composition writing emphasizes on the [relationships](#) among the stimulus, the problem, the oral discussion and the final written composition (Hillocks, 1986). It is a teaching model that can take place at any grade level that is involved in English writing. Using this method of teaching composition writing follows a schematic that would involve six major box flows namely: stimulus maybe composed of living experience, picture, student narrative, literature, current news, or an actual object. The stimulus is the most urgent need of the students for any written or oral composition. It serves mainly to activate the flow of the discourse at the grade school or at higher levels of education.

Use of Pictures in Language Teaching

As Hill (1990) pointed out, “the standard classroom” is usually not a very suitable environment for learning languages. That is why teachers search for various aids and stimuli to improve this situation. Pictures are one of these valuable aids. They bring “images of reality into the unnatural world of the language classroom.” (Hill, 1990) Pictures bring not only images of reality, but can also function as a fun element in the class. Sometimes it is surprising, how pictures may change a lesson, even if only employed in additional exercises or just to create the atmosphere.

Pictures meet with a wide range of use not only in acquiring vocabulary, but also in many other aspects of foreign language teaching. Wright (1990) demonstrated this fact on an example, where he used one compiled picture and illustrated the possibility of use in five very different language areas. His example shows employing pictures in teaching structure, vocabulary, functions, situations and all the four skills.

Hillocks (1992) has demonstrated several advantages of pictures, such as availability (one can get them in any magazines, on the internet, etc.); they are cheap, often free; they are personal (teacher selects them); flexibility - easily kept, useful for various types of activities (drilling, comparing, etc.), they are “always fresh and different”, which means they come in a variety of formats and styles and moreover the learner often wonders what comes next. (Hill 1990)

Strategic use of images in the classroom helps engage students who have grown up in a media-rich environment. Digital technology makes images more readily available and easier to incorporate into teaching and learning materials. While teaching with images has been at the core of disciplines like art history for decades, all courses can benefit from the use of visual materials in class lectures, assignments, exercises, and resources. Images can be an effective way of presenting abstract concepts or groups of data. Instructors have reported that their use of images in the classroom has led to increased student interactivity and discussion. Using pictures is one of the teaching aids that teachers depend on in their teaching. Harmer (2001) states that, “Teachers have always used pictures or graphics – whether drawn, taken from books, newspapers and magazines, or photographs – to facilitate learning”. They also feel that pictures attract pupils' attention and deepen their understanding of vocabulary. Pictures can also help learners with abstract words, and associating the words with a concrete object makes these words easier to remember. Harmer (2001) states, “one of the most appropriate uses for pictures is for the presenting and checking of meaning. An easy way of

explaining the meaning of the word aeroplane, for example, is to have a picture of one.” Of course, not all new words can be taught using pictures but most concrete vocabulary can. Some of these techniques involve the use of pictures from a variety of sources - pictures from computers; photographs; drawings or diagrams on the board; and pictures from books. It will be interesting in this study to see which techniques teachers use.

According to Harmer (2001), pictures should be appropriate not only for the language to be learned but also for the classes they are being used for; if pictures are too childish students may not like them and if they are culturally inappropriate they can offend people. Pictures also need to be visible – especially if they are being shown to the whole class; they need to be big enough for everyone to see. And it also helps if pictures are durable – that is, strong enough to be used several times.

Types of Pictures

Wall pictures and posters, compiled pictures. Wall-pictures are a valuable visual material for language classes. In the first place, they can be displayed in the classroom to set English (or foreign in general) environment and then they function as another source of language to be absorbed by students in the process of natural acquisition. Furthermore, they will find their use both in presentation of new language and controlled practice. (Marzuki, 2015) specified in their characteristics of wall-pictures that these are often complex pictures, illustrating a scene and containing lots of objects and details. They are big enough to be seen by the whole class and they can be used instantly and repeatedly.

Due to their character, they are obviously suitable for presentation of new language. They put vocabulary into context and therefore make the presentation meaningful, which is highly recommended for successful retention of new words.

Compiled pictures may also be found in plenty variations of worksheets. They are useful for individual written exercises on structure as well as vocabulary practice and for speaking activities in pair work. These often occur in the form of handouts with two slightly differing pictures (or a picture and text), which are used in individual work or pair work. Alternatively, different details can be missing in each picture, which can lead to information-gap type of activity for pair work. Activities with compiled pictures are usually popular among students, giving them an opportunity to apply their knowledge of vocabulary and structure in combination with their ability to speak in order to reach the goal.

