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SUPPORTING THE SPEAKING DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENTS IN A KISWAHILI-AS-A-FOREIGN-LANGUAGE (KFL) CLASSROOM

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Abstract

Kiswahili is a language that is studied in many countries as a foreign language. However, research on the teaching and learning of language skills in Kiswahili-as-a-foreign language (KFL) classrooms remains few. In this paper, I examine the classroom activities that two beginner level KFL instructors use to support the development of their students' speaking skills. Data was collected qualitatively through classroom observations and in-depth semi-structured interviews. The data revealed that there were various activities such as role-play, small talk, drill, and dialogue that the teachers used to assist students in their speaking development. Also, it was found that although the instructors were aware of some of the speaking activities they were using in their classrooms, they were unaware of others. The study thus concludes that KFL teachers should consciously and purposefully select speaking activities to support their students' speaking skills.

Keywords: Kiswahili, Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTLs), language skill development, speaking

1. Introduction

Although people decide to learn a language for various reasons, past studies have shown that the ability to speak the language is a priority for most of them (Bimpong 2019; Leong and Ahmadi 2017; Nunan 1991; Richards 2006). A majority of language learners measure their success by their ability to speak a language well. They depend on their instructors to guide them in achieving their goal of speaking, especially in foreign language contexts where students rarely get exposed to the language outside the classroom. Littlewood (1981) explained that, in such contexts, the classroom becomes an artificial environment for

foreign language learners to practice and use the language. Instructors, therefore, design and engage students in a variety of classroom activities to support the development of their speaking skills (Goh and Burns 2012).

Most studies on Kiswahili have focused on grammar and culture (Lusekelo 2013; Mpirinya 2015; Riedel and de Vos 2017). A few have, however, explored the teaching and learning of Kiswahili in a foreign language context (Bimpong 2019; Wa'njogu 2008). In particular, Bimpong (2019) and Wa'njogu (2008) explained that one of the reasons students decide to study Kiswahili is to be able to communicate with native speakers. Therefore, these students consider speaking skill as a crucial component of their language learning.

In this paper, I examine the activities that two instructors who teach beginner college-level Kiswahili students at Ohio University use to support the growth of their students' speaking skills. The study aims at filling a portion of the research gap regarding the teaching and learning of Kiswahili. More specifically, the study will contribute to the effective teaching of speaking in Kiswahili-as-a-foreign-language (KFL) contexts. Besides, teachers of other less commonly taught languages (LCTLs) could transfer the findings to related cases to effectively guide students in the development of their speaking skills.

This paper is structured into the following sections: introduction, a review of related literature on supporting speaking development and using speaking activities in language classrooms, methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion.

2. Supporting speaking development in foreign language contexts

Past studies have shown that language instructors often rely on the method and/or approach they use in their classrooms to help students build their foreign language skills (Brown and Lee 2005; Prator and Celce-Murcia 1979; Richards and Rodgers 2001; East 2016). East (2016:3), for instance, explained that language instructors that use Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) rely on that approach to guide students to acquire proficiency in their listening, reading, writing, and speaking skills. Some of the methods and approaches of language teaching that have held sway in the past century include Grammar-Translation (GT), Direct Method (DM), Audiolingual Method (ALM), Total Physical Response (TPR), and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Brown and Lee 2005; Richards and Rodgers 2001; Rivers 1981; Prator and Celce-Murcia 1979; East 2016). Over

the years, the teaching of foreign languages has shifted away from emphasizing grammar, mainly representative of GT, to giving prominence to communication, which is characteristic of CLT.

To enhance the skills that students need to communicate effectively, language instructors often use various activities in their classrooms. These activities usually fall under an approach or a method of language teaching. For instance, while modeling is a speaking activity that is characteristic of DM, mimicry, memorization, and drills are characteristic of ALM (Brown and Lee 2015; Richards and Rodgers 2001; Rivers 1981; Prator and Celce-Murcia 1979). Similarly, speaking activities that focus on real-world contexts are features of CLT (Brown and Lee 2015; Buckingham and Alpaslan 2017). Thus, each speaking activity has a purpose; hence, language instructors should have a tangible reason for selecting or using specific activities.

