THE EFFECT OF CONTENT OF GUIDED CLASSROOM TALK ON IMAGINATIVE WRITING SKILLS IN ENGLISH OF PUBLIC BOYS’ SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN KIMILILI/BUNGOMA SUB COUNTY, KENYA.

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ABSTRACT

Writing is a process that must follow an established structured approach that is used for every assigned paper in one way to create independent writers and ensure generalization of writing skills. A typical writing process consists of steps. These steps form a method used by teachers to lead students from random thoughts to a cohesive, written paper. In a classroom, teachers meet learners who are diverse hence differentiating writing instruction for a population of diverse learners may sound difficult; but, it does not have to be. Scaffolding or guided classroom talk is one process that allows teachers to organize a writing activity systematically to meet the needs of all students. This study therefore focused on the effect of guided classroom talk on imaginative writing skills of public boys’ secondary school students. The study was anchored on Output hypothesis. The study was guided by the research objective: determine the effect of content of guided classroom talk on imaginative writing skills of public boys’ secondary school students. The study used prospective self-control cohort research design. The study was carried out in Kimilili-Bungoma Sub-County. The target population of the study comprised Form Three students of public boys’ secondary schools and their English language teachers. The study randomly selected one public boys’ secondary school and used purposive sampling to select 400 Form Three students in that school together with 10 English language teachers. Data were collected using teacher questionnaires and individual interviews, classroom observation and documentary analysis checklists and pre- and post-tests. Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics with aid of SPSS. The findings of the study indicated that content has an effect on students’ imaginative writing skills. Findings also showed that familiar content is the greatest motivation for discussions in class. This meant that guided classroom talk has an effect on students’ imaginative writing skills. It is recommended that topics for writing should be chosen according to learners’ age, and teaching writing should be done in a free and friendly environment. Findings of the study should form the
basis for policy reviews by the Ministry of Education on teaching imaginative writing in secondary schools in Kenya. Scholars can use these findings to establish effect of guided reading on imaginative writing skills.

1 Background to the Study

English Language classrooms are characterized by academic discourse (Bakhtin, 1981) between teachers and learners and among learners themselves. Academic discourse is often referred to simply as classroom talk, scaffolded dialogue or dialogic teaching (Mohr & Mohr, 2007). Scaffolding is the process of supporting learning by a teacher, coach or more experienced peer (Vygotsky, 1978). The teacher or coach builds a framework to guide the student’s own construction of ideas, skills, concepts and/or processes being learnt (Mercer & Littleton, 2007). Dialogue allows participants to have thoughts they could not have had on their own, yet to recognize these thoughts as developments of their own thinking (Game & Metcalfe, 2009). Classroom talk uses carefully-structured extended exchanges or dialogue to build understanding through accumulation; and throughout children’s own words, ideas, speculations and arguments feature much more prominently (Alexander, 2005). That also means that classroom talk is collective, supportive and genuinely reciprocal and the quality and quantity of talk is important.

Classroom talk differs from traditional approaches evident in many classrooms where teachers use question-and-answer technique to invite learner participation (Durkheim, 1978/1979; Cazden, 1988). The procedure begins with the teacher posing the question and students competitively bidding for the opportunity to answer the question. In contrast, classroom talk is characterized by
comparatively lengthy interactions between a teacher and a student or group of students in a context of collaboration and mutual support. These interactions can occur in the context of whole class, small group or one-on-one learning activities and are designed to help the child to build understanding, explore ideas and practice thinking through and expressing concepts. During these interactions teachers deliberately model and explicitly teach strategies for reasoning, enquiry and negotiation, among others (Mohr & Mohr, 2007). Language is not merely seen as a tool for describing what one already knows. It is a pervasive process through which students learn about their world and develop creative and problem solving skills (Smith, 2001). A similar observation (Fisher, 2007) also draws attention to the role of talking in developing relational and emotional skills, as well as those necessary for creativity and problem-solving. Human intelligence is primarily developed through speaking and listening. The quality of our lives depends on the quality of our thinking and on our ability to communicate and discuss what we think with others. Talk is intrinsic to literacy and to our ability to form relationships with others. It is the foundation of both verbal and emotional intelligence.

Vygotsky (1962) argued that language is the medium by which children acquire more than information. By participating in guided interactions (or scaffolded dialogues) with more experienced members children also acquire the ‘mental tools’ of their culture. Vygotsky (1962) observed that tools begin as social products but become the property of individuals by the process of internalization. In the most conspicuous and significant example, language becomes thought. Interaction in the classroom is crucial because it is the necessity for child learning and growth. Interactions with more experienced others are vital for children’s acquisition of the key mental tools of their culture. Language is an aspect of such culture. Aspects like etiquette in conversation are taught through classroom talk. Working with an adult or more accomplished peer allows the
child to internalize knowledge, ways of thinking and ways of doing. Guided participation in both learning activities and conversation about these activities help the child not just to acquire information but to learn how to use this information, to transform it and make it a part of his or her own mental toolkit. Classroom talk is a key part of this process of ‘handing over’ knowledge and skills. It shapes the learner’s brain and expands its power, develops their capacity for learning, memory and language itself (Alexander, 2006). It also helps the learner to form their world-view that is often manifested in imaginative writing. Teachers get a glimpse into the learner’s world view through their essays.

