

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 Widowsom'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.

Keywords: effective communication, communicative competence, text varieties and communicative language teaching

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