

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE SPEAKING SKILL IN PRIVATE AND PUBLIC PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN TRANS-NZIOIA COUNTY, KENYA

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the Study: To investigate the measures employed to foster the acquisition of English language speaking skills in both private and public primary schools in Trans - Nzoia County. The objectives of the research were the following: To establish the disparities that exists in the learning of English language speaking skill in private and public schools in Trans-Nzoia County; to analyze the reasons that lead to disparities in the learning of English speaking skill in private and public schools of Trans Nzoia County and to explain how the school language culture affects the learning of English language speaking skill among pupils in private and public primary schools.

Statement of the Problem: English Language is one of the core subjects taught to all students in Kenya as most of the examinable subjects at primary, secondary, tertiary and university levels are done in this language. The proper acquisition of English language skills in primary schools is a milestone towards fostering students who are fluent communicators. .

Research Methodology: A descriptive survey research design was employed in which 6 primary schools in Trans-Nzoia County were selected to draw generalizations from. Purposive sampling was used to identify the sample population from both public and private primary schools. The target population consisted of 3 public schools and 3 private schools from all the sub-counties. Questionnaires were administered to the H.O.D's (Heads of Departments) or H.O.S (Head of Subjects) of languages. Furthermore, interviews were conducted to the head teachers of the 6 schools that were sampled. The data was analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively. This entailed collating the data received from interviews and through observation to explain the findings in accordance with the set objectives.

Result: The findings revealed that in the selected schools, there were few disparities in the acquisition of English skills in private and public schools but many similarities were also noted. The findings revealed a notable disparity in the acquisition of English language skill in both categories. More speaking activities in English language were found to exist in private schools as

opposed to public schools; these activities entailed: debates, speaking competitions and class presentations.

Conclusion: The end result was that those students in private schools were seen to have more mastery of speaking skill in English as opposed to their counterparts in public schools.

Recommendation: The study recommends that more student centered approaches be adopted which will enhance comprehensive acquisition of English language speaking skill among learners. The findings will be of benefit to Linguists, Educators, Psychologists, and curriculum developers.

Keywords: *English Speaking Skills, Trans Nzoia County, Kenya*

1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The importance of English language in the primary school curriculum cannot be over emphasized. This is because most of the examinable subjects at K.C.P.E (Kenya Certificate of Primary Education), with the exception of Kiswahili, are taught in English. What this means is that proper acquisition of English language skill at this level does enhance the process of learning and comprehending other subjects as well. Of vital importance are speaking skills; as these skills are expressive in the sense that for the learner to demonstrate proper acquisition, one must speak the language fluently (Oloo, 2016). This is crucial because all the examinable subjects at the KCPE level, except Kiswahili, are taught in English (Mukembu, 2016). Furthermore, speaking skills are the cornerstone of language acquisition, in fact, Tribble, (1996) observes that an ability to speak fluently, persuasively and appropriately is something most language learners aim to achieve and they do. The significance of language culture was underscored in Lev Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Theory (1978). This theory was employed in trying to explain the co-relation between cultural factors and the acquisition of language skills, which was found to be positive. To elevate this relation further, Cummins (1981) underscored that language is the most overt expression of culture and most of the learning process, both in school and at home is carried out through language.

Speaking skills in Kenya are not taught separately from the skills of listening, writing and reading, but are taught as English language. This entails selecting a piece of writing especially from literature which can enable the learner identify various aspects of the four language skills. In English language, there is a strong relationship between oral language skills and success in the written language (De Gelder & Morais, 2015). Bruner (2016) observes that, when one starts to write, s/he has already a good knowledge of how to use spoken language in ordinary social interaction. For that reason, people come to write language with a concept of spoken language. In view of this, Floden (2010) stresses the need for teachers of English to examine the teaching of speaking. KNEC (2014) observed that lack of good speaking skills in English made students perform poorly in the National examinations due to lack of good skills of expression. Floden (2010) further advocated for content and methodology that would help learners to learn to speak English. This is because English language plays a crucial role in the learning process in the school curriculum and largely depends on a learner's proficiency in all the language skills. Speaking and listening skills form a strong foundation for the development of reading and writing skills respectively and in the general teaching of English.

