

A Constructivist Perspective to Language Teacher Development in Kenya

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Abstract

The field of language teaching has over the years been expanded to accommodate more modern and flexible approaches examining the entire process of language learning and teaching. This we believe is able to provide knowledge into a new orientation in the manner in which the modern language teacher should be educated and taken through the process of teacher development. Based on this orientation of thought to the process of language instruction, in this paper, we do envisage a language teacher who is dynamic and versatile, one who is able to reconstruct their cognitions to language teaching and learning to accommodate unique and varying instructional environments in order to experience productive language learning. Such a teacher in our view is one who is not only grounded in theory of language, language learning and acquisition and pedagogical knowledge but is also, guided by constructivist approaches to teaching and learning. This is a teacher who is able to constructively manipulate their teaching and learning environment to attain the best possible results through the nature of instructional process. Such a teacher is able to ingeniously handle challenges that they face or are likely to face. The perspectives within the constructivist approaches provide the teacher with resourceful and practical avenues of expression and practice. The teacher's role modifies to that of helping learners to construct knowledge rather than to reproduce a sequence of facts. This is a teacher who is oriented in such a manner that they handle the entire language instructional process with an understanding of the distinctive features of the instructional environment academically, socially and culturally. In this paper, we thus endeavour to create a link between theory, research and practice from the backdrop of the constructivist teacher education and the practice of the English language teacher in Kenya.

Key Words: Language Teacher Development, Language Teacher Education, Instructional Process

INTRODUCTION

In order to provide an adequate understanding of the process of language teacher education (LTE) it is important that certain concepts and processes in the field of LTE, language teaching and language learning be described. Based on varied literature available on the concept of language teaching, language is viewed as a complex phenomenon and therefore its teaching, learning and the preparation of its teachers requires that language educators and learners pay attention to its specific features and properties in order to enhance the instructional process. We do in this case view the instructional process as encompassing both the teaching and learning processes within the classroom and the general learning environment as perceived from a constructivist language teacher education (CLTE) point of view. We thus conceptualize language teacher development (LTD) as encompassing the process of CLTE. This paper is presented under the following sub-areas: the historical account of language teaching methods, constructivist language teacher education, English language curriculum in Kenya, language teacher education in Kenya, challenges to constructivist language teacher education and as a way of concluding we share some thoughts on the future of the CLTE in Kenya.

The Historical Account of Language Teaching Methods

History always provides a podium upon which to deconstruct and reconstruct the present day events. Therefore historical accounts of language teaching methods are key to the understanding of the way things are, and why they are that way. This is a way of providing language teachers and teacher educators a better understanding of the forces that influence the language teaching profession, thus acting as a link of theory to their own practice. In the history of language teaching, there are four main milestones that can be identified and these greatly shaped the manner in which we envisage the constructivist language teacher (CLT). These are the: classical period, alternative period, communicative period and post method period. The many and varied language teaching methods that have been developed and used over the years certainly find a place in one of the periods of development, (Larsen-Freeman, 1986; Brown, 2000;

Richards & Rogers, 2001). However, as noted by Tosun (2009) it is important to highlight that we may not have the exact emergence periods of these methods because some of them coincide and the majority were devised on discrete territories of the world.

The *classical period* (17th, 18th and 19th centuries) is mainly associated with methods used in the teaching of the classical languages (Latin and Greek) with a focus on reading and writing classical texts in these languages. It was greatly associated with the classical method which later was referred to as the Grammar Translation method. Other methods are the Natural method and Direct method (posited by Charles Berlitz) among others in the 1840s–1950s, (Larsen-Freeman, 1986; Brown, 2000; Richards & Rogers, 2001). These were deemed to be mechanical in language learning emphasizing memorization of grammar rules without any communication focus. This gave way to the *alternative period* in the 1950s–1980s mainly linked with the Audio-lingual method as submitted by Charles Fries and Leonard Bloomfield structural linguists; and the Structural–Situational language teaching method a pragmatic version of Audiolingualism originating in the United Kingdom. These methods mainly focused on memorization of language rules and items, development of oral proficiency and teaching language in a contextualized manner, (Larsen-Freeman, 1986; Brown, 2000; Richards & Rogers, 2001)

