

Influence of Teachers' and Students' Attitudes Towards Performance in Shorthand in Technical Training

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Abstract: Scholastic achievement is the goal of any training. The trainee's attitude to a subject greatly influences the outcome. This study sought to look at the influence of the learner's attitude towards shorthand subject on one's performance in the subject by examining the 'self' and the 'significant other' variables namely subject teachers and course peers. The case study method was used where all the 40 students and 6 teachers in the Secretarial Section of Thika Technical Training Institute, made the study population. The results are a significant basis for effective policy making on shorthand subject in Tertiary Level Institutions in Kenya. Both qualitative and quantitative data was elicited through questionnaires, interview schedules and document analysis. Data was developed by use of the SPSS text editor. The findings indicated that labeling the subject as 'difficult' through peer influence had resulted in the 'self-fulfilling prophesy' of incapability in the subject. Further, majority find the subject obsolete in today's technologically automated world of a secretary. The curriculum developers need to review the place of shorthand in the secretarial career today because cultivating a positive self-concept in a subject is not just about the 'significant others' influence but also springs from appreciating its normative dimension.

Key words: Attitudes, performance, self concept, shorthand

INTRODUCTION

Most students who enroll in Secretarial Studies at either certificate or diploma levels do not get certificates at the end of their training because of failing in shorthand - considered a key subject in the training of secretaries, (Eddy, 2002). Its performance in national examinations today continues to be poor because the intrinsic desire to excel is lacking in many learners.

Waweru (1982) in Muasya (1992) asserts that the factors that contribute jointly to determine students' achievement among experts on scholastic achievements continues to be a controversial issue. Many researchers have concentrated on extrinsic factors namely; availability of resources, teachers' qualifications and teaching experience, the learners' socio-economic background and learners' motivation to learn. This research was cognizant of the fact that the four areas had been exhaustively studied; recommendations made and implemented yet performance in exams continues to remain poor. The researcher thus chose to address attitude; an intrinsic factor that also has a bearing on performance.

A student's attitude towards a subject greatly influences performance. It affects the individual's organized manner of thinking, feeling and reacting to a study subject (Evans, 1972). Hamachek (1971) observes that an individual's attitude towards a subject will influence their self-concept of academic ability.

Nash (1976) infers that the 'significant other' namely teachers and peers also have a great impact in the developing of a student's attitude towards a subject.

Examples of studies done on the impact of attitudes on academic performance include: Kim (1977), Simpson and Oliver (1990), Wawire (1996) and Osborne (2003) among others. The bulk of the studies have been on Mathematics and Sciences among Primary and Secondary school students. The subjects are considered 'difficult' 'hard' 'unnecessary evils' by many students and a direct cause of poor overall performance in school examinations. The researchers assume that if the influences of attitudes among adolescents can be identified, they can be corrected at the tender age since the learners are still at the quagmire of personal identity and career path search. Shorthand on the other hand is a course for college trainees who have already made a career choice. Poor performance in the subject by young adults thus makes the researcher seek to establish how attitudes have influenced the situation.

While shorthand remains the bed-rock upon which the secretarial career is established by imparting on learners initiative, innovation and organizational skills, the failure rate in shorthand is so high that there is need to explore ways to reverse the trend.

Statement of the problem: A cross-sectional survey of the target population of this study shows that the scale of

poor performance in shorthand is over 90%. With most trainees looking forward to a secretarial career, this state poses a great concern to all stakeholders because of its manpower implications.

Curriculum innovations at tertiary level have not fully addressed this issue as evidenced by the continued poor performance. While many reports have been written following poor performance at primary and secondary levels, little has been done at tertiary level. It appears like there is a silent assumption that a student at the tertiary level is an emotionally, physically, intellectually and socially mature learner; one who has already chosen a career path and is keen to attain the theoretical rudimentaries through interaction with course content unlike their counterparts at the lower levels who are still at the quagmire of self-identity and career path search. Poor performance in shorthand however is an indicator that the commitment to attaining the career goal might either be lacking or has been dimmed by either internal or external influences.