The motivation for this present research was performance of pupils in English language at KCPE level. In Trans-Nzoia County, a trend in the K.C.P.E performance reveals that; Private schools and public schools compete in the performance of the language, with the former demonstrating higher scores in English compared to the latter. (K.C.P.E Results-Trans-Nzoia, 2017). Private schools, in this study involved those schools which are not owned by the government and they as such do not receive government funding and pay their teachers using their own money. Public schools are those which receive funding and teachers from the government have many pupils in them because of the Free Primary Education program. This revelation therefore necessitated an investigation on what could be the underlying reasons which lead to this disparity; the focus was on speaking skills because speaking precede writing and reading in any learning experience. Therefore, it is against this background that this research aimed to unravel the acquisition of speaking skills in selected Private and Public schools in Trans-Nzoia County.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The ability to speak fluently in English is the chief goal of the teaching and learning of the language. In fact, successful language communication through speaking mode requires constant practice. This bestows a responsibility to teachers of English on the need to examine the teaching of speaking as a skill by taking into consideration the content and methodology that would help learners learn to speak English (Floden, 2010). Pundits have stated that speaking skills have not developed because they are not tested in National Exams. What makes it difficult to test speaking skills is that speaking skills involve a combination of skills which may have correlation or do not lend themselves well to objective testing (Oloo, 2016). This, therefore, means that English language cannot be learnt by just mastering the rules of grammar or through the lecture method alone. Rather, English is learned through conversation and discussions. What validates this point is that the main purpose of learning English language is to improve the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in order to enable pupils use English language for proper communication.

A look at KCPE results of Trans-Nzoia County reveals that private schools perform better in English language compared to Public schools (2017 K.C.P.E Analysis for Trans-Nzoia County). It is worth noting that the teaching environments and the facilities in both private and public schools impact differently on the acquisition of the skills; this is because of factors such as the activities that foster acquisition, mother tongue influence and the language policy. This study therefore sought to find out how these two academic environments affect the acquisition of English language speaking skill.

1.3 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To establish the disparities that exists in the learning of English language speaking skill in private and public schools in Trans-Nzoia County.
2. To analyze the reasons that lead to disparities in the learning of English speaking skill in private and public schools of Trans Nzoia County
3. To explain how the school language culture affects the learning of English language speaking skill among pupils in private and public primary schools.

2.1 Literature Review

According to Chomsky (1957), children have the innate ability to acquire a language. To this end, Chomsky (1957) used Krashen's Monitor Model. According to the model, 'comprehensible input'

is a necessary and sufficient source of successful second language acquisition. According to The Behaviorist Theory by B.F Skinner (1938), any human behaviour could be learned through a process of stimulus, response and positive or negative reinforcement. All this is aimed at making a desired behaviour a habit, performed spontaneously. At the same time, Social interactionists like Gass (2002), on the other hand, focused on the language learning context and how learners use their linguistic environment to build their knowledge of a second language. They allude that the social environment is pivotal in the overall acquisition of a language. Others like Swain (2000) argue that 'comprehensive output' in a meaningful conversation is also necessary for successful second language acquisition.

On the issue of Social Cultural determinants of a language, Walqui (2006) rightly reported that Vygotsky considers all language written and spoken as dialogical rather than monological. This means that the basic unit of language is conversational interaction, not sentence structure or grammatical patterns. Vygotsky (1978) emphasized the role of social environment on children's learning. He argued that everything is first learned socially then individually. This therefore does place a momentous role on the social factors in the acquisition of language.

Mang'eni (2010) posits that, learning should take place by doing in order to produce the best results. Therefore, practical methods like group activities, inquiry, discovery and discussions should be very much emphasized by educators. The author further contends that, learners should be encouraged to express themselves orally in class discussion and where possible be provided with radios, televisions (TVs) and videos because they promote students' oral skills, aural skills and appeal to their senses. Moreover, the teacher of English too should continue perfecting own spoken English so as to serve as a role model for students to emulate. Kaye and Rogers (1968) support this argument by claiming that group work when managed well can lead to increased prospects for learners to speak English. This small group setting provides favourable context for the learners to use language freely from the teacher's domination. In this respect, classroom teachers should only be facilitators and enablers but not providers of knowledge. Besides, repetition and imitation be employed in the learning of speaking skills (Mang'eni, 2010). Margret (2010) conducted a study on linguistic strategies teachers of English use to teach language oral skills. The study findings revealed that teachers taught using various strategies for learners to develop their English oral proficiency skills like dialogue, group and pair discussions and storytelling. Margret however in the study noted that debates were not adopted by the teachers due to the fact that debates seemed boring to teachers. Mundui (2002) carried out a related study to scrutinize the interaction in English language lessons with a view to investigating the role teachers played in encouraging learners to speak. Findings for the study indicated that teachers used teacher-centred methods in teaching, that is, explanation, questioning other than discussion methods. Mundui (2002) found questioning method used to check the understanding of concepts by learners.

