



LEARNING ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN A TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME THROUGH OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN TANZANIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the issues related to the learning of oral communication skills (OCS) in the English language through distance learning in an era where the information revolution is affecting the delivery and practice of language learning through open and distance learning (ODL). The study is modelled after Kurniasih's study of language skills and learning (Kurniasih, 2011), and uses both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The sample for the study comprises 102 participants (100 students and two tutors) from the Diploma in Primary Teacher Education programme, presented by the Open University of Tanzania. The data was collected through questionnaires and interviews. The findings indicate that the student teachers share positive perceptions of learning OCS through ODL, primarily because of the nature of ODL. The study can assist the development of teaching OCS in the English language.

Keywords: *Oral communication skills, open and distance learning, teacher professional development, English language, language learning.*

INTRODUCTION

Teacher professional development is defined as any formal or informal activity aimed at enhancing the knowledge and skills of teachers by means of orientation, training and support (Coetzer, 2007). This development can take place in the form of initial training, induction courses or in-service training.

According to the Suzan (2000), teacher professional development is significant in deepening teachers' knowledge of the subjects that they teach, sharpening their teaching skills in the classroom, helping them keep up with developments in individual fields and in education in general, helping them generate and contribute to new professional knowledge, and increasing their ability to monitor learners' work. In addition, teacher professional development helps to change teachers' teaching methods, which impacts on students' learning (Borko & Putman, 1996). A study on the perception and practices of teachers in teacher professional development in Tanzania by Komba and Nkumbi (2008) showed that 67.6% of teachers perceived teacher professional development as a means of improving teachers professionally, academically and technically.

Bearing in mind the significance of teacher professional development, this study aims to explore the issues related to the learning of oral communication skills (OCS) in the English language through distance learning in an era where the information revolution is affecting the delivery and practice of language learning through open and distance learning (ODL) at the Open University of Tanzania (OUT).

OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING AND TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

ODL refers to the provision of flexible educational opportunities in terms of access and multiple modes of knowledge acquisition, which permits learning with no barriers of age, gender and time (Santhi, Mohayidini & Chun, 2015). As far as professional development is concerned, the ODL mode is a tool for human capital development, specifically for in-service teachers who want to upgrade their knowledge and skills in higher education and education agencies in both developing and developed countries (Maila & Pitsoe, 2013).

ODL is also useful in developing the knowledge of teachers in remote and rural areas by helping them access opportunities for academic advancement. The ODL mode is therefore complementary to the conventional teaching and learning system as it addresses challenges of cost, access and quality of education. It provides access to education for the marginalised.



DIPLOMA IN PRIMARY TEACHER EDUCATION AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AT OPEN UNIVERSITY OF TANZANIA

The Diploma in Primary Teacher Education (DPTE) is a two-year programme offered by OUT in collaboration with the United Kingdom Open University (UKOU) and Teacher Education for Sub-Saharan Africa (TESSA). The programme was launched in 2008/09 in response to the urgent need for quality teachers in Tanzania. The programme is offered in three streams: science, social science and languages.

The languages stream is the focus of this study. In this stream, students enrolled for the programme practise and develop communication skills through ODL. As a result of the information revolution in recent years, OUT adopted a policy for the integration of new technology in the teaching and learning process.

The incorporation of information technology in language teaching through ODL is thus expected to change students' perceptions of learning OCS through ODL, as showcased in the study of Rodrigues and Vethamani (2015) regarding the impact of online learning in the development of OCS. Their study collected students' feedback on the effectiveness of the online learning programme, English Proficiency in Conversation (EPIc). The study's purpose was to assess how the programme influenced the speaking performance of students in both the EPIc group and the non-EPIc group. The study found that the EPIc group of students performed better than the non-EPIc group of students in terms of improved speaking grades, vocabulary and listening skills.

It is against this backdrop that the present study aims to explore the current perceptions and challenges faced by OUT student teachers in learning OCS through ODL in the context of the information revolution.

AIM OF THE STUDY

The study aimed to examine student teachers' perceptions of learning OCS through ODL, and the challenges they face in learning OCS through ODL in the information revolution era.

Objectives

The objectives of the study were as follows:

- To identify the perceptions of student teachers enrolled for the DPTE regarding learning OCS through ODL.

