The Application of Songs in the Teaching of Swahili Grammar

Abstract

Linguists posit that children learn a second language if exposed to interesting activities like songs. Songs can be of great value in learning as they capture the children’s attention and guide them through the learning environment. In addition, songs also enhance students’ receptivity and help students understand the target language. The research on which this paper is based set explored the application of songs in the teaching of Swahili tense and negation. The data were qualitatively analyzed and the emergent findings support the claim that the use of songs reinforces acquisition of the grammatical structures. In addition, the paper discusses the findings and proposes recommendations for pedagogy.

Key Words: Songs, Swahili tense, negation, grammar

Introduction

Research in language teaching has pointed out that students’ motivation and interest are among the most important factors for the learning of a language (Bolitho et al., 2003). Harmer (1998), for example, notes that “highly motivated students do better than ones without any motivation at all” (p. 8). Several methods of improving the effectiveness of teaching and raising the interest and motivation of the students have been proposed. Kirsch (2008), for example, notes that the use of songs is one of the most effective language learning strategies reported by most children. According to Griffee (1995), songs also create that friendly and co-operative atmosphere so important for language learning. Papa and Iantorno (1979, p. 8) add that “singing is certainly one
of the activities which generates the greatest enthusiasm and is a pleasant and stimulating approach to the culture of foreign people.” As Abidin et al. (2011, p.1988) note:

Songs are one of the most captivating and culturally rich resources that can be easily used in language classrooms. Songs offer a change from routine classroom activities. They are precious resources to develop students’ abilities in listening, speaking, reading and writing. They can also be used to teach a variety of language items such as sentence patterns, vocabulary, pronunciation, rhythm, adjectives and adverbs.

Exposure to songs in language teaching will help students understand the target language (Falioni, 1993). Songs are comprehensible, enjoyable, authentic and full of language we need in real life (Shen, 2009). Songs can be employed in the teaching of all languages including Swahili. Swahili has been considered unique among the African languages of the modern world for the dynamism of its development (Pawliková-Vilhanová, 1996). The Niger-Congo language phylum, which Swahili belongs, consists of 1436 languages and this makes it the largest phylum in the world (Heine & Nurse 2000:11). Specifically, Swahili belongs to the Narrow Bantu subgroup which consists of about 500 languages spoken by at least 60 million people in sub-Saharan Africa. Its ability to adapt to changing contexts has contributed to its unique position among languages of East and Central Africa

According to Rieger (2011), Swahili is prototypically agglutinative with considerable prefixing and suffixing. This means that most words consist of a root and one or more affixes. The basic
word order in Swahili is SVO. This means that the subject is the initial element in the basic sentence. The verb comes next, while the object follows the verb as in the following sentences:

a) Mwalimu alifundisha wanafunzi. (The teacher taught the students).

b) Mama alipika chakula. (My mother cooked the food).

The verb root in Swahili carries many different markers such as negation, number, person, and tense and aspect distinctions (Givón 2001). The purpose of this research, therefore, is to show how songs can be used as teaching tools to provide insight into the teaching of tense and negation in Swahili. As aptly noted by Falioni (1993, p.98) “practically all grammar points can be found in music texts, and the texts also offer a wide variety of vocabulary.” In the same vein, Claerr and Gargan (1984, p.31) posit that, “With some imagination, songs can be used to teach all aspects of foreign languages”. It is with this in mind that this paper zeroes in on the use of Swahili songs as a vehicle of providing insight into the teaching of Swahili tense and negation.

Statement of the Issue

While the use of songs has won plaudits from linguists, few empirical studies have formally assessed songs’ actual pedagogical effectiveness on language learning in Swahili. Since Swahili is prototypically agglutinative with considerable prefixation and suffixation, one cannot easily equate Swahili tenses with English tenses, as some of the affixes do not specifically refer to time, but rather to some aspect of the action or state. This is a lacuna that this paper attempts to fill. Secondly, there is often little emphasis on tense and negation in the primary school curricula.
Music and songs have also been slow to catch on in schools and, therefore, it is imperative to use songs to facilitate acquisition of Swahili grammar.

