

## **Classroom Spoken Discourse and Its Influence on Learner's Spoken and Written English Language in Kenyan Primary Schools**

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**Abstract:** English language is widely used in Kenya. It is used as a medium of instruction from primary class 4 to university (Ominde Report, 1964). It is also used as the official language alongside Kiswahili. It was given this status through the Kenya Education Commission Report of 1965 and Kenyan constitution 2010. Its use is also widespread in the operations of higher learning, Modern Technology and international communication. It is thus an important language in Kenya because in recent times, Kenya has become a centre for services like Agriculture, Trade and Technology that extend over the whole of East and Central Africa. English then plays the role of an international language. It also plays an important role in schools and in the classroom. It is an academic subject that is taught and examined at the end of both primary and secondary schools in Kenya's education system. This paper investigates how this important subject and language is taught, acquired and learned by pupils in Kenya.

**Keywords:** Medium of instruction, official language, academic subject, acquisition.

### **INTRODUCTION**

At the end of the Primary English Course, all pupils are expected to have acquired a sufficient command of English in spoken and written form to enable them to communicate confidently and competently in all sorts of discourse. However, by the end of Primary school education, most learners are not able to use the language accurately in real life situations, and it has been questioned why this happens, by both Parents and educators. Exposure to good English is lacking and there is lack of well trained teachers yet Foundation in Primary schools is not well laid [1].

Most learners in Kenya who use English as a second language rarely encounter it outside the classroom situation, and even when they do, the informal or non-formal situations do not always provide them with a proper model for learning English. This is because the socio-economic standing of the majority of parents in Kenya today is hardly what one could call the right environment to learn English Language from. Consequently, the classroom therefore remains the pupil's main source of a role model. This means that children rely almost entirely on the teacher as the model to learn from [2].

In circumstances where parents are communicatively competent in English, many of them do not use the language often enough in the home to

enable the pupils learn from them. Many pupils at home do not also have access to enough English reading materials to help them to improve on their English. Moreover, the pupils lack serious exposure to English from the parents [3, 4]. These non-formal learning situations therefore, do not provide ample input to learners.

This means that almost all the English language that pupils learn is gotten from the formal teaching and learning situations provided in the classroom. This then points to the importance of the role of the teacher as the model for learning English Language use. However, Ryanga [2] observes that facilities in schools such as textbooks, space, teachers are inadequate. In this paper it is also noted that the formal input can be deficient in various ways. And because the formal input might not always be providing pupils with comprehensible and accurate input, justification is therefore given for the need to examine what takes place in the classroom, to see what goes on in terms of language practice. The main focus of this paper was to investigate the existence and effect of comprehensible input in the classroom.

### **STUDY OBJECTIVE**

Analyze the deficiencies found in the learners' oral and written work in relation to the teacher's language use in the classroom.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Krashen's input hypothesis was considered relevant to this study because it claims that learners acquire language through comprehensible input that they are exposed to. The term 'Comprehensible Input' as popularized by Krashen [5] refers to the fact that not all the target language to which second language learners are exposed is understandable, only some of the language they hear makes sense to them. In this case, the teacher in the classroom has a duty to make input as comprehensible as possible. Krashen [5] says that since simple exposure to input data is not enough; learners need comprehensible input which he presents in the form of the Input Hypothesis thus:

Human beings acquire language in only one way, by understanding messages or by receiving comprehensible input ... we move from *i* our current level, to *i+ 1*, the next level along the natural order by understanding input containing *i+ 1* [5].

If the target language is slightly more advanced than the second language learner's current level of understanding, then comprehension would be possible, and learning would also take place.

Krashen's input Hypothesis is relevant to this study since it has a lot to offer on the nature of input. In spite of various criticisms that have been leveled against the hypothesis, the researcher maintains that it was best to use Krashen's input hypothesis for this study. This was due to the fact that the study looked at input in the classroom setting. Krashen's comprehensible input, within the classroom, in the form of teacher-talk, is particularly useful. This is so, especially, if the input outside the classroom is not rich enough [3].

