



Testing Speaking Skills Through Writing and Learners' Speaking Competence in Selected Secondary Schools in Wareng' Sub- County Uasin Gishu County, Kenya

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Abstract

At the end of the secondary English course, all students are expected to have acquired a significant command of English in spoken form to enable them to communicate confidently and competently in all sorts of discourse. However, by the end of secondary school, most learners are not able to speak competently in English language in most real-life situations. Therefore, this study investigated the effects testing speaking skills through writing and learners' speaking competence in selected secondary schools in Wareng' Sub- County Uasin Gishu County, Kenya. This study adopted a descriptive research design. The researcher used both purposive and stratified sampling techniques to select the schools that were investigated. The study employed various data collection instruments, including a questionnaire for students, a questionnaire for English teachers, a classroom observation guide, and a method of assessment guide. English language teachers and their form four students were observed during the listening and speaking English lessons. The reliability of the research instruments tested using test-retest method. The qualitative data collected was analyzed using narrative analysis, while quantitative data were analyzed using frequencies and percentages. Findings were as follows; on testing speaking skills, 43(62.3%) revealed that testing speaking skills through writing helps in assessment of write proficiency, 15(27.7%) revealed that it not only helps to test or monitor whether students have mastered words spellings but it helps them improve on word spelling and lastly, 11(15.9%) revealed that the when they get the spellings right, then it led to improvement in speech. The study concluded that testing speaking skills through writing helps in assessment of write proficiency. Learners engage in groupwork which improves there speaking competence. The study recommended that a study should be conducted to establish the challenges associated with testing speaking skills orally in all public secondary schools in Kenya.

Keywords: Testing Speaking Skills, Learners' Speaking Competence, Kenya

INTRODUCTION

Speech has always been an important mode of communication in the world since most of everyday activities are conducted through verbal interaction (Njuguna, 2000). Very few people address each other through other modes of communication such as reading and writing in their daily interaction and therefore, a bigger percentage of their communication is through speech. Talley and Hui-ling (2014), states that occasionally, because of time or financial constraints, test users- those who use scores to make decisions about test takers' qualifications for work or study may be inclined to use a less than fully comprehensive assessment of important skills or abilities (Oketch, 2005). This is true especially when assessing English language proficiency, where the key question often is: "can a single measure (typically, a test of speaking ability, or

sometimes reading) serve as a sufficient proxy for a test taker's overall proficiency in all modes of communication in English, including listening, speaking, reading and writing?"

According to Choi (2008), for a variety of practical reasons, the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) test programme originally offered only a multiple-choice test of listening and reading skills. Educational Testing Service (ETS) introduced the TOEIC Speaking and Writing tests in 2006. Similarly, until 2005, the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) test included only listening, writing and reading components. The main reason for adding a speaking component to the current TOEFL battery, therefore, was the criticism that although students could perform well on the original TOEFL Listening and Reading test, some could not communicate orally in academic situations (Mang'eni, 2010).

The performance of English in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) has not been good over a number of years throughout the country. The Kenya National Examination Council (KNEC) newsletters of the years 2012, 2013 and 2014 all testify that many candidates perform poorly in English (Njuguna, 2000). As a result of this poor performance, the Ministry of Education places a lot of emphasis on the development of English language. It also places on the shoulder of English language teachers the task of molding the students so that they can express themselves effectively in spoken English. This skill is important to secondary school graduates who need them to further their studies and advance their careers in various professions (Magoma, 1999).

Statement of the Problem

English language is both the official language and the language of instruction in Kenyan secondary schools for all the subjects except for Kiswahili and other foreign languages; it is also used at the international level during formal forums. Academically, students need to be able to speak proficiently in order to accomplish a number of tasks such as asking and responding to questions, giving oral reports and communicating with classmates. It is therefore, important to develop English oral skills competence in learners. Globally, there is a debate that majority of high school graduates cannot speak English language properly (Alonzo, 2014; Sarwar & Alam, 2014; Alharbi, 2015). Even the bright students who get high scores in written examinations are unable to express themselves orally in English language (Sarwar & Alam, 2014).

According to Choi (2008), many newspapers have reported on cases of TOEIC test takers who, although they obtained very high scores on TOEIC Listening and Speaking test, were seriously deficient with regard to overall communicative ability. The point here is that, although listening and reading can provide an indirect indication of speaking and writing ability, they provide no comprehensive assessment of speaking competence. In Kenya, Atieno (2015), in her study on the variations in the levels of performance of learners among the various English language speaking skills tested in both written and oral approaches, pointed out that the testing of speaking skills has for a long time been ignored by KNEC even though the two skills (listening and speaking) have been in the syllabus since the inception of 8-4-4 system of education in 1985, the speaking skill was first tested in Kenya certificate of secondary education (KCSE) English paper 2(102/2) in 2002. Only one aspect of speaking, namely pronunciation (homophones), was tested. The syllabus recommends that the students sit for an oral examination at the end of form four. However, this has never been implemented.

