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Influence of Gender on Students' Attitudes towards English Language in Kenya

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Abstract:

English is the official language as well as the medium of instruction in secondary schools, colleges and universities in Kenya. It is also the pre-eminent language of international communication. Consequently, those who master English achieve academic, social and professional benefits. This study therefore explored Kenya's secondary school students' attitude towards English language learning. Learners' attitude towards any language can be either positive or negative. Students with positive attitudes put more efforts into the task of learning the required language and therefore learn it better, faster and easier than those with negative attitudes towards the same language. Therewith, gender could be one of the factors influencing students' attitudes towards English language learning. The present study was undertaken on a sample size of 218 secondary school students drawn using stratified and random sampling methods. Questionnaires were used to collect the required data from students and teachers of English. Descriptive (percentages and frequencies) were used to analyse the data. The researcher used the statistical package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0 for windows in data analysis. Findings revealed that female students hold more positive attitude towards English language than their male counterparts. It was therefore concluded that the perennial poor performance of English subject in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) particularly among the male students is attributed to the attitudes, students hold towards the subject. As such, education stakeholders in the country need to be sensitized on the effects of negative attitudes towards English and how it affects performance among secondary school students.

Keywords; Influence, gender, attitude, English performance

1. Introduction

English Language plays a central and strategic role in the school system in Kenya because almost all the school subjects are taught using English language. However, students' achievement in this subject in secondary schools in Kenya is not encouraging. This could be attributed to their attitudes towards the subject. Several studies have analysed students' attitudes towards learning English in terms of gender. Results of such studies for example, Fakeye (2010) and Kiziltan and Atli (2013) found that gender is not a significant variable on students' attitudes towards English language learning, which is consistent with Karatas et al. (2016) who in a research that examined Turkish university students' attitude towards learning English, discovered that attitudes towards learning English are not affected by gender. These findings further agree with another study by Zareian et al (2014) who found participants' positive attitudes toward English learning had no significant differences between two genders. However, many studies have found gender to be a significant variable on students' attitudes towards English language learning such as Gomleksiz (2010), Karahan (2007), Shams (2008) and Soku, Simpeh and Osaf-Adu, (2011) who found out that female students had more positive attitudes towards English language learning than their male counterparts. Other studies found male students had more positive attitudes towards learning English when compared with females (Soleimani & Hanafi, 2013 & Tetik, 2016). Furthermore, Eshghinejad (2016) conducted a research on the attitudes toward learning English language of Kashan University students in Iran and found that the students had positive attitude concerning English but there were statistically significant attitudinal differences between male and female groups. Thus, the study determined gender as a possible factor in constructing behavioural and emotional attitude towards English language learning. The results are similar with those in a study by Shoaib and Dorney (2005) and Abidin, Pour-Mohammadi and Alzwar (2012) and Kesgin and Arslan (2015). They advocate that gender is an important variable in second language learning investigations and concluded that females show more interest, positive behavior, and performance compared to males. In their view, the differences between the male and female respondents' attitudes may be due to, on the one hand, the diversity of English teaching strategies and classroom activities employed by English language teachers to teach female and male students, and, on the other hand, the design and content of English curriculum may not meet the interests and needs of the male students. Consequently, they do not show a positive reaction towards learning English (Abidin, Pour-Mohammadi & Alzwar (2012). According to Al Noursi (2013), understanding learners' attitudes benefits all stakeholders in different ways. For example, it can help language teachers, syllabus

designers, and curriculum developers select better teaching strategies, design better lesson plans, and develop better language curricula that is gender sensitive. Consequently, it is hoped that the results of the present study have provided valuable insights into the students' attitudes, which would be substantially beneficial to all stakeholders, especially teachers in Kenya and elsewhere.

1.1. Problem of the Research

Gender related disparities have characterized Kenya education system at levels of education from primary to the university. Particularly, gender differences have been observed in performance in the various subjects offered at the school level with females performing better in languages and arts-based subjects whereas males outperform the females in mathematics and science related subjects. Though many researchers have been conducted to establish the key factors contributing to variation in students' general performance with reference to gender, there is need for more studies to clearly establish the role of gender in students' performance in the various subjects offered in the school system in Kenya. Consequently, this study investigated the influence of gender on students' attitudes towards English language. This is because attitude is considered as one of the most important components of language learning and studies conducted in Kenya and elsewhere have yielded contradictory findings.

1.2. Research Focus

The problem of gender differences in attitudes towards English language is a worldwide issue that is experienced by most learning institutions of higher learning both in the developing and developed countries. In a study conducted in Turkey, female learners found to have a much more positive attitude towards English than male students (Karahan, 2007). In a similar study in Ghana, Soku, Simpeh and Osaf-Adu (2011) concluded that gender had a considerable effect on learners' attitudes to the study of English. However, Fakeye (2010) in a case study conducted in Nigeria established that there was no statistically significant difference in the attitudes of male and female students towards English thus the students' attitude is not gender-related. This view was supported by Zareian et al (2014) who found no significant differences in attitudes between the two genders. This study therefore, explored to give more knowledge in the role of gender in students attitudes towards English in order for scholars to come up with conclusive knowledge in this research area of concern.

