

Effects of a Learning Together Model on Students' Attitude towards School Poetry

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Abstract

The importance of poetry in enhancing the development and growth of students' intellectual, emotional, social and linguistic aspects is well documented. However, there is poor performance by students in poetry at the KCSE examinations due to the negative attitude students hold towards poetry instruction. This may be alleviated by effective CL models capable of boosting students' academic achievement, attitudes and liking of school. This study investigated the impact of LTM on students' attitudes towards poetry. The pretest-posttest quasi-experimental design was employed because school authorities do not allow randomization of individual students. 199 Form three students located in six secondary school classes took part. Results revealed higher attitude for students using LTM than those in regular classes. The study concludes that LTM has pedagogical implications for poetry instruction.

Key words: Poetry instruction, attitude, collaborative learning, pedagogy, learning together model, secondary education

Introduction

Over the past few years, interest in the use of literature in reading instruction has increased because of the learners' exposure to literature at a young age. This tends to help them develop sophisticated language structures which include vocabulary and syntax (Amisi, 2002; Auta, 2002). Moreover, students' development and growth in the realm of intellectual, emotional, social and linguistic aspects can be improved through exposure to literature (Kenya National Examination Council [KNEC], 2000). For this reason therefore, poetry is taught in Literature because it provides students with the opportunity to explore linguistic and conceptual aspects of the written text without necessarily concentrating on the mechanics of the language. Furthermore, it enables them develop a sense of awareness of the self in the mainstream culture through dramatic interpretations of poems (Chemwei, Kiboss & Ilieva, 2005).

But in spite of this importance, students' attitude towards poetry in our schools and colleges is wanting. For instance, Auta (2002) has cited it as the most unpopular genre of literature in Secondary schools, colleges, as well as universities. Amisi (2002) contends that the poetry section of the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education English paper is poorly performed since the merger of English language and literature in 1985. Another area that most scholars of literature lay blame is the poetry explication practices. The way in which poetry is taught tends to promote negative or indifferent attitudes towards poetry (Kabaji, 2001; Amisi, 2002).

Many teachers are handicapped by the lack of flair needed to inspire a genuine appreciation of poetry due to certain instructional traditions followed in poetry teaching that are not cohesive with the practices currently felt. Such instructional traditions do not allow classroom practice to obtain the level of informality and comfort necessary for a general passion of poetry to come through because contemporary theories of language learning stress the importance of student-centered learning where much learning is done through peer-to-peer interaction (Connolly & Smith, 2003; Abdulla & Jacobs, 2004). However, it is important to realize that a positive student attitude towards the content of an instructional activity should be a critical goal for the teacher because there is a positive correlation between student attitude and student achievement (House & Keely, 1996).

In poetry classroom teaching, the issue of student attitude – student achievement correlation can be addressed through collaborative learning (CL) has been lauded by educators as effective in promoting the cognitive and

linguistic development of learners (McGroathy, 1993; Kagan, 1995). CL is a comprehensive approach to teaching that encompasses key assumptions about what students should learn and how they should learn it (Johnson & Johnson, 1994). The advantages of CL over individual work include greater learning gains, higher order thinking, better self-images and increased prosocial behavior (Thomson & Tayman, 1996). Besides, collaborative learning tends to result in deeper student learning and more positive attitudes towards schooling, their subjects of study and toward themselves because of its prowess to promote group socialization and cohesiveness while decreasing prejudicial attitudes, thus fostering self-esteem and increasing ability to see another's perspective (Felder, 1995).

But in most of our schools, the development of positive attitudes remains an ongoing challenge to teachers of poetry because the students lack the attitude and motivation to learn in this genre. In this respect, the teaching of poetry can benefit from the inclusion of a Learning Together (LT) model of collaborative learning in that it allows the teacher to organize instruction according to the principles of positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive face-to-face interaction, group processing, and social and collaborative skills (Chemwei, Kiboss & Ilieva, 2005).

