

DILEMMA OF LEARNERS OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN KENYA

Martha Mambo

University of Eastern Africa, Baraton, P. O. Box 2500-30100, Eldoret, Kenya

Email address: marthamambo@yahoo.com

Abstract

To learn a foreign language means to learn a language that is not officially and commonly used in one's usual habitat. The need to learn a foreign language normally arises as dictated by various factors including professional, academic, personal and socio-economic. The mastering of a foreign language implies the ability of the learner to put the language into use within various spheres of operation such as speaking, reading and writing; these corporately define what is referred to as communication skills. These skills are crucial in virtually every aspect of life. The professional domains, fields of study and circles of social interaction all foreground the mastery of language as a means of communication and operation. When the communicative ability is challenged within given domains and settings, the ripple effect is felt in other related spheres of the individual's operation. One such domain is education; when the language of operation is foreign to the learner, a dilemma arises as to the way forward. A number of private universities in Kenya enjoy an international ethnic variety, including learners of English as a foreign language. This study looks into the challenges of such students, the strategies employed in overcoming them and the way forward.

Keywords: language mastery, foreign language learning, multilingualism

Introduction

Foreign language learning and mastery has continued to gain prominence in the world, especially in today's global village economy. This fact notwithstanding, Foreign Language learners and users have over time been forced to grapple with certain challenges, directly or indirectly associated with the language acquisition process.

The status of English as a language has continued to gain prominence in the world today. With about 400 million speakers, English is the third most spoken language in the world, after Chinese and Spanish. English however stands an advantage of non-regional localisation and is as such spread and functionally used across all five continents of the world. Moreover, another 600 to 700 people speak English as a foreign language. 67 out of 195 world nations have English as the primary official language and approximately 27 have English as the secondary official (co-official) language (Crystal, 2006).

In Kenya, English has served as an official language since independence, and has as such been prominent in various domains; it has long been the language of administration, used for example in law and governance, education and mass media. Kenya's national language is Kiswahili, the lingua franca of

the country. In 2010 however, Kiswahili was declared an official language of the country, alongside English, as provided for in the Constitution of Kenya, Laws of Kenya, Section 7 (Republic of Kenya, 2010). This fact notwithstanding, English continues to be seen as the language of the elite (Nabea, 2009). Kiswahili, on the other hand, still has to grapple with issues on prestige planning, not in relation to its status as a national language, but rather, in relation to its status as an official language in the country. Knowledge of English is therefore essential, especially within the educational system, where instruction, teaching and examinations are basically carried out in English. Concerning language use in examinations, for example, the Kenya National Examination Council states, "Answers of examination questions must be written in English language except for language subjects other than English, or as otherwise stated in the rubric of the question paper" (KNEC, 2000, p. 18).

This underscores the importance of mastery of English within the education framework. For higher education, English remains the sole medium of instruction and language of research at colleges and universities (Michieka, 2005).



Admission of non-English speaking Students

Admission of International students from both English-speaking and non-English speaking countries into Kenyan institutions of higher learning is open and accessible. However, unlike in America for example, where all non-speakers of English are required to undertake the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) examination, this is not the case in Kenya, where the mean grade acquired in the National Examinations of one's country of origin are equated with that of the admitting institution for one to qualify or not for entry. It is left at one's discretion to undertake special English language courses either before or upon admission. Others who have had a brief stint with English opt for bridging courses in the language upon arrival in the country, prior to joining university. Many however, find themselves in Kenyan institutions of higher learning even before mastering the English language to satisfactory levels. This in turn has potential repercussions both on the academic performance and the social interactions of the student as well.

Need for Higher University Enrolment

Out of the 615,773 candidates who sat KCSE in 2017, only 70,000 made the cut-off grade of C + (plus) to join university. Kenya Association of Private Universities (KAPU) chairman Kisau Mumo said both public and private universities had been hard hit by the reduction of the number of students joining university. The Standard Newspaper, Jan 19 2018. It is therefore evident that Kenyan universities are in dire need of students, and the steady influx of foreign students, including the non-Anglophones, is a welcome move. The question however still remains, 'what is the extent of their dilemma in the realm of English language mastery, and what would be the way forward?'