As a reaction to the limitations of the methods in the *alternative period*, in the 1970s the *Chomskian Revolution* came into being. Noam Chomsky drew the attention to the —deep structure of language, language as communicative nature not as a habit formation process and eclecticism in language teaching. The Chomskian revolution gave way to the *communicative period*. One of the main proponents was Earl Stevick who suggested that various affective factors influence the way language is learnt, and that language learning and use are interpersonal and communicative in nature. The *communicative period* is mainly associated with two main approaches: first, *the humanistic (designer) approaches* (1970s–1980s) and the methods include: suggestopedia, the silent way (posited by Caleb Gattegno), total physical response (developed by James Asher) and community language teaching (advanced by Charles A. Curran). Second, *the communicative language teaching approaches* (1980s), associated with: The Natural Approach, Cooperative Language Teaching, Content- Based Language Teaching, Task-Based Language Teaching and Skills integrated methods among others, (Larsen-Freeman, 1986; Hadley, 2001; Brown, 2007).

The three periods came with an array of methods that seemed to expose the teacher to so many methods to select from with no specific instructions on which should be used for specific kind of language content. It is this orientation that has given rise to the *post method period*. In relation to this period, Tosun (2009) argues that the pursuit in search for methodology of language teaching seems to have been vain. It is an era in which Kumaravadivelu (1994, p. 43) identified what he called the 'post method condition', a result of 'the widespread dissatisfaction with the conventional concept of method'. He says that as long as teachers are caught up in the web of method, they will continue getting entangled in an unending search for an unavailable solution. He suggests that, language educators should find an alternative to method rather than finding an alternative method. To further enhance this concept, Kumaravadivelu (2006) observes that different from the obsolete method applications, new pedagogy is said to be more flexible since it takes the —macro structures –social, cultural, historical and political – that shape the micro structures (p. 59) of the classroom ambiance into consideration. This view marries with idea of 'eclecticism' as advanced by Noam Chomsky relating to the choice of method. It is a conception that advises the teacher to select aspects from different methods that they deem valuable in the instruction of specific language content in given learning contexts. Hence, rather than subscribe to a set of techniques embedded in one method, post method teachers should be able to adapt their instructional procedures based on local contextual and environmental factors. This standpoint advocates for maximum flexibility in teacher disposition to the instructional process for effective teaching. As argued by Prabhu (1990) that there is no one method, but that individual teachers fashion an approach that accords uniquely with their 'sense of plausibility.'

This historical exposition clearly demonstrates a field that has gone through many levels of research as a way of trying to comprehend how best language teaching and learning can take place. As acknowledged by Brown (2000, p. x) 'our research miscarriages are fewer as we have collectively learned how to conceive the right questions'. This is further emphasized by Thanasoulas (2002) noting that nothing is taken as gospel: nothing is thrown out of court without being put to the test. This 'test' may always

change its mechanisms, but the fact remains that the changing winds and shifting sands of time and research are turning the desert into a longed for oasis.

Based on the arguments presented above we do believe that a language educator's understanding of what language is, how the learner learns and the orientations in various language teaching methods determines to a large extent, their philosophy of education, and how they teach English. More especially these end up shaping their teaching style, their approach, methods and classroom techniques aspects that are vital in their development as teachers. In the perspective of this paper, we do envision therefore that all these facets should form the basis upon which a LTD programme that focuses on a constructivist approach (CA) can be developed and enriched. The CTE programme derives from the post method philosophies.

Constructivist Language Teacher Education

A close analysis of the array of language teaching methods points to perspectives that have been shifting from the teacher- focused to the more learner oriented methods that allow for a lot of autonomy on both the parts of the teacher and learner during the instructional process. According to Barasa and Omulando, (2011, p. 206), the teacher-centred approach is 'that in which the teacher's role is to present information to learners and basically direct the learning process. The teacher is at the centre of the classroom activities and has the major responsibility of guiding and offering explanation to the content presented, while in the learner-centred approach the teacher is viewed as a facilitator of the instructional process, allowing the learners the opportunity to construct and experiment with knowledge, both new and old, in the learning situation'. It is from this perspective that we do in this paper focus on the preparation of the kind of teacher we envisage is able to constructively, from an informed point of view adequately manipulate the entire language instructional process to enhance language learning. This teacher is able to soundly consider manipulating on the available learning opportunities and promoting learner autonomy during the actual instructional process and classroom interactions.