**Rationale of the Study**

Our choice of songs as a method of teaching tense and negation in Swahili is based on a number of reasons. First, from a grammatical point of view, songs, “provide a natural context for the most common structures such as verb tenses and prepositions” (Griffee, 1995). Ersöz (2007) and Halliwell (1993) also posit that while designing a syllabus for young students in English as a Foreign Language context, the focus should be on the communicative function of the language and should, therefore, include songs and games. According to Murphey (1992, p.6), “It seems easier to sing language than to speak it” (p. 6). Sharpe (2001) also argues that in planning the primary modern foreign language curriculum, attention should be focused on oral and aural ends and, therefore, songs should be included in the curriculum. This study is of the opinion that the same can be applied to the learning of Swahili.

Secondly, songs have a plethora of benefits in language learning. According to Griffee (1995, p.4) “No one knows why songs are powerful, but everyone knows from a personal point of view they are.” However, this paper notes that, songs have a cultural significance. “Bringing a song into the classroom entails bringing the culture of the song in with it”. And thus “songs can be used as a way of looking at a culture and comparing it with other cultures” (Griffee, 1995, p. 5). Griffee (1995) also adds that.
Songs are part of what makes a generation a generation and the current generation is a global generation rather than a parochial one. The world is evolving a common culture and pop songs are its backbone. By using pop songs in your classroom, you and your students are participating in the emerging world culture. (D. Griffée, 1995, p. 6)

Thirdly, this study will be significant for language policy and all related stakeholders like teachers, teacher trainers, curriculum developers and assessment specialists since the importance of songs in education cannot be gainsaid. Sarıçoğan and Metin (2000), for example, note that songs are one of the most interesting and culturally rich resources that teachers and teacher trainers can employ in a language classroom to teach a variety of language items such as sentence patterns, vocabulary, and rhythm. Songs, according to Griffée (1995) songs are, “especially good at introducing vocabulary because they provide a meaningful context for the vocabulary” (Griffée, 1995). Songs have, therefore, become an integral part of our language experience, and if used in cooperation with a language lesson they can be of great value.

In addition, our choice of Swahili is also based on its importance. Kawoya and Makokha (2009), for example, offer a novel perspective on how Swahili can be tapped as a resource for mobilizing popular support for the East African regional integration process. Secondly, Swahili, being a Bantu language contains some of the most complex Tense Aspect Mood systems in the world (Polomé, 1967). Tense in Swahili, according to Polomé (1967:115), describes “the time/aspect dimension in the verbal process”. Bantu languages normally have a considerably larger number of TAM markers than the Indo-European languages, and aspectual markers are especially numerous (Polomé, 1967:18). Dahl (1985:185f) suggests that this complexity might be because
Bantu languages are generally prefixing rather than suffixing. Rieger (2011) argues that tense, for example, is the prominent and orienting feature for Swahili verbal markers.

**Theoretical Framework**

Krashen’s Theory of Second Language Acquisition, which consists of five main hypotheses, is employed in this study. One of the proposed hypotheses is the Affective Filter Hypothesis which represents Krashen’s view that a number of affective variables play a supportive role in second language acquisition (Schütz, 2007). These variables include motivation, self-confidence and anxiety. Krashen claims that students with high motivation, self-confidence, a good self-image, and a low-level of anxiety are better equipped to learn a second language compared with students with low motivation and low self-esteem. The former become more successful to learn a new language while the latter create a mental block which prevents them to learn the language successfully. Shen (2009) notes that listening to songs can knock down the learner’s psychological barriers, such as anxiety, lack of self-confidence and apprehension as well as fire the learner’s desire to grasp the target language. Schoepp (2001) describes the Affective Filter Hypothesis in Krashen’s Theory of Second Language Acquisition as an explanation of how the affective factors relate to language learning. Teachers, therefore, need to provide an environment which is conducive to language learning. Optimal learning is realized when the affective filter is weak. This results in a positive attitude towards the learning process. If the affective filter is strong, the students do not seek the language input and are not open to language learning as well. It is therefore the opinion of this paper that using songs in the learning process leads to achieving the weak affective filter and thus promoting language learning.
Studies on Songs