Pictures are used in composition writing to arouse interest and draw the learner’s attention to the subject at hand; they stimulate interest and make the learner innovative in the sense of developing stories around the pictures at hand.

Embossed pictures. Embossed pictures are sometimes referred to as raised letters (tactile dots). The embossed pictures exist in a form that can be touched, felt, and seen easily by the pupils. To make embossed letters, words, sentences, and pictures, the researcher use the following materials: coloured thread, manila papers, pair of scissors, glue, pencil, felt pens and stencils. This kind of pictures can be useful when teaching writing composition to the hearing impaired learners.

Composition Writing Using Pictures

A creative teacher always trains a learner to master a lesson he has given, especially in writing. The teacher is a motivator who helps the students to write idea and point of view through writing. Primary learners prefer playing to studying. So this research is about teaching writing composition using pictures. Pictures can make learners express their ideas and understand more the material given by a teacher. Pictures stimulate learners to discuss the topic hence come up with a good story to write. These activities make learners more active in learning the process of writing and at the same time make learning more meaningful and fun for them. Learners will understand better the material and it will be easier to make a new idea by using pictures because they do not only listen to the material but also see it.

A study has suggested that there is a significant difference between use of pictures and other visual aids in teaching of vocabulary among Iranian beginners (Gutierrez et al., 2015) there may be likelihood that when used in the same language teaching but for writing it would have an impact. Furthermore pictures have been shown to draw students' attention more during the lesson hence possibly they would make the lesson more interesting. This then drives my interest in comparative study on use of pictures and the usual conventional teaching that is banal. That is what this study seeks to establish, whether the same pictures can be used to generate some positive results or otherwise in the writing of composition

Motivation in Learning English

Motivation is the driving force that helps us to achieve goals. Motivation is said to be intrinsic or extrinsic. According to various theories, motivation may be rooted in a basic need to minimize physical pain and maximize pleasure, or it may include specific needs such as eating and resting, or a desired object, goal, state of being, ideal, or it may be attributed to less-apparent reasons such as altruism, selfishness, morality, or avoiding mortality. This research is also exploring the effectiveness of a picture in as far as motivating learners to write good composition full of creativity and imagination.

Pictures help pupils to be inspired to have more creative ideas. They are used as additional tools to motivate students to develop their vocabulary hence express their ideas. By having many vocabularies, pupils can be guided to expand their sentences. Through pictures, pupils have more flexibility and freedom to write well developed story so that they can share with others. Picture series are excellent devices in providing both in purpose and content for writing activity. By using picture series, it is hoped that the students will increase their motivation in the teaching and learning process. Of course, there are many other techniques, methods or approaches, yet it needs priority. As people say, "a picture is worth a thousand words".

Summary

From preliminary findings of our ongoing study, it has been shown that very few teachers use pictures when teaching composition writing. When asked to explain why they preferred other methods to the use of pictures, the teachers noted that they hardly had time and resources to facilitate the acquisition of pictures. This shows that pictures are one of the motivators to good composition writing. These findings are in agreement with those in the US by Steve Graham showing that, students are also likely to be more motivated to write if you are enthusiastic about writing. Furthermore this is in agreement with a study on use of picture series in Java (Ariningsih, 2010) where use of picture series was compared with translation in writing instruction. The results showed a significant difference between the two approaches, reinforcing the fact that pictures are a strong tool to motivate learners. All these findings are a pointer to the fact that more innovation in teaching of the English composition is imperative in order that we may realize better performance in elementary levels of instruction.

What is of more concern is the fact that very few studies have been conducted in Africa on the use of pictures in teaching of English. There is need for more pragmatism in the education sector to purposefully consider studies on this aspect of instruction

In Kenya, there few studies that have been carried out to evaluate the use of pictures in teaching English composition in primary schools. It would be interesting to know the effect of this valuable resource on performance, considering that, from past studies on performance, composition writing has been lowly performed hence impacting negatively on the general performance of English language.

As noted above, although it is generally accepted that pictures can play an important role in drawing the attention of the learner and getting the learner involved in classroom activities,

there is need to go further to examine the effectiveness of these pictures in motivating the learner to write better compositions.

We recommend that a study be carried out on the role played by the school administration and the community in the effective teaching of English composition and the relevance of the English language curriculum used at teacher training colleges in relation to the new trends in English Composition. Furthermore it would be necessary to evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of Ministry of Education in English language assessment by Quality Assurance and Standards Officers.

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