The main advantage of learning together model (LTM) over other collaborative learning models is that it is less prescriptive and unlike other CL models it does not employ specific steps in lesson planning and strategies in a prescribed manner. Moreover, it provides a conceptual framework that can be tailored to meet the teachers' circumstances, students' needs and school contexts (Kluge, McGuire, Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Therefore this study adopted the use of LTM in the teaching of poetry with the goal of determining its potential to improve students' attitudes towards poetry which has been considered an unpopular genre of literature that is reported to be a major challenge for teachers in Kenya.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of LTM that included the use of rewards, structured processes, and training of students in group processes and interactive skills, periodic tests, assigning roles to group members as well as summing up scores for peer groups to improve students' attitudes towards poetry.

Hypotheses

In pursuit of this purpose, the study set forth the following Null hypotheses for testing:

HO₁: There is no significant difference between the attitudes of students in the LTM group and those in the regular group.

HO₂: There is no significant difference between the attitudes of students in the LTM group and those in the regular group irrespective of school category.

Method

Participants

A total of 199 Form three students situated in three secondary school categories (two girls' only; two boys' only; and two coeducational) in Baringo district participated in the study. Two intact classes of each school category served either as the experimental or the control group. The experimental group comprised of 40 students in the coeducational, 25 in the girls only and 22 in the boys only categories, while the control group comprised of 40 students in the co-educational, 44 in the girls only, and 25 in the boys only categories of those taking poetry. All the subjects studied the same poetry content for a period of eight weeks. Those in the experimental groups were taught using the LTM intervention whereas those in the control condition learned poetry using the regular method.

Research Design

In Kenyan secondary schools, classes usually exist as intact groups and so it was not possible to have them reconstituted for research purposes. Nevertheless, the study utilized the quasi-experimental, pretest and post test research design. To control for interaction between selection and maturation, the schools were randomly assigned to either the control or the experimental group while interaction between selection and treatment was controlled by ensuring that the administration of instruments across the schools was kept as similar as possible (Zechmeister & Shaughnessy, 1994; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007).

Moreover, the regular qualified teachers of poetry run the experiment therefore the students were less aware of the fact that they were being subjected to experimental treatment (Koul, 1993). To control for teachers' gender, training and experience as sources of internal invalidity, female teachers of equivalent training and experience with their male counterparts were also chosen. Form three students of approximately the same age were used to avoid the threat of maturity to internal validity. Besides, a pretest analysis showed no significant difference

between the subjects' attitudes towards poetry to suggest that they were equivalent before the commencement of poetry teaching.

Instrument

All the 199 students were asked to complete the Students Attitude Questionnaire (SAQ) administered to measure their attitudes towards poetry. This instrument was adopted from Kiboss (1997) and modified to suit the present study. It entailed the measurement of the attitudes of students using a twenty items Likert-type scale with options describing the students' feelings about poetry instruction. Data from a pilot test of the SAQ using Cronbach alpha formula yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.75, which is above the 0.70 threshold for acceptable reliability.

Procedure

Students in six intact classrooms from three school categories (coeducational, boys only and girls only) were randomly assigned to either the experimental or the control groups. The students in the experimental groups were taught poetry lessons using the LTM method while those in the control group received their instruction through the regular teacher centered method. Before instruction, both the experimental and control groups were pre-tested using the SAQ. This was done to assess the learners' initial attitudes towards poetry prior to implementation of the intervention. At the end of the poetry course, the SAQ measure was again administered to all the students. This was done in order to determine the degree of change that had occurred in each individual regarding their attitudes towards learning of poetry.

During the intervention, all students exposed to the following four poems: Henry Barlow's '*Building the Nation*'; Pius Oleghe's '*A Sudden Storm*'; Richard Mabala's '*The Money Changers*', and Everett Standas' '*That other life*.' The students in the experimental treatment learned poetry using LTM while those in the control group used the traditional method. Observations were conducted regularly to ensure that all the components were being carried out as intended.