2.1.1 Culture and Language Acquisition

Doherty (2003) states that the study of culture is important as one needs to consider the home environment. The author's research thus focused on the socio-cultural environmental features but this research will dwell only on the school culture and how it affects pupils' speaking skill. Reed and Railsback (2003) state that some researchers distinguish stages of learning a second language; the first one is the silent stage (receptive or pre-productive stage); in this stage, student has words they understand but are not comfortable to use. They thus remain silent but can respond using

varieties of strategies including pointing to an object, picture or person, standing up, closing the door, gesticulating or nodding or even simply saying yes or no. This stage can last between ten hours and six months.

2.1.2 Cognition and Language Proficiency

According to Grant and Sleeter (2007), Skill acquisition is attained through cognitive and constructivist perception and therefore teaching language skills needs more drill and practice strategies. But on the contrary, according to Curtin (2009), teaching language skills acquisition is done through students' interaction, attentiveness and interest to promote comprehension. In fact, according to Waliqui (2006), Vygotsky stressed the importance of thinking aloud, or private speech. The author said that children talk to themselves to organize and think about a task. Learners must thus think and challenge themselves so as to acquire language proficiency. The Z.P.D (Zone of Proximal Development) promotes acquisition of language skills too because learners demonstrate a task or skill with the help of a 'Knowledgeable other'. Lantolf (1994) adds to this argument by stating that as children participate in these collaborative interactions, they appropriate themselves the patterns of planning, attending, thinking and remembering. These views are very important for this study since the issue of how the language culture affects acquisition were investigated

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This research employed Lev Vygotsky's 'Socio-cultural Theory (1978)'. This theory hinges its argument on the idea that children learn through interaction and communication with others. This interaction involves communicating with peers, teachers, family and even other experts. According to Vygotsky (1978), the social environment thus influences the learning process. Culture, according to him, is another primary factor to knowledge construction. The environment in which children grow will influence how they think and what they think about, therefore, social interaction develops language which in turn supports thinking.

Vygotsky (1978) suggests that knowledge is constructed in the middle of our interaction with others and is shaped by the skills and abilities valued in a particular culture. For him, language is the main tool that promotes thinking, develops reasoning and supports cultural activities like reading and writing, which means these cultural activities are 'hand maids' in the acquisition of language. He further says that the speech we use aloud and with others eventually becomes internalized as part of our repertoire of strategies for problem solving.

The major themes in this theory are: Social interaction, the more 'Knowledgeable other' and 'Zone of Proximal Development'. Vygotsky's Socio-cultural Theory of human learning thus describes learning as a social process and the origination of human intelligence in society or culture. He argues that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition. For him thus learning occurs in two levels; through interaction with others and then integrated into the individual's mental structure. So the levels are social level and individual level. Individual development hence takes place in the context of activities moulded or assisted by the more skilled person, whom he refers to as 'the knowledgeable other'.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The research adopted a descriptive survey design. Descriptive study design was adopted by this research as it best explained the comparison of English language speaking skill in both private and public schools. This research was carried out in Trans-Nzoia County. The county has 512 primary

schools (MOE, Trans Nzoia County, 2017). Out of these, 184 are private schools while 328 are public schools. Trans Nzoia County was selected because it has many private schools which outperform public schools in English at the K.C.P.E level. The 2017 KCPE results were the motivating factor that prompted this study.

Target population is described as the population of interest from which the individual participant for the measurement is taken (Cooper, 1998). The target population entailed public and private schools in Trans Nzoia County. The County had 512 primary schools at time of study. These schools are spread in the five sub counties that make the county. Out of these, 6 schools were targeted whereby pupils and the HOD’s of languages were selected for the study.

The schools were selected using purposive sampling method.

The research utilized the following research instruments; questionnaires, interview schedules and observation guides. The questionnaires that were given to teachers and pupils had both open ended and closed ended questions; the former allowed the respondents to freely express themselves on the issue of language speaking skill as much as possible while the latter elicited specific information on English speaking skill.