The Problem

The English language is becoming more and more attractive to non-English speakers in the world today, especially due to career prospects attached to it, given its international status. In Kenya, although both English and Kiswahili are the county's official languages, English is still considered the language of the elite and is as such the core language of instruction in Institutions of higher learning. Non-English speaking foreign students have had the privilege of being admit-

ted into Kenyan institutions of higher learning. Several among these students have had little or no contact with the English language. Understanding their challenges and ensuring that mechanisms of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) are set in place for such students, would not only benefit the students, but would also boost international student enrollment for various courses in the universities, and thus be a step as well in curbing the problem of low enrollment.

Definition of Terms

First language

This is also referred to as native language or mother tongue. It is also the language of one's ethnic group rather than the language that one first learns (Davies, n.d). The first language is as well alternatively viewed as the language that one has been exposed to from birth. It is therefore known as the arterial language or L1 (Bloomfield, 2014).

Second language

Although there are various perceptions on what constitutes a second language, the first language is generally distinguishable from the second language in that the second language is a language other than one's mother tongue, used for special purpose such as education and government (Crystal, 2003). A 'second language' usually has official status or a recognized function within a country. At the individual level though, one may be a speaker of several other recognized languages used within a particular country for example, but which on the contrary do not enjoy an official status or function. Such is the case with the Kenyan local languages, serving as native languages and Kiswahili and English serving as second languages. A second language is important, especially in multilingual societies, for one to functionally live operate in a particular area of jurisdiction. The 'second language' is also referred to as L2.

Foreign language

This is a language which is not the native language of large numbers of people in a particular country, is not used as a medium of instruction in schools and is not really used as a medium of communication in government and media. Usually, foreign languages are taught in schools for the purpose of communicating with foreigners or for reading written materials in the

language (Richard & Schmidt, 2002). For the foreign student in Kenya originating from a non- English speaking country, say Congo, learning English would be akin to learning EFL, where is considered as a Foreign language to the individual.

Why Learn a Foreign Language?

Several benefits have been purported with the learning of new languages in general, and with that of learning a foreign language in particular. Research from Auburn University in Cambridge Massachusetts suggests that the benefits range from creating positive attitudes and less prejudice towards others, development of analytical and critical thinking skills, overall improvement of language communication skills, enhancement of creativity, increment of perception of abstract concepts and problem solving skills, enhancement of one's career opportunities, improvement of school grades, enhancement of listening skills and memory retention, to opening up of opportunities to travel abroad (Norbahinra & Radzuwan, 2017). Note that brains of monolingual and bilingual people work in different ways (Wenner, 2009).

Language Learning

Scholars in the fields of linguistics and psychology have advanced various theories explaining language acquisition and learning. On acquisition of L1, Skinner (1985) proposes the Behaviorist Theory. According to this school of thought, learning a language occurs through stimuli that learners receive, in terms of positive or negative reinforcement. A positive response is conditioned by positive reinforcement such as praise or reward while a negative response is conditioned by punishment- psychological or otherwise. This stimuli-response approach of the Behaviorist Theory was viewed as being too simplistic especially by the proponents of Chomsky's (1959) Universal Grammar Theory. According to this approach, children are born with a language acquisition Device (LAD), which accounts for the swift mastery of language among children despite the extremely abstract nature of language. The assumption here is that language learning rules for L1 are universal, and hence LAD irrespective of language and environment. This theory has also been criticized by scholars like Jean Piaget (1896-1980), who uphold the interactionist as well as the constructivist view on cognitive development of which language learning is

part. Piaget's thesis upholds that language learning is a product of physical interaction between the L1 learners and the environment.