Various scholars have placed speaking activities into different categories based on their purposes. For instance, Littlewood (1981) categorized speaking activities into functional communication activities and social interaction activities. He explained that functional communication activities assist learners in using the language to get meanings across as effectively as possible, and social interaction activities prepare students to use language appropriately in social situations. Littlewood (1981) further grouped functional communication activities according to two main uses of language: (a) using language to share information, and (b) using language to process information. Some examples of functional communication activities include discovering missing information, reconstructing story sequences, and discovering identical pairs. Littlewood (1981) cited simulation and role-playing as some examples of social interaction activities.

Also, Thornbury (2005) argued that a language learner's speaking skill development needs to go through three stages: awareness, appropriation, and autonomy. Based on his argument, he categorized speaking activities into awareness-raising activities, appropriation activities, and autonomous activities. Some awareness-raising activities he mentioned include using recordings and transcripts to raise learners' awareness of certain features of spoken language, using live listening to expose students to a range of accents, and using noticing-the-gap to assist students in noticing language features. Thornbury (2005:63) explained that appropriation activities put students in the driver's seat of their speaking development. He used riding a bicycle as an analogy to explain this category: "it is like being allowed to pedal freely, but with someone running right behind, just in case".

Activities that fall under this category include drilling and chants, writing tasks, reading aloud, assisted performance and scaffolding, memorized and rehearsed dialogues, and repeating tasks. Thornbury's (2005) final category, autonomous activities, includes presentations and talks, stories, jokes and anecdotes, drama, roleplay and simulation, discussions and debates, conversation, and chat.

From a CLT perspective, Harmer (2007:348) explained that there are several widely-used categories of speaking activities used to assist students in building their speaking skills. He grouped speaking activities into four categories: (1) acting from a script, (2) communication games, (3) discussion, and (4) prepared talks. Some activities that fall under the first category include acting out dialogues and play scripts. Information-gap, television, and radio games are activities that Harmer provided under the second category. He exemplified the third category with activities such as buzz groups, instant comment, formal debates, unplanned discussion, and reaching a consensus. With the final category, questionnaires, simulation, and role play are some activities he provided as examples. He explained that all these activities aim at helping students speak as quickly and fluently as possible.

In the same vein, Goh and Burns (2012) provided three types of speaking tasks that could be used by instructors to assist in students' speaking-skill growth. Unlike the previous authors, Goh and Burns' (2012) categorization was based on activities that students do collaboratively or individually in the classroom. They include communication-gap, discussion, and monologic tasks. On the one hand, communication-gap and discussion are tasks that demand that learners work in pairs or small groups to achieve specified outcomes. Examples of such tasks include context gap, information gap, simulations, and regular group discussions. On the other hand, monologic tasks require an individual to produce pieces of extended discourse. Examples of monologic tasks include telling a story, sharing personal anecdotes, and giving a talk.

The variation in the categories illustrates that different demands are made on learners in their language development; hence, not all speaking tasks are the same. Thus, foreign language teachers should carefully consider the variation that exists in speaking activities before choosing one for their classroom.

3. Using speaking activities in the language classroom

A considerable amount of studies has been conducted on the use of speaking activities to guide students' speaking development in both foreign and second language learning classrooms (Arbain and Nur 2017; Afraz, Taghizade, and Taghinezhad 2018; Baidawi 2016; Defrioka 2018; Gudu 2015). Several such studies have specifically investigated the activities that teachers use to teach speaking (Arbain and Nur 2016; Gudu 2015). Gudu (2015), for instance, investigated the speaking activities that English as a second language (ESL) teachers in the Eldoret Municipality, Kenya use to promote learners' speaking skills. Through observation and questionnaires, they found that the teachers used dramatization, discussion, debating, impromptu speeches, storytelling, role-play, dialogue, oral narratives, poems recitation, songs, and tongue twisters. The study also revealed that the teachers had a preferred combination of activities that they used to teach speaking; Dramatization, debating, and dialogues were the most preferred combination. Similarly, Arbain and Nur (2017) investigated the activities used in teaching speaking at Widya Gama Mahakam University. Their study revealed that the instructors used four main activities in teaching speaking at the University. These activities are show-and-tell, oral presentation, drama, and question and answer. Arbain and Nur (2017) concluded that these activities motivated students to actively participate in the class. Thus, students had positive attitudes toward such activities.

