

Designing Visual Materials for Teaching English Writing Skills in Kenyan Public Primary Schools: A Case of Kericho County

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Abstract

Quality teaching is a prerequisite for achieving quality education worldwide. For this to be achieved, well-designed visual materials should be employed. Research has proven that visual materials have inherent advantages when well utilized. This article examines the relevance of visual materials designed for teaching English writing skills in primary schools and ascertains whether learners were involved in designing them. The study employed descriptive survey design where 21 public primary schools were involved. Purposive and multistage sampling techniques were used to obtain the study sample. The sample comprised of 42 teachers and 84 class 7 learners. Data was collected using questionnaires, interview schedules and observation checklist. The results indicate that visual materials are relevant in the teaching of English writing skills with 25 out of 42 teachers confirming that visual materials arouse learners' interest. The findings also revealed that learners are rarely involved in designing visual materials with the exception of charts, models, diagrams, pictures and photographs. The study concluded that visual materials are relevant in the teaching of English writing skills. This study recommends that the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development should relook into the Teachers' Training in order to realign it with the technological advancement so as to equip teacher trainees with modern teaching approaches.

Keywords: Visual materials, writing skills, designing, relevance

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1. Introduction

English is the official language in Kenya due to its importance across the globe. It is used as a tool for trade, in conferences and exchange of information. English is ranked as the most spoken language in the world with over 2 billion speakers (Pegg, 2012). Kenyans, find it easy to interact with people globally due to their ability to communicate in English. Deuchar (2005) contends that teachers facilitate children to express their personal writing so as to develop clarity of thought and communication. Creative writing skills are developed over time and are essential for academic progress (Parker, McMaster, and Burns, 2011). The primary school curriculum is designed to facilitate the teaching of creative writing for the acquisition of competences in communication and critical thinking skills. Therefore, nurturing effective creative writing communicators is a major contribution towards the achievement of Kenyan vision 2030. Unfortunately, analyses of annual Kenya National Examination Council (KNEC) reports reveal poor performance in English composition writing among Kenyan primary school graduates. The narratives are plain and hardly developed; there is lack of language resource and creativity to sustain a given account; lack of definite plot; hardly, any development and episodes are highly contrived and ridiculous (KNEC, 2007:9; 2008: 1; 2010: 7). It is an indication that the approach to the teaching of English creative writing skills requires intervention in order to eliminate the spiraling effects.

Domin (2008) posits that visual materials are suitable for all levels and age groups. However, not every visual material is appropriate for every class. In this study, a single picture or sequence of pictures without textual guidance was used as the traditional test in written composition. The teacher presented the first picture and asked students to start writing a story based on it. She then showed another picture which may not have had any obvious relationship with the previous one and told the students to continue writing their stories without any break. The findings revealed that there was coherence and logic in the compositions written by the experimental group and was not comparable to the control group that wrote on the same topic without support of visuals. Domin concluded that visual stimuli were found to be effective in the teaching of composition writing. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the teacher of English, to select and utilize relevant visual materials when teaching creative writing skills.

Hence, there was need to investigate whether appropriate designing of selected visual materials for use in the classroom would enhance and develop effective communicators who have the capacity to contribute positively towards the achievement of the Kenya's industrialization goals.

1.2 Study Objective

The objectives of this paper were to:

- 1) Assess the relevance of visual materials designed for teaching English writing skills in primary schools
- 2) Ascertain whether learners are involved in the designing of visual materials for teaching English writing skills

1.3 Research Questions

The study was guided by the following questions:

- 1) What is the relevance of visual materials in the teaching of English writing skills?
- 2) What is the learner's involvement in the designing of visual materials for use in the English writing skills lesson?

2. Literature Review

Dale (1957) describes visual teaching materials as materials that do not depend primarily on reading to convey their meaning. It is based on the principle that all teaching can be greatly improved by such materials because they can help make learning experience memorable. Dale's advancement, suggests that when visual materials are designed and used wisely in the teaching-learning process, effective learning is achieved. This argument neither suggests that visual materials should be introduced into every teaching situation nor teachers should scrap all teaching methods that do not involve a variety of visual materials. These sentiments are shared by Agbadzi (2009) who opines that when a well-designed teaching-learning material is used appropriately in the teaching process, a desirable outcome will be achieved and teachers' problems related to methodology are minimized. This paper assumes that a well-designed visual material serves in reducing workload on the cognitive structures of the working memory thereby enabling storage and easy retrieval from the long term memory as propounded by Sweller (1998). According to Fianu (1999) cited in Agbadzi (2009), visual materials are implements which a teacher uses to make visual impression on the learner during the lesson for effective comprehension of the subject contents. The strategic role of visual materials towards the development of creative writing skills which is a long term product of intensive preparation is the concern of this paper.