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The Role of Comprehensible Input in Second Language Acquisition

Gaies [6] examined the following question:

Does the input to which formal second language learners are exposed through the oral classroom language of their teachers involve linguistic and communicative adjustments, analogous to those which are characteristic of much of the adult input in first language acquisition?

He found out that interactional adjustments do actually occur similar to those observed in motherese e.g. repetition. Gaies was one of the first to investigate teacher-talk as input. He was encouraged to undertake his research because, for quite some time, many studies of language learning had focused entirely on the utterances which learners produced, and paid little attention to the language directed at them. Gaies' study, therefore, helps in the identification of teacher-talk as input in this paper.

A research carried out by Chaudron [7] to establish the features of the second language teacher-talk which distinguish it from speech to second language learners in non-instructional settings was concerned in determining what made teacher-talk an aid to learning. He found out that teacher talk consists of slower rate of speech, longer pauses, simplified pronunciation, basic vocabulary, less questions and more declarations and statements, and teacher-repeating-self frequent. Chaudron's work helped in this study in looking at the classroom talk as a formal setting compared to the non-formal setting which is majorly found in homes.

While conducting an investigation of the behaviour of Czech speakers, Henzyl [8] compared the language that the teachers used when teaching pupils of different levels of proficiency. He observed that teacher-talk was slower in rate, simpler lexicon, shorter sentences than those of native speech, less colloquialism, fewer idioms, more concrete and proper nouns and fewer indefinite pronouns. The nature of the speech addressed to learners of a second language is an important factor in influencing how well they learn. The ideal input for acquiring a second language is similar to the input received by the child (simpler in structure and more limited in vocabulary, contains more repetition, and is closely related to the immediate situation) Littlewood [9].

In advancing the concept of comprehensible input, Krashen [5] quotes research findings from both first language and second language acquisition. Such a research is that by Clark and Clark [10] on first language acquisition, who established that native speakers modify their speech to first language acquirers in the following ways: Firstly, they use simpler forms of the language to make themselves understood by the child. Secondly, caretaker speech unlike adult-adult speech is roughly tuned to the child's current level of linguistic competence and not finely tuned. This implies that caretaker speech is not precisely adjusted to the level of each child as it is impossible to determine such a level with accuracy. Thus, caretaker speech tends to get more complex as the child progresses in speech. This is supported by Gaies [6], Freed (1980) and Krashen [5] who established that foreigner-talk (speech

directed to a non-native speaker by a native-speaker) and teacher-talk are roughly tuned to the level of the learner. Teacher-talk played an important role in this particular study.

Hatch [11] too, established that comprehension can be aided by first a slower rate of speech and articulation; secondly by more use of high frequency vocabulary with less slang and idioms and finally by syntactic simplification. Consequently, Krashen [5] views the classroom as a major source of comprehensible input for second language learners. He reckons that interlocutors in the informal setting are not always ready to supply comprehensible input to the older second language learners.

The implication the above literature has for this study was that pedagogy should be related to the learners' mental age. Learners at a lower stage, like standard seven, are at a preliminary developmental stage compared to learners at a higher stage such as those in the fourth form. The linguistic input for the former group of learners should, therefore, be less complex. The teacher is expected to adjust and use simpler language. In fact, the major methodological offshoot of Krashen's work is manifested in the natural approach jointly developed with Terrell [13]. Acting on many claims that Asher [12] made about total physical response (TPR), Krashen and Terrell [5] felt that learners should be as relaxed as possible in the classroom, and that a great deal of communication and 'acquisition' should take place as opposed to analysis. Asher (1982) notes in several of his papers that students are generally ready to start production in the target language after about ten hours of TPR input. Informal language research, according to Asher [12], claims that the 'silent period' may last as long as six months. This is because possibly the child is exposed to incomprehensible input. Thus, the main advantage of formal instruction may be its potential to provide comprehensible input at the early stages, bringing the acquirer to the point where he or she can begin to take advantage of the natural environment. The natural approach by Terrell and Krashen [13] advocates the use of TPR activities at the beginning level of learning when comprehensible input is essential for triggering acquisition. Such activities include giving simple commands to learners and having them act out what the teacher says, asking questions based on physical characteristics and clothing of students in the class and use of pictures cut from magazines.

Three important observations need to be made about this research in relation to the findings of the scholars discussed above. First, the requirement that the teacher roughly tunes his language to the learners' linguistic level for the purpose of comprehensibility is plausible. For instance, on several occasions, the

teachers who were conducting the lessons during the research had to paraphrase some sentences to enable the learners to understand the meanings portrayed. Furthermore, sentences which depicted events within the learners' daily experiences tended to be more receptive to the learners than those that dealt with abstract ideas. Allowing learners to be relaxed also made most of them willing to participate in speaking.

One other criticism by the anti-input hypothesis theorists that cannot go unchallenged is that the relationship between comprehensible input and acquisition is not clearly spelt out; and that it is not easy to distinguish comprehensible and incomprehensible input amongst learners of mixed ability. However, again this claim does not nullify the strong points that can be drawn from this hypothesis. Classroom instruction can make use of comprehension checks, confirmation checks, and clarification requests to monitor the comprehensibility of the input. Interaction where the teacher asks the learners to answer questions or repeat certain language structures also plays a role in measuring the comprehensibility of the material being presented.

Comprehension checks, confirmation requests assist in creating rapport between the teacher and the learners in the classroom environment. That is why the interaction hypothesis supplements the input hypothesis. The input hypothesis is positioned as the cog upon which the other hypothesis revolves. A statement of great value for language pedagogy posited by Krashen [5] and which constitutes one of the main principles of the input hypothesis is that for successful classroom acquisition, learners require access to message oriented communication that they can understand.

It was therefore the contention when conducting this research that classroom input via instruction as posited in the input hypothesis has the potential of facilitating a learner's language ability in many target language structures. To improve from stage 'i' to 'i + 1'. Secondly, the notion of comprehensibility of input is quite crucial to language acquisition. It is thus logical to hypothesize that a learner will find it difficult to attend to and proficiently use language structures that are incomprehensible to him. The incorporation of the idea of classroom interaction into the input hypothesis gives it a strong dimension as far as pedagogy is concerned. From an analysis of the arguments, what seems to have sparked controversies about the input hypothesis is the need for more empirical evidence that can assist in answering questions such as?

1. How best can linguistic data be manipulated in the classroom environment to foster learners' proficiency as fast as may be required?

2. How best can interaction between the teacher and the learners and amongst the learners be managed to ensure that there is comprehensibility that facilitates acquisition?

Kembo [14] notes that it is important for a teacher to study errors made by the learner. This is because the errors reveal the hypotheses that a learner may be testing out, generalizations he or she is making about certain linguistic structures or rules, and the progress that the learner may be making towards native-speaker competence. Language entails mistakes, and the learners errors will largely be eradicated or reduced as a result of feedback and input from his or her target-language environment.

A number of scholars have proposed that the most effective way of developing successful L2 competence in a classroom is to ensure that the learners have sufficient opportunities to participate in discourse directed at the exchange of information [5, 15, 16]. According to this view, the failure of many classroom learners derives from the lack of comprehensible input and/or comprehensible output. One way of investigating this claim is by studying to what extent a communicative classroom environment results in successful L2 learning. This is what this study set out to accomplish.

## METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out in selected primary schools in Kisii County in Kenya. Kisii County was selected for the study because, like many other parts of the country, its performance in English language at the National examination level has deteriorated [17]. In this study, three instruments were used. These were: Observation schedule, Audio-recording and Composition Writing. The population from which the sample for this study was drawn consisted of 115 registered primary schools both in the public and private categories. Purposeful sampling was used to select 35 schools. Respondents were selected from class seven pupils, one teacher handling English in class seven classes in each of the 35 schools was observed.

