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Learning Theories and Curriculum: Analysis of Kenya Secondary School English Syllabus

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Abstract:

Curriculum developer are to a large extent influenced by learning theories to determine the design of their curriculum. This paper therefore, sets out to analyze how various learning theories such as cognitive constructivism, behaviourism, and social constructivism among other theories have influenced the design and the development of the key aspects of Kenya Secondary School Syllabus. The paper recommends that for the effective implementation of this syllabus, the curriculum evaluators should revise their mode of evaluation to include alternative assessment in their assessment procedures and the curriculum developers should organize seminar and workshops for teachers to sensitize them on the best way to implement the syllabus.

Keywords: Curriculum development, English syllabus, learning theories

1. Introduction

The current secondary school English syllabus in Kenya was last reorganised in 2001 where some topics from the previous curriculum were removed and others reordered. The syllabus integrated literature into English language and this requires that that the two subjects be taught as one. The curriculum also introduced emerging issues such as human rights, democracy, labour relations, environmental conservation, gender equity, HIV/AIDS among others. The national examination format for English papers was also changed to conform to the integration aspect of the curriculum. However, since then, there have been concerns from teachers and other stake holders on the content and implementation of the curriculum (Okwara, Shiundu & Indoshi, 2008).

Pritchard (2005) advise that curriculum designers and teachers need to know about what is currently considered as most important in terms of learning theories and the way in which these can be translated into practice. Consequently, this article sets out to analyze the significance of basic learning theories such as behaviourism, cognitive constructivism, and social constructivism and traces their possible influence in the design and development of the key aspects of the Kenya Secondary School English Syllabus: the syllabus's objectives, content, methodology and assessment. This perhaps may help us to understand the reason behind the inclusion of various language aspects in the curriculum and how best it could be implemented.

1.1. Influence of Learning Theories in Objectives of the English Syllabus

The Kenya Secondary School English subject curriculum has 20 subject objectives these are that at the end of the *Learning Theories* secondary English course, the learner should be able to:

- listen attentively for comprehension and respond appropriately;
- use listening skill to infer and interpret meaning correctly from spoken discourse; listen and process information from variety of contexts;
- use non verbal cues effectively in speaking;
- read fluently and efficiently;
- appreciate the importance of reading for a variety of purposes;
- develop a life-long interest in reading a wide range of subjects; read and comprehend literary and non literary materials;
- read and analyse literary and non-literary works from Kenya, East Africa and the rest of the world and relate to the experience in these works;
- appreciate and respect own as well as other people's culture;
- make an efficient use of a range of sources of information including libraries, dictionaries, encyclopedias and the internet;
- use correct spelling, punctuation and paragraphing; use a variety of sentence structure and vocabulary correctly;
- communicate appropriately in functional and creative writing;
- write neatly, legibly and effectively;

- use correct grammatical and idiomatic forms of English;
- think creatively and critically
- appreciate the special way literary writers use language
- appreciate the universal human values contained in literary works (KIE, 2002).

These objectives are clearly stated because they are in specific, realistic and achievable terms. The clarity makes it easy for implementers (teachers) to formulate their own lesson objectives and to come up with relevant teaching and learning activities. This agrees with Marsh and Willis (1995) who state that objectives should be stated in a form that is helpful in selecting learning experiences.

The objectives in this curriculum are stated in a behaviourist manner in that they define and dictate the expected competences required of a learner after being taught the content of the Secondary school English syllabus. The Kenya national examination council administers examination at the end of the four years to determine if candidates have acquired the required standards of English at the end of the course. This aspect is in line with behaviourism learning theory that is based on assumption that learning is the acquisition of new behaviour (Pritchard, 2005). The theory is therefore primarily concerned with the observable changes in the behaviour and insists in seeing visible evidence that learning has taken place (Evans and Bruekner, 2004).

1.2. The Syllabus Content

The syllabus has a variety of topics covering broad areas of grammar, oral skills, reading and writing. The content of this syllabus is arranged progressively from simple to complex.

Topic	Form One	Form Two	Form Three	Form Four
Writing :Letter Writing	Informal letter	Business letter	Letter of application	Letter of inquiry Letter of request
Oral skills Pronunciation	English Sounds: Vowels and consonants	Problematic sounds	Stress and intonation	Distinguishing word class on basis of stress. Use of tone to reveal attitude
Grammar Nouns	Types of nouns Common, proper, abstract and concrete nouns	Collective nouns Compound nouns	Typical noun Derivation	Functions of nouns in sentence e.g. subject, object and complement
Grammar Pronouns	Types of pronouns Personal, possessive, reflexive pronouns	Pronoun- number & person pronouns Indefinite pronouns	Pronoun case Subjective and objective. Demonstrative pronouns	Interrogative pronouns Relative pronoun
Verbs	Lexical Regulars & irregular verbs	Auxiliary verbs Primary & modal auxiliary. Perfective and progressive aspect	Transitive and intransitive verbs Phrasal verbs Idiomatic expressions Participles	Participles phrases Gerunds
Adjective	Comparative and superlative Regular and irregular adjective	Order of adjectives	Quantifiers: few, a few, little, a little. Predictive and attributive adjectives	Adjectives Typical ending of adjectives (eg -ful, -less, -ous) Functions of adjectives