Other studies have examined the impact of some activities on students' speaking skills (Afraz, Taghizade, and Taghinezhad 2016; Baidawi 2016; Huang 2008; Mantra and Maba 2018). Afraz, Taghizade, and Taghinezhad (2016), for instance, investigated the effect of using pictorial aids to teach speaking in English as a foreign language (EFL) context. They found that pictorial aids motivated students to participate more in class, especially when teachers used them effectively. Thus, using pictorial aids in the classroom positively impacts students' speaking skills. In another study, Ziafar, Toughiry, and Sadat (2014) examined the influence of role plays on students' speaking development. They concluded that role play effectively helps students develop their speaking ability. Studies such as Afraz, Taghizade, and Taghinezhad (2016) and Ziafar, Toughiry, and Sadat (2014) show the role of speaking activities in the growth of students' speaking skills. In addition, such studies demonstrate that instructors play a crucial role in making speaking activities effective for students.

4. Methodology

The study was conducted at Ohio University, a university located in the midwestern section of the United States (U.S.). At the university, Kiswahili is usually taught at two proficiency levels: elementary and intermediate. Students who enroll in the elementary class are college or high school students with little or no background in Kiswahili. Those in the intermediate class, however, are students who have studied Kiswahili for at least one academic year. The elementary level is usually divided into two separate classes taught by two different instructors.

4.1 Participants

This study focused on the elementary-proficiency-level class. Thus, the participants in the study were purposefully selected. Specifically, they were two instructors who teach college-level KFL to beginners. Purposefully selecting participants was in line with the aim of the study. In this paper, the participants will be referred to as Pendo (pseudonym), a Swahili word which means love, and Amani (pseudonym), another Swahili word which means peace. At the time of the study, Pendo and Amani had a total of 25 students enrolled in their classes.

Pendo is a native speaker of Kiswahili who comes from Kenya. At the time of the study, Pendo had taught Kiswahili in Kenya and the U.S. for a total of four years. Pendo's colleague, Amani comes from Ghana and she is a non-native speaker of Kiswahili. She had taught Kiswahili in Ghana and the U.S. for a total of two years. At the time of the study, both instructors were graduate students at Ohio University.

The reason for such a relatively few number of participants in this study is not merely because the study is qualitative. I was only interested in the speaking activities that were used by the instructors in the elementary-proficiency-level class. Thus, Pendo and Amani were the only instructors who fit the criteria for participation.

4.2 Data Collection and Analysis

I used observation and interviews as the methods of data collection. First, I observed the classrooms of the teachers, and then I conducted face-to-face in-depth semi-structured interviews with both instructors. Using both methods was to ensure that the study produced rich data that appropriately and adequately provided answers to the question under investigation.

Before the observations and interviews, I interacted with the instructors via email explaining my study, the purpose of the study, and how the study is likely to contribute to effective teaching and learning of KFL. Also, I shared with them the approval letter from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the study. Fortunately, both instructors agreed to be participants in the study.

I observed each class three different times for a total of 330 minutes (5.5 hours). The observations gave me the opportunity to see the activities that were used by the KFL teachers to help the students build their speaking skills.

