

The Impact of Examination-Oriented Private Tutions on Learners' Communicative Competence in English as a second language: A Case of Selected Public Schools of Livingstone District of Zambia

Elliot Machinyise

David Livingstone College of Education

machinyise@yahoo.co.uk

and

Akombelwa Muyangana

amuyangana@gmail.com

University of Zamia

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the effects of examination-oriented teaching approaches on communicative competence and learning achievements among secondary school pupils in Livingstone District of Zambia. Along with interviews, class pedagogical activity observation, this study revealed a number of challenges arising from exam-centric delivery of instruction in many public schools. Because of the progression value attached to passing examination, education is viewed as nothing but the tool for passing examination. Findings were that examination-oriented approaches don't focus on the acquisition of practical skills, communicative and linguistic competences and attitudes in learners. The major objective of pedagogical instruction is merely to enhance learning institutions attain higher passing rate in national examinations and enable candidates progress to the next academic grade. The study therefore recommends an interactional task based instructional approach that provides second language learners practical acquisition of communicative competence in the target language.

Keywords: backwash, examination oriented, language teaching, communicative competence

1.0 Introduction

The major objective of writing examinations is to help bring an improvement in the learner's knowledge because every assessment should provide regular feedback to the learners. Having received their feedback, learners acknowledge their shortcomings and work on them. Since another objective of writing exams is grading and classification, there is fighting for places in the upper grade thereby *promoting competition among students*. This encourages them to work harder to improve their knowledge and skills. (Mackatiani,2017)

For Zambian learners, the aim of learning focuses solely on passing examinations. There is little learning done in grades seven, nine and twelve as teachers are preoccupied with the desire to see their learners pass exams with high grades refers to as 'flying colours'. In urban schools the process of preparing for examinations begins as early as grade five. Thus, every parent in Zambia encourages his or her child to study harder and harder in order to score excellent grades in their final examinations. Roediger H and Putnam, A (2011) observe that if there were no exams taking place, the children would have never studied and this would ruin their lives. Thus, the primary aim of taking a child to school is not that of imparting future life skills and competence but to pass and move to the next grade.

Kirkpatrick and Zang Y (2011) talk about 'backwash' which is the influence of exams on learning. They report that the teaching that focuses on assessment has a negative influence on the students' language learning. Messick 1996 (cited in Manjarres, 2005) argues; 'If a test is deficient because it has construct under representation or construct irrelevant characteristics, then good teaching cannot be considered an effect of the test, and conversely, if a test is construct-validated, but there is poor teaching, then negative backwash cannot be associated with the test.' This means that a very good teacher whose pupils fail a centrally set examination is viewed by society as incompetent while a bad teacher whose learners pass the same examination gets an outright credit. In such situations, it can be said that the examination has a negative back wash on learning.

In the Zambian education system, the content of the English examination paper determines the pedagogical approach in schools or schemes of work. For example, if students are working towards an examination where all of the test items focus on Reported speech, direct speech and punctuation, the teacher may spend much of his or her teaching focusing on this area - and obviously neglecting other areas that deal with communicative competence outside the course such as spoken fluency or listening and written expression. This means that the examination would have negative backwash because it forced the teacher into teaching for the exam rather than providing a balanced teaching which dealt with all the language skills that improve students' areas of communicative competence than just grammatical and linguistic knowledge.

1.1 The Role Examinations Play in the Zambian Educational System

As discussed above, examination in Zambia is the bedrock of the whole educational system. Bbalo and Mulauzi (2019) point out that an examination determines a student's eventual certification, placement and promotion. The examination is used by the ministry of Education to select students for the next level of education in a situation in which the number of places at each successive level is limited (e.g., from primary to secondary school, from junior secondary to senior secondary, from senior secondary to higher education).

Just like in any other country, the Examination Council of Zambia (ECZ) issues formal certificates to candidates after examinations to be used as evidence that students have reached certain levels of achievement. These certificates are important for gaining employment and promotion in the world of employment. It is, therefore, the responsibility of the ECZ to manage and administer examinations at primary, secondary and technical levels. However, Mackatiani (2017) observes that instead of using assessment feedback to improve the academic performance of the learner and to help the teacher choose appropriate pedagogical approach, governments use examinations as gatekeepers. This implies that examinations are used as a tool with which to access entrance at a higher level. In other words, Examination results are used as evidence of learning outcomes. The results also act as a means of quality control.