Games and songs have played a pivotal role in a number of approaches in various countries. First, Huy Le (2007), a Vietnamese ESL teacher, noted that music is highly valued by both students of English and (ESL) teachers in the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Other researches that underscore the importance of music and music activities in the teaching of English as Second Language include (Baez, 1993) in the United States, Mexico (Domoney and Harris, 1993), and South Africa (Puhl, 1989). Brand (2007), for example, noted that song lyrics can be used in sensitizing Chinese ESL learners to the importance of effective intercultural communication. He, therefore, advocated the use of song lyrics in helping create a natural speaking environment that more closely adheres to the intercultural communication skills necessary for ESL students to understand English and to be understood by others.

Ayotte (2004), on the other hand, investigated whether listening to songs played a role in the acquisition of second language verb forms when teaching French as Second Language. One of the experiments showed that subjects who listened to songs performed with more grammatical accuracy on the immediate posttests on three verb forms – present, future, and conditional. The other experiment, however, showed no statistical significance between language taught with music and language taught with no music.

In another study, Sevik (2011) explores the views of Turkish state primary school EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers about songs in teaching English to young learners. The views were collected through a questionnaire and the results showed that the Turkish EFL teachers have strong beliefs about the pedagogical value of songs and about the effectiveness of using
songs in teaching EFL to young learners. However, Sevik also found out that teachers had challenges in accessing appropriate songs to use in their classes and in measuring student success when they use songs. Therefore, it was suggested that teachers should be provided with materials to use in their classes.

Tense (Nyakati) in Swahili

Dahl (1985) has pointed out that no standard terminology exists for classifying tense, aspect and modality systems. The grammatical descriptions of Bantu languages are no exception. This has given rise to numerous so-called tenses with different interpretations, both temporal and aspectual. Kang’ethe-Iraki (2004), however, claims that tense locates an event on the axis of time. That is, it determines whether an event is present, past or future. Tense is also defined as “the systematic coding of the relation between two points along the ordered linear dimension of time” (Givón 2001:285). Similarly, according to Chou and Wu (2007), “Tense locates an event or a situation in time with respect to the moment of speaking (speech time) or a reference point (reference time) (p.32). Loogman (1965:190) divides the tense aspect markers in Swahili into three temporal systems: the present system, the past system and the future system. His tense markers are na-, li- and ta-, which describe time in reference to a fixed reference point, which is the moment of speaking.

The marker for the present tense (wakati uliopo) is “na.” Linguists such as Bybee et al (1994) prefer not to call present a tense. They argue that the present tense is not primarily a deictic temporal reference. They claim that what we refer to as present actually covers various types of imperfective situations, with the moment of speech as the reference point. Bybee et al (1994:126)
state that present includes: ongoing activities, generic situations and habitual situations. Bybee et al (1994:140) argue that a present marker expresses the meaning of present imperfective situations. Besha (1989) admits that it is difficult to characterize the present tense, because present is simultaneous to the ST and there is no other RP to anchor it to. Therefore, the simple present tense denotes an action happening in this time. For example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Present tense (wakati uliopo)</th>
<th>Verb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ni</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>kula</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The tense marker for the future tense [wakati ujao] is “ta.” The future tense marker is a relative tense marker, in that it takes its reference from the immediately preceding context or the matrix tense when in an embedded clause. The ta-marker is the only grammatical morpheme that indicates future tense in a simple declarative sentence, independently of temporal adverbs,

The tense marker for the past tense [wakati uliopita] is the li-marker. The li-marker in Swahili refers to a situation that occurred before the moment of speech (Bybee, 1994). Li is used in simple past tense contexts and is said to be an absolute tense (Bybee, 1994). That is, it can be used as “an anchoring tense” in discourse and is not dependent on the surrounding context.

