Functional Writing Skills for Effective Communication: The English Language Classroom in Kenya

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Abstract
This study sought to investigate to what depth learners are exposed to appropriate functional text varieties, Identify the kind of support teachers give learners in their functional writing tasks and establish how this exposure influences the teacher in teaching functional writing for effective communication. This study was based on Hylands' theory of teaching writing, Hymes concept of communicative competence and Widowson's concept of communicative language teaching. This was a descriptive research and data was collected using observation, a student's self evaluation schedule and interview schedule to capture the actual teaching and learning of writing in the classrooms. A total of 6 secondary schools in Nyanza Province were selected randomly to make the study population. During the entire study 720 students and 18 teachers of English language participated. From the research, it was found that teachers have different understanding about the teaching of functional writing skills. The differences in the beliefs that teachers held about the issues in teaching functional writing, did reflect differences in their practices , approaches and the depth to which learners are exposed to appropriate functional writing text varieties, that students are not fully exposed to varieties of functional writing texts, that teachers give minimal support to learners. Lastly, minimum effort is employed by the teachers in trying to show the learners how functional writing should be seen as a means of effective communication.
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Keywords: effective communication, communicative competence, text varieties and communicative language teaching

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INTRODUCTION
The expectations of a teacher are that a student should express his academic ideas effectively in order to score high marks and pass an examination. However, in the teaching of English, the emphasis should not simply be on the passing of examinations but rather on passing exams and on the acquisition of communicative competence. In fact, becoming proficient in the language is a desirable life-long goal. Writing is an advanced language skill that has wider ranging implications for the way we think and learn. Writing as a skill also encourages us to be organized, logical and creative in our thinking. Learners should be helped to acquire nearly every skill that will enable them to express ideas clearly and effectively in writing for now and later in life. Ability to write well is essential and influences our chances of success, personal development and our relations with other people.

As is the case in Kenya, at the end of the form four course, all students are expected to have acquired sufficient command of English in written form to enable them to communicate freely and competently in all sorts of discourse. Yet by the end of the course, most learners are not able to use language accurately in real life situations. (Oduol, 1991; Silverman, 1996; Onchera and Mwamba, 2009; Otieno, 2010.)

Functional writing skills provide an individual with the essential knowledge, skills and understanding that enables one to operate confidently effectively and independently in school, life and at work. Individuals of whatever age who possess these skills are able to participate and progress in education, training and employment as well as develop and secure the broader range of aptitudes, attitudes and behaviors that enable them to make a positive contribution to the school, community in which they live in and places of work.

The term functional should be considered in the broad sense of providing learners with the skills and abilities they need to take on active and responsible roles in their communities, workplace and educational settings. It requires learners to be able to communicate in ways that make them effective, operate confidently and convey their ideas and opinions clearly in a wide range of meaningful contexts; learning, in life and their communities.
As a teacher, one is assumed to know all the specific tasks that learners will be faced with in their lives that

will require them to use their functional writing skills. So, one can help learners apply their skills to maximum effect. Thus, helping learners to become functional in writing means helping them to: choose appropriate communication methods, ensure their communication methods are fit for the purpose, they communicate in ways that meet the needs of the audience and situation, apply writing English skills in a range of meaningful contexts and become increasingly independent in their learning. It is also essential to think of learners becoming functional in their English, as well as being aware that there is a vital body of knowledge known as functional writing. This therefore is likely to require a serious approach to teaching and learning which focuses on intensive learning. Within the English lessons learners need opportunities to apply their skills to a range of real and realistic topics, relevant to class, life and work. Teaching functional writing should reveal that English is used in life enabling learners to gain experience of breadth of applications of the subject. Writing should be applicable to real life examples, situations and tasks and learners should produce realistic documents that are meaningful to them.

Given that employers are looking for people who can write fluently and accurately, using accepted business conventions of format, spelling, grammar and punctuation, they have identified these skills as vital for enabling young people and adults to have the practical skills to succeed in further learning, employment and life in modern society. This study therefore, seeks to investigate what happens in the English language classroom to find out what approaches are used in the teaching of functional writing as a skill.

STUDY OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study were to: Establish the depth learners are exposed to in handling appropriate functional text varieties, Identify the kind of support and exposure teachers give learners in their functional writing tasks and establish how this support and exposure influences the teacher in teaching functional writing for effective communication.