On the other hand, L2 and foreign language learning usually implies that one has already acquired L1. Krashen (1982) argues that learning of L2 can be done subconsciously, although the L2 language acquirers at the time may be unaware that they are acquiring language; they are then only aware that they have acquired language during language use. He further notes L2 learning can also occur consciously, as is usually the case; the learning is therefore formal and explicit. This latter scenario is also true for foreign language learning. Krashen's theory on second and foreign language learning five hypotheses: the Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis, the Monitor Hypothesis, the Natural Order Hypothesis, the Input Hypothesis and the affective Filter Hypothesis. Although these hypotheses each operate under specific propositions, they can collectively be summarized as forming two perspectives in relation to second/foreign language learning; one is the 'natural approach', focusing mainly on communication skills. The second perspective is that "the purpose of the language course will vary according to the needs of the students and their particular interests (Krashen & Terrell, 1983).

This research argues from the point of view that best practices must be adopted in terms of input, if the dilemma of students of English as a foreign language has to be tackled. Among the theories of second /foreign language learning, Krashen's (1982) theory was found to be applicable due to its exhaustive nature in that apart from embracing the natural approach, it also advocates for recognizing the specific language needs of the student, and therefore varying the course to suit the said needs.

Methodology

The study focused on a private faith-based institution of higher learning in Kenya. The research population was French-speaking students, using English as a foreign language. A total of 17 students in their 2nd, 3rd and 4th year of study of various academic courses of profession were randomly selected. This sample was chosen with the assumption that they would be in a better position than first year EFL speakers to respond appropriately, as they would relate their past and present experience in the use of EFL within the school system.



The data instruments in place were questionnaires and interviews. Questionnaires were used to measure mastery of EFL and effects thereof in the following five areas: lecture comprehension, note taking, oral communication and social interaction. All courses in the university are taught in English, with the exception of specific language study courses in Kiswahili or French. A Likert scale was used to measure the extent to which various areas of English mastery were required and its effects on the learner's academic and social life in general. The measures ranged from very well, well, relatively well, little and very little. Interviews and open ended questions on the other hand measured the effect of EFL mastery on social interaction, the array of language related problems faced by the said students and mechanisms of dealing with the problems.

Table 1

Analysis of EFL Mastery on Lecture Comprehension

MEASURE OF ANALYSIS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Very Well	6	35.2%
Well	8	47.1%
Relatively Well	2	11.8%
Little	1	05.9%
Very Little	0	00.0%
TOTAL	17	100%

Note Taking

For note-taking, measurements consisted of the extent of the student's ability to take dictations and to spell English words correctly, extent of understand-

ing English and writing irrespective of the teacher's/ student presenter's accent and speech speed. Ability to take dictations and spellings was also measured.

Table 2

Analysis of EFL Mastery on Note –Taking

MEASURE OF ANALYSIS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Very Well	4	23.5%
Well	7	41.2%
Relatively Well	4	23.5%
Little	1	5.9%
Very Little	1	5.9%
TOTAL	17	100%

Analysis

The analysis that follows shows the results for the various areas of EFL mastery and use.

Lecture Comprehension

This measured understanding of classroom lectures, comprehension of lecture instructions, understanding of technical vocabulary used in class, ability to follow fellow student presentations, understanding teacher accent of English and speed of speech. The likert scale used had measures ranging from very well, well, relatively well, little and very little.

Oral Communication

For oral communication, ability to speak English, give explanations, use technical English vocabulary, use acceptable pace, giving oral presentations in class were looked into.

Table 3

Analysis of EFL Mastery on Oral Communication

MEASURE OF ANALYSIS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Very Well	5	29.4%
Well	7	41.2%
Relatively Well	3	17.6%
Little	2	11.8%
Very Little	0	0.00%
TOTAL	17	100%

EFL Influence on Grades

Influence on individual subject grade as well as on overall cumulative grade was measured here. The degree to which the student's grade would possibly impact on their career prospects was also looked into.

Table 4

Analysis of EFL Influence on Grades

MEASURE OF ANALYSIS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Very Much	5	29.4%
Much	5	29.4%
Relatively Much	2	11.8%
Little	3	17.6
Very Little	2	11.8%
TOTAL	17	100%

The table that follows shows cumulative measurements of the analysis of the various components measured.