The kind of data needed was the linguistic input found in the classroom, from the teacher's language and pupils linguistic output from their written and oral work. The interaction in class was captured by tape recording alongside observation so that linguistic data was recorded exactly as it occurred. To obtain more detailed knowledge of what is observed McDonough (1995) observes that it is wise to use other methods. Thus, all class seven pupils whose lessons were observed in the sampled schools were given a composition to write and these were marked by the researcher following a set standard.

## DISCUSSION OF STUDY FINDINGS

The objective of this study was to analyse the deficiencies found in the learner's oral and written work and interrogate them in relation to the teacher's language use in the classroom.

The data obtained from the schedule was used alongside the transcriptions of the audio recording of each specific lesson in order to come up with concrete information. This data consisted of grammatical features. These features were first ticked if used in the classroom during instruction or crossed out if not used. Secondly, the source of the grammatical feature was identified. The source was classified to three parts; the teacher, the pupil, and instances where the source was not applicable because the feature was already absent. Thirdly, the usage of the feature was checked to be either correct or incorrect. Lastly, against each feature was the action taken when the feature had been wrongly used. In this case, either correction of the error took place or was assumed altogether. *All the percentages are captured in the brackets.*

The following grammatical features were checked and how they were used during instruction.

**Number** and number agreement as a grammatical feature was used in 60 (100) observed lessons. The main source was the teacher. During usage, in 50 (83.3) lessons a number of the sentences used during instruction didn't have number and number agreement, meaning that they were not correct. Only in 7 (11.7) lessons was correction done when it was detected. In 43 (71.7) lessons wrong constructions went uncorrected. This same thing was seen in the transcriptions. For example, in **Lesson 9**, (English):

**Tr: These are a group of concrete nouns. It ... You must know which tenses you are using, and it must follow each other.**

The correct form should be: (This is a group of concrete nouns. You must know which tense you are using, and ...)

In **Lesson 23**, a GHC lesson, the teacher was using such sentences:

**Tr: Some parts of our country is suffering from drought.**

The correct form should be: (Some parts of our country are experiencing drought).

There were recorded instances where teachers themselves made mistakes in number agreement. One would then not expect pupils to perform any better if these incorrect forms were from the teacher himself, and also if these incorrect forms were not checked by the teacher, in cases where the pupils made mistakes. These are examples of teachers' language:

**Tr: 'some parts of our country is suffering from drought'**

**Tr: 'These are a group of concrete nouns'**

The following is an example of a teacher's reinforcement of a wrongly used feature by the pupil:

**Tr: 'Who can give an example of collective nouns?'**

**Lr: 'Luggages'**

**Tr: 'Yes, luggages another example?'**

**Phrasal verbs** as a grammatical feature was used in 42 (70.0) lessons. A higher number was used by the teacher this being in 31 (51.7) lessons while pupils' use was minimal that is in 10 (16.7) lessons. In 26 (43.3) lessons where phrasal verbs were used during instruction, they were correct while in 16 (26.7) lessons, the phrasal verbs were not correctly used. For those that were correctly used, they required actually no correction, but for the wrongly used phrasal verbs, went uncorrected. This information can be supported from the lessons transcribed.

During **Lesson 2**, an English lesson, the teacher was recorded saying:

**Tr: All the pupils in this class must fill the answers in the spaces provide. After that go to exercise II and after you fill the blanks ... Don't break for lunch before you finish your work.**

(All the pupils in this class must fill in the answers in the spaces provided. After that go to exercise II and fill in the blanks ... Don't break up for lunch ...)

