

Innovations

Reviewing the Role of Literature in Promoting Effective Communication Competence: A Focus on Kenyan Technical Institutions

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Abstract: *The rapid advancement of robots, automation, and artificial intelligence (AI) is gradually replacing human workers, leading to job disruption and widespread unemployment. This is a global concern, especially for future graduates, as these technologies imitate human intelligence and capabilities. To compete with these artificial "employees," experts recommend that universities expand their education and skills-building programs. This study explores how literature can enhance Kenyan technical-based students' communication skills and prepare them to succeed in today's job market. The research also focuses on how literature facilitates effective communication and offers tools that can benefit Kenyan technical-based students in their respective fields. Effective communication in this context refers to any means of conveying information for better understanding.*

Keywords: *Literature, Communication, Communication Skills, Language, Kenyan Technical Institutions*

Introduction

We live in a fast-changing technological world. There exists stiff competition in today's job market. Apart from the competition between humans, there is a gradual increase in the competition between humans and artificial intelligence in the world workforce. The question is not whether artificial intelligence will continue to occupy more space but how humans, especially future university graduates, can compete effectively and prove their relevance. Mohamed et al. (2024) defined AI as "comprising a broad array of techniques and technologies that enable machines to perform tasks that have traditionally required human intelligence. (350)." AI is transforming the human work experience and displacing many workers at an alarming rate. According to the World Economic Forum (2020):

In 2025, automation and collaboration between humans and machines will result in a loss of 85 million jobs in medium and large enterprises. Currently, over 80% of executives are intensifying their efforts to digitise workflows and adopt new technologies. Moreover, half of employers expect a quicker

automation of specific organisational roles. Unlike in previous years, the creation of new jobs is declining while job losses are on the rise. Management, advisory roles, decision-making, reasoning, communication, and interpersonal skills remain competitive attributes for humans (n.p).

The above competitive attributes for humans show the natural skills of human minds and brains and their ability to learn, relearn, or reskill for better benefits. On the other hand, literature provides the best avenue for studying the above skills.

The relevance of university students in effectively realising their potential after their years at university primarily begins in their first year and depends on how well they have been equipped during this time. This is because a university is a place where students are nurtured and taught how to succeed, and this includes providing students with structured academic courses and principles that encourage and enhance a realisable goal. Another question is, how does literature contribute to students' creativity in generating new ideas in their different fields of specialisation? And how does it enhance their appreciation of human values in the face of a rapidly technologising world? Literature is indeed an invaluable study that exhibits artistic and utilitarian values and beyond; it exposes to us who we are and what we are capable of achieving as humans because it "serves as an exemplar of excellence in one of humanity's most important skills: the mastery of the art of verbal and written communication (Ussery 2019)." This means that one can achieve a lot through effective communication. The question remains: How can literature enhance a technical-based graduate's relevance in a world currently regarded as a "global village?" However, one good thing about literature is its strong, interactive, dynamic, and expository nature, which fosters the four primary language skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

Kurgat (2010: 1), in tracing the challenges encountered by a pioneering language program established in Kenyan universities since the 1980s, emphasised that the main reason for introducing the Communication Skills (CS) program in 1989 in Kenyan universities was to address the growing concerns about declining English proficiency across the country. According to Kurgat, the initiative sought to achieve two primary goals: provide academic support and improve English standards in schools. As a result, participation in the program became mandatory for all students entering public universities (3). Kurgat again argued that communication studies have been made compulsory for all first year students at Kenyan universities, which echoes the saying: catch them young. This shows the importance of communication in human affairs. For Mamuliet al. (2013), "effective communication is an important ingredient within the university management structure." Mamuli et al. (2013:258) investigate the constraints on effective communication faced by staff in public universities in Kenya, asserting that one consequence of "poor communication within the university community

has been identified as contributing to the conflict situations that characterise universities in Africa.” They argue that disputes between staff and administration, as well as between students and administration at Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology (MMUST), regarding various issues, can be attributed to a breakdown in communication (259). Communication is essential for personal growth and quality of life. Literature improves problem-solving by providing diverse viewpoints and complex situations. Through studying literary texts, students are presented with the opportunity to assess challenges, find solutions, and enhance critical thinking, which can help them when faced with similar real-life issues. According to Rachuri (2024: 1909), reading enhances cognitive growth and critical thinking. Literary genres offer unique ideas and complex characters. Students improve analytical skills and higher-order thinking, developing inferential abilities while interpreting texts. Literature, through poetry, improves students' communication skills by enriching vocabulary and enhancing critical thinking. It includes prose, poetry, drama, novels, and short stories, with poetry being the most captivating. Its rhythm and rhyme attract students, while diverse terminology broadens their linguistic knowledge (Ilankumaran & Deepa 2018: n.p).