Table 5

Comparative Measurements

Unit of Measure	Lecture Comprehension		Note-taking		Oral communication		Grading	
	Tally	%	Tally	%	Tally	%	Tally	%
Very well	6	35.3%	4	23.5%	5	29.4%	5	29.4%
Well	8	47.0%	7	41.2%	7	41.2%	5	29.4%
Relatively well	2	11.8%	4	23.5%	3	17.6%	2	11.8%
Little	1	05.9%	1	05.9%	2	11.8%	3	17.6
Very little	0	00.0%	1	05.9%	1	05.9%	2	11.8%
		100%		100%		100%		100%

Cumulative comparative measures obtained from the analysis are represented as follows.

Table 6

Cumulative Comparative Measures

Unit of Measure	Cumulative Tallies	Cumulative Percentages	Average Percentages
Very well	20	117.6	29.4%
Well	27	158.8	39.7%
Relatively well	11	64.7	16.2%
Little	7	41.2	10.3%
Very little	4	23.6	05.9%

In the analysis of level of English knowledge and its impact thereof among EFL students, the unit of measure 'well' received the highest score, at 39.7%, followed by very well at 29.4%. The units 'relatively well, little and very little' altogether rated at 32.4%. It is important to note that all individual units of measure scored less than the average mark of 50%, EFL students at the university. This is an indicator that master of English among EFL speaking students at the university should be an issue of concern.

Results reveal that mastery of English influences lecture comprehension; 47.1% of the students reported that given their level of mastery of EFL, they comprehended lectures 'well', as a unit of measure. Analysis of EFL mastery on note-taking also scored

the highest on 'well', at 41.2%, showing the aptitude of students relating to note-taking in the classroom. Concerning analysis of EFL influence on grades, 29.4% of the students reported that level of mastery of English affected their grades 'very much'. The same score, 29.4%, was obtained for the measure of analysis 'much', regarding EFL influence on grades.

EFL Influence on Social Interaction

Three aspects of EFL student social networks were established here. These included nature of friends, preference for type of roommates and quality of interaction with other English speakers. The following results were obtained.

Table 7

Analysis of EFL Influence on Social Interaction

	Spanish		French		English		Other	
	Tally	Percentage	Tally	Percentage	Tally	Percentage	Tally	Percentage
Most of my friends speak	1	5.9%	7	41.2%	8	47.0%	1	5.9%
I prefer roommates who speak	1	5.9%	3	17.6%	13	76.5%	-	-

47% of the EFL students reported to have most of their friends as English speaking while 41.2% had most of their friends being French speakers. The former was possibly driven by the desire to learn English through interaction. The close score with those having most friends being French-speaking may imply that the

latter group seeks comfort and companionship from others that speak their own language and who therefore understand them. There is therefore an enigma in seeking to master EFL and seeking to belong and to be understood within ones comfort zone. This could explain the 5.9% preferring to have friends who



speak specifically Lingala, a Congolese language. This is despite the fact that virtually every Congolese is a French speaker as well. This also implies the need not only to connect, but to feel ‘at home’ in the real sense; a way of back lashing homesickness in a foreign land.

The 5.9% who had most friends as Spanish speaking were from further Western Africa Francophone nations neighbouring, Guinea Equatorial, the only Hispanophone (Spanish-Speaking) country in Africa. Here again, the need to identify with those from one’s own ‘region’ is viewed as a causative factor. Given the very minimal number of Hispanophone students in the particular institution, the desire of students from the broader Western Africa region to be close to and in solidarity with another minority group (the other being Francophones), may be a driving factor as well.

On preference of roommates, the highest score was recorded at 76.5%, indicating that most EFL speakers prefer to have English-speaking roommates, in comparison to 17.6 % preferring to have French-

speaking roommates. This reveals that although most of their friends were French speaking, a considerably large number of EFL students preferred to have Anglophone (English speaking) roommates. The scenario thus created would assumedly create a balance between the need to learn and master EFL through socialization, and the need to belong, to fully express ones feelings and perspectives as well as to ‘feel at home’ during social interaction with fellow French speakers. Preference for Spanish speaking roommates scored 5.9 % possibly for the reasons stated earlier.