Uasin Gishu County, also referred to as the home of champions is known to produce the most prominent athletes in the world. However, in as much as a majority of these athletes are form four graduates; they cannot express themselves orally in English language during interviews. For instance, an interview by WBZ TV on one of the Kenyan athletes, who is a form four graduate from one of the schools in Uasin Gishu County, in April 17,2017 can be seen struggling to express herself orally in English language. There is need therefore, for both teachers and the KNEC to emphasize on the importance of the speaking skill. Surprisingly, so far, there is no study that has been done on the effects of testing speaking skills through writing on classroom practices and learners' speaking competence. This study was therefore, an investigation of the effects of testing speaking skills through writing in Kenyan secondary schools, its effects on classroom practices and ultimately on the learners speaking competence. The specific objectives adopted in the study was to observe how testing speaking skills through writing affects learners speaking competence.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a descriptive approach research design. This design enabled the researcher to get students' and teachers' opinions on learners' verbal communication competence during classroom interaction. The research was conducted in Wareng' Sub-County Uasin Gishu County, Kenya. The target population was 3266 students and 108 English teachers in public secondary schools in Wareng' sub-County. This study utilized the purposive sampling technique, because the researcher purposely carried out a study on the Form four students. The form fours were selected because they are the graduating class who have had a lengthy interaction with English language, and therefore their responses would determine whether the method of testing speaking skills affected their speaking competence. Stratified random sampling techniques was employed in selecting the secondary schools that were investigated. The sample size for this study comprised of four sub-sets of schools. 356 Form four students in each school and eighty-five teachers of English from a selection of boys, girls and mixed secondary schools in the sub-county were sampled. Data was collected using; questionnaire for teachers of English, questionnaire for students and lesson observation and method of assessment guide. The research instruments were reviewed and validated by the supervisors and other experts from the School of Education, University of Eldoret. Pilot study was carried out with eight teachers and eight students who were not considered in the actual study. Two teachers were randomly selected from each of the strata, that is, (the national schools, extra county schools, county and sub-county schools); in Eldoret West, Uasin Gishu county, Kenya. Reliability of the research instruments was tested through test-retest method. The collected data was both quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively using frequencies and percentages, while qualitative data was analyzed using the narrative approach.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Background Information of the Teachers

Teachers' background information was based on sex, age, education qualifications, which form the respondent teaches and the capacity of the class as presented in table 1 below. In relation to sex, 50.7% (35) of them were male while 49.3% (34) were female. This implies that majority of the English teachers are of male gender. In regards to age, 4.3% (3) of the teachers were aged between 21 to 25 years, 33.3% (23) of them were aged between 26 and 30 years, 36.2% (25) between 31 and 35 years and 26.1% (18) were aged above 36 years. Furthermore, 7.2% (5) of the respondents had a masters' degree, 46.4% (32) of them had a bachelor of education arts, 29.0% (20) had a

Bachelor of Arts degree and 17.4% (12) had a post graduate diploma in education. This study targeted form four English teachers and therefore, 100.0% (69) of them taught form four class (es).

Table 1: Teachers' Biographic Information

		Frequency	Percent
Sex	Male	35	50.7
	Female	34	49.3
	Total	69	100.0
Age	21- 25	3	4.3
	26 – 30	23	33.3
	31 – 35	25	36.2
	over 36	18	26.1
	Total	69	100.0
Educational Qualification	Master's degree	5	7.2
	Bed arts	32	46.4
	BA	20	29.0
	PGDE	12	17.4
	Total	69	100.0
Which form do you teach	Iv	69	100.0
	Total	69	100.0
What is the capacity of your class	30	9	13.0
	40	5	7.2
	50	29	42.0
	60	19	27.5
	> 61	7	10.1
	Total	69	100.0

Source: Survey data, 2018

In a bid to establish the capacity of the class the respondent teaches, 13.0% (9) taught a class capacity of 30 students, 7.2% (5) had 40 students, 42.0% (29) had a student population of 50, 27.5% (19) had 60 and 10.1% (7) had more than 61 students.

Background Information of the Students

An attempt was made to determine the gender distribution of the students, revealing that 39.9% (115) were male and 60.1% (173) were female. This implies that majority of the respondents were female. In regards to age 76.0% (219) of the respondents were aged between 16 and 20 while 26.0 % (69) of them were aged above 21 years. The respondents were asked to state their end of term score for speaking skills in English language, 26.4% (76) had a score of between 41 and 50 percent, 24.0% (69) scored between 51 and 60, 24.0% (69) between 61 and 70 while 25.7% (74) had a total score of above 70 percent. This implies that majority of the respondents' performance of speaking skills in English language ranges between 41 and 50.