The collaborative learning program was used to supplement the regular poetry classroom instruction. Prior to carrying out the treatment, teachers in the experimental groups participated in a five day, 2-hour in-service, training session given to familiarize them with the LTM program, the materials needed, the lesson plans and the various poetry activities. Similarly, students were assigned to five member heterogeneous groups which were based on their gender and ability (mixed ability). To encourage bonding and identity, each team was asked to create a unique name for their group. Each student was also issued with a LTM manual detailing the sequence of the learning activities to guide them during the collaborative learning sessions and were informed of the basic group skills viz.: 1) Every member should participate in group's activities, 2) Members should help each other understand the poems, 3) Each student is accountable for asking and seeking help from members. In addition, desks and chairs were rearranged into groups within the classroom to enhance interpersonal interaction.

During the poetry lessons, learners dramatized and presented their poems in class as their teacher and colleagues evaluated their group performance. Each member of the best three groups won themselves certificates of poetry achievement. These certificates were meant to enhance the students' motivation and increase their participation (Giraud, 1997). In the course of the program implementation, the researcher met with the teachers once a week so as to discuss any problems and concerns emerging from classroom management, skill development, and how to improve the program.

Results and Discussion

SAQ was used to measure the students' attitude towards poetry. Overall, there was a significant difference between from Pre to Post test mean gains. Two interesting interactions were observed during the data analysis. The first was the determining the entry level of both groups prior to the commencement of the poetry course. The second was the difference between the experimental group learning poetry using the LTM and control group using the regular method.

Entry behaviour of students' attitudes towards poetry

The subjects' comparative results of their performance on SAQ (Table 1) shows that prior to the commencement of the poetry course the subjects were equal. This was evident from their pretest mean scores (M=64.52 and M=64.82) which were not significantly different and the standard deviations (SD=10.05 and 7.70) for the experimental and control group respectively.

Table 1: Pre-analysis of pretest mean scores and standard deviation (S.D) obtained by the subjects on SAQ

SCALE	GROUP	
	EXPERIMENTAL N=87	CONTROL N=112
Pretest mean	64.52	64.82
S.D	10.05	7.70

A one way analysis of variance (ANOVA) $F(1,197)=0.058$, $p<0.05$ confirmed that the slight differences in the means and standard deviations were not significantly different. This implies that the groups had comparable characteristics hence suitable for the study.

Impact of LTM to improve students' attitudes towards poetry

The data in Table 2 indicates also that after exposure to the poetry course, the posttest mean scores (76.85) obtained by the experimental group 76.85 are higher than that (66.46) for the control group. Also, this finding is supported by the high mean gain (12.33) of the students in the LTM program which is not only ten times that (1.64) of their counterparts in the traditional class but almost twice that (6.32) of all groups combined.

Table 2: Comparison of pretest and posttest mean scores and standard deviation (S.D) obtained by the subjects on SAQ

SCALE	OVERALL N=199	GROUP	
		EXPERIMENTAL N=87	CONTROL N=112
Pretest mean	64.68	64.52	64.82
S.D	8.78	10.05	7.70
Posttest mean	71.00	76.85	66.46
S.D	11.21	11.95	8.14
Mean Gain	6.32	12.33	1.64

Apparent here is the fact that the subjects in the experimental group outscored their counterparts in the control group on SAQ. The figures in Table 3 from an ANOVA test performed to determine whether the subjects mean scores were significantly different or not confirm this finding.

Table 3: Results of One-way ANOVA of the subjects' posttest mean scores on the SAQ

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p-value
Between groups	5282.08	1	5282.08	52.98*	0.000
Within groups	19640.92	197	99.70		
Total	24922.00	198			

**Statistically significant at 0.05 level*

The data in Table 3 revealed an F-value $F(1,197) = 52.98$, $p<0.05$, an indication that there was a statistically significant difference between the two groups the posttest attitude mean scores. Therefore the hypothesis suggesting that there is no statistically significant difference between the attitude and interest of students exposed to LTM and those not so exposed is therefore rejected.