Writing is a technical skill that cannot be acquired by chance or innate ability (Sure, 1982). It takes techniques, tasks and materials for the learner to acquire the skill (Byrne, 1988). The language teacher has the arduous task of looking for the best instructional approaches to teach writing skills effectively. Based on the power and promise of guided classroom talk as a successful instructional approach to bolster student learning, would it help improve student’s imaginative writing skills? Would learners benefit from carefully-structured extended exchanges, dialogues and scaffolded interactions to build their understanding to explore ideas concepts, skills, processes, speculations and arguments and practice thinking through and expressing themselves in imaginative writing? Would content of discussion, length and frequency of interactions between a teacher and a student or group of students in a context of collaboration and mutual support augment imaginative writing?

Cormack, Wignell, Nichols, Bills and Lucas (1998) argue that by setting the topic for classroom talk and keeping the talk going in the intended direction, key literacy outcomes can be achieved. According to Cormack et al. (1998), control by the teacher of classroom talk, topic and direction had a positive effect on student’s learning. Cormack et al. (1998) assert that effective classroom talk for learning did not just happen. For such talk to be effective there had to be clarity of task
setting (e.g. that the students knew what kinds of talk were required) and appropriate selection of topic (e.g. so that it had relevance to students and they had knowledge to bring to the task).

Findings of Cormack et al., (1998) study concurred with those of a research study conducted in primary classrooms in five countries (the ‘Five Nations Study’) that demonstrated the powerful learning effects of skilfully used classroom talk (Alexander (2000). According to Cormack et al. (1998), both teachers and children made substantial and significant contributions through which children’s thinking on particular ideas and/or themes was moved forward (Mercer & Littleton, 2007). Godhino and Shrimpton study concluded that for students to engage in classroom talk they need to be familiar with the discussion process, and teachers must enact enabling strategies that support the talk. Godhino and Shrimpton identified three factors upon which exploratory talk is dependent: teacher and student knowledge of what constitutes a discussion, teacher enactment of strategies that support dialogic talk, and classroom pedagogy that embraces collaborative inquiry.

Nuthall (2005) has argued that the amount of time given to classroom talk is important. Adequate time enables the teacher to give immediate and appropriate feedback and to correct misconceptions or misunderstandings that learners had during the classroom talk. Indeed, where children are offered ample opportunities to make substantial contributions to classroom talk and are provided with instruction about relevant skills, they are able to develop and practise a range of important speaking and thinking skills including the ability to: narrate, explain, instruct, ask different kinds of questions, receive, act and build upon answers, analyze and solve problems, speculate and imagine, explore and evaluate ideas, discuss, argue, reason and justify and negotiate (Mercer & Littleton, 2007). According to Mercer and Littleton (2007), children also develop four vital abilities for interacting productively with others: listening, being receptive to alternative viewpoints, thinking about what they hear, and giving others time to think. Hill and Flynn (2006)
observe that small-group interactions with peers offer several benefits: repetition of key words and phrases, functional, context-relevant, speech, rich feedback, and reduced student anxiety.

Content of Guided Classroom Talk

One big goal of talking is to create content that serves both your goals and your audience’s needs. An important piece of content in any talk is the main reason you are talking to an audience. Your key message is the biggest, most important, and most true thing that you can say on any given topic. Ideally, it’s the thing that your audience will remember and think about long after you’ve finished talking to them. Content depends on the audience and the purpose of your talk. Stotsky (1987) states that once students understand their key message, the rest of their talk rolls out pretty easily. This review is relevant to this study as the present study was meant to determine how this content affects students’ ability to write imaginative essays. This research wanted to answer the question; if students know the content they are talking about; does this affect the way they write their compositions?

Imaginative writing

Writing is a process which requires careful planning and an appropriate approach or technique for the learner to acquire this skill. It is learned through a process of instruction which requires the learner to grasp the written form of language (Byrne, 1988). Writing is also regarded as the acquisition of basic skills which form the spring board for other skills that help one learn (Muliward, 1983).

Sure (1982) holds the view that imaginative writing is a technical skill that cannot be acquired by chance or innate ability but rather needs instruction methods, teaching strategies and materials that only a trained teacher can handle. Sure agrees that the teaching of imaginative writing skills
requires a careful selection of teaching methods, materials and tasks. It is therefore upon language
teachers to look for the best method influenced by a particular theory to teach effectively
imaginative writing skills. This is so because language writing instruction is well established and
follows a particular theory (Asher & Simpson 1994).