1.2 The Impact of Task Based Approach on Communicative Competency in English Learning

Farkas (2003) and Chang (2010) note that instructional methods used by language teachers significantly influence learning achievement and outcomes. Teachers may use teacher centred or learner centred approaches to teach English as a second language. In order to nurture communication, Li and colleagues (Li et al., 2012) suggest that teaching in an English Second Language (ESL) classroom should be:

- Student-centered and activity-based, with lots of group interaction and opportunities for input, output, and negotiation of meaning;
- Task-based with authentic materials used in real-life situations, using a variety of input that is slightly higher than the students' own level;
- Use of evolving needs of students through integrated resources from diverse fields of learners' community and environment.
- Focused on providing language competence training that will make the learner useful in life.

To achieve the above stated goals, language learning should be anchored on content-based, task-based and competence-based instructions in class.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Description of the Study Area

This study was conducted and limited to Livingstone district of Southern Province of Zambia. According to the 2000 Zambian Census, Livingstone district had a population of 103,288 people. Its border with Zimbabwe is formed by the Zambezi River and Victoria Falls.

2.2 Research Design

The type of research design employed is a case study. This type of design was chosen, as it is easy to collect the detailed data. Besides, case study design is not as expensive as experimental or survey design. This type of design makes it easy for the researcher to easily participate in the process of data collection methods like interview, observation, questionnaire and focus group discussion (Cochran, 2002).

Using a case study design, the researcher was able to collect both primary data from education stakeholders and some secondary data from previously conducted research reports and various library documents.

2.2.1 Research Approach

This study preferred a mixed research approach in which qualitative approach took dominance. The mixed research approach was opted because the study had a great deal of interpretation and analysis of individuals' views, opinions and perceptions in relation to the socio-economic and cultural contexts and status of respondents (Kothari,2004) However, some quantitative aspects whereby analysis and presentation of data in numerical data form were included in the study.

The simple random sampling procedure was chosen so as to provide each individual with an equal chance of being selected from the population after which data was collected from a larger percentage of this random subset (Ghauri & Gronhaug, 2005).

In order to collect accurate data, Parents, teachers and students were randomly selected. This group of people was believed to have reliable information for the study. In this case, also purposive sampling was used in order to filter out irrelevant responses that may not be related to the context of the study. Consequently, pupils, teachers and parents were purposely selected to provide useful information for the study.

2.2.2 Sample Size

Sample size is a research term used for defining a small group of people included in a research study to represent the population. Therefore, the study included five (05) selected public secondary schools and two (2) primary schools in Livingstone district with sixty (60) respondents comprising 40 pupils, 10 teachers 10 parents.

2.3 Data Collection Methods

2.3.1 Primary Data

In this study, primary data collection methods used were self-administered questionnaires using open ended and closed questions, group interviews and group discussion.

2.3.1.1 Interview

The Unstructured interviews were used to collect supplementary information from some parents, heads of departments and heads of school. The interview method is easy and reliable as it enables the interviewer to change questions according to the reaction of the interviewee (Patton, 2004).

2.3.1.2 Questionnaire

The study also used questionnaires to elicit vital information from pupils. The questionnaires contained both closed and open-ended questions.

2.3.2 Secondary data.

The study used books, articles, reports and internet engine to collect secondary data.

3.0 Findings

3.1 The Impact of Examination Oriented Learning on Learners' Communicative Competence

The study revealed that almost all secondary school pupils go for extra lessons on weekends in order to be oriented about how to write examinations and to be acquainted with the content and structure of exam papers. It was generally observed that teachers were not using prescribed reference books but were using past exam papers and batches consisting different sections of examination-based questions.

3.2 Examination-Oriented Learning is the Source of Anxiety and Pressure

Interviews from pupils revealed that an exam-oriented learning does not only deprive learners' opportunities to acquire life skills such as communicative competence but also overwhelms them with pressure and anxiety as they attend private tuitions in all the six compulsory subjects. A pile of ten or more past examination papers of different years on the desk of a grade twelve pupil is a common sight inside classrooms. This pressure on the pupil emanates from teachers and parents who believe university enrolment is the only way to success. According to survey results, 80% of school leavers who fail the grade twelve examinations believe and are convinced that they no longer have any career prospects and society view them as total failures in life. In terms of causing anxiety and frustration, examinations stand second to none.