Visual materials become more effective if they are well designed. Herold & Pomeroy (1992) indicate that design is a visual thinking of high order compared to verbal thinking. Teachers' ability to give guidance in the design and production of relevant and effective visual materials that aid in the development of learners' creative writing skills was the subject of this inquiry. This paper purposes to establish the level of teacher competence to design some of the visual materials and if negative, investigate reasons contributing to the limitations. Careful planning according to Nkuuhe et al. (1995) must be given top priority before one can produce any instructional material.

Smith (1978) states that without design, production cannot be achieved. This means that in producing an artifact for use in the classroom, design has to be given prominence since it plays a vital role in determining the nature of the complete work. Amenuke (1995) cited in Agbadzi (2009) opines that design deals with identification of a problem or a need for what one is to produce. This leads to analysis of the proposed function of the suggested design. Such analysis may include the function, size, shape, tools and materials needed for the work putting into consideration the technology and aesthetic qualities. Even in situations where ready-made designs are adopted for classroom use by teachers, questions arise as to whether public primary schools have the capacity in terms of costs, equipment and time.

However, the pitfalls associated with teacher designed materials have not been highlighted by Smith (1978) and Agbadzi (2009) and needs to be brought to the fore if designing is to attain and serve intended purpose. A study by Howard and Major (2004) indicate that course books are usually organised around an identifiable principle and follow a discernible pattern throughout and provide both teachers and students with some security and a "coherent body of work to remember and revise from" (Harmer, 2001:7). In contrast, teacher-designed materials may lack overall coherence and a clear progression. Without some overall organizing principle, materials may be piecemeal and can result in poorly focused activities lacking clear direction. This is frustrating and confusing for learners who may not be able to see how their creativity in writing is developing.

3. Study Design and Methodology

This study was conducted in public primary schools in Ainamoi Division of Kericho County. This location was chosen for this study because of its poor academic performance especially in English writing skills. The study adopted a descriptive survey design. This was found ideal since it would allow the researchers to collect quantifiable data from the sample (Kombo and Tromp 2006 cited in Onchera and Manyasi, 2013). 68 public primary schools, 42 teachers of English language and 84 standard seven pupils formed the population from which the sample for this study was drawn. The researchers first used multistage sampling as described by Cochran (1977) cited in Nafiu, et al (2012) to divide them into subsets thus distinguishing them into their respective administrative zones. A representation in form of a percentage was then used to sample each of the zones. (Orodho and Kombo, 2002) argue that at least 30% of the target population can be considered ideal

generalization of the findings. Through purposive sampling, the researchers selected 4 schools from Municipality zone, 5 schools from Ainamoi zone, 5 schools from Kapsaos zone, and 7 schools from Kapsoit zone. Therefore the study sample consisted of 21 public primary schools representing 30% of the target population. From the 21 schools, purposive sampling was used in selecting class seven. Thereafter, simple random sampling was used to select 2 teachers of English subject to participate in the study. Thus, a total of 42 teachers were selected.

The researchers also employed stratified sampling to select 2 schools each from Ainamoi zone, Kapsaos zone, Kapsoit zone and 1 school from Municipality zone thus making a total of 7 schools to conduct of classroom observations in the classes that had been selected out of the 21 schools. This represented 10% of the target population in line with Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) cited in Macharia (2013). A total of 42 teachers and 84 class 7 learners participated in the study. Data was collected using questionnaires for teachers, interview schedules for pupils and observation checklist for visual materials used in the classroom.

The teachers' questionnaire consisted of two parts: I and II. Part I sought to capture the biographical data such as teachers' gender, age bracket, highest academic qualification, experience in teaching the subject and training background. Section II sought to record the relevance of the designed visual materials and learners' involvement in the designing of the visual materials. The questionnaires were administered by the researchers for a minimum of 45 minutes per teacher. The pupils' interview schedule was divided into part I and II. Part I captured the learners' biographic data such as gender and age brackets. Part II consisted of questions on relevance of visual materials used in the classroom and learners' involvement in the designing of the materials. The interviews took a minimum of 20 minutes per pupil. The observation checklist was used to observe and record the type of visual materials used in the classroom. The test items in the questionnaire and interview schedule were discussed with research experts for their input and validation. Piloting was conducted in two schools in order to eliminate items that would have likely brought irrelevancy or no responses. The instruments were then amended accordingly after piloting. A test-retest approach was used to establish the reliability of the instruments. The first and second tests were correlated and a coefficient of reliability of 0.78 was obtained thus implying that there was high degree of reliability of research tools.