EFL Influence on Quality of Interaction

Responses on extent to which EFL mastery affects quality of interaction were rated on a continuum as follows.

Table 8

Analysis of EFL Influence on Quality of Interaction

Unit of Measure	Very Much		Much		Relatively Much		Little		Very little	
	Tally	Percent	Tally	Percent	Tally	Percent	Tally	Percent	Tally	Percent
Effect of EFL level on interaction	5	29.4%	7	41.7%	4	23.5%	1	5.9%	2	11.8%

EFL speakers reported that mastery level of English would considerably affect their social interaction ‘very much and ‘much’, at scores of 29.4% and 41.7% respectively. The total for these two was at 71.1%, indicating the perceived importance of EFL mastery for reasons of social interaction among the students.

Facing the Dilemma

Respondents also answered open-ended questions, targeting the real problem of inadequate English knowledge, and mechanisms of addressing it. Issues highlighted were of a wide range, including inability to:

- interact and socialize well with others on campus thus avoidance and isolation
- participate fully in academic and extra-curricular

- activities such as in class presentations and sports respectively
- Communicate feelings and ideas adequately
- formulate and ask questions where necessary
- have acceptable confidence levels, thus low self esteem
- tackle exam essay questions satisfactorily
- take good lecture notes
- avoid being objects of teasing and jokes from peers
- acquire targeted grade scores
- understand classroom lectures well

The Way Forward

ELF speakers indicated that their dilemma



seemed to find resolution through the following channels as represented on the table that follows.

Table 9

Tackling the Dilemma

Reading English Books		Interaction with English speakers		Private Tuition		Listen to English Songs		Watch English Movies		Listen to English Sermons	
Tally	%	Tally	%	Tally	%	Tally	%	Tally	%	Tally	%
6	35.3%	14	82.4%	1	5.9%	2	11.8%	4	23.5%	1	5.9%

What Else in Tackling the Dilemma

The students also responded on the appropriateness of introduction of Beginner English Courses for true novelties in the language and Bridging Courses

in English, acting as refresher language lessons for improving EFL skills. Results were as follows.

Introduce Special English Program for EFL speaking students

Table 10

Introduce Special English Program for EFL students

Yes		No	
Tally	Percent	Tally	Percent
15	88.2%	2	11.8%

A total of 15 students felt that introduction of a special English program would be essential ensuring mastery of the language; this represented 88.2% of the respondents. Similarly, above 80% indicated that introducing a special English program targeting EFL speaking students would be of very much or much importance.

of English as a foreign language must be tackled. The results prove that Krashen’s (1982) theory of second / foreign language learning would be applicable here due to its exhaustive nature in that apart from embracing the natural approach to language learning within a given environment, it also advocates for recognizing the specific language needs of the student, and therefore varying the course to suit the said needs.

Conclusion

The results of this study reveal that tackling the dilemma of University level EFL students in Kenya requires a multi-faceted approach. This research has argued from the point of view that best practices must be adopted in terms of input, if the dilemma of students

Recommendations

On tackling the challenges of EFL students, a multi-faceted approach is recommended. It should include not only involve classroom instruction, but audio-visual media platforms as well in order to maxi-

mize on the learning experience of the learners of English as a Foreign Language. Although the institution under study has a language laboratory, fully equipping it with adequate and relevant audio-visual material destined for EFL teaching and learning would go a long way in helping to resolve the dilemma of EFL students. Encouraging interaction, communication and spending time/staying with English speakers on campus is also viewed as positively impacting on the learning outcome of EFL speaking students.

Dealing with challenges of EFL students in the 21st century will therefore not only ensure success in their academics but will also act as a stepping stone in enhancing career opportunities; and as the world steadily and gradually becomes a global village setting in place specific programs that will cater for the needs of EFL speaking students will act as well as a good marketing strategy for Kenyan institutions of higher learning. The programs should include courses ranging from Beginner, Intermediate to advanced English levels as well as Bridging programs meant for testing on placement and readiness to officially commence the required degree program.

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