After the observation, I sent out emails to the instructors to set up a time for the interview. To ensure that they were comfortable, I asked them to choose a suitable date, time, and location for the interview. Although both instructors taught the same proficiency level, they were interviewed separately. Also, the conversations were audio-recorded for later transcription and analysis. Some of the questions that guided the interview are as follows:

- Why did you decide to teach Kiswahili?
- How many years have you been teaching Kiswahili?
- How different do you teach Kiswahili now in comparison with when you started teaching the language?
- How does a typical day in your classroom look like?
- What language skill do you emphasize most in your class?
- Tell me about the factors you consider in choosing activities for your class.
- What activities do you use in your class to teach speaking?

The interview was semi-standardized; therefore, the above questions mainly served as a guide for the conversation.

After data was collected, I used thematic analysis to find out the significant patterns and themes. In the results section, I focus on the themes that align with the purpose of the study.

5. Results

Activities used in language classrooms are usually determined during lesson planning. Pendo and Amani revealed that various factors determine their choice of classroom activities. Both of them indicated that the topic they plan to teach is central to this decision. Aside from the topic, they consider important factors such as the proficiency level of the learners. Amani commented:

It depends on the topic... One, I consider the relatability, I look at the subject they can actually relate to. Two, how fun it is. The most underlying thing I look at is, is this activity going to make them learn something? That is the main point of the activity. If it's going to make them learn, how is it going to make them learn?

Pendo also shared:

First of all, I consider the topic. So, I select the activities considering the lesson I am going to teach. Also, I consider the level of the students because you cannot teach something which is related to advanced speakers to beginners.

Thus, Pendo and Amani take various factors into consideration when selecting classroom activities. These include the topic they plan to teach, the proficiency level of the students, the impact of the activity on students' learning, and how fun the activity will be in the classroom.

The instructors explained that, before implementing the activities in the classroom, they make sure students have had enough instruction. This enables students to perform the activities well. Pendo indicated that her lesson is typically divided into three sections: direct instruction, activity demonstration, and assessment of student performance. She said:

I divide my lesson into three sections. The first one, I am the one who gives instructions and deliver the lesson to the students. After that, I demonstrate to the students whatever I want them to do and then I finally give them the chance to perform or do what I have taught them so that I can evaluate and see if they got what I taught them.

Similarly, Amani explained that what happens in her language class on a typical day is "...we learn, we reproduce and then we practice among ourselves." Explaining further, she said:

... first, I teach. So more or less I model it for them...and then give them the information they need for that kind of activity. And then they are supposed to practice among themselves and present.

From the classroom observations, I noticed that the structure of the lessons for both instructors was the same. The first part of the class was mainly for direct instruction. The teacher did almost all the talking during this part of the lesson. The second part of the class was, however, very interactive. There were a lot of student-to-student and teacher-to-student interactions during this time. In the final part of the lesson, the students demonstrated what they had learned by performing a classroom activity either in groups or individually.

In the interview, the instructors explained that they planned their lessons together, which explains why the structure of their lessons was the same.

We plan our lessons together and decide on which activity we are going to use for our lessons. We teach the same level of students and we want to make sure no class is ahead of the other. (Amani)

The activity that a teacher chooses for a class usually targets one or more language skills. In recent times, the skill that is emphasized most in language teaching classes is speaking. Emphasizing speaking, however, does not mean a language teacher should neglect the other skills. Pendo and Amani indicated that they teach all language skills. Amani explained:

I try to emphasize more or less on all skills as much as I can, but I make sure one skill is translated into others. If we learn how to introduce yourself in Kiswahili, this is speaking, right? In an attempt to translate this to the other skills, sometimes I play a video or audio of someone talking about themselves, then they are practicing their listening skills. Now in translating this into writing, I have them write about everything they can say about themselves. And as far as reading is concerned, sometimes I provide them a text that has these elements, so they are able to discern some of the elements from the text... So, I try to touch on all of these in ways I can. You can't do all of them equally.

Although their teaching targets all language skills, both teachers explained that the skill that they emphasized the most was speaking.