Attitude, whether intrinsically or extrinsically motivated plays a major role in influencing performance at any stage. The students' self-concept of academic ability is not only influenced by the learners' self-concept profiles but also by those of the 'significant others' especially subject teachers and fellow students. So long as the curriculum continues to emphasise the teaching of shorthand for prospective secretaries, it is imperative to ensure that the products of the process are well qualified to pursue their career path. Establishing strategies to reverse the trend are necessary to avoid wastage in manpower training.

Study objectives:

- To find out whether a student's self concept of academic ability has an effect on one's academic performance.
- To assess the influence of the shorthand teacher's perceptions of a student's ability in the subject on the actual performance
- To apprise the interests of shorthand students in the subject and find out how these affect its performance.
- To establish the influence of the peers attitude in shorthand to one's performance in the subject.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Summers (1964) views attitude as the underlying disposition which enters along with the other influences to the determination of a variety of individual behaviour directed towards an object or class of objects including statements of beliefs or feelings about an object and approach-avoidance actions with respect to it.

Attitudes develop through a variety of ways. They can be passed on to learners by parents, teachers or peers. One could also acquire own attitude in an effort to adjust

and cope with his environment because they are developed in order to protect one's self-esteem and express one's fundamental values. In the early stages of development, Evans (1972) argues that, thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, feelings and emotions can be modified by new experiences. Later, their organization may become inflexible and stereotyped, usually because we have been encouraged over long periods of time to react in standard ways to particular events.

Siegel and Siegel in Muasya (1992) observed that individuals will change their attitude in order to conform to those that the environment holds as the norm. Since attitudes develop and change throughout life, a teacher needs to know how they can be modified and inculcated in order to be able to instill favourable ones in the learners.

Orton (1987) notes that, the differences in attitudes are a result of one's perception of the usefulness of the subject in the shaping of one's future career, not the difficulty. The intrinsic drive born out of an expectation that the acquired knowledge and certificate will make a learner's future career dream come true. This according to Njoroge and Bennars (1992) is the instrumental appeal of education that:

“... Educationists, scientists, the news media ... many people including parents, teachers, students and pupils, have come to regard education, defined here as 'schooling' as a mechanism for social mobility and individual opportunity. Education is thus a kind of investment, an economic asset, the value ... determined by the market value of the certificate or diploma gained Once a certificate has been obtained The holder then qualifies almost automatically - it is believed - for a job, for salaried employment.”

Learners are thus likely to put effort to excel in subjects they consider of relevance to their career aspirations. The researcher in this study sought to establish whether students regarded shorthand as crucial to their career aspirations as a benchmark to gauge their keenness on the subject.

The 'significant other', namely teachers and peers, have a great influence on performance. Wawire (1996) established that a teacher's label on a student's capability brings a self-fulfilling prophesy in the learners which has diverse effects on their self-concept of academic ability. Those the teacher labels 'bright' will believe that they know everything, while those labeled 'dumb' lose hope of passing in that particular subject.

Learners on the other hand can influence one another to either like or dislike a certain subject. While the entry behaviour of prospective students for a certain course usually exhibits high motivation and desire to excel, starting college and interacting with the continuing

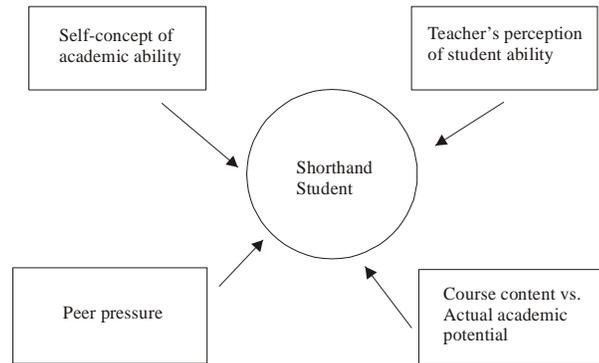


Fig. 1: Schematic representation of students' attitudes towards shorthand

students results in development of attitudes towards the subjects to be taught. When beginners are told by peers that 'they cannot pass a shorthand exam', or, 'