

Justifying Innovative Language Programs in an Environment of Change: The Case of Communication Skills in Kenyan Universities

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Abstract

This paper traces the challenges faced by an innovative language programme started in Kenyan Universities in the 1980s and points out to challenges that innovative programmes can face. In the analysis of the literature that has been written on project management and language issues in development, it attempts to show how the Communication Skills programme could benefit from this knowledge on project management and educational change management in the third millennium. The paper concludes that it is necessary for those in charge of Communication Skills to borrow a leaf from this literature in order to overcome some of the educational challenges of the third millennium.

Key words: project management, change management, educational management, educational innovation

Introduction

The Communication Skills (hereafter CS) program in Kenyan Universities, established in 1989, is both a product and a potential “victim” of change in language and educational policy on the one hand and development priorities on the other. The ongoing educational policy review that started in the 1990s, on the face of it, at least, poses a challenge for practitioners of applied linguistics in general and English language educators in particular to justify the teaching of the course in the universities. This is because in Kenya, national development priorities over the last three decades have directly affected the nature of education.

It is therefore the contention of this article that those involved in the teaching of the CS courses in the universities may have to increasingly seek ways to justify this course that exists in an environment of change. It explores the ways in which priorities in national, development has affected language education throughout the whole education system from the 1980s and how this brought about the need for CS in Kenyan universities. The paper then considers how some characteristics and factors in project planning can aid in charting out the future of CS in Kenya. It further suggests some areas that language teachers and practitioners can address in order to justifiably put academic communication skills at the centre of language teaching in tertiary education.

Educational Policy and National Development

For Kenya, like all developing countries in Africa, the 1950s and 60s were the decades of what has been called the decades of “educational inflation” (Blaug 1987). This was when there was expansion of education at all levels, with the target being universal primary

education by 1980. However, towards the end of the 1970s, it became obvious in half of the forty-six or so countries that this target will not be met till the year 2000. This led to debates on the existing educational policies and their relationship to national development.

By the 1980s, the policies of the previous three decades had resulted in the expansion of primary and secondary education. In Kenya, for example, up to 250,000 students were in secondary schools. Despite the apparent shortage of places in higher educational institutions (with 250,000 chasing only 10,000 places in universities) an analysis of educational development showed a disproportionate expansion in higher education in relation to the lower levels of education.

It was during the 1970s and 80s that the phenomenon of “school leavers” with no vocational skills became the subject of discussion. The education system was criticised as being examination oriented and largely irrelevant to national aspirations since it was unable to provide the majority of the young people with relevant skills to get gainful employment.

At this time also, Africa’s priorities underwent a dramatic change with educational planners coming up with new priorities designed:

- a) To introduce work experience into the primary school curriculum
- b) To vocationalize the curriculum in secondary schools
- c) To introduce mandatory labor market experience between secondary and higher education
- d) To recruit dropouts of the educational system into national youth employment service(s)

(Blaug 1987:347)

In Kenya in the 1980s, these debates led to the introduction of a “technological or skills-oriented” curriculum in the primary and secondary schools.

All these changes of course were not just designed to prioritise skills-oriented education but also to stem the expansion of higher education which had not only created under-employment of university graduates but unemployment at all levels. These attempts to limit the number of places in higher education were then and now still opposed by public opinion. Moreover, the government of Kenya, like most governments in the developing world, regarded the principle of higher education as a right and not a privilege. Thus, at the beginning of the last cycle of implementation of the new educational system, the government was forced to give in to public pressure at the first intake of students in the universities. This led to the admission of more than 10,000 prospective entrants to the universities.

The Birth of Communication Skills

The new educational system that was launched in 1985 was thought to be more in tune with the national aspiration of education with skills for self-employment. However, with the launching of this system, concern was expressed about those who would qualify for

university education. It was felt that the new university students would not have had enough exposure to an adequate English language teaching and learning environment to enable them to cope with university education owing to the reduction in the number of hours allocated to English language in the school system. Only six hours per week had been allocated to English language teaching and learning (which included the teaching of literature) whereas the earlier educational system had allocated eight hours to language teaching alone. Moreover, the students in the previous education system had the benefit of one extra year in high school in which they were also expected to study for a General Paper, which allowed them to practice academic writing skills.