The tense marker for the Present Perfect [wakati uliopo hali timilifu] is a difficult one to define but is marked by “me”. It has also been described as the past continuous tense (i.e. something that happened and is still happening). However, this definition does not always make sense! Here are some examples of the tense marker me being used,

Amezaliwa – He/she has been born (in) -zaliwa = to be born.
Mimi nimesoma Swahili.

[I have read/studied Swahili

**Negation**

Negation occurs in three positions in the sentence: at the head of the verbal complex, within the verbal complex, and lastly at the end of the verbal complex in the form of a negative final vowel (Krifka, 1995). These three reflexes of negation are not mutually exclusive as most negative sentences require at least two of these negation positions to be overtly expressed (Vitali, 1981; Krifka, 1995). The negative past tense is expressed by the **ku**-marker (Krifka, 1995 and Vitali, 1981). The **li**-marker is frequently followed by the **ka**-marker. In the simple future tense, the negative prefix **ha** is employed.

The tense marker “**na**” for present tense is deleted and the final vowel “**a**” changes to “**i**”. The tense marker for present perfect tense “**me**” changes to “**ja**” and the final vowel does not change. The tense marker “**li**” for past tense changes to “**ku**” and the final vowel does not change. The tense marker for future does not change.

**Methodology**

The research adopted a survey design because the focus was on collecting popular Swahili songs that could be used to highlight particular grammatical aspects. Then, after collecting four Swahili songs through tape-recording, purposive sampling was employed to select one song that was deemed most suitable for teaching Swahili tense and negation. In this way, the popular Swahili song, “Mchikisho” was selected. Content analysis guided the analysis of the song to identify the
parts of the song that were relevant to the achievement of the research objective. Thus, we did a word by word, sentence by sentence analysis of the content in the song, as presented below.

**Application of Swahili songs in the teaching of tenses and negation**

The popular Swahili song “Mchikicho” emerged as the most suitable song to illustrate how Swahili songs could be applied in the teaching of tense and negation in Swahili. This Swahili song and its English equivalent are given below.

**MCHIKICHO**

**Stanza 1**

Je,

Ninauona mpilipili na maua yake mchikicho

Siuoni mpilipili na maua yake mchikicho

A leo ni leo

A kesho ni kesho

Teremka pande kwa pande

Na maua tako siyataki

*I see a pepper tree and its flowers blossoming*

*I do not see a pepper tree and its flowers blossoming*

*Aa! Today is today*

*Aa! Tomorrow is tomorrow*
Come down side by side

And I don’t want your flowers

Stanza 2
Je,
Nita uona mpilipili na maua yake mchikicho

Si ta uona mpilipili na maua yake mchikicho

A leo ni leo

A kesho ni kesho

Teremka pande kwa pande

Na maua yako siyataki

I will see a paper tree and its flowers blossoming

I will not see a paper tree and its flowers blossoming

Aa! Today is today

Aa! Tomorrow is tomorrow

Come down side by side

And I don’t want your flowers
Stanza 3

Je,

Niliuona mpilipili na maua yake mchikicho

Sikuona mpilipili na maua yake mchikicho

A leo ni leo

A kesho ni kesho

Teremka pande kwa pande

Na maua yako siyataki

*I saw a pepper tree and its flowers blossoming*

*I didn’t see a pepper tree and its flowers blossoming*

*Aa! Today is today*

*Aa! Tomorrow is tomorrow*

*Come down side by side*

*And I don’t want your flowers*

Stanza 4

Je,

Nimeuona mpilipili na maua yake mchikicho

Sijauona mpilipili na maua yake mchikicho

A leo ni leo

A kesho ni kesho
Teremka pande kwa pande

Na maua yako siyataki

*I have seen a paper tree and its flowers blossoming*

*I have not seen a paper tree and its flowers blossoming*

*Aa! Today is today*

*Aa! Tomorrow is tomorrow*

*Go down side by side*

*And I don’t want your flowers*

The Swahili song presented above can be made use of in the teaching of Swahili grammar, particularly tense and negation. Songs make learning foreign languages enjoyable especially when the language is new to the student. When learning a foreign language, most learners find it difficult to understand the different tenses in the language. Therefore, they need all the help they can get to understand the conjugation of tenses. When these tenses are taught in form of interesting songs, it makes it easier for the learners to understand and apply tense marking in the grammar of the specific language being learned.