Table 1: Sample topics that have been developed progressively from Form one to Form Four

Table 1 show that language concepts in this syllabus are introduced in lower classes and pursued at deeper level in higher classes. For instance, letter writing skill is developed gradually. In form one, the students are introduced to the skill by learning rather simple informal letter, in form two they are taught the general format of business letter while in form three and four they learn complex and specific letter of application and letter of inquiry respectively. This spiral arrangement of content reinforces knowledge and transfer learning (Ellis, 2002). Such sequencing of topics could have been underpinned by cognitive constructivism learning theory which believes that best learning is based on the notion of continuous building and amending the structure in the mind. These constructivists suggest that "a new understanding, experiences, action and information are assimilated and accommodated in the schemata change" (Fry & Kelleridge, 2003, p.10). A schema is a framework that exists in learners' mind and which they actively use to construct new knowledge by organizing and interpreting information. Bigge and Shermis (1999) while noting that Brunner's theory hold that education is an active process in which learners construct new ideas or concepts based upon current or past knowledge, suggest that the curriculum should be organized in a spiral manner so that students continually built upon what they have learnt. This assists them to grasp knowledge easily. Similarly, Piaget also stresses that a good curriculum should be planned developmentally to enhance student's logical and conceptual growth (Santrock, 2004).

The Kenya's Secondary Schools English syllabus responds to the contemporary needs of the society. Although it is basically a language syllabus, its integration concept has enabled it to incorporate emerging issues such health, environmental education, gender, industrialization, poverty among others. This is perhaps in response to one of the country's national goals that states, 'education should promote national, social, health and environmental development' (KIE 2002 p.vii). In emphasizing the need to integrate language skills with other social issues, the syllabus designers stress:

"It should be noted that language is not learned in a vacuum. It revolves around issues and concerns that affect us on daily basis. These in our context may include civic education, good governance, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the need to conserve environment, the fight against corruption, the struggle to preserve our moral and spiritual values, and technological advancement." (KIE, 2002).

These issues expose learners to societal needs and expectations. They also equip them with knowledge and skills to handle emerging issues.

The syllabus also emphasizes the integration of literature with other aspect of language. For example, what learners read in literature texts could form the basis of their oral presentation and essay writing. In essence, this enables learners to build new knowledge from the existing one. Furthermore, the integration of language with literature exposes learners to authentic language use and challenges them to interact naturally in the language. Okwara, Shiundu and Indoshi (2008) are of the view that such an integrated approach enables learners to rapidly gain a picture of the richness and complexity of language as employed in communication. Integrating the language skills, they add, promotes the learning of real content and is highly motivating to learners because that is how language occurs in real life. Vygotsky's social constructivism theory asserts that "an important function of education is to guide children in learning the skills that are important in the culture in which they live" (Santrock, 2004 p.52). Consequently, the integration of literature and language skills and the inclusion of contextual issues in the current English curriculum may have been influenced by this theory.

Social constructivism also advances that language is the primary form of interaction. It argues that children can use their language not only to direct their behaviour but also to plan, guide and monitor it. These social constructivists believe that language expresses culture which mirrors the society (Santrock, 2004). Perhaps, this is why this syllabus puts emphasis on oral skills especially etiquette. Etiquette such as the use of polite expressions, appropriate choice of register, negotiation skills, and turn taking are emphasized. The syllabus designers explain: "Learners need to develop the ability to present oral reports, learn negotiation skills, exhibit acceptable speech habits, show empathy and adhere to other language conventions." (KIE, 2002 p.20). Generally, these are language conventions from which ones culture and behaviour can be judged. The insistence that learners need to acquire good speech mannerism could also be an aspect that may have been underpinned by behaviourism learning theory which advocates for desirable behaviour change (Biehler, 2006).

1.3. Methodology

A variety of teaching and learning methods that range from transmission (teacher centred) methods to learner-centred methods are suggested in this syllabus

Teacher centred methods suggested include exposition and lecture. For instance the syllabus suggest: "Clarification of concepts taught, through explanation by the teacher is of paramount importance" (KIE, 2002 p. 9). This could imply that the teacher is seen by the curriculum designers as "a know it all person" whose role is to provide knowledge to learners. The inclusion of teacher-centred methods may have been influenced by the behaviourist theory. This is because the behaviourists view the teacher as the source of knowledge and the learner as the receiver. Hence the role of the teacher is to arrange stimuli which result in changed student behaviour (Hargreaves, 2006, Pritchard, 2005 & Evans, 1990).

Learners- centred approach recommended are debates, hot seating, group discussion, oral presentation, and inquiry. The syllabus suggests: "The teacher could use oral poetry, proverbs, recorded speeches, impromptu speeches, role-play, hot-seating, dramatization and discussion on issues like poverty eradication ..." (K.I.E, 2002 p. 20). These in essence could instil in learners confidence, problem solving skills, presentation skills, interpersonal skills among others. In supporting such learner-centred approaches, Stronge (2003) advises that effective teachers should stress the importance of higher mental processes such as problem solving, analytical thinking skills and creativity.