Again, the value of studying literature also includes its ability to enhance students' ability to deal with their fellow humans, environments, and situations. Literature includes prose, poetry, drama, short stories, documentaries, etc. Literature is important in everyday life because it connects individuals with larger societal truths and ideas. Literature allows people to record their thoughts and experiences in a way accessible to others through fictionalised accounts of the experience. Literature exposes one to different worlds, which includes the world of robots.

Literature as a Foundation for Communication Competence

Using literature as a foundation can help improve communication competence. Oral literature has been the foundation of human communication since the beginning of humanity. Before the advent of formal writing, including modern technological ways of transmitting and preserving information, oral literature was once an art form for the repository of the non-literate's critical knowledge, philosophy, and wisdom. It was the primary form of human communication wherein knowledge, art, ideas, and cultural materials were received, preserved, and transmitted from one generation to the other. The transmission of thoughts, cultural materials, etc., was performed through speech, oral narratives, traditional drama, and songs of different kinds. Most of these oral performers acquired their skills through training and constant practice. According to the Firebird Foundation for Anthropological Research, oral literature “encapsulates the traditional knowledge, beliefs, and values about the environment and the nature of the society itself. It arises in response to the universal aesthetic impulse to provide narratives explaining life's nature and

describing human responses to challenges.” David Wilson D., in “A Study on Oral Tradition as a Communication Tool”, opines that “the ability of man to speak and communicate distinguishes him from other beings. Human activity to communicate through speech and intelligence, as well as the cognitive ability to be aware of his surroundings and visualise them in his mind, are the two pivotal factors in human society’s progression (7).” He emphasises the importance of human communication in his ability to reconstruct and express his thoughts to others. David Wilson further argues that oral communication is one of the fundamental pillars of acquiring and transmitting information or knowledge from one person to another “irrespective of whether they have written practice or not (7)” In other words, communication is an attribute of human nature.

University education has become a tradition that is supported not only by every government but also by everyone yearning to belong. One of the significances of striving to attain a university education is gaining knowledge, values, skills, creativity, independent thinking, and having a better future. Then, how can one achieve a better future when other elements already overshadow the proposed positive, progressive future? Enrique Rubio opines that human deficiency regarding the ability of artificial intelligence is too obvious because artificial intelligence can “analyse data, memorise facts, predict potential scenarios, and do them all in seconds or nanoseconds”. This means that human beings cannot compete with this artificial intelligence unless they return to those attributes that define them as humans. According to Rubio, “all research and predictions show that the most powerful skills to remain relevant in the future are precisely what make us (and made us) humans in the first place (n.p)”. In addition, he listed many attributes that distinguish humans from others, making them always relevant in the world. Some of the attributes are: “Emotional intelligence, collaboration and cooperation, proactivity and initiative, effective communication, analysing information (not necessarily data, but making sense of that information), curiosity and imagination, cross-cultural competency”, etc. Since human beings are naturally endowed with the skills mentioned above, what they need is to go back to this basic humanity nature and “relearn those fundamental skills that are dormant (n.p)” within them. The same line of argument is seen in an article titled: “Artificial Intelligence and Robotics and Their Impact on the Workplace” by Gerlind Wisskirchen, Blandine Thibault Biacabe, Ulrich Bormann, et al. Their argument is based on individual and collective future effects of technologising the global labour market. According to them:

Artificial intelligence (AI) will have a fundamental impact on the global labour market in the next few years... what is already clear and certain is that new technical developments will have a fundamental impact on the global labour market within the next few years, not just on industrial jobs but on the core of human tasks in the service sector that are considered ‘untouchable’. Economic structures, working relationships, job profiles and well-established

working time and remuneration models will undergo major changes... Owing to the great number of emerging multidisciplinary support alternatives due to AI and machines, the requirements for future employees will change (IBA Global Employment Institute: 2,9)

Like Rubio, they suggest areas of expertise that will be highly demanded by future employers in the next few years, including effective communication.