This analysis points at constructivist philosophies. Theories related to the CA postulate that people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world, through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences. In such a case a person must always interrogate, explore and engage in a discourse about what they know. Based on the classroom experience, both the teacher and the learner must be in a position to apply the CA philosophies by assessing and reflecting upon their own teaching practice and learning processes respectively. In such a case, the teacher's role is that of ensuring that they have a good understanding of their learners' world and language dispositions in order to be able to appropriately guide them through reflection, the various learning activities and processes. Thus constructivism modifies the role of the teacher, from one of reproducing a sequence of subject content to that of one who guides learners to construct knowledge. In this sense then, the teacher must also keep reconstructing their own instructional processes, rendering the instructional process dynamic. The constructivist teacher is one who searches the realm of knowledge along with their learners, enables the process of learning, stimulates and encourages the learners, acts as a mentor, an accommodating and understanding coach. This presentation displays a recent trend in second language teacher education (SLTE) as pointed out by Crandall (2000), Richards (2004) and Farrell (2007) that there is a theoretical shift from behaviourism to constructivism and reflective practice.

Having looked at the concept of constructivism from a teacher and learner point of view, it will suffice to conceptualize TE. TE is viewed variously by different scholars; the divergent views normally arise from the fact that teacher educators will have different visualisations of the kinds of teachers they want to produce. As noted in the Education Encyclopaedia (2013), the conceptualizations are likely to vary in their structure, goals and organisation due to expected differences across countries. Equally, this will be affected by the major transition that the field of TE began undergoing in the developed world since the late 1980s and the beginning of the 20th Century for several developing nations. Teacher Education as it were, is conceived at three main levels: teacher training, teacher induction and lastly, teacher development or continuing professional development. These three facets facilitate an understanding of the concept of Language Teacher Development as discussed in this paper. As pointed out in Education Encyclopaedia (2013) teacher training reflects the actual process of giving prospective teachers or noncertified teachers some subject matter knowledge and some pedagogical tools so that they could transfer information to their students. This is a practice that is still prevalent in the developing world, particularly in Africa, Asia, and Latin America where the shortage of certified teachers is experienced.

This differs from what is referred to as teacher professional development, which reflects more on the fact that teachers are professionals, their job is complex and so their preparation is a lifelong process of learning and development. Consequently, Language Teacher Development as perceived in this paper encompasses a selection of elements; formal teacher training, in-service courses and informal learning which mainly occurs when one is a practicing teacher. The description of Language Teacher Education implies a Teacher Education programme that does not limit itself to the regulated training that the teacher undertakes when in pre-training period. It goes beyond to include aspects of sustained education, broadening the practice of lifelong learning, thus our conceptualization of Constructivist Language Teacher Development. Therefore, in this paper, LTE refers to the guidelines and processes designed to equip prospective language teachers with the knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, abilities and skills that they require in order to adequately and constructively conduct the instructional process from the beginning to the end ensuring language learning effectively takes place. This is an appropriate LTD programme, one that is able to offer applicable professional knowledge and subject knowledge to the student teachers in the context of the community in which they are going to operate.

This approach to LTD is embedded within the ideas of the *person-centred approach to second language teacher education*. As suggested by Richards and Rogers, (2001) a person centred approach is one whose point of departure is an internal rather than external views of learning. It commences from the assumption that teachers, rather than methods, make a difference and that teachers are engaged in a complex process of planning, decision making, hypothesis testing, experimentation and reflection.