**Another grammatical feature observed was Repetition or redundancy.** This was used in sentence constructions in 49 (81.7) lessons out of these in 35 (58.3) lessons, incidences of repetition came from the teacher while pupils' use of repetition was in 10 (16.7) lessons while again both of them were a source in 4 (6.7) lessons. This shows that in all the lessons in which it appeared it was incorrect and the action taken to correct this feature was minimal. It can be observed that only in 3 (5.0) lessons was correction done while in 45 (75.0) lessons no correction took place. During transcription the following incidents were noted from **Lesson 15**, a science lesson:

**Lr: Birds**

**Tr: Can you repeat your answer again!**

**Lr: Birds**

(Can you repeat your answer?)

In **Lesson 24**, a science lesson, the following was said as the teacher was leaving the classroom:

**Tr: Mnaona mtu anakunywa na wewe unanza. So utilize this time when the rain is raining to copy the notes for those who were absent.**

(You see somebody who takes alcohol and follow suit. So utilize this time when it is raining to copy the notes for those who were absent.)

Therefore, the transcriptions can be used to verify that teachers were using redundancy during classroom instruction. Apart from being the source they were not keen to correct themselves and even the pupils

who made such mistakes. Equally, the kind of input given cannot count as comprehensible nor is it at the level of the class. Language use was poor among teachers.

As noted elsewhere in this article, the teacher was the main source of verbosity. In 35 (58.3) out of 49 (81.1) lessons the teacher produced structures that were repetitive. The following were recorded from the teacher's language.

Examples

**Tr: 'can you repeat your answer again'**

**Tr: 'so utilize this time when the rain is raining'**

**Tr: 'Can we repeat that again'**

**Tr: 'What time do you call that time?'**

In class, pupils were thus heard to say sentences such as:

**Lr: They went away and then came back again the next day.**

**Lr: The students were told to re-do the work again.**

The above sentences were however not corrected by the teacher.

At the phonological category, **Mother tongue interference** was noted in a number of lessons. It was present in 46 (76.7) lessons. The problem did not show up in only 14 (23.3) lessons. In 24 (40.0) lessons, mother-tongue influence was from the teacher compared to 9 (15.0) lessons in which pupils' language indicated mother-tongue interference. As indicated early the pupils' spoken language was minimal because in nearly all the lessons observed, the teachers dominated. This means that in the 46 (76.7) lessons the feature was wrongly used and only in 1 (1.7) lesson was this problem corrected while in 45 (75.0) lessons it went uncorrected. Quite a number of teachers were unable to correct this problem that came from the pupils maybe because of having the same.

Quite a number of these features were captured during transcription. **Lesson 5** (maths):

**Tr: I want us to do something on circles. Circles is our topic and our sub-topic is circumference of circles.**

(I want us to do something on circles. Circles is our topic and our sub-topic is circumference)

**Lesson 6** (English)

**Tr: Juma is a pig boy.**

(Juma is a big boy)

**Lesson 7** (science)

**Tr: Lack of vitamin A. You are advised to take a lot of carrots and liver.**

(Lack of vitamin A. You are advised to take a lot of carrots and liver)

In **Lesson 8** (GHC):

**Tr: River Tana, Nile, Nyando, Sambesi, nsoia, Athi ... Where fishing is an economic activity.**

(River Tana, Nile, Nyando, Zambezi, Nzoia, Athi ... where fishing is an economic activity)

A number of teachers observed had the problem of substituting certain consonant sounds during instruction while others were adding vowel sounds.

Examples

**Tr: I want us to do something on circles. Circles is our tobic and our sub-tobic is circumference of circles. Which baragraph can this be found?**

**Lr: The second baragraph**

The teachers, in a number of lessons, were unable to correct problems of this kind because they also had the same. For example a pupil was heard reading as follows:

**Lr: fliction is defined as...?**

There was no correction from the teacher at all. The implication here is that learner's language gets fixed even when it is not correct because of lack of correction from the teacher who is treated as a model in class.

Addition of sounds as another phonological feature was present in 43 (71.7) lessons. The main source of this feature was the teacher, appearing in 27 (45.0) lessons while in 11 (18.3) lessons the pupils were the source. In 43 (71.7) lessons this feature dominated thus posing a problem to accurate acquisition of language. Out of the 43 (71.7) lessons, in which the feature appeared, only in 2 (3.3) lessons was correction done while in 41 (68.3) lessons the wrong use went uncorrected. Verification of the above figures can be done while looking at the transcriptions of the audio taped lessons.