The collected data was both qualitative and quantitative; because of this, the researcher adopted two ways of analysis. On the other hand, qualitative data that was collected using interviews and observation schedule was analyzed thematically by examining language skills; disparities between private and public schools and language culture. This data was discussed in prose to complement the qualitative data.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Findings on the disparities in the English speaking skill in private and public schools

The teachers were asked several questions that were aimed at ascertaining the disparities in the speaking of English in both private and public schools. Their responses were as follows:

Table 1: Speaking skills in private and public schools

Question	Private Schools	Public Schools	
Do pupils participate in debates frequently?	66	3	50
Do pupils use mother tongue informally?	34	4	66
Do pupils pronounce words appropriately?	17	5	83

In Table 1 above, a comparison was established on English speaking skill in private and public schools. The teachers were asked whether pupils do participate in debates; 66% of the respondents from the private schools indicated in the affirmative while 50% from the public schools did indicate the same. This suggested that more debates take place in private schools. As to whether pupils converse in mother tongue, 34% of the respondents from the private schools agreed to this assertion and another 66% of the respondents from the public schools also agreed with the assertion. Lastly, they were asked whether the pupils pronounce well English terms, of which 17% and 83% of the respondents from private and public schools respectively answered in the affirmative. These responses were corroborated with my observations; many students in private

schools were seen to be more confident in expressing themselves in English as compared to those from the public schools.

4.2 Findings on the reasons for disparities in the English language speaking skill in private and public schools in Trans-Nzoia County

This part was aimed at establishing the differences in the learning of English language skill in both private and public schools in Trans Nzoia County. Pupils were asked whether they have a language policy in their schools. The following were the findings for teachers.

Table 2: Presence of language policy in schools

Response	Private schools	Percentage	Public schools	Percentage
Yes	3	100	2	66
No	0	0	1	34
Total	3	100	3	100

The question was aimed at finding out whether the schools have an English speaking policy in their school. As per table 5 above, 100% of the teachers in private school sampled indicated that they have it in place while 66% from public schools did indicate that they have it in place. This shows that the private schools were ahead as far as having a policy on English speaking schools is concerned. However, since sampling involved schools of the same status, even in some those public schools sampled demonstrated that there was a policy in place.

The teachers were asked to explain the nature of the speaking skills. The responses were varied; they ranged from making pupils speak the language from Monday to Thursday to forcing the students to speak the language when addressing teachers, having debates frequently and encouraging pupils to participate in activities such as poem recitations, drama and public speaking , all which enhance their grasp in the spoken English language. In the observations carried out in the schools selected; it was noted that many students followed the guidelines on speaking in English. In fact, there were posters in some of the schools like private primary school (A) reminding pupils that the school is an English speaking zone.

4.3 Findings on the School language culture and its influence on the speaking of English by pupils in private and public primary schools

In a bid to understand the cultural context of English speaking in the sampled schools, the respondents were asked several questions. Their responses were tabulated in Table 3 below:

Table 3: Responses by teachers on language culture in private and public schools

Statement	Public schools		Private schools	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
The school ensures that English is spoken by pupils throughout in the school	53%	47%	60%	40%
Pupils like expressing themselves in English whether in formal or informal settings	60%	40%	73%	17%
There are follow up activities to ensure students speak in English	20%	80%	80%	20%
Pupils feel afraid to express themselves in English to teachers	80%	20%	26%	74%
Some English words are hard to pronounce	80%	20%	14%	86%

Table 3 sought to assess the school language culture in private and public schools. The respondents were asked several questions aimed at establishing the influence of school language culture on the speaking of English. First, they were asked to state whether their respective schools ensure that English is spoken by pupils throughout. On this, 53% of the pupils in public schools asserted in the affirmative while 47% stated in the negative. This was in contrast with the 60% in private schools who stated in the affirmative and 40% in the negative. The deduction from these responses that as much as in both settings English speaking is emphasized, private schools do put a lot more emphasis as compared with public schools.

Secondly, the respondents were asked to state if they like expressing themselves in English always; to this, 60% of the pupils in public schools indicated that they do while another 40% stated that they do not like expressing themselves in English. In private schools, 73% indicated in the positive while a paltry 17% in the negative. This was a clear indication that pupils from private schools were at ease in the expression of English if contrasted with those in private schools. As to whether there are follow up activities to ensure that students speak in English, a paltry 20% of pupils from public schools answered positively while 80% negatively. This was in contrast with the 80% in private schools who indicated that there were indeed follow up activities; only 20% in these institutions answered in the negative.

The pupils were also asked to state whether they are usually afraid to express themselves in English to teachers; 80% from public schools answered in the positive while 20% in the negative. In private schools, 74% stated that they do not feel afraid to speak to teachers in English while 26% stated that they do feel afraid. Lastly, regarding pronunciations, they were asked to state whether they

find some English words hard to pronounce; 80% stated positively, 20% stated negatively in public schools while 80% in private schools stated in the affirmative with the remaining 14% indicating in the negative.