Phothongsnanun (2010, p. 4) notes that, —this process is usually specific for a person and situation; it involves teachers developing their own personal theories of teaching, exploring the nature of their own practices and developing strategies for critical reflection and change. This orientation to LTE links closely to what Borg (2003) describes as language teacher cognitions. He uses this term to refer to the unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching: what teachers know, believe and think. He notes that the following are key questions addressed in teacher cognition research: what do teachers have cognitions about? How do these cognitions develop? How do they interact with teacher learning? And lastly, how do they interact with classroom practice? Providing answers to these questions, he further highlights four main themes that encompass language teacher cognition: schooling, professional work, contextual factors and classroom practice. Figure 1 presents a detail of themes about the knowledge the teacher of English should possess. All these perceptions provide an apt description of the CLT we envisage. The CLT's beliefs have great impact on their teaching, teaching methods, attitudes towards their learners and even to fellow teachers. Belief could be rightly observed in the way the teacher behaves and in what they say.

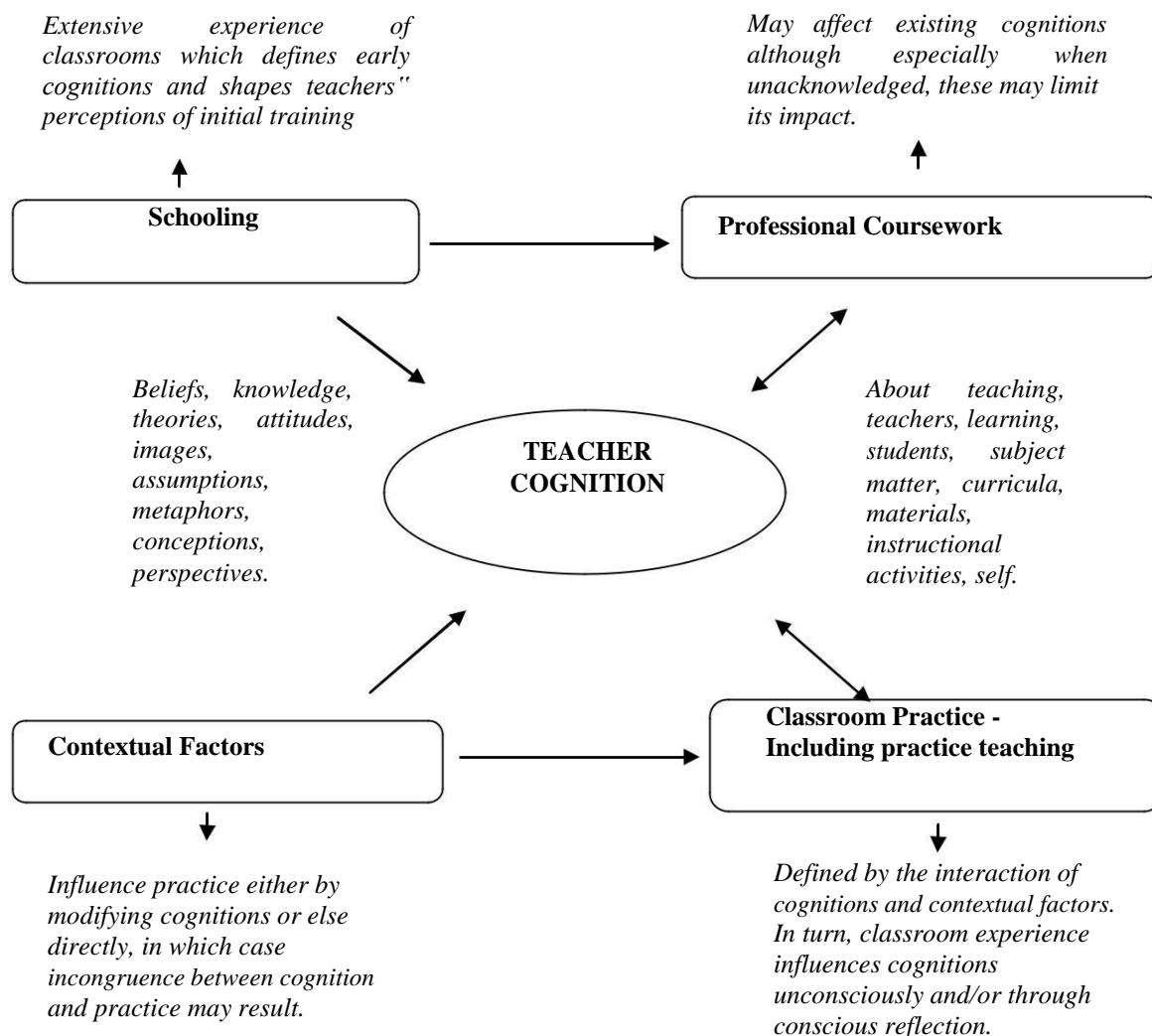


Figure 1. Teacher cognition, schooling, professional education, and classroom practice (Borg 1997, adapted from Borg, 2003)