In the Swahili song above, four markers of tense in Swahili have been used:

- “*na*”: marker of present continuous tense
- “*me*”: marker of present perfect tense
- “*ta*”: marker of future time
• “li”: marker of past tense

“Ni**na**uona” in the song has been used to show that the action is taking place at that moment; “Ni**ta**uona” in the second stanza shows that the action is to take place in the future. “Ni**me**uona” has been used in the third stanza to indicate that the action has just taken place, and finally “Ni**li**uona” indicates that the action took place some time back; a day or so. The students will therefore find it easier to understand the complexities of Swahili tenses having been introduced to them in the song. In fact the students can keep on referring to the song when not sure of the formation of a particular tense in Swahili.

The song also introduces the students to negation in Swahili: the prefix “si” introduces negation in the song. The Swahili word “Sijauona” means “I have not seen it” while “sitauona” means “I will not see it”. “Sikuuona” means I did not see it. Thus through this song, the learner is introduced to negation and how it changes according to the tense in the sentence.

Many young people are adapting to a culture of listening to music wherever they are since technology has made it possible. With the trends in technological advancement, most gadgets have been introduced in the market for listening to music. Music is portable; one can walk around with his or her music and not feel exhausted because it is not a heavy luggage, unlike books. Hence the learner can get a chance to listen to the music over and over again, thus being able to master the words that express tense and negation in Swahili.

Students can dramatize Swahili songs such as “Mchikicho” to put more emphasis on the formation of tenses and negation in Swahili. While singing, students can use facial expressions and dynamics to show the tenses.
Apart from being used in the teaching of grammar, the same song can be used in the teaching of pronunciation of terms, and vocabulary. For example, words like “mchikicho” and “mpilipili” can be difficult for foreign students to pronounce but once the words are introduced to them through a song which they learn to sing, the pronunciation of the words by the students is bound to improve. The more the students sing the song, the easier the pronunciation of the word becomes. In addition, languages are better learned through saying words aloud. Therefore, when singing, words come out better. For example, the above song has many words, some of which may be new to students; words like “leo” meaning today, and “kesho” meaning tomorrow are introduced.

**Recommendations**

The analysis of the song has revealed that the Swahili song “Mchikicho” contains words and sentences that can be used to enhance acquisition of Swahili tenses and negation by learners. The discussion has also highlighted the advantages of using songs in the teaching of Swahili grammar. With this in mind, we recommend that teachers of Swahili utilize songs in the teaching of grammar because of the many benefits that can be accrued when songs are applied in language learning. Further, the learners are encouraged to learn songs so that they can refer to them when they want to understand better how particular grammatical aspects are used in specific linguistic contexts.

**Conclusion**

Since songs are viable vehicles for language learning, it is important that we no longer regard them as recreational devices, having little instructional value. Therefore, linguists and other stakeholders in education might consider giving songs a more prominent role in the second
language learning. The findings of this study could persuade educationists of the value of using songs in language teaching. The addition of songs in lesson planning on a regular basis could have a long-term influence on language students’ performance.

Second, Sarıçoban and Metin (2000) claim that songs offer a change from routine classroom activities and are precious resources to develop students’ abilities in listening, speaking, reading and writing. Moreover, songs increase memorability. Murphey (1992, pp. 121) puts it clearly: “The music ties words and motion together and increases memorability.” He refers to this impact as the “song-stuck-in-my-head phenomenon” (p. 55). Research on psycholinguistics also reveals that songs can activate language acquisition and learning in both hemispheres of the human brain (Larsen-Freeman, 1985). Thus, exposure to song lyrics, according to Brand (2007), not only teaches vocabulary, grammar, rhythmic speech, phrases, and meanings, but a song, as a sort of ambassador of a culture, offers ESL students lessons in grasping the nature and style of a particular culture.

**References**