3.1 Data Analysis

Quantitative data collected from the teachers' questionnaires and pupils' interview schedules, was processed by coding the closed ended questions for descriptive analysis. As for the open ended questions, information was categorized into themes, data coded and entered into the computer for descriptive analysis using SPSS program. The findings were reported and discussed using tables.

4. Results and Discussion

The main objective of this study was to assess the design of visual materials used to enhance learners' creative writing skills. Teachers were asked whether pupils participated in the designing of specific visual materials for teaching and learning of English writing skills. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Learners' involvement in designing visual materials

Visual Material	Yes	No	No Response	Results
Charts	27(62.8)	9(20.9)	6(14.0)	Involved
Maps	22(51.2)	8(18.6)	12(27.9)	Involved
Models	25(58.1)	6(14.0)	11(26.2)	Involved
Story boarding	10(23.3)	15(34.9)	17(40.5)	No Response
Visual brainstorming	9(20.9)	18(41.9)	15(34.9)	Not Involved
Mind maps	5(11.6)	18(41.9)	19(45.2)	No Response
Pictures and photographs	27(62.8)	5(11.6)	10(23.3)	Involved
Diagrams	30(71.4)	4(9.5)	8(19.1)	Involved
Graphics	14(32.6)	12(27.9)	16(38.1)	No Response

The results in Table 1 clearly indicate that 30(71.4 %) of the learners are involved in designing diagrams, while 27(62.8%) are involved in designing charts, 27(62.8%) design of pictures and photographs. Designing of story boarding 10(23.3%), visual brainstorming 9(20.9%), mind maps 5(11.6%) and graphics 14(32.6%). Factors such as scarcity of resources, high pupil enrolment, and lack of time were found to be the deterrents of designing of visual materials. Other inhibiting factors were non- availability of resources and lack of relevant skills.

These findings are supported by the teachers that were interviewed. One teacher, Respondent 5 said, "There is lack of time to explain and involve pupils." This was supported by Respondent 8 who asserted that, "we are so busy that there is hardly any time to engage pupils." Similarly, Respondent 24 blatantly said that, "There is lack of time to explain and involve pupils." This was corroborated by the pupils interviewed. One pupil, Respondent

1 from school 4 said that, “*there is no time to do them because we are very busy with other subjects as well.*” The findings of this study concur with Omariba (2012) who noted that teachers did not design instructional resources due to heavy work load, limited time and exerted pressure from school administrators to cover the syllabus at a specified time. On the contrary, a study by Omwenga (2001) intimated that teachers from other parts of the world had no problem availing instructional technologies as they used new technologies in designing them. This is affirmed by Baylor & Richie (2002) who noted that teachers valued the use of technologies in class and that it had a positive impact on learners’ content acquisition. The absence of technologies, however, is not a good reason for lack of design of visual materials in Kenyan public schools.

This paper reckons that designing ability, being a high order visual thinking skill as described by Herold and Pomeroy (1992) is essential for the production of relevant and effective visual materials and therefore requires the full attention and commitment of teachers. Similarly, Agbadzi (2009) holds that designing deals with identification of a problem or a need for what one is to produce and as such visual materials cannot be available in class unless they are designed through the guidance and initiatives of the teacher. The absence of locally made materials in the English writing skills classrooms expose loopholes in the management of the curriculum in the public institutions and portray a dire need to address issues such as teacher apathy towards designing visual materials, teacher training needs and motivation and curriculum supervision in an effort to promote quality designs of visual materials for teaching and learning of English writing skills.

5. Conclusion

The results of this paper provide evidence that at primary school level, teachers did not take time to select relevant and appropriate designs of instructional resources and only relied on the traditional textbooks and story books whose illustrations may be outdated. It was evident that learners’ interests were captivated when other instructional resources other than the commonly available textbooks were introduced to the creative English writing lessons. Where teachers made initiatives and guidance as was the case in one school, learners were able to participate in the selection, improvisation and utilization of support materials that facilitated the learning process.

However, teachers complained of too much workload due to the persistent high enrolment in public schools and therefore limited their available time to using the readily available resources with no options for improvisation. This does not give sufficient explanation as to why teachers who have undergone training cannot use other approaches to manage the high enrolment such as devolving learning by empowering group work activities and assignments.

6. Way Forward

The Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development should relook into the Teachers’ Training College curriculum and review training needs in line with the technological advancement. Teacher Trainees ought to be equipped appropriately with modern skills that would enable them source for teaching materials using modern equipment such as computers and thus move away from the printed resources whose content and illustrations get redundant with time. This is because consistent use of textbooks without variation hardly motivates learners.

This will also give teachers opportunity to produce simplified and detailed visual materials for effective use of story boarding, mind maps and visual brainstorming approaches in the teaching of creative writing through the support of the school administrators.

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