- To explore the challenges faced by student teachers enrolled for the DPTE in learning OCS through ODL in the information revolution era.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of OCS

Rahman (2010) defines communication as a dynamic interactive process that involves the effective transmission of facts, ideas, thoughts, feelings and values. According to Alam and Uddin (2013), communication can happen orally or in writing. Byrne (1986) argues that “communication is a two-way process between the speaker and the listener and involves the productive skills of speaking and the receptive skills of understanding”. Communication is therefore the process of verbally transmitting information and ideas from one individual or group to another.

OCS include the mix of the verbal, interpersonal and physical strategies needed to interact confidently and effectively with a range of audiences (Griffith Institute of Higher Education, 2004). According to Alam and Uddin (2013), this implies speaking and listening to oral language. Carter and Nunan (2001) propose that speaking is a linguistic activity that consists of pronunciation (sound), morphology and lexis (words and their parts), grammar and syntax (structure), semantic discourse (conversation and utterances), pragmatics (the use of language and associated rules) and fluency (ease of speech, confidence, coherence and speed). Speaking is thus all about verbal responses.

According to Kurniasih (2011), there are several activities for learning language-speaking skills. These include songs, chants and poems, games, peer work activities and oral reports or discussions on materials read. These activities can encourage new learners of a language to listen to and experience the language in diverse ways, encouraging the sharing of ideas, as well as the ability to ask questions or give information.

Listening is an active process of constructing meaning. When listening, a listener needs active mental involvement (Staab, 1992). In developing OCS, listening constitutes the first step (Alam & Uddin, 2013). Kurniasih (2011) argues that no one can say a word before having listened to it. In this regard, the teacher must take into account that listening is a critical skill in communication, because one can respond accurately to a communication stimulus only after listening to it accurately. In this way, listening represents half of the communication process as a person gains



access to most of the information through listening. Learners spend more than half of their time in the classroom listening.

Both of these skills must therefore be practised satisfactorily for successful oral communication. Alam and Uddin's study revealed that students improved their OCS because they were given opportunities to practise language skills in a structured environment (Alam & Uddin, 2013). The authors therefore concluded that the teaching of skills needs to be planned, strategised, practised and assessed; preferably in an authentic setting (Chan, 2011). Similarly, Rahman's study concluded that the task-based approach to language learning has merit (Rahman, 2010). This study revealed that such skills were limited by technology in the past and might not have been accommodated by the present ODL language-teaching technology.

Learning communication skills

Four language skills are involved in learning any language: listening, speaking, reading and writing (Carter & Nunan, 2001). Figure 1 illustrates the process.

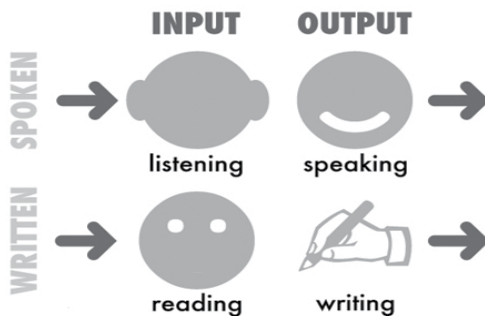


Figure 1: Language skills and learning (adapted from Kurniasih, 2011)

As shown in Figure 1, successful language learning involves listening and reading, which leads to language output in the form of speaking and writing skills. Listening and speaking are considered spoken or oral communication language skills, whereas reading and writing are considered written communication language skills.

Eisenhart (1990) mentions five components to focus on during the teaching of OCS. These are the development of listening and speaking skills, the teaching of a variety

of spoken texts, the creation of a rich language-learning environment, the teaching and extending of vocabulary and conceptual knowledge, and the promotion of the auditory memory of the students.

Developing listening and speaking skills

Eisenhart (1990) argues that the teacher has to develop a set of pre-skills or rules before proceeding with the formal instruction of oral language. These are rules for listening and rules for speaking. For instance, when learning listening skills, a learner has to be taught how to be a good listener. The teacher has to encourage conversation and attentive listening, and create natural learning charts to demonstrate what good listening is. When it comes to speaking skills, learners should be provided with opportunities to engage with others in a conversational style, taught rules that govern social interaction, and use natural charts to capture the mannerisms associated with effective speaking, such as non-verbal behaviour. Non-verbal behaviour may include intonation, use of voice, volume (which depends on the situation and needs), pronunciation, proximity, eye contact and pauses.