#### Lesson

- 7 (science) **Tr: Heggs, we have what?**  
(Eggs, we have what?)
- 29 (science) **Tr: Preparing desiks okay, which machine do we use?**  
(Preparing desks, okay, which machine do we use?)
- 26 (English) **Tr: An adverb ee... is a wordi which modifies or tells us more about a verb.**  
(An adverb, ee... is a word which tells us more about a verb.)
- 10 (Maths) **Tr: Look at some tables and some questions that will be asiked that you'll answer from the table given.**  
(Look at some tables and questions that will be asked that you will answer from the table given)
- 15 (Science) **Tr: We can get cow which gives us miliki manure, skins.**

We can get cows which give us milk, manure and skins)

This was an indicator that the language used by the teacher in the classroom during formal instruction had quite a lot of challenges, which could influence usage among pupils.

In some lessons teachers produced words having added unnecessary consonants and vowels. For example:

**Tr: Heggs, we have what?**

**Lr: Heggs.**

In another lesson:

**Tr: An adiverb, enh... is a word, which modifies or tells us more about a verb. Which part is this?**

**Lr: Adiverbs.**

It can be noted in the above examples that both the teacher and the pupils had no idea that they were adding unnecessary consonants and vowels. Given that they were not aware of this, most mistakes went uncorrected.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

In relation to the theoretical framework on which this study is based; 'The input hypothesis' [5] research has shown that in order for language learning to be effective, the kind of input the pupils get especially in the classroom must be comprehensible. It must be accurate and clear. However, the present research found out that in the classroom today, input is not always accurate. The teachers are not always accurate as evidenced by the many mistakes collected from their language. This lack of accuracy, in turn has an effect on learner language, both in the oral and written output. Following the conclusions reached, the researcher wishes to make the following suggestions and recommendations on how best the classroom language can be improved, to positively affect the learner language.

The use of English language in the classroom is still poor, since it is the teacher in the classroom who nominates pupils to speak, he should try to distribute turns evenly among the pupils. This is because some pupils barely talk in class, and this eventually affects their language use. Pupils should be given more time to speak in class. Teacher training is yet another factor that needs to be addressed at the classroom level. The classroom teacher needs to be looked at as the key factor in language input, and to recognize the importance of adequate training to improve his language capacity taking into account that irrespective of the subject he teaches language is paramount.

Teachers, as human beings, do make mistakes. However, since they are entrusted with the young learners, they should try as much as possible to avoid making such mistakes. Even when pupils make mistakes, the teachers should try to correct them in order to improve on the learner's language. Although handling learners' linguistic replies is one of the most difficult tasks for any teacher it is what actually determines language learning.

### CONCLUSION

From the findings, various conclusions were drawn by the researcher. These conclusions were based on the findings related to the different aspects of input. Generally the teachers' classroom input has a profound influence on learners' language (Flanders 1970). Although for most of the time this influence is positive, the present research revealed that classroom input could also have a negative influence on learner language. Instead of improving the language, the learners' language is then made up of many mistakes, which are carried over, from the teacher. This was evident from the many mistakes, which the researcher noted from the pupils' work and related them to the linguistic input provided by the teacher.

The results also revealed that teachers made many mistakes in their language, and this had a serious effect on the pupils' language. Pupils hardly questioned their teachers much, even when in doubt. This is especially so in primary schools, thus mistakes are easily carried over to the pupils, become 'fossilised' and the pupils finally never learn the correct forms. One might argue that it is expected of teachers to make mistakes, especially if one is a non-native speaker of that language. However, the researcher maintains that being models to the young learners in language, teachers are expected to correct these mistakes. Unfortunately, in most cases, the teachers do not correct these mistakes either because they do not know them, or they just choose to ignore them.

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