They argue that it's not enough for employees to communicate with others in today's work environment. They should also be able to lead and coordinate effectively with them. In other words, creativity and flexibility are becoming increasingly important as well. This means that in the future, critical thinking and problem-solving skills will be the most sought-after qualities in employees. This requires sound judgment and decision-making abilities. Furthermore, employees are expected to take on multiple tasks that are often complex and multifaceted and to work collaboratively in teams. Non-formal qualifications, such as the ability to act independently, build networks, organise teams, and think abstractly, are also becoming increasingly important. This shows that a technical student who has been equipped with social and interdisciplinary competence will be in a better position in the future. Hence, this is the aim of this study to propose that the inclusion of literature as a core course in a technical-based institution will help students to relearn those mentioned above fundamental human skills that would make them excel even in the face of stiff competition and adversity, thereby, enhancing their sense of humanity. In other words, a university should not only be an institution where students study for degrees, different certificate awards, or academic research but also a place that restores the dignity of man.

The ability to think critically and independently and communicate thoughts competently should be achievable for every university student. Therefore, it is one thing to acquire knowledge through university education, and it is another thing to put this knowledge to effective use or be able to pass it on to another. The ability to reconstruct our thoughts or the knowledge acquired is very important in effectively contributing to our development and environment. Literature allows students to effectively and creatively reconstruct and transmit their technical ideas and the knowledge acquired through "magical" words, which can be very powerful in solving complex problems. Literature provides the main available sources for reconstructing technical knowledge for easier understanding. Again, literature, as an art form, allows one to present their culture, values, and ideas to others in a non-confrontational way. This is because the nature of literature enables one to manipulate words in creating and delivering a message or thought, thereby improving the efficiency of communication skills. Hence, it becomes a channel code that enables reliable communication with other people.

Literature improves creativity because of its emphasis on professional style and the use of language, which manifests its uniqueness through speaking and writing. It offers students the opportunity to acquire the needed communication skills, which include analysis, clear thinking, and creative writing, even as it

provides the opportunity for students to study the human condition and its environment. According to Robert, L. Heath and Bryant, Jennings (2000), in *Human Communication Theory and Research: Concepts, Contexts, and Challenges*, “words are a unique part of the human communication process. Their meaning and impact deserve careful attention. ...examines information as the foundation of communication (viii). Kolegaeva&Strochenko (2018), Ukraine, in “Academic and Literary Communication: Addressability, Statuses, and Functioning”, express the power of literature in its creative use of words to double the world, provide the opportunity to learn and experience, and make it possible to transfer knowledge or experience “from one individual to another (72).” He further argues on page 20 that language is the most effective means of human communication, connecting individuals and generations. This connection can occur in two primary forms: personal and transpersonal communication. Personal communication comes before transpersonal communication genetically. The difference between personal and transpersonal communication involves the nature of addressability and all aspects and components of a communicative act.

The use of language for communication is a very important feature of literature. Language is an essential tool for literature; according to Kolegaeva&Strochenko (2018), language is primary, and literature is secondary; this means that literature cannot exist without language. “Literature is the product of language, so it depends on language. If a language is dead, its literature is automatically dead.” Language has been defined as a set of words used to express ideas or thoughts to others; that is, our thoughts are expressed through language. So, without language, it will be difficult for humans to share ideas or express their thoughts. On the other hand, literature equips us with the skills to express our thoughts in a certain way. The question is: how does the literature study help a technical student express or communicate their technical knowledge to the world, especially to those lacking a technical knowledge background? The other question is, what does a technical institution stand to gain in including literature in its academic curriculum? One good thing about literature is the dialogism effect it instils in students. According to “Bakhtinian Dialogism In: The SAGE Encyclopedia of Action Research,” “Life is dialogic and a shared event; living is participating in dialogue. Meaning comes about through dialogue at whatever level that dialogue takes place. Nothing can exist without meaning; everything has meaning (2).” Literature provides students “with a rich cultural background, in addition to developing the analytical and communication skills so important in today’s job market (Chestnut Hill College)”. Integrating literature to enhance students’ communication skills also equips them with experience that helps them grow and develop professionally within their fields of speciality. It is believed that the ability to communicate effectively enhances relationships with others, and according to Kiran Grover:

Literature is a social document of contemporary society. Literature expands our imaginations and refines our moral and social

sensibilities. We need to go beyond the appeal to common experience and into the territory of psychological research. people are more prone to do that when the story is set away from home. The emotional situations and moral dilemmas that are the stuff of literature are also exercises for the brain studies suggest, increasing our real-life. We also become sensitive towards other human beings. And our family and social relations depend upon our sensitivity towards others. In literature, it is used for the cleansing of the emotions of the characters. It can also be any other radical change that leads to the emotional rejuvenation of a person (np).