Teaching a variety of spoken texts

Eisenhart (1990) asserts that spoken texts include oral reports, questioning and interviews, storytelling and anecdotes, arguments, and formal or informal pair and small group work and debates. The work of the teacher is to show learners how to use these texts for the effective learning of oral communication skills.

Creating a rich language-learning environment

Supporting and nurturing the learning environment is key if communication styles are to be valued, accepted and accommodated (Eisenhart, 1990). Strategies for developing speaking and learning skills have to promote authentic learning.

Teaching and extending vocabulary and conceptual knowledge

Vocabulary is the knowledge of words and word meanings (Kamil & Hiebert, 2005). It refers to the kind of words that students must know. Vocabulary is the term used to describe the collection of words in a given language and understood in speaking, listening, reading and writing (NRTAC, 2010). A student has to be introduced to the familiar words or concepts before new vocabulary is introduced.



Promoting auditory memory

Auditory memory involves the process of attending to, listening to, processing, storing and recalling information. It refers to a student's ability to assimilate information presented orally, to process that information, store it and recall what has been heard.

Conclusion

This literature review has indicated all the skills that are important in communication, and has alluded to different strategies that can be used to enable teaching. Even so, teaching in the ODL mode is conducted by someone who is away from the learner. By definition, the learner and the teacher are not in the same classroom and are separated by some geographic distance (Ghosh, Nath, Agarwal & Nath, 2012). Following this physical separation of the institution, the learners and the teacher in the ODL mode, the teaching of OCS is likely to be problematic, despite the progress made by technology to mitigate the constraints imposed by physical separation. This study therefore aims to examine the challenges faced by students who have opted for the language stream in the DPTE programme at OUT.

METHODS

This study uses a mixed methods approach. A quantitative method was used to collect data on students' perception of learning OCS and the associated challenges brought about by the ODL mode. A qualitative method was used to capture in-depth information from the tutors in the DPTE programme.

The study was conducted at eight OUT regional centres: Temeke, Kinondoni, Ilala, Njombe, Iringa, Shinyanga, Morogoro and Dodoma. Purposive sampling was used in selecting the OUT regional centres and the subject tutors who were involved in teaching the OCS-related modules. Simple random sampling was used in selecting the participants (student teachers). The sample included 100 students and two tutors. However, only 67 students returned the questionnaire.

For the data-collection process, the study used both questionnaires and a structured interview. The questionnaires were administered to the student teachers and the tutors were interviewed. The questionnaire consisted of five-point Likert scale-type responses. The scale ranged from "strongly agree", represented by 5, to "strongly disagree", represented by 1. Participants were requested to indicate their level of agreement.

The questionnaire was used to collect data regarding students' demographics, perceptions and challenges in learning OCS in the English language through ODLE. The semi-structured interview was administered to the tutors to obtain information about their perceptions of teaching OCS in the English language through ODLE, and the challenges they encountered in this process. The alpha reliability of the questionnaire was 0.79, which was in the acceptable range. Data from the questionnaire was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 19. Content analysis was used to process the interview data.

FINDINGS

Table 1: Demographic characteristics

Variables	Categories	Frequency of responses	
		N	%
Sex	Male	23	34.3
	Female	44	65.7
Regional centres	Temeke	9	13.4
	Kinondoni	12	17.9
	Ilala	2	3.0
	Morogoro	9	13.4
	Shinyanga	9	13.4
	Njombe	10	14.9
	Dodoma	7	10.4
	Iringa	9	13.4
Type of school where the student teachers are teaching	Private primary school	1	1.5
	Public primary school	65	97.5
	Private English-medium school	1	1.5

The data from Table 1 indicates that the sample predominantly comprised females (65.7%). The participants were drawn from eight regional centres of OUT, of which



Kinondoni (17.9%) supplied the largest pool of participants. The findings showed that almost all respondents (97.5%) taught at public primary schools.