To fill this gap, the CS program for Kenyan universities was launched in 1989. The project was expected to develop a course that would first and foremost serve as an academic language-oriented course for university students. However, it was also thought that the course would be opportune as there had been widespread concern over apparent falling standards in the use of English in the country. Educational practitioners and the public felt that this was particularly acute in educational institutions. It was, therefore, thought that the program could kill the proverbial two birds with one stone, that is, provide academic support as well as arrest the decline in the standards of English in educational institutions. Thus the program became compulsory for all the students entering the public universities.

At present the CS course is confined to providing academic language support in the public universities, with the initial teaching of Academic Writing, Reading, Listening, Speaking and Library and Study Skills. This alone however, does not seem to guarantee the sustainability of the course considering that there were and continue to be problems associated with the new educational system whose solutions lie in the need for a review of the system itself. The present state of affairs, on paper at least, means that so long as there are fewer hours allocated to English language learning in the lower levels of education, the course is perceived to be filling a gap in English language education. And yet this is probably the weakest reason for its 'survival' if prioritization will mean the scrapping of some of the courses which parents and some teachers are 'burdensome' to students in the lower levels of education. If, as some people are advocating, the earlier system (or one close to it) is brought back, how can a place for CS still be justified? Would reallocation of eight hours (as previously) for English language teaching in primary and secondary schools make the CS course redundant at the university level?

Justifying the Role of the CS Programs in the Year 2000 and Beyond.

It has been pointed out that, from a historical perspective, the process of change or development in both developed and developing countries has had, and continues to have an effect, on educational institutions, both 'formal and informal' so that they undergo shift in function (Foster 1987).

The CS program is now established as a compulsory course for first year undergraduate students in the various universities in Kenya. However, though the course is linked with the present educational development objectives, it is in fact at the 'mercy' of forces of

change basically because its sustainability is not yet “firmly grounded in analysis (that clearly show its link) to educational development priorities” (Verspoor 1989, brackets mine). Whereas its launching was based on some limited analysis of needs of pre-university students, it is still unclear what these needs are.

Thus, the changes in the national education policy in Kenya seem at first glance to have created more rather than solved the problems it was intended to solve. First of all, the new system does not seem to have yet been able to make any headway in attempting to halt the ‘diploma disease’ that bedeviled the earlier system. As noted above many and even more students than in the previous system, are clamoring for entry into the universities. Secondly, the change has even led to certain sections of the Kenyan community to be skeptical of the new system. Evidence shows that certain employers prefer to employ graduates of the previous system rather than those of the new. It is these teething problems that those responsible for the CS ought to be aware of. There is need for them to be part of those seeking to arrest the skepticism of the public and parts of the educational establishment to the new educational system in general and CS in particular. These issues are not only challenges of the project planners in the wider educational and national contexts but ones that teachers of CS can participate fully and positively. But their contribution will only be stronger if they have the necessary understanding of project management.

Some Characteristics of Educational Change Programmes: Their Relevance to CS.

Several international agencies have contributed much in terms of material and technical support for educational change projects in the developing countries. However, their contribution to projects has mostly ended at the end of the first phase of implementation. By the 1980s, it became evident that it is at this stage that many projects in the developing world fail. This led to an attempt at a systematic review of projects to find out how the characteristics of change processes influenced the outcomes of projects. In this section, I want to look at some of these characteristics that have been noted by one donor agency, namely, the World Bank and at the same time attempt to highlight those that may be of relevance to those involved in CS.

Among the features of educational change programmes that have been identified are:

i) Time

Research done has shown that educational reforms of a nationwide nature have always taken time. In the 1950s in Europe, for example, it is reported that it took a decade for such projects to reach full implementation. In developing countries, it has been noted that they take longer. For example in Ethiopia, educational change began in 1972 and it is still going on. In Thailand, a programme for diversification in secondary schools started in the 1960s and by 1978, had affected about 50% of secondary schools.