To further expound on the *person-centred approach to second language teacher education*, Phothongsunanan (2010) proposes that two main approaches borrow from this thought: the humanistic approach and CA. In this paper we rest on the CA which has two levels, the individual and social. At the individual level, it is the cognitive development that underlies learning. He notes that although there are areas that teachers may not be familiar with and may wish to learn about, more emphasis is placed on what teachers know and do and on providing tools with which they can more fully explore their own personal theories and practices. At the social level, learning to teach is not an internally constructed process with a set of techniques and some specialist knowledge but rather a social process, involving the adoption of a social role. For teachers, this means that they selectively acquire the values and attitudes, interests, skills and knowledge of their professional group. What comes through these ideas is that the *person-centred approach to second language teacher education* emphasizes teacher development, learning and experience that are gained beyond the formal teacher training programmes. It is important to note that recent research in SLTE as recorded by Wright (2010), shows that the new agenda for SLTE, drawn together by the reconceptualised knowledge base, has clear consequences for the SLTE curriculum in the early 21st century. This is noted in terms of goal –producing reflective teachers; learning experiences and evaluation –by creating means of evaluating personal and professional development.

Based on the forgoing discussion, we advocate for a CLTD curriculum framework that covers the four main knowledge areas: content, theoretical, pedagogical and experiential knowledge.

DISCUSSION

English Language Curriculum in Kenya

The English language curriculum in Kenya is discussed in the light of the objectives of teaching English at each of these levels. These depict the kind of instruction required in order to identify the kind of teacher to be prepared.

Early Childhood Development Education Curriculum

The language curriculum in Early Childhood Development Education (ECDE) in Kenya is covered under a subject referred to as ‘_language activities’. The general objectives of teaching language activities in ECDE are presented in the ECDE Syllabus (K.I.E, 2008). It is expected that by the end of the course, the learner should be able to develop appropriate and required oral, reading readiness and writing readiness skills for a child of that cognitive level. The content is organised in such a manner that the teacher must employ thematic and interactive approaches in teaching, those that will encourage the development of linguistic competence in all the four language skills and aspects of memory in language use. The types of activities that are described in K.I.E (1990) for teaching language activities suggest a learner-centred approach. The teacher should have the ability to select the activities depended on different learner abilities. Furthermore, the teachers should be able to —create a free and relaxed atmosphere in class so that children are able to explore, exploit and realise their abilities! (K.I.E, 1990, p. 76). At ECDE level Barasa (2011, p. 173) observes that ‘_the teacher is trained to help the children learn to volunteer to participate in class activities and also use strategies which will help even the introverts to participate in class’. All these descriptions of the role of the teacher in ECDE reflect on a CLT.

Primary School Curriculum

The curriculum at primary school level is organised in such a manner that the teacher should teach from the known to the unknown. Barasa (2011, p. 174) highlights that the content is —systematically arranged with the aim of covering the simpler language items first building on to the more complex ones under the same title as the learners’ progress in class levels from standard one to standard eight!l. This style of content arrangement and presentation in language teaching is referred to as spiral teaching. Furthermore, the content is situationalised and related in terms of ‘_theme and objective’ based on the thematic and contextualized approaches to language teaching. This manner of content presentation is based on the integration method, embedded within the theoretical foundations of holistic education and whole language teaching. These kinds of methods and approaches to language teaching require that the teacher of English be constructivist in their orientation to the language instructional process, thus the need for CLTE programme.