Students' perceptions on the development of OCS in the English language through the ODL mode

The perceptions of student teachers on the development of OCS in the English language through the ODL mode were processed separately from those of the tutors. The perceptions of the student teachers are represented in Table 2 and those of the tutors in Table 3.

Table 2: Mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) of students' perceptions of learning OCS in the English language through an ODL delivery mode

Statements of the perception	M	SD
OCS can be acquired individually through self-study	3.13	1.27
There is accuracy in learning OCS individually	2.31	1.10
OCS are individually learned and acquired easily	2.92	1.20
Individual demonstration is important in learning OCS	1.67	0.89
Individual practice on pronunciation and persuasion are crucial in learning OCS	1.49	0.84
Average	2.26	1.04

Scale: 5 = Strongly agree, 4 = Agree, 3 = I don't know, 2 = Disagree, 1 = Strongly disagree

The findings indicated that the highest level of agreement occurred on the item "OCS can be acquired individually through self-study" with a mean of 3.1 and a standard deviation of 1.2. The statement that "OCS can be learned individually and acquired easily" produced a mean of 2.9 and a standard deviation of 1.2. Generally, the descriptive results shown in Table 2 regarding the students' perceptions of the development of OCS in the English language through ODL demonstrated the low levels of agreement of students. The mean for the statements ranged from 3.1 to 1.4, where the average mean was 2.26 and the standard deviation was 1.04.

Table 3: Mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) of tutors' perception of students' learning of OCS in the English language through ODL

Statement of the perception	M	SD
OCS are effectively learned in the presence of a tutor during discussion	1.47	0.61
Tutor directives are significant in learning OCS	1.52	0.58
Tutors' immediate feedback is crucial in learning OCS	1.49	0.84
Tutor assistance and rewards are significant in learning OCS	1.47	0.61
Tutors' recognition of students' needs and their ability to guide helps in learning OCS	1.52	0.58
Average	1.44	0.64

Scale: 5 = Strongly agree, 4 = Agree, 3 = I don't know, 2 = Disagree, 1 = Strongly disagree

The findings in Table 3 indicated that tutors had the same level of agreement on the following statements: "OCS are effectively learned in the presence of a tutor during discussion" (mean of 1.47 and standard deviation of 0.61) and "Tutor assistance and rewards are significant in learning OCS" (mean of 1.47 and standard deviation of 0.61). Participants indicated similar perceptions with the statements "Tutor directives are significant in learning OCS" (mean of 1.52 and standard deviation of 0.58) and "Tutors' recognition of students' needs and their ability to guide helps in learning OCS" (mean of 1.52 and standard deviation of 0.58).

As shown in Table 3, the means ranged from 1.52 to 1.47. The findings indicated that tutors' perceptions on the development of OCS through ODL are similar to some issues in Table 2, which summarises the findings from student teachers on the same issues. The average mean of the results in Table 2 (M = 2.26) is higher than the average mean of the results in Table 3 (M = 1.44).

Subject tutors were interviewed on their perceptions of teaching OCS in the English language through ODL. They emphasised the importance of the availability of a tutor in teaching and helping student teachers develop their OCS through ODL.



The tutors indicated the following:

Tutor 1:

“In learning OCS, the presence of a tutor is very important, because a tutor has to guide and direct students, and demonstrate the pronunciation of an English word.”

Tutor 2:

“Immediate feedback from the tutor is essential to what is learned in any language skill, including OCS.”

Table 4: Mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) of the perceptions of the challenges of learning OCS through ODL

Statements on the challenges	*M	SD
Time for practicing OCS is limited	2.34	1.08
Synchronous feedback is limited in learning OCS	2.34	1.08
No guidance on clarity on the pronunciation of words in learning OCS	2.02	0.96
Limited chance for students to make judgments on what they learn in the process of learning OCS	2.13	1.16
OCS learning through ODL is passive	2.12	1.11
Average	2.18	1.08

Scale: 5 = Strongly agree, 4 = Agree, 3 = I don't know, 2 = Disagree, 1 = Strongly disagree

The findings from Table 4 indicate that the following statements were perceived in equal rank: “Time for practicing OCS is limited” (mean of 2.34 and standard deviation of 1.08) and “Synchronous feedback is limited in learning OCS” (mean of 2.34 and standard deviation of 1.08). Students had high perceptions on the statement “Limited chance for students to make judgments on what they learn in the process of learning OCS” (mean of 2.12 and standard deviation of 1.16). Generally, student teachers perceived minimal challenges in learning OCS through ODL, with the average mean being 2.18 and the standard deviation being 1.08. Furthermore, tutors commented on the challenges they faced when teaching English language to distance learners.