RELATED LITERATURE
Functional Writing Skills

Writing skills are important to learners who need them in their every day communications in school and even after school. When writing skills are needed in everyday communications be it in school or after school, they take an instrumental or a functional role and are therefore referred to as functional writing skills. The functional writing skills (KIE 2006:82) are defined to include writing of minutes, agenda and notifications, reports, e-mail, memoranda, notices, advertisements, business letters diaries and completion of forms, packing lists, shopping lists, journals, recipes, directions, instructions, thank you notes, posters among others.

Much of the world's commerce is today known to be conducted to a significant extent in the written medium of communication. To be able to operate effectively in commerce, one has to be equipped with functional writing (Lunsford and Connors, 1989)

Writing is neither easy nor a spontaneous activity (Byrne, 1980; Mojica, 2010). It requires some conscious mental effort: 'we think out' our sentences and consider various ways of combining and arranging them. One may write several versions of a text before being satisfied with the result - this is because writing involves the encoding of a message. Since reading involves the decoding or interpretation of a message, other than when we write for ourselves e.g. shopping list, the reader is one who is absent physically. Learners need to be taught that they should ensure what they write will be understood without any further help.

Text-Oriented Teaching of Writing

Hyland (2002) states that text-oriented approaches, consider writing as an outcome, a noun rather than a verb, viewing writing as the words on a page or screen, and texts are seen as *objects* or as *discourse*. (Writer's italics)

Seeing texts as objects means understanding writing as the application of rules. Hyland (Ibid). He further says that writing is a 'thing' independent of particular contexts, writers or readers- and learning to become a good writer is largely a matter of knowing grammar. In this view a text is seen as an arrangement of words, clauses and sentences, and those who use this view in the classroom believe that students can be taught to write exactly what they mean by learning how to put these together effectively. According to Hyland, teachers in the writing classroom emphasize language structures in the following four stages

- Familiarization: learners study a text to understand its grammar and vocabulary.
- Controlled writing: then they manipulate fixed patterns: substitution tables etc.
- Guided writing: then they imitate model texts-usually filling in gaps
- Free writing: use the patterns they have developed to write a letter etc

Hyland asserts that texts are often regarded as a series of appropriate grammatical structures, and so instruction may employ slot and filler framework in which sentences with different meanings can be generated by varying the words in the slots. In this approach writing should be rigidly controlled through guided compositions which give learners short texts and ask them to fill in gaps, complete sentences, transform tenses or personal pronouns and complete other exercises which focus students on achieving accuracy and avoiding errors.

The present study heavily borrows and notes that the concept of accuracy in functional writing and the arrangement of words, phrases sentences to communicate as very important. Although the above stated; accuracy and order/arrangement is just few of the many features of good writing, they do not on their own facilitate communication. Even the most explicitly written contracts and legal documents can result in fierce disputes of interpretation.

This study therefore notes that our goal as writing teachers should not just be limited to training students in accuracy because all texts include what writes assume their readers know and how to use the text. The learner's problem should not be to make everything explicit, but to make it explicit for particular readers, balancing what needs to be said against what can be assumed. Teachers working with writing should identify how texts actually work as communication, regarding forms of language as located in social action (Hyme 1972).

In text oriented theory of teaching writing, Hyland suggests that a teacher who understands how texts are topically structured, understood, and used is in a better position to intervene successfully in the writing development of his or her students.

Widdowson's Concept of Communicative Language

This study was interested in analyzing what goes on in the classroom in terms of the teaching of functional writing skills for effective communication. Zahorick 1986:22 observes that a good teacher is a person who assesses the needs and possibilities of a situation and creates and uses practices that have promise for that situation. Based on this, the study was influenced by Widdowson's views of language teaching. Widdowson views language learning not merely as acquiring the knowledge of the rules of grammar, but also as acquiring the ability to use language to communicate. He says that knowing a language is more than knowing how to understand, speak, read and write sentences, but how sentences are used to communicate. In the teaching of functional writing skills, the present study wanted to establish how learners are taught to use language to craft functional writing texts and whether the texts were meaningful in class and outside class. Widdowson says:

> We do not only learn how to compose and comprehend correct sentences as isolated linguistic units of random occurrence: but also how to use sentences appropriately to achieve communicative purposes. (Widdowson, 1978).

According to Widdowson (1972) the idea that once competence is acquired, performance will take care of itself is false. He states that six or more years of instruction in English does not guarantee normal language communication, (Widdowson, 1978). He suggests that communicative abilities have to be developed at the same time as the linguistic skills; otherwise the mere acquisition of the linguistic skills may inhibit the development of communicative abilities. Functional writing skills need to be developed well throughout the four-year course to lead to communicative abilities. Widdowson's idea seems to be influenced by knowledge of appropriateness. Hymes points out that children acquire knowledge of socio-cultural rules such as when to speak, when not to speak, what to talk about with whom and in what manner, at the same time as they acquire knowledge of grammatical rules. "Children develop a general theory of speaking appropriately in their community from a finite experience of speech acts and their interdependence with socio-cultural features," (Hymes, 1972). Taking this into account, Widdowson strongly suggests that we need to teach communicative competence along with linguistic competence.