In suggesting such a variety of learner centred approaches, the curriculum designers may have considered Piaget and Brunner's argument which proposes that learners enter the learning environment with some knowledge. The two emphasize that children learn best when they are active and seek solution for themselves (Santrock, 2004). Bruner goes on to argue that learning is an active process where the learner construct knowledge based on current and past experiences. He believes that instruction should take cognizance of students' experiences in order to ensure a state of readiness towards learning. Similarly, learner-centred strategies make the teacher a facilitator of the learning process as opposed to teacher-centred methods that make him a know -it- all person.

In supporting active learning, Piaget's cognitive theory stress that learners need to be involved in what they are learning in order to make meaning of it (Orlich, Harder, Callahan, Trevisan, & Brown, 2007). The theory also supports the teaching strategies that encourage learners to explore their world and discover knowledge. Social constructivism theory similarly encourages collaborative learning that involves a community of learners.

It is also important to use a variety of teaching strategies because students respond differently to various ways of learning. It is therefore my contention that if used well, these methods could enable the teacher to identify and nurture various students' potential as advocated by Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligence (MI) (Amstrong, 1994).

However, my experience as a teacher indicates that most teachers rely most on teacher-centred methods such as lecture and exposition. This is mostly as a result of lack of appropriate pedagogical content knowledge in using learner centred approaches. This assertion is confirmed by a study by KIE that found out that although most teachers in Kenya have basic qualifications to teach in secondary schools, they do not have the right competencies to tackle the new syllabus (Wayua, 2010). Lack of appropriate curriculum support materials, the need to rush to complete the syllabus in readiness for examination, and large classes coupled with big teaching load on the side of the teachers also contribute to the prevalence of teacher-centred methods.

1.4. Evaluation

Assessment is an invaluable component of any curriculum. There is both formative and summative assessment in the English syllabus. The syllabus stresses on diagnostic and remedial exercises to cater for individual learner's needs. It recommends aptly: "teachers should design appropriate diagnostic exercises to identify the unique problems of the learners '...then ensure that appropriate opportunities are provided for the learner to develop their skills (K.I.E., 2002 p.8). I take this to be a form of scaffolding. This idea is borrowed from Vygotsky's social constructivism learning theory which advances the concept of Zones of Proximal Development (ZPD). The concept suggests that the teacher should identify the gap between what the learners can understand by themselves and what can be understood with help. I have found this kind of approach to be important in my class because it makes the learners to work on their own up to their individual limits before seeking help. This kind of arrangement instils in learners problem- solving skills and makes them independent.

Assessment methods provided for in this curriculum are both conventional and alternative. Alternative methods include oral presentations, hot seating, dramatization, debates, recitation of poems, and storytelling among others. The curriculum designers stress the need for continuous assessment and immediate provision of feedback. The syllabus states: "This syllabus puts emphasis on immediate, meaningful and supportive feedback in the assessment of the learners' work" (K.I.E, 2002 p.23). It is also noteworthy that as part of alternative assessment, the syllabus recommends that students sit for an oral examination at the end of form four. However, this aspect is yet to be implemented by the Kenya National Examination Council (KNEC) perhaps due to logistic problems in administering such an examination to a large number of candidates. Instead, it tests oral skills in a written paper. Such a paper however cannot examine appropriately all aspects of oral skills. As a result of this, teaching of oral skills is ignored by most teachers. Despite the fact that the syllabus recommends a variety of alternate assessment methods, most teachers still depend on the traditional paper pencil examinations in their classes. Perhaps this could be because of high stakes put in the national examination that does not consider formative and alternate evaluation.

1.5. Conclusion

We can conclude from this discussion that designers of Kenya Secondary schools English syllabus are likely to have been influenced by ideas from various learning theories. Such theories include behaviourism, cognitive constructivism, and social constructivism theories. The suggestions of these theories are evident in the curriculum's objectives, content, methods and evaluation. This seems to be one of the strong points of this syllabus. However, it appears that the curriculum is not implemented as intended. This probably could be as a result of failure by teachers to understand the spirit behind the curriculum, lack of appropriate pedagogical content knowledge to implement the curriculum, large classes and lack of curriculum support materials. Emphasis put on summative conventional paper-pencil examination could also be the cause.

1.5.1. Implications

The discussion and conclusion in this paper have implication to curriculum designers and developers.

1.5.2. The Curriculum Designers

The curriculum designers need to find a way of closing the gap between the spirit behind the design of the curriculum and its implementation. They can do this by advising English education providers to review their courses to be in tandem with the demands of the syllabus. The curriculum designers also need to organize seminars and workshops for key stakeholders so as to make them understand the spirit behind the curriculum and sensitize them on the best way to implement it. They also need to design and provide a variety of curriculum support materials to make the implementation of the curriculum easy.

1.5.3. Curriculum Evaluators

The examination council needs to revise its mode of assessment so as to include alternative formative assessment in their assessment procedures. For instance, it needs to implement the curriculum suggestion of assessing oral skills orally.

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