According to Daskalovska and Dimova (2012), “communicative methodologies that emerged in the 1970s stress the importance of using authentic materials and activities in the classroom to help students achieve communicative competence that will enable them to use the language for communicative purposes in the real world (1182).” Skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, creative thinking, and the ability to communicate creatively have always been part of the main focus of literature. Through the study of literature, students are equipped with the above mentioned skills needed to succeed in the real world and adapt easily to what is happening in their world. The technical knowledge that students acquire from the years spent in the University already provides them with the contents which the study of literature equips them with additional skills to enable them to embellish these contents for optimal benefits; this is because literature provides the opportunity to practicalise this knowledge through different activities.

The world is changing dramatically and will continue changing. There is currently a high demand for professionals with problem-solving skills, which will continue to rise. Still, the ability to independently think critically and communicate thoughts effectively is an acquired skill for a successful future. For technical knowledge to be productive, it has to be explained to whoever will need it, and there is no other way than through communication; it does not matter the mode of communication; what matters is the understanding between the sender and the receiver. According to Karl Erik Rosengren (2006, p.1) in *Communication: An Introduction*, “communication’ is historically related to ‘common’. It stems from the Latin verb *communicare*, which means ‘to share’, ‘to make common’...” How far can a technical student/graduate share technical knowledge without communication competency? This also brings the issue of cross-cultural competence in mind, bearing in mind we are presently living in a globalised world. Robert Shuey (2001) views globalisation as a term used to describe “the recent and rapid process of intercontinental economic, social, and political integration (37).” He further argues that globalisation encourages worldwide integration, which “allows people to communicate, travel, and helps companies market their products widely, acquire capital, human and material resources more efficiently... (37).” Panos Arion Hatziprokopiou (2006), on the

other hand, views globalisation as a “historical novelty” which implies “qualitative changes in the dynamics of the world system,” these changes include; “the restructuring of the global economy, the interconnectedness between various kinds of networks, the interdependence between states and communities, the increasing interaction, deterritorialisation and fusion of existing cultural forms (17).

Listening skills are a crucial aspect of effective communication. The ability to listen well significantly impacts various aspects of our lives, including understanding ourselves, maintaining personal relationships, and responding appropriately to what we hear. It is widely believed that being a good listener is a key trait of a good communicator with an excellent memory. According to "Boundless Communications", critical thinking skills are also crucially linked to listening effectively and processing the information heard. Critical thinking is another process by which people qualitatively and quantitatively assess the information they accumulate (n.p). Thus, the question that crops up is: how can one lead effectively without the skill to listen attentively? A good leader is expected to listen to his/her subjects and those whose duties include advising him concerning certain issues. His ability to figure out what to believe or what to do, and do so in “a reasonable, reflective way” (n.p), depends so much on his listening capability because effective listening includes sieving information, so how can one sieve what he has not heard or paid attention to? Listening enables one to observe and evaluate situations to communicate effectively and critically. In literary studies, meaning is exchanged in the act of communication through oral and written means, and a good listener pays attention to the different voices and interacts with them intelligibly. For Brown (2001), listening is more than sitting quietly...not a passive activity.... Listening must be viewed as a vital and active part of communication (14). This shows a difference between hearing and listening in the sense that listening demands action, and one of the actions needed is communication. Accordingly, a good listener must also equip him/her with the proper language use.

Conclusion

The aim of the study was to review several significant roles that studying literature plays in developing communication skills. Introducing literature as a compulsory course for technical students in Kenya will equip them with essential communication skills necessary for success and help them become well-rounded individuals. An effective approach to teaching literature for improved communication is to introduce it to undergraduate students. This will enable them to grasp the fundamental aspects of literature that enhance communication skills, as effective communication requires a mutual understanding between individuals. Literature exposes students to various facets of human nature that will not only improve interpersonal relationships but also sustain them.

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