In relation to whether the students consider speaking in English to be hard, easy or fair, majority of the respondents 50.3% (145) revealed that it was hard while 49.7% (143) of them acknowledged that it was easy. The students were asked to respond accordingly as to whether good spoken English is essential for either passing examination, general communication or any other besides the two, 49.7% (143) revealed that it was essential for passing examination while 50.3% (145) agreed that it was meant for general communication with other people. It was interesting to note that all the respondents used in this study 78.8% (227) revealed that they use English language for verbal communication in school, 17.7% (51) used Kiswahili, 10.1% (21

used all but not vernacular while 3.5% (10) used other languages such as sheng. While at home 15.6% (45) of them used English, 32.3% (93) used Kiswahili, 26.4% (76) used vernacular and 6.9% (20) of the respondents used other languages as shown in table 2.

Table 2: Background Information of the students

		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	115	39.9
	Female	173	60.1
	Total	288	100.0
Age bracket	16 – 20	219	76.0
	> 21	69	24.0
	Total	288	100.0
End of term score in English language speaking Skills	41 – 50	76	26.4
	51- 60	69	24.0
	61 – 70	69	24.0
	Above 70	74	25.7
	Total	288	100.0
	What is well spoken English is essential for	Passing Examination	143
Language often used for verbal communication in School	General communication with other people	145	50.3
	Total	288	100.0
	English	227	78.8
Language often used for verbal communication at home	Kiswahili	51	17.7
	All	29	10.1
	Other	10	3.5
	English	45	15.6
	Total	288	100.0

Source: Survey data, 2018

Effects of Testing Speaking skills through Writing in Selected Secondary Schools

The study sought to determine first whether a speaking lesson existed at the school. The study established that 53.6% (37) of the respondents acknowledged that they have a speaking lesson in their schools, 46.4% (32) of them disagreed that the selected secondary schools tested speaking skills as tabulated table 3 below.

Table 3: Speaking Lesson

		Frequency	Percent
Do you have a speaking lesson	Yes	37	53.6
	No	32	46.4
	Total	69	100.0

Source: Survey data, 2018

The study further sought to determine the effects of testing speaking skills through writing. Findings were presented in table 4.

Table 4: Effects of Testing Speaking skills through Writing

	Frequency	Percent
Writing proficiently	43	62.3
Words spellings	15	21.7
Improvement of speech	11	15.9
Total	69	100.0

Source: Survey data, 2018

As per table 4, majority of the respondents, 43 (62.3%) revealed that testing speaking skills through writing helps in assessment of write proficiency while 15 (27.7%) revealed that it not only helps to test or monitor whether students have mastered words spellings but it helps them improve on word spelling. Also, 11(15.9%) revealed that the when they get the spellings right, then it led to improvement in speech. According to Oriwo (2015), even though many students have mastered basic listening and speaking skills, some students are much more effective in their oral communication than others. Those who are more effective communicators experience more success in school and in other areas of their lives. The skills that can make the difference between minimal and effective communication can be taught, practiced, improved and tested.

In the current study, 13.0% (9) of the respondents revealed that teachers ask students on the content taught, 14.5% (10) acknowledged that exercises are given to be marked later, 33.3% (23) noted that exercises are given to marked or corrected at the end of the lesson, 21.7% (15) revealed that students ask questions or give their views and 17.4% (12) agreed that summary is done on the chalkboard. This implies that majority of the respondents acknowledged that exercises are given to be marked or corrected at the end of the lesson as shown in table 5.

Table 5: How Speaking Skills are Tested

	Frequency	Percent	
How speaking skills are assessed at the end of the lesson	Teachers ask students on the content taught	9	13.0
	Exercises are given to be marked later	10	14.5
	Exercises are given to be marked / corrected at the end of the lesson	23	33.3
	Students ask questions/give their views	15	21.7
	Summary done on the chalkboard and student copy	12	17.4
	Total	69	100.0

Source: Survey data, 2018

The teachers who disagreed argued out that the skill is not tested by KNEC and therefore it was pointless to subject learners to oral tests. Assessment is the final step where the learners get feedback of what they have been taught and how much they have learnt (Noor, 2013).

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concluded that testing speaking skills through writing helps in assessment of writing proficiency which contributes to improvement in speaking skills. It helps to test or monitor whether students have mastered words spellings. This in turn helps learners improve on word spelling which are important in pronunciation and hence it contributes to improvement in speaking skills. When the respondents get the spellings right, their speech improves. Clear evaluation modes help to improve and perfect fluency in verbal abilities in students just as it is done when learning other foreign languages like French. This plays a very vital role in ensuring that learners, teachers and the curriculum developers give English speaking skills the attention it deserves. Testing the speaking skills orally also enables the learners to be able to assess their proficiency in spoken English and also to know where to improve on. The study recommended that KICD should consider developing a curriculum that ensures that the speaking skill is given the attention that it deserves. Secondly, KNEC should deliberate on how they can successfully administer an oral examination. They should also consider collaborating with other institutions like Alliance Francaise who have been administering oral examinations for French listening and speaking skills. Teachers on the other hand should ensure that they organize oral tests to be able to ascertain their learners' speaking competence in English language.

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