The teaching of imaginative essays has been influenced mainly by the traditional approach for a
long time. This approach to imaginative writing resulted from the audio-lingual method that was
used to teach second language (Brumfit et al., 1994). In the traditional approach of teaching
imaginative writing emphasis was put on the form of structures produced so that elements like:
correct grammar, correct spelling and correct image played the central role in language learning in
the essay (Applebee, 1988). Emphasis was also put on the topic sentence, the discourse markers
and the final whole of the paragraph of the essay (Graves, 1983). Errors were corrected
immediately. The method originated in the USA during the Second World War and was used to
teach US, German, French and Chinese soldiers so that they could fight the enemies (Bright et. al.,
1970). The method was developed because the USA was under threat of isolation from scientific
discoveries that had already started in Russia (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). In response, modern
language was studied and teaching materials developed (Asher & Simpson, 1994).

Under this method audio-lingual forms of language (i.e., listening and speaking) were to be given
priority before writing (Krashen, 1987). However if writing was to be introduced, learners were
asked to write what they said orally. New language items were presented to check the errors
produced during talking and writing (Asher & Simpson, 1994). According to Krashen (1987) the
method is good because it lays emphasis on a natural approach of language learning, beginning
with audio-lingual skills before graphic skills are taught. However, the method has been criticized
for being impractical in language and learning theory. The method is also boring (Ellis &
Tomlison, 1980) and difficult for learners to apply oral skills to the real communication (Broughton, 1980). In addition, the needs of the modern student have changed and therefore there is need to come up with the best method that would be used to teach imaginative writing. This is the reason why the present study sought to determine effect of guided classroom talk on imaginative skills of secondary school students.

There are many studies around the world on imaginative writing skills. Schonell (1942) studied reproductive, narrative-descriptive, explanatory and imaginative compositions written by children in USA. He found that children with mental ages 6-8 years experienced some confusion in writing imaginative composition but that this type of compositions led to greater variety of expression and greater interest on the part of children having mental ages 9-10 years. The greater interest shown led to automatic improvement on mechanical and structural aspects of imaginative writing. Edmund (1959) further established that children choose topics on derived rather than read experience and they show a lot of creativity in writing such imaginative essays.

Brant (1933) studied the development of maturity of expression in children’s imaginative writings in France. He found that complexity of sentence structure varies with chronological age when mental age is constant. Brant’s findings concurred with those of Bear (1939) who found that the use of complex sentences in writing imaginative essays increases with age. She said, however, that children find difficulty in constructing complex sentences in those essays.

Betzner (1930) studied the value of the method of having young children dictate original stories to the teachers in Kansas, USA. She concluded that hearing their stories read aloud led these children to change their forms of expression so that their imaginative essays were improved. Abboushi (1983) looked into the motivational and attitudinal influences which contribute to achievement in
English language among international students studying in America. The study revealed that affective factors play a role in ESL, hence the need for teachers of English to synchronize their ways of teaching and learning. The study concluded that there is need for appropriate approaches to teach writing. The teachers should fully involve learners in writing tasks. The affective factors include context, practice, guidance by the teacher or peers and familiarity of content through time. This was the focus of the present study that guided classroom discussion would supply affective factors that would influence students’ writing of good essays.

Perven (1969) identified three types of problems when investigating the experiences in education through second language in Africa. These problems are: pedagogical, training and supply of teachers and administrative problems. One of his findings was that second language learners have to be handled by trained teachers of English. However, he only recommended for methods of teacher training but did not provide the method or the type of training the teachers require in handling ESL learners. The present study therefore sought to provide such an approach and how teachers should use such an approach to teach imaginative writing.

Omwadho (1984) in his research sought to analyze and interpret methods and materials used in the teaching of imaginative essays in upper primary classes. His research concluded that enough practice can help develop learners’ imaginative writing skills. His study is relevant to the current study because of its emphasis on the critical role of practice in improving writing skills. However, the research focused on primary schools whereas the present study focused on secondary schools.

Kembo (1982) investigated factors that influence achievement in written composition in primary schools in Thika and Nairobi. He concluded that good staffing, teacher experience and familiarity of content have a direct polarity to performance. On imaginative writing, he found out that lack of
materials impacted negatively on learners’ attitude towards writing and consequently, learners wrote poor compositions. Although Kembo (1982) sought to explain the state of English in the country and the cause of poor performance in imaginative essays, it made no significant address to the best approach to teach this writing so this study sought to provide a good method of teaching imaginative writing.