Comparison of the pretest and posttest means scores and standard deviations obtained by the subjects on SAQ by school category

Part of the objective of this study was to determine if the use of LTM to teach poetry is differentially effective in respect to school categories. Table 4 compares the results of pretest and posttest mean scores and mean gains obtained by the students in the LTM co-ed group, boys only group and girls only group with those of the students in the regular co-ed group, boys only group and girls only group. The data reveal that the pretest mean scores of students in the LTM co-ed group ($M=62.43$) and that of the regular co-ed group ($M=62.98$) are similar. The same case applies to the pretest mean scores of the LTM boys only group ($M=66.68$) and regular boys only group ($M=67.00$) and the LTM girls only group ($M=65.08$) and the regular girls only group ($M=65.92$). This is

an indication that the groups were of equal disposition prior to the commencement of the poetry course.

Table 4: Results of the SAQ pretest and posttest mean scores and the standard deviations (S.D) obtained by the subjects by school category

SCALE	LTM TREATMENT GROUP			TRADITIONAL INSTRUCTION GROUP		
	Co-ed(N=40)	Boys(N=22)	Girls(N=25)	Co-ed(N=44)	Boys(N=25)	Girls(N=40)
Pretest mean	62.43	66.68	65.08	62.98	67.00	65.92
S.D	6.98	7.81	7.18	7.02	7.80	7.86
Posttest mean	70.72	78.40	85.26	63.47	68.89	68.05
S.D	12.34	7.61	8.60	8.04	8.74	6.91
Mean Gain	8.29	11.72	20.17	0.49	1.89	2.13

Notable from the data is the fact that after exposure to the poetry course, there was a remarkable difference between the mean scores and mean gains of the experimental and control groups in favor of the student using the LTM. Specifically, the posttest mean scores obtained by the LTM groups by school category co-educational (M=70.72), boys' only (M=78.40) and girls' only (M=85.28) are much higher than those of the traditional classes co-educational (M=63.47), boys' only (M=68.89) and girls' only (M=68.05). Similarly, higher mean gains were obtained by the LTM groups co-educational (8.29), boys only (11.72) and girls only (20.17) as compared to the very low mean gains obtained by their counterparts in the regular program co-educational (0.49), boys' only (1.89) and girls' only (2.13). These figures (Table 4) show that students in the LTM treatment seem to have had a similar attitudinal effect. Similarly, the ANOVA results presented in Table 5 confirm the findings.

Table 5: ANOVA of the SAQ posttest mean score obtained by the subjects by school category

Source		SS	df	MS	F	p-value
Boys	Between groups	1115.68	1	1115.68	16.352*	0.000
	Within groups	3279.99	48	68.32		
	Total	4395.68	49			
Girls	Between groups	4767.27	1	4767.27	79.03*	0.000
	Within groups	3640.94	63	67.00		
	Total	8208.21	64			
Co-ed	Between groups	1100.62	1	1100.62	10.33*	0.000
	Within groups	8730.95	82	99.70		
	Total	9381.52	83			

*Statistically significant at 0.05 level

The ANOVA test results shown in Table 5 yielded the following F- ratios $F(1,83) = 10.33, p < 0.05$; $F(1,64) = 79.03, p < 0.05$ and $F(1,49) = 16.32, p < 0.05$; for LTM treatment co-educational, girls' and boys' school and traditional co-educational, girls' and boys' school categories respectively, which are statistically significant at the 0.05 level. This finding is a clear indication that LTM had an impact on students' attitudinal change irrespective of their school categories. Therefore hypotheses suggesting that there would be no statistically significant difference between the attitudes of students exposed to LTM and those not so exposed is therefore rejected.

Discussion

The present study sought to investigate the impact of LTM type of collaborative learning on students' attitudes towards the learning of poetry. The findings of this study indicate that significant differences were found between the LTM experimental and the control groups in attitudinal change as measured by SAQ. This is a strong suggestion that the attitudes of the students taught through the LTM intervention improved significantly as compared to those taught using traditional instruction. This is in line with findings of earlier studies indicating that the use of collaborative learning models engendered more positive attitudes towards the subject of study and also the instructor (Felder, 1995; House & Keely, 1996; McCurdy, 1996; Hirst & Slavik, 2000).