To make the discussion of teaching both linguistic and communicative competence clear, Widdowson distinguishes two aspects of performance; "Usage" and "use." He explains that "usage" makes evident the extent to which the language user demonstrates his knowledge of linguistic rules, whereas "use" makes evident the extent to which the language user demonstrates his ability to use his knowledge of linguistic rules for effective communication which views influence the present study, (Widdowson, 1978). He also distinguishes two aspects of meaning. "Significance" and "value." Significance is the meaning that sentences have in isolation from the particular situation in which the sentence is produced. Value is the meaning that sentences take on when they are used to communicate, (Widdowson, 1978).

Thus, acquisition of linguistic competence is involved in use. The present study suggests that the classroom presentation of language must ensure the acquisition of both kinds of competence by providing linguistic and communicative contexts. Linguistic context focuses on usage to enable the students to select which forms of sentence is contextually appropriate, while communicative context focuses on use to enable the students to recognize the type of communicative function their sentences fulfill. The selection of content should be made according to its potential occurrence as an example of use in communicative acts rather than as an example of usage in terms of linguistic structure, (Widdowson, 1978).

STUDY DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The research took place in Nyanza Province. Schools in the country, specifically in Nyanza have performed variedly in English at Kenya certificate secondary examination KCSE examinations. Communicative competence in a language in academic circles is

largely judged by performance in the examinations. While a number of schools in this area have shown performance consistently above a mean of 7.000, a majority has shown a mean below 4.000 (PDE Reports-Nyanza, 2009). The significance of this study area to this study is that it has all the required sample size that represents different performance categories. This was a descriptive study design. The use of descriptive is useful for educational fact-finding because they provide a great deal of information which is accurate, (Kerlinger 1978, Kombo and Tromp, 2006:71). This research was based on oral data collected from the classroom, data from the interviews with the teachers of English, student's self evaluation schedule and secondary records like teachers' lesson notes.

To obtain a representative sample for this study, the stratified sampling and purposive sampling methods were used to sample out the required schools in the Province. These methods were used because the researcher wished to include specific categories of schools in the study. The researcher hoped that by using these methods, every category of the required schools were to be represented. Given that this research is qualitative, a limited number of schools were used so that enough time was used to collect data.

Six secondary schools in Nyanza Province were used in the study. The schools were sampled as follows: 2 schools whose English language subject mean was above 7.900, 2 schools whose mean was between 6.000-7.800 and 2 schools whose subject mean was below 6.000.

In each of the schools, the teachers of English handling forms 2 – 4 became automatic respondents. Three lessons of English were selected from each school for observation; this made a total of 18 lessons. In all the schools, where there was more than one stream, only one stream was observed and the teacher handling the stream became an automatic respondent, thus 18 teachers were interviewed.
All students whose lessons were observed also participated in responding to the students self evaluation schedule.
The schools were selected in three categories using the stratified sampling; these were:
 a) Schools with a subject mean above 7.9
 b) Schools with a subject mean between 6.0-7.8
 c) Schools with a subject mean below 6.0

From each of the above groups, 2 schools were randomly selected to make a total of 6 schools, using the list of secondary schools available from formally the PDE's office Nyanza. As Kerlinger (1978:79) observes:

A sample drawn at random is unbiased in the sense that no member of the population has any more chance of being selected than any other member.pg 79

Second, with regard to the observation method, three lessons were observed in each sampled school; 1 form2 class, 1 form 3 class and 1 form 4 class. In all the schools we had more than one stream thus; random sampling was used to have one stream of every class selected for observation.In this study, three instruments were used. These are: Students self-evaluation schedule, Interview schedule for Teachers of English and Observation schedule

STUDY FINDINGS
Depth to Which Learners Are Exposed To Text Varieties
Regarding the depth to which learners are exposed to appropriate functional writing text varieties, it was found that students are not fully exposed to varieties of texts. The teachers used the class text in most of the lessons. What is contained in the textbooks is shallow, the format of one or so type of functional writing , most textbooks do not have varieties of texts; for example only one variety of a form is given and probably a form for form one admission. Other varieties of forms like hospital form, employment form, claim form etc are not given. This is left for the teacher to do since a textbook is just a guideline. Noticeably then, during the lesson observation, the teachers seemed not to have the time to spare to research and collect all relevant samples, specimens of varieties of texts to use in class. This means the learners are not adequately exposed to samples and specimens of functional writing skills. For better results, as in all writing, examples of pieces that meet the standard should be shown to the students (Cowan, 2008).