3.3 Unreliable Measure for Linguistic and Communicative Competence

Results of End of year English exams for grade twelve pupils for the previous year were outstanding. It was observed that 50 percent of pupils in each class scored above 75 percent in their mock examination. This outstanding performance is attributed to the intensive exam-oriented teaching and repeated memorization of the same exam structures. However, when the same learners were subjected to task-based assessment such as report writing, speech writing and oral expression, the assessment results were below to average. Since exam-oriented learning demands great deal of memorization, learners are tempted to cheat when their memory capacity cannot store any more items.

The disparity between formative exam results and class task-based assessment results interpret the unreliability of examination based assessment results. This study revealed that there are so many factors that influence examination results. Hence it can be concluded without any fear of being bias that Task-based assessment results are more reliable than examination results.

3.4 Poor Pedagogical Approach Used in Class

Since the aim of examination-oriented teaching is to make learners pass examination with high grades, the findings of the study revealed that the pedagogical approaches used by teachers are purely teacher centered techniques. Learners mainly do frequent tests and exercises with focus on revision of past papers. The purpose of these class activities is excelling in final examinations and to proceed to university. These approaches applied lead to memorization of structure, composition writing format rather than expression and language rules. This therefore impacts negatively on communicative competence and generally quality education.

4.0 Conclusion

The current examination system of Zambia evolved indirectly from the colonial British Examination system which was used to select, classify and determine the progression of learners to the next level. From the findings of this study, it is evident that the content and structure of the examination influenced the pedagogical approaches applied by teachers in schools. It has been revealed that the examinations-oriented model does not provide Zambian learners with life skills and communicative competence outside classroom. Learners progress to the next grade or

level not because they have acquired real life skills and useful competence but they are promoted because they are able to remember theoretical skills and write what they have been studying.

The exam-oriented education in Zambia promotes rote learning approaches which enable pupils pass their final examinations so as to proceed to the next level. Instead of thinking about how to improve the learning experience of the learners that pass through their school every year and how they will use what they learn in their life after school, teachers spend most of the time doing a series of examinations and revising the examination papers. As a result, learners are able to reproduce the acquired information in the final examinations. It cannot be doubted that the main objective of this approach is to enable pupils get good results in the final examinations at the expense of acquiring life skills and useful communicative competencies.

It can therefore be concluded from the findings that Zambia's approach to education demands reform and overhaul to sustain its relevance. In other words, the system has to benefit both pupils and teachers by changing the existing examinations-oriented model to quality-oriented model that equip learners with equal opportunity to master necessary skills and become successful adults. The task-based model will develop students through recognition of special skills, individual talents and competence. This means that learning outcomes are proven by action, and focus on building the skills students need to become better learners into adulthood. Second language learning should integrate task-based teaching into the classroom meaning that the language tasks (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) that are 'practiced' should be applicable and directly transferable into real-world situations.

References

- Bbalo, J and Mulauzi, F (2019). Examination Malpractice: A Study of Selected Technical Educational Vocational Entrepreneurship Training (TEVET) Institutions on the Copperbelt Province of Zambia. *Journal of Lexicography and Terminology*. 1 (2): PP 12-20.
- Farkas, R (2003) Effects of Traditional Versus Learning-Styles Instructional Methods on Middle School Students. *Jornal of Education and Research*. 1 97 (1): PP 42-51
- Kirkpatrick, R and Yuebing, Z (2011) The Negative Influences of Exam-Oriented Education on Chinese High School Students: Backwash from Classroom to Child
- Li, S et al (2019) Task Based Language Teaching. In *Task Based Language Teaching Theory and Practice*. Cambridge Applied Linguistics P1.
- Mackatin, C (2017). *Influence of Examination Oriented Approach on Quality Education in Primary Schools in Kenya*. 8 (14): PP 51- 58
- Manjarres, B (2005). *Washback of the Foreign Language Test of the State Examinations in Colombia: A Case Study*. @Inproceedings {Manjarrs2005washbackot
- Roediger, H and Ptnam, A (2011). *Ten Benefits of Testing and their Applications to Educational Practice*. *Psychology of Learning and Motivation*. L (55): PP 1- 36