2. Methodology of Research

2.1. General Background of Research

The research was ex post facto in approach that adopted the casual-comparative design. This design was used because the researchers had little control over the study variables particularly the students' attitudes towards English Language thus; they only established the attitudes held by male and female students in regard to English language in Kericho County, Kenya.

2.2. Participants

In the study, 218 form three and four students were involved. Stratified sampling was used to classify the respondents into three categories, which included mixed, girls' and boys' schools. Proportional sampling was then used to obtain the number of participants from each randomly selected school. This study used a Likert-scale questionnaire which the students responded to the items were closed ended with 5 options on the Likert scale that included SA: Strongly agree; A: Agree; U: Undecided; D: Disagree; SD: Strongly disagree.

2.3. Data Analysis

To establish the extent to which gender influences students' attitudes towards English language, the Likert scale responses were scored and then the scores were put into three categories namely positive (76-95 points), Moderate (39-75 points) and Negative (19-38 points). The frequencies and percentages of male and female students whose attitudes scores fell within the various categories were presented accordingly. In effect, frequency and percentage tables were generated. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0 was used to analyse the data obtained from respondents.

3. Results

Table 1 gives a detailed analysis on the influence of gender on students' attitude toward English.

| | Score | Females | | Males | |
|-------------------|-------|---------|------|-------|------|
| | | f | % | f | % |
| Negative Attitude | 19-38 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0.9 |
| Moderate Attitude | 39-75 | 92 | 66.8 | 105 | 93.7 |
| Positive Attitude | 76-95 | 14 | 33.2 | 6 | 5.4 |
| Total | | 106 | 100 | 112 | 100 |

Table 1: Students' Attitude towards English by Gender

The results in Table 1 shows that none of the female students have a negative attitude towards English language, 66.8% have a moderate attitude and 33.2% have a positive attitude towards English language. 0.9 % of the male students have a negative attitude towards English, 93.7 % have a moderate attitude while 5.4 % have a positive attitude towards the language. From the findings it can be concluded that the majority of students in Kenya have a moderate attitude towards English. The female students however seem to have a more positive attitude than the male students.

4. Discussion

The problem of students' attitude towards English language is a worldwide issue that has been and still being experienced by students in institutions of learning both in Kenya and elsewhere. The findings of this study agree with those of earlier studies for instance Gomleksiz (2010), Karahan (2007), Shams (2008) and Soku, Simpeh and Osaf-Adu, (2011) who found gender to be a significant variable on students' attitudes towards English language learning with female students showing more positive attitudes towards English language learning than their male counterparts. However, it contradicts other studies which found male students to have more positive attitudes towards learning English as compared to the female ones (Soleimani & Hanafi, 2013; Tetik, 2016). Furthermore, Eshghinejad (2016) conducted a research on the attitudes toward learning English language of Kashan University students in Iran and found students to have positive attitude concerning English but there were statistically significant attitudinal differences between male and female groups. Thus, the study determined gender as a possible factor in constructing behavioral and emotional attitude towards English language learning.

Other studies have also shown that include Fakeye (2010) and Kiziltan and Atli (2013) found that gender is not a significant variable on students' attitudes towards English language learning, which is consistent with Karatas et al. (2016) who in a research that examined Turkish university students' attitude towards learning English discovered that attitudes towards learning English are not affected by gender. Moreover, Zareian et al (2014) in their study found participants to have positive attitudes toward English learning but no significant differences between two genders.

Several researchers have regarded attitudes as a key factor to be taken into account when attempting to understand and explain variability in student achievement in English language (Dika, 2002; Kiptui & Mbugua, 2009). In fact, Karthigeyan and Nirmala(2012)assessed the gender differences in academic achievement of 10thclass students in English in Salem and Sankari educational districts of Tamil Nadu. The findings revealed that in all the five years, academic achievement of the students in English is average, but further analysis based on different demographic variables revealed that the girls had a higher means core compared to the boys in their academic achievement in English. In both educational districts (Sankari and Salem)girls showed higher academic performance in language than boys. Thus, one of the key variables to be continually studied is the student attitudes towards various subjects and how gender moderates the attitudes.

5. Conclusions

From the literature and the findings of this study, it can be concluded studies on the influence of gender on students' attitude English language still yield conflicting findings. However, there are strong indications that generally female students have more favourable attitudes toward English language than their male counterparts. Since attitude is considered as one of the most important components of language learning, to can also be concluded that the perennial poor performance in English subject in KCSE in the Kenyan context is attributed to the attitudes the students hold towards the subject.

6. Recommendations

It is recommended that secondary school teachers in Kenya should motivate learners towards English language learning by highlighting its importance. The teachers should also be responsive to learners' attitudes and value their students' attitudes and preconceptions, as it can affect their success in language learning. Moreover, teachers should involve learners in activities which build up positive attitudes towards English language learning. Curriculum designers at the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development and policy makers in the Ministry of Education and the Teachers Service Commission, Kenya should be aware of the influences of learners' attitudes on English language learning. Most teachers of English in Kenya are females. The problems of learners' attitudes especially the boys may be rooted in the culture of African society where boys were and still being trained not to be instructed by women. Curriculum designers who understand these problems, have a responsibility to share their knowledge of solutions associated with attitude, with educators who should use this knowledge in their classrooms to enhance learners' positive attitudes towards English language learning and reverse any negative attitudes that may harm learners' motivation.

7. References

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