4.4 Discussions

Syemene (2013) argues that teachers should engage pupils in activities like pronouncing new words and answering questions since they are appealing in the teaching of oral communication skills in English. Instead of emphasizing on reading and writing, pupils should spend maximum time during the lesson listening and speaking English. Activities that should be placed at the fore front should entail; pronunciation of sounds, constructing sentences using the new language items by pupils, question and answer, practicing differentiation and intonation patterns in sentences which are vital in oral communication skills. This comparison revealed a disparity in activities which enhance the acquisition of English language speaking skills in both private and public schools. This disparity therefore has an overall influence in their performance in the subject in the KCPE examinations.

According to Kerubo (2017) when she states that Learners should be exposed to situations where they can use language in context. This means that they should be encouraged to express themselves orally, for example, in class discussions and be provided with opportunities for role-play, drama and debates. Further, Gecaga (1986) reinforces this assertion by stating that if students are well exposed in their learning, minimal guidance is needed because they are able to gain more vocabulary and build in their use of language. At the same time, Mang'eni (2010) posits that learning should take place by doing in order to produce the best results. Therefore, practical methods like group activities, inquiry, discovery and discussions should be very much emphasized by educators. The author further contends that, learners should be encouraged to express themselves orally in class discussion and where possible and be provided with radios, televisions (TVs) and videos because they promote students' oral skills, aural skills and appeal to their senses.

The language culture that dictates acquisition of speaking skill is very critical; in fact, according to Newport (1990), language acquisition cannot be constricted to a biological environment alone, but rather it must include the cultural environment. Therefore, the findings demonstrated that in private schools, the language culture was more established in comparison to public schools.

Interviews with the head teachers of the selected primary schools revealed the following about language culture: at a private school B in Kiminini Sub County, the head teacher stated that a culture was established right from lower primary where pupils are trained to always speak in English. This over time creates a culture of speaking in English that characterizes the language culture of the school.

At a public primary school B in Trans Nzoia East, there is a language culture in place but it experiences several shortcomings. The head teacher stated that being a public school, some pupils who join the school midway contribute towards making the language culture inconsistent. This is because they come from other schools which do not have the English language culture in place, hence coping up becomes a hard task for them. However, it was also noted that for the speaking of English to be consistent, it starts from home. If the home environment does not encourage the speaking of the language, then it becomes solely a school affair, this negatively affects proper language culture. The head teacher of public primary A school in Trans Nzoia West stated that language culture is both an issue that exists inside the school and out of the school. In school, he stated that the teachers are encouraged to be vigilant in enforcing the language culture and they

also lead by example; they always address students whether in informal or formal settings purely in English. Observations that were done in these schools revealed that measures were in place aimed at ensuring the pupils adhere to the policy. However, since English is not their L1, the pupils experience difficulties in scrupulously adhering to the language policy of the school since more often they find themselves speaking Kiswahili or *sheng*.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

From the findings, language culture was found to be in both private and public schools; however, the culture in private schools is more reinforced compared to public schools. The factors that can be attributed to this disparity include: teachers monitoring of the pupils to ensure that they get accustomed to a language culture, language activities in school such as frequent speaking of the language whether in formal or informal settings and monitoring and evaluation of the activities by the teachers.

Indeed the performance of these schools was revelation of the fact that the stronger a language policy is entrenched in a school, the more it goes a long way in instilling in the students the skills necessary to master the language. Those schools where it was observed that they have systematic measures in place to enhance the frequent speaking and general communication in English also posted good results in the subject. In the private schools from the three sub counties which happened to post high scores in the exams, it was observed that they had a zero tolerance to speaking any other language except on Fridays when they speak Kiswahili. Furthermore, it was observed that in these schools, everyone, including the support staff, was encouraged to converse with the pupils in English. These measures were seen as a major contributing factor towards their good performance in English.

The study concludes that there are indeed disparities in the acquisition of English language speaking skill among pupils in private and public schools in Trans Nzoia. It was revealed that there were more activities which support the acquisition of this skill in private schools; these activities included debates, public speaking, clear policies that enhance the environment which facilitates the acquisition of speaking skills. These findings are in tandem with those of Kerubo (2017) which found out that the facilitating environment plays a key role in enhancing the acquisition of English language speaking skill.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Based on the research, the following recommendations can be made:
2. Schools ought to have standardize their language teaching approaches to ensure that there are no disparities
3. The teaching of English language skill ought to place the students at the centre in order to enhance its acquisition
4. Teachers should enhance the participation of pupils in language related activities such as competitions and contests, symposiums which will enhance learner acquisition of English speaking skills
5. Incentives such as awards should be given to those pupils who excel in English as a way of motivating them to develop a keen interest in the language.

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