I emphasize speaking skill more...most of the activities I use in the class are speaking activities. (Pendo)

I think I do a lot of speaking. Yeah, even though I emphasize the other skills as well. (Amani)

The instructors explained that they emphasized speaking skill because that is the goal of most of their students. Pendo shared:

Most of the students told me their goal was to be able to speak Kiswahili with native speakers. They intend to travel to East Africa one day and so it's important to be able to speak.

Activities that support the speaking development of foreign language learners are numerous. When I asked the teachers about the activities they used for that purpose, Amani said: "We do role plays a lot, and then sometimes games". Pendo also shared that "We do some role plays and we do some discussions. Then we do some asking and answering questions.

Overall, the activities that the teachers mentioned are role play, presentations, questions and answers, games, and discussions. During my observation, some of these activities, such as role plays and small talk, which includes asking and answering, were used by the teachers. However, the use of discussions, presentations, and games were not seen during the observations. Since I did not observe the classes for the entire semester, the teachers might have used these activities on days that I did not observe their classes. However, there were activities that none of the teachers mentioned they used in their classrooms, although I observed that they used those activities. These activities were drills and dialogues.

Role play was the main activity that the teachers used. Responding to why they usually used role play, Pendo indicated that role plays are used to help students “improve on their speaking”. Amani also explained that role play provides students with “specific expressions that are relevant to that context”.

Role play was usually used toward the end of the lesson. Before the activity was used, the teachers had taught the students various vocabulary and expressions they needed to be able to perform the activity. An example of a role play scenario that was provided in one of the lessons is as follows:

You are in Tanzania for your study abroad program. On your way to the market, you meet your friend. Ask him about the vegetables he usually buys at the market and those he or she likes or dislikes.

Also, small talk was another major activity the teachers used. This activity was mostly used as a pre-main-lesson activity. That is, they were used before the teacher introduced the main lesson of the day. The small talk consisted of various topics, such as greetings, work, studies, family, and how students spent their weekends. The talk was usually teacher-initiated. Mostly, the students' role in this activity was to respond to what their instructor said. Below is an example of a small talk that was observed during one of the classes.

Teacher: **Hujambo** Jabari? (How are you, Jabari?)

Student: **Sijambo**. (I'm good)

Teacher: **Habari za wikendi**? (How was your weekend?)

Student: **Salama**. (Peaceful)

Teacher: **Wikendi ulifanya nini**? (What did you do over the weekend?)

Student: **Mimi nilifanya kulala**. (I did sleeping.)

Teacher: Oh **nilala**. **Sema nililala** (Oh I slept. Say I slept.)

Student: **Nililala**, (I slept)

Teacher: **Sawa**. (Ok)

In the above conversation, the teacher engaged a student in a small talk. During the talk, the teacher corrected a grammatical error the student made. Thus, not only was the use of small talk a means to develop the speaking ability of students but also it was an opportunity to address some errors students made.

Another activity that was used in the classrooms was drill. This was used to practice language chunks or expressions used in particular contexts. In one of the classes, the students were learning about buying and selling at the market. To practice the language used in that context, the teacher modeled a conversation between two people (a buyer and a seller) on buying and selling of fruits in the market. First, the teacher acted as both the buyer and seller. Afterward, she asked the whole class to be the buyer while she played the role of the seller. Then she switched roles with the students again; The students became the seller and she became the buyer. Following this was pairing students as buyers and sellers to further practice this conversation. Thus, the teacher drilled the students multiple times on the same expressions to get them familiar with the language used in buying and selling. Dialogue was also an activity that the instructors used in their classrooms. This activity prepared students for role plays. The instructors usually modeled short phrases and then asked students to turn to their neighbors to practice such phrases. As students practiced, the teachers moved around to listen to the students. The teachers also answered questions students had and made corrections when necessary. Besides, the teachers sometimes asked students to read written dialogues. These dialogues were contextualized; therefore, they were relevant and meaningful to the situations of everyday life.

6. Discussion

The aim of the study was to investigate the activities that the KFL instructors at Ohio University use to support the speaking development of their beginner-level learners. The results showed that the instructors used role play, presentations, small talk, games, discussions, drill, and dialogue.