Magut (2003) sought to investigate the use of process approach by teachers of English for effective teaching of writing skills in Kenyan secondary schools in Uasin Gishu Sub-County. Magut (2003) concluded that there is little interaction between teachers and learners; this is because teachers do not allow learners enough time to plan and write their work. The study by Magut (2003) is relevant to this study because it looks at an approach to teaching writing. However, while Magut (2003) looked at the process approach to writing, the current study investigated the effect of guided classroom talk on students’ imaginative writing skills. Another point of convergent between Magut (2003) and the present study is that both looked at imaginative writing skills.

Methodology

The study employed a prospective self-control cohort research design. A cohort is a group of people who have a common characteristic and are observed over time. The target population was four public boys’ secondary schools in Kimilili-Bungoma Sub-County, Form Three students and Form Three teachers of English. The sub-county has 32 secondary schools: Four Boys’ Schools, six Girls’ Schools and 22 Mixed Schools. One is a national school, 3 are extra-county schools and 28 are county schools. Purposive sampling was used to select four Boys’ Schools to participate in the study. One of four boys’ schools was selected through simple random sampling. Once the school was selected, all Form Three students and their English language teachers were purposively
selected to participate in the study. The Form Three class was considered ideal for the research because the students had stayed in school for at least two years and were assumed to be more proficient in speaking and writing than those in the lower levels. Obanya (1982) provides another justification for using the Form Three class saying it is also the year of study when teachers consolidate the language grammar learnt in Form 1 and 2 in preparation for the KCSE examination in Form Four. The Form four class was excluded because it was an examination class so the teachers were mainly taking the class through a scheduled revision program and joint exams with other schools. The sampled school had an average of 7.5 as a mean score in English at KCSE level since 2010 to 2015.

Findings

This shows that the content of guided classroom talk is a predictor of students’ imaginative writing skills in English. Thus it can be concluded that content of guided classroom talk is a factor in students’ imaginative writing skills in English.

These findings were compared with the findings from the teacher interviews and the teachers had similar opinion to this finding where all the ten teachers (100%) agreed that there is a relationship between the content and the quality of students’ imaginative writing skills. They stated further that familiar topics encouraged more creativity among students when writing imaginative essays. The teachers also agreed that guided classroom talks on given topics before writing were very important before learners were asked to write. Their perspective was consistent with other research. Classroom talks unite cognitive and “social aspects” of the classroom (Cazden, 1988). Cazden (1988) observed that during discussions, discussants will ask questions if the content is not clear hence it is very easy for them to understand the content.
During interviews, teachers disclosed that they held debates once a fortnight on a range of topics. Some of the topics touched on social issues like gender, education and family. The same topics were closely related to the themes in the set books which students were reading. The reason for choosing topics related to what the students were doing in the set books, the teachers argued, was to familiarize them with the content or themes in the set books so that when they are asked in their final exams to write essays on themes brought out in the set books, it would be easy for them to write about. In essence the debates served as a way of familiarizing students with content in the texts as well as giving them an opportunity to learn new language structures from their peers and teachers.

Findings also revealed that during guided classroom talks, teachers used questioning to improve understanding of content covered. They argued that they purposely asked students questions that tested them on mastery of content while at the same time encouraged interaction and discussion among students. Engle and Ochoa (1988) suggest that the following types of questions should be evident during classroom discussions: definitional questions (“What does that mean?”), evidential questions (“What reasons can you give for your belief?”), speculative questions (“What if that hadn’t happened?”), and policy questions (“What should be done?”). These types of questions are needed to stimulate student thinking and guide classroom discussions. For discussions to educate students, there should be serious interactions where students “support their ideas with evidence, where their opinions are subject to challenge by their peers as well as the teacher, and where the teacher’s ideas are equally open to criticism” (Engle & Ochoa, 1988). The purpose of probing questions and discrepant viewpoints is to encourage interactions and to encourage students to respond with the most powerful evidence available to them. During the discussion, students familiarize themselves with the content under discussion so that they write good essays.
Findings from interview data of teachers about effect of content on students’ imaginative writing skills revealed that essays written on topics which students were familiar with or those that allowed students to manipulate them to suit their thinking scored high marks because they displayed a lot of creativity, originality and pleasantness. In these essays learners showed that they were in control of both language and what they were writing about.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Familiar content encouraged creativity and originality in the essays but did change the students’ scores in essays. A familiar content is an avenue for students to experience catharsis which is useful in managing students’ emotional behavior. Many essays under this category were well developed. On the other an unfamiliar content kills the students’ creativity and motivation to write. Content is key in creating fluency in learning though not accuracy. Familiarity of content is tied to the learners’ experiences and their age not necessarily what is said to be common knowledge.

It is therefore recommended that:

- The learners’ age and experience are important when choosing topics for guided classroom talk.
- Teaching of imaginative essays should be done in a free and friendly environment.
- There is an urgent need for social learning through debates, hot seating and class discussions to be time tabled.

REFERENCES