The subjects in collaborative learning groups reported an increase in attitude with regard to their enjoyment of reciting and dramatizing poems in groups. They further expressed that they could make mistakes and be corrected by their colleagues without hurting another's feelings or self-esteem. At the same time, the rewards in form of certificates played a major role in influencing the subject's attitudes. This view is shared by many researchers (Felder, 1995; Thomson & Tayman, 1996; Slavin, 2000) who claims that forms of collaborative

learning that provided rewards have not only increased achievement but also motivated and encouraged learners to help one another to achieve. Earlier studies have also demonstrated that students who work in collaborative groups often portray better positive attitudes and behaviors (McCurdy, 1996; Hirst & Slavik, 2000).

It is also notable from the results that girls in girls' schools and boys in boys' school benefited more from the program than did students in co-educational school categories as shown by differences in their mean gains. This implies that collaborative learning is more effective in homogenous settings where we have single sex groups than in heterogeneous settings such as in co-educational schools. This augurs well with the conclusion of researchers such as Underwood and Jindal (1994) and Cecez-Kecmanovic and Webb (2000), Williams (2007) that collaborative learning favours homogenous groups (both female and male) than heterogeneous groups.

Generally, the study has demonstrated that students in the collaborative learning programme realized that poetry is an oral art than can easily be enjoyed and understood better if acted and discussed in groups (Chemwei, 2003; Chemwei, Kiboss & Ilieva, 2005). Therefore, the use of collaborative learning models such as LTM should be encouraged because they enable students to take ownership of their own work and more importantly of their own reaction to the learning process.

Conclusion

Although this study was limited in duration and scope, the findings support earlier research on collaborative learning which demonstrated that the use of well designed collaborative learning models can be effective in improving students' attitudes towards the subject of instruction and also themselves (Chemwei, 2003).

In view of this, the findings of this study have shown that the use of collaborative learning interventions hold a great promise for becoming a powerful instructional tool that can positively influence students' learning outcomes in areas where attitudes and motivation and/or interest is lacking. As this study has demonstrated, the LTM program boosted students' self esteem and promoted their motivation to learn poetry because LTM enabled them to discuss, recite and dramatize poems in collaborative groups. Furthermore, the study supports earlier research that collaborative learning favorably tend to have an impact on girls and boys in single sex schools more than those in co-educational schools (Underwood & Jindal, 1994; Cecez-Kecmanovic & Webb, 2000). Therefore, the findings of this study have shed light on our understanding that effects of learning together on students' attitudes in various school categories may help us organize language and literature in collaborative learning groups so as to better enhance the teaching and learning of poetry. Further, researchers and educators should capitalize on the effectiveness of both learning together models for both boys and girls so as to post more positive learning outcomes in poetry.

Implications and Recommendations

Apparently, this study has clearly demonstrated that the use collaborative learning models such as LTM can help us reverse the current misconceptions and stereotypes of students viewing poetry as a hard and boring subject (Chemwei, Kiboss & Illieva, 2005). This is because the attitudes and interest of students taught through the LTM intervention were positively influenced than those of their counterparts taught through the traditional method. Furthermore, the use of LTM was more effective in improving attitudes of students' in single sex schools, especially girls' schools than those in coeducational schools. In view of this, there is evidence that the use of LTM has major implications on the teaching and learning of poetry in our schools. Therefore, education authorities in Kenya should encourage teachers of literature to use this method because it is capable of positively boosting the attitudes of students who have developed otherwise poor attitudes towards poetry.

In order to realize this, the study proposes the following recommendations:

1. Poetry teachers should be given intensive training on how to implement the learning together model of collaborative learning and the benefits of doing so before making it part of the literature curriculum.
2. Support materials should be provided so as to enable teachers of English and literature to adopt and implement collaborative learning in teaching poetry effectively.
3. The Learning together model should be integrated into the English and literature curriculum so as to facilitate instructional reforms and change instructional practice.

While the results of this study suggest that collaborative learning models such as LTM offer a significant potential for developing positive attitudes in poetry instruction, several logistical and methodical barriers need to be overcome before this potential is fully realized. Therefore more studies should be conducted to include larger samples and taking longer periods. This would also increase both the generalisability of these results and the adoption of such collaborative learning models across a wide range of subjects.

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