Secondary School Curriculum

The curriculum at secondary school level is organised in an integrated manner, where language and the four main skills are taught in the background of literature, emerging issues and content from other subjects. As noted in K.I.E (2006, p. 3), —the teacher will focus on both the skills and the content ... the syllabus is organised in such a way that none of the language skills should be taught in isolation. The teacher should as much as possible integrate the teaching of the skills!l. As regards the methodological aspects, in the handbook for teachers of English (ibid, p. 1) it is noted as advice to the teacher of English that, ‘_the teacher should not view these as prescribed methods. They are only suggestions and the teacher should therefore feel free to explore other methods that will enhance the teaching and learning process.’ This is only possible with the constructivist oriented teacher, one who has the ability to recreate the learning and teaching experiences to accommodate practices that best work for given learners and language content.

Language Teacher Education in Kenya

TE in Kenya is no longer held with high esteem as it was during the colonial period to the 1970s (Kafu, 2011, p. 46). He further advances the fact that *only* privileged individuals in terms qualifications, experience and competence were associated with this programme'...however with time *the* programme has been marginalized. Great emphasis is being placed on the development of the two sectors of education at the expense of teacher education'. He is further critical of the poor management of TE in Kenya, where decisions are made by personalities who are not educationists. This we view as a pointer toward a TE programme that does not receive the necessary resource input to produce teachers who can operate in the modern constructivist TE world.

Furthermore, LTE in Kenya seems to be lagging behind the new trends as established from available literature in SLTE. Based on research analysis, Wright (2010, p. 281) observes the fact that *there* is evidence to suggest that, in many contexts, change in SLTE pedagogy has been either slow or negligible'. He further notes that from a research report on initial TE programmes in several African, Caribbean and Asian countries, the programmes were highly prescriptive and dominated by transmission pedagogy. Despite reform efforts, new pedagogy had not been embraced. This tendency he suggests requires more research to encourage innovative SLTE practitioners. A similar trend is reported in the Education Encyclopaedia, (2013) where it is noted that: teacher training reflects a practice that is still prevalent in the developing world, particularly in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. This insight into the trends in developing countries exposes Kenya as one of the countries where teacher training is still a prevalent practice.

However, it is important to note that there are recognisable positive efforts being made by the Ministry of Education at various levels to try and improve the kind of TE offered in Kenya. For example there is a Teacher Education and Professional Development (TEPD) programme run by USAID Kenya in partnership with the Ministry of Education which aims at improving the quality of education (TEPD, 2013). Among other things, they support public teacher training colleges (TTCs) in strengthening the skills and expertise for educators, so they are prepared to deliver quality education. They are able to learn and apply international practices, and are provided with quality pre-and in-service TE and professional development. In order to enhance their influence on TE, twenty TTCs have launched Professional Development Centres that use action research to continually improve teachers' skills (TEPD, 2013). In order to understand the status of TE in Kenya, it is necessary to describe the nature of TE offered in TE institutions.

Early Childhood Teacher Education

UNESCO (2005) records that the World Bank provides a two year certificate in-service course for Early Childhood Development (ECD) and a few weeks short course. However, there are complaints from the ECD teachers that *the* short course is insufficient to equip them with necessary knowledge and skills' (UNESCO, 2005, p. 20). In addition, the National Centre for Early Childhood Education (NACECE) and District Centre for Early Childhood Education (DICECE) offer professional development and support, however due to —lack of accommodation and boarding facilities and a clear management structure (p. 20) many ECD teachers cannot access this facility. In the recent past, universities offering TE programmes have started offering ECD TE at certificate, diploma and degree levels. Despite the curriculum at this level being prepared and determined by the specific university offering the ECD TE course; they all seem to be skewed toward teacher centred teacher preparation. The curriculum offered in government institutions is prepared by Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) which advocates for child-centred interaction and holistic development approaches. The trainers and teachers are supposed to adopt the curriculum and construct their knowledge to suit the specific and local environments they teach in, however this does not happen.