They indicated the following:

Tutor 1:

“There is limited time in meeting students when needs arise, for instance, when I mark students’ annual examination papers or main timed test papers... I observe and find some of the things that a student needs to be told or taught for authentic learning of OCS... Students are scattered all over.”

Tutor 2:

“Since the national and official language in Tanzania is Kiswahili, most learners use Kiswahili in everyday communication. Consequently, learning English becomes difficult. The students make many grammatical mistakes in examinations. Learners tend to think in Kiswahili and explain in English, as observed in face-to-face interaction sessions.”

DISCUSSION

Students’ perceptions of the development of OCS through in the English language ODL

The findings of this study indicate that students recognise the importance of individual efforts for the development of OCS in the English language through ODL. They realise that this is more important than tutor assistance due to the nature of ODL as a mode of delivery. According to Santhi et al. (2015), the ODL mode provides flexibility to the students regarding their choice of educational endeavours that can occur anywhere, anytime and in any way. As a result, the individual student becomes self-directed. This means that the student is empowered to take increasingly greater responsibility for various decisions associated with the learning endeavour (Hiemstra, 1994). Moreover, the findings seem to support the view that, when studying through ODL, information and communication technology (ICT) plays a vital role in meeting the requirements and expectations of students on a large scale. ICTs in teaching and learning are significant in creating greater information access, better communication, synchronous and asynchronous learning, increased cooperation and collaboration, cost-effectiveness and pedagogical improvement (Sanga, Sife & Lwoga, 2007). A study by Yunus, Lubis and Lin (2009) shows that a high percentage of students agreed that it is beneficial to use ICTs to learn English (92.4%). In addition, 89.4% claimed that using ICTs improves English language skills.



In ODL, ICT is integrated in terms of electronic learning through educational technologies (Sanga et al, 2007). These educational technologies include computers, video conferencing, audio CDs and DVDs (Nyandara, 2012), all of which facilitate the learning of OCS in ODL through self-study.

According to Nihuka and Voogt (2011), a student who studies through ODL can interact with an instructor through ICTs. This implies that the ODL mode promotes learner autonomy, empowers students and motivates self-directedness. The students take responsibility for their learning.

As far as the ODL mode is concerned, tutors highlight the importance of feedback in the development of language skills. These results are similar to the findings of Mikre (2010:111), who considers feedback essential in improving learning, since learners will be in a position to review both correct and incorrect performance. However, Black and William (2004) found that feedback in the form of incomplete comments had a negative impact on students' learning. For instance, comments, grades or scores may not tell students how to improve in a certain area of learning. Therefore, this indicated that immediate feedback through face-to-face interaction is significant in education through both the contact and ODL mode. This leads to authentic learning.

Challenges distance learners encounter in developing OCS in the English language through ODL

Even though learners reported minimal challenges in learning OCS in the English language through ODL, their tutors stated otherwise. The tutors cited the lack of English language practice due to the common usage of Kiswahili to present a problem. There are two contrasting contexts for language learning: the university and the home. This is supported by Hurley (2003), who argues that this is a consequence of the many language identities and alternatives embedded in the day-to-day communication functions of the student, as well as the existence of environmental challenges. However, the findings regarding the challenge of limited interactions with students from tutors align with the findings of Attri (2012), who contends that, in the ODL mode, students lack feedback or contact with the tutor; this means that there are limited support services. Other challenges distance students may encounter include insecurity about learning due to the financial cost and disruptions of family life.

The findings revealed that the autonomy and self-directedness developed by learning through ODL empowered the learners who studied the English language to overcome challenges in their learning, while other general challenges remained constant for both ODL and contact students.

CONCLUSION

The development of OCS in the English language through ODL is possible because of the flexible nature of the ODL mode and the autonomy learners develop. Despite the challenges experienced by learners, the ODL mode is still viewed as positive and assists them in becoming competent in their teaching.



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