Role play was the main speaking activity that was used in these KFL classrooms. Littlewood (1981:44) explained that role-playing prepares learners for various social contexts. Thornbury (2005) also argued that role play provides a springboard for real-life language use. Similarly, Harmer (2007:352) described role play as an activity that trains students for specific situations. Since the goal of most of the students was to be able to speak the language well when they travel to a Kiswahili-speaking country, role play was thus an appropriate activity to use in preparing them towards that goal. Besides, considering the perspectives of language learners in language skill development is crucial to the development of their language skills (Bimpong 2019).

The results also showed that role play was used towards the end of the lesson. Using role plays towards the end of the lesson was beneficial to both the students and the instructors. On the one hand, the activity provided students with an opportunity to put all the vocabulary and expressions they had learned in the lesson together in a meaningful context. On the other hand, the instructors could use the activity to assess how well students met the performance goal of the lesson.

Small talk, which the instructors referred to as questions and answers, was another activity that the instructors used to support students' speaking skill development. Small talk involves short conversations and chats. It is an activity that is characterized by the usage of fixed expressions. As students continually practice these fixed expressions, they are equipped with the language that is needed to be able to engage in casual conversations. In addition, they learn and practice opening and closing strategies. They are also able to memorize and use such expressions in appropriate contexts. Therefore, the use of small talk to support students' speaking skill development is meaningful.

The other activities that the teachers mentioned they used in the classrooms were discussions, presentations, and games. Past studies have shown that these activities improve students' speaking skills (Brooks and Wilson 2014; Girard, Pinar, and Trapp 2011; King 2002). Oral presentations, for instance, allow students to practice their speaking skills. Also, classroom games, such as find-someone-who, put students in positions where they have to interact. Using such activities in the KFL classes, therefore, provides students with the opportunity to grow in their speaking. Even though the use of oral presentations and games in the elementary-level KFL classrooms are appropriate, the use of discussions is questionable considering the proficiency level of the students. Discussions require a higher level of language proficiency which the students had not yet developed.

Dialogues and drills were the activities that neither of the teachers mentioned they used in their classrooms, although they used them. Rivers (1981:200) explained that dialogues enable students to “learn important features of conversations such as greetings, expressions of impatience, dismay, or surprise, conventional expressions of agreement and polite disagreement, common forms of question and noncommittal answer.... for specific situations and relationships”. Also, Brown and Lee (2015:353) described drilling as an activity that helps “loosen the tongue” of students. In the KFL classrooms, the teachers mainly used drills and dialogues to prepare students for role plays. The drama that characterizes role play requires practice; therefore, the drills and dialogues were used for that purpose. There is the likelihood that the teachers did not mention drills and dialogues as activities they used in their classrooms because these activities seemed to be a part of role play. Drills, dialogues, and role play are, however, different activities with diverse purposes. Therefore, language teachers must realize the differences that exist between such activities in order for them to be selected and used purposefully.

7. Conclusion

Classroom activities that target students’ language skill development differ and have various purposes. This study investigated the activities that teachers of college-level elementary Kiswahili at Ohio University use to support their students’ speaking skill development. The results showed that the activities that teachers used are role play, small talk, dialogue, drill, discussions, presentations, and games. The results also showed that, although the teachers noticed they used activities such as role play and small talk in their classrooms, they did not realize their utilization of dialogue and drill.

Using diverse activities in a language classroom is crucial for students’ language development. However, these activities should be selected consciously and purposefully to fulfill teaching and learning needs. To be able to purposefully select activities that support students’ speaking skill development, instructors should familiarize themselves with a lot of these activities. Then, they would be able to expose students to multiple activities ensuring that students’ language skills are supported in various ways.

In the future, a similar study could be conducted in an intermediate proficiency-level classroom to find out the speaking activities that are used to support such students’

speaking development. Also, both elementary and intermediate proficiency-level classrooms could be examined in one study to compare the differences and similarities in the activities that teachers use to support students' speaking skills.

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