Teacher Training Colleges Curriculum

The TTCs train both primary and secondary school teachers at diploma level. The curriculum is teacher training oriented. It focuses on exposing the student teacher to the content knowledge and pedagogical skills they require to conduct the instructional process. Furthermore, due to the mechanical and examination oriented education system in Kenya, the student teachers hardly get the opportunity to

creatively interact with and interrogate the knowledge they are gaining. The nature of the curriculum and duration of the programme do not provide openings for student teachers to construct own knowledge about their understanding of teaching and learning processes based on the many and varied learning, teaching and language theories they learn. Furthermore, the manners in which micro teaching and teaching practicum sessions are conducted do not allow the student teachers to constructively go through the process. They are usually preoccupied with what the assessors look out for in order for them to attain a high mark. The English Primary TE curriculum by KICD is integrated, —where literary skills are integrated with language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing‘ whose objectives aim at enhancing _the development of language skills, learner’s creativity, imagination and innovation...learners critical and analytical skills required for their academic, professional and personal purposes| (Barasa, 2011). An analysis of the secondary school English TE objectives shows that it mainly focuses on acquisition of content and pedagogical skills, limiting it to a training programme.

University Teacher Education Curriculum

The English TE curriculum at the university is basically skills oriented. The objectives of the programme show that the student teacher should attain skills and knowledge in language and literature alongside the pedagogical skills acquired through the various educational and methodological courses offered in the curriculum. There is no specific content that is geared towards producing a constructive and reflective teacher of English.

Challenges to Constructivist Language Teacher Education in Kenya

Given the nature of learning and teacher training orientations in Kenya, it would be challenging for the teacher educators at whichever level to apply the CLTE approaches. The following are some of the challenges to the establishment of a CLTE programme:

- a) The English language educators involved at teacher education level in TTCs and universities require induction on the knowledge required in order to prepare a CLT in a CLTE programme.
- b) The curricula that is offered in TTCs is designed and developed by the Ministry of Education through KICD with very little engagement of the people responsible for TE, therefore innovations may not be readily welcome.
- c) The curricula offered at the university level are basically developed by the faculty members of the schools or faculties of education in individual institution. The Commission for University Education has the mandate to oversee and approve the quality and value of the curricula offered but does not have full control over the exact nature of content offered.
- d) The Kenyan universities offering TE have now adopted the school based programmes which only ran when ECDE centres, primary and secondary schools are on recess, a period of three months in a year. This would not provide sufficient time to implement the CLTD process.
- e) The training Staff at DICECE tend to change every year so the programme lacks continuity and a teaching cultural basis, this definitely affects the nature of training offered.
- f) The lack of accommodation and boarding facilities and a clear management structures at DICECE limits access for many ECD teachers.
- g) The ECDE trainers and teachers do not adopt the curriculum and construct their knowledge to suit the specific and local environments they teach in.

CONCLUSION

As stated in the initial arguments of this paper, the main objective was to create a link between theory, research and practice from the backdrop of the CLTE and the practice of the English language teacher in Kenya. This was in the attempt to demonstrate how CLTD programmes can be used to mould a language teacher who is able to wholesomely visualize the facets within the learning context and environment to ensure effective language learning within the Kenyan context. It has been established from the discussion and the historical trends in language teaching methodology, that there is a deliberate shift from teacher-centred to learner-centred approaches which then require a teacher who understands and can practice approaches related to autonomy in the instructional process. It is ascertained from the discussion that TE in Kenya lags behind the new global trends. As noted by Wright (2010) SLTE is going through a reconceptualization, the focus shifting to inclusion of research components and developmental approach by reflective practice, and this —has ensured that SLTE is now viewed as the commencement of a long

professional journey, rather than the preparation of the finished article, (p. 267). If this practice has to be actualized, Kenya has to make an intentional effort to change its orientation to TE to include more CLTD philosophies in the curriculum of its student teachers for all levels of teacher preparation. As highlighted by Kafu (2011, p. 51), 'Kenya needs to adopt collaborative and cooperative strategies with relevant/global stakeholders in teacher education and institute national concerted effort to promote the quality and image' of TE. This paper therefore takes cognisance of the central role played by English language teachers in the implementation of the school curriculum, therefore the urgent need for sound and contemporary TD programme. Consequently, the ideas presented in this paper form a basis upon which decisions concerning English CLTE in Kenya can be made by way of contributing to the knowledge base of LTE research and practice in Kenya.

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BIO-DATA

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