Support and Exposure
Regarding support and exposure, it was revealed that teachers give minimal support to learners. Teachers were grappling with large classes, and this made it very difficult for them to give individual attention to all learners. It was further revealed that teachers have very many lessons to teach and therefore relegated teaching writing skills and only evaluated the same. What emerges here is a scenario whereby the students are given tasks to perform, which tasks are not marked, revised and necessary correction done in class.

The students are therefore not assisted to detail. When writing assignments are given and they are not marked/evaluated and we understand that writing is a skill which should be done again and again to be mastered; then it means that learners are ill prepared for examinations and even for life outside the school environment.

Learners are not given a chance to be independent. During observation lessons, it was observed that teachers dominated in the classrooms. In fact in very few classes observed, few learners were given a chance by a teacher to help in teaching and explaining of a concept. The teacher, in most lessons gave lengthy explanations on the format used in most text types. Assignments were given to be done outside the classroom, meaning that no supervision is given as the learners learn the concepts. Another reason for very minimal support to the learners by teachers in terms of functional writing skills was attributed to the teachers' old methods of teaching. One point though worthy of further discussion is the seemingly lack of innovation in the teaching of functional writing skills in schools. Teachers interviewed made mention of sessions wherein the learners and teachers would get to share the 'best approaches' in the classroom. The new strategies and approaches are shared among teachers, colleagues during in-house workshops and departmental meetings. Teachers said that occasionally, a speaker may be invited from outside their institution to talk to the students if finances allowed. One of the teachers gave a hint as to why it is difficult to introduce innovations:

> Introducing innovation? "It is difficult. When we introduce an innovation, it is okay at the class level, since the members of the department are open minded in general. But to inform the principal about the changes is difficult. Principals don't like the idea. So you are always put on the spot. But for me, what I believe is that, if there is anyone who is in the best position to revise the curriculum, it is not the principal; it has to be the English language department."

This remark from an interviewee identifies bureaucracy as a possible explanation as to why it may be difficult to introduce innovations as a kind of support to help learners develop their functional writing skills. It is also important to note that the very nature of innovation is sometime the problem in itself – it may be difficult for those who have become "too" familiar with older ways to be introduced to something new; hence they react negatively. Particularly those who have aged in the profession, the introduction of an innovation would be burdensome.

Teaching for Effective Communication
The interview with the teachers revealed that the teachers recognized functional writing as communication. The detailed discussions indicated that functional writing is the image of the writer; proper writing means proper communication, poor writing leads to ineffective communication among other responses. During observation of lessons, it was observed that teachers do mention these points

indicated above in class-by passing. The implication of these findings to the present study, is that teachers understand what functional writing entails, what the learners should do etc. But the problem might be with the process of imparting this understanding to the very people it is intended to help. The fact that teachers target preparing learners for exams, as mentioned elsewhere in this paper, indicates that they really don't mind much about preparing students beyond the school environment.

In addition, exposure to written functional texts by itself is not sufficient. The present study notes that learners also have to be made aware of how we communicate through the written medium and how this differs from speech. Learners need to be shown that any piece of writing, whether or not is addressed to a specific reader has a communicative purpose. Also teachers need to make learners understand how the written text is used to fulfill this purpose, by establishing and maintaining contact with the reader in order to get one's message across.

CONCLUSION
This study reveals that teachers do not go into depths while teaching functional writing skills. Students should be helped to internalize criteria for quality and in-depth writing as this can train them to assess their own writing in and out of school. Also, very minimal support is given to the learners by teachers in terms of functional writing skills. This was attributed to the teachers' old methods of teaching. One point though worthy of further discussion is the seemingly lack of innovation in the teaching of functional writing skills in schools. Lastly, the present research found out that in the classroom today, the teaching of functional writing is not always effective, communicative and accurate. The teachers are not always accurate as evidenced by their attitudes, cognitions and lack of in depth teaching. This lack of accuracy, in turn has an effect on learner language in written output.

RECOMMENDATION
Following the conclusions reached, the researchers wish to make the following suggestions and recommendations on how best the teaching of functional writing can be improved, to positively improve effective communication:

Direct whole-class presentations of content, the questioning of students, teacher and student reading, linking new learning with students' prior knowledge and experiences, and students' recording of orally dictated points or of notes from the board were the main teaching methodologies observed.

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