The educational change process that began in the 1980s is now a decade old, (and the Communication Skills project is fifteen years old.) This process however cannot be said to be over. The educational review that was mentioned earlier is evidence of this. But in

order for this review to be meaningful to English Language teaching in tertiary education, the challenges of and the need for the review need to be addressed by the CS teachers too. This is a challenge then for the teachers and those involved in the institutionalization of CS teaching. They need to carry out proactive research which shows that, even in the short term, the course has not only been beneficial to the students but also to the wider context of educational and national development.

ii) Professional capacity and ability to implement change

It has been noted that most of the programs which have failed, have done so at the implementation stage. This has been due, to among other things, lack of professional capacity and ability to implement change. Some projects have been successful because they incorporated ability for innovation as part of the routine aspects of the project. This process of institutionalization, it has been suggested, is perhaps even more important than the impact of the original change program. Moreover, it is noted, projects can expect to succeed if those charged with implementation are provided with the necessary skills and knowledge to face the challenges of the process of change.

In addition, successful projects have also depended on good organization. This is seen as essential in projects with ambitious geographical coverage objectives. For example, successful implementation of educational change projects in Bangladesh, (the former) Yemen Arab Republic, Haiti and Pakistan, was due to the strengthening of administrative structures.

iii) Origins of change

This is another characteristic of educational change process that has been identified. Though this is not always easy to trace, origins of educational change are sometimes political or external. In Ethiopia, for example, the reform was due to political objectives of the Marxist government then in power. In Haiti, it is reported that external agencies were largely involved in the initiation of basic education reform.

In the Kenyan context, educational change in the 1980s was also followed closely by political changes in the 1990s. In the run up to multi-party elections in 1992, some opposition parties, for example, argued that they would change the new education system because there was really no reason to have changed the previous system in the first place. They argued that the incumbent government was only interested in its political survival and that its professed aim to create a sound education policy was not genuine.

Whereas political objectives cannot be underestimated or dismissed out of hand in the Kenyan context, those involved in CS teaching need to take into consideration the fact that Kenya in the twenty first century is a changing political landscape. For CS to sustain a meaningful place within the education context, they need to be informed about the views held by various political institutions and be in a position to judge their possible impact on the sustainability of the program. This way, they can be able to argue their corner, as it were, from a more proactive and informed perspective.

The Role of CS in National Development in the Year 2000 and Beyond

As suggested above, one of the first tasks that those involved in the CS program need to do is to be proactive in carving out a more robust role for the program so that it is not seen as merely that of a handmaiden to university education. For example, CS teachers should show that they have already made a significant impact on the students' communication requirements in the universities. This should be based on research within the context in which the program operates.

The issue of declining standards in the use of English in Kenya also needs clarification. There are at present no authoritative empirical studies, which tell us what this entails. It has even been argued that it is not the standards that are falling but the challenges of the new needs that necessitate a new direction in English language teaching (Burnett 1991). Teachers need to take the initiative to convince the public and policy planners to look at the programme's role as one that can, does and should go beyond that of 'remediation.' Research into the potential for its expansion should provide them with tangible evidence of present benefits to students in relation to national development. National educational policy planners and employers need to be convinced that the programme has helped university students to become better users of English.

In addition, there is also need for the teachers to become more involved in the process of negotiating change during any review period of the whole education system. This can be achieved through understanding the process of educational change and the place of innovative programmes in such a process. For the CS teachers, therefore, there is need to review to what extent:

- (i) There has been an effort to strengthen administrative capacity in institutions that deal with the CS programme.
- (ii) There has been a development of effective policy, planning and support institutions at the central level.
- (iii) There has been an establishment of effective mechanisms of feedback.

Answers to these aspects of project management would aid in placing the role of CS and language teaching in general on a sound scientific base. This way, lecturers can give a strong argument to justify continuation of the course regardless of change in priorities on national development. Rather than being products of change, they should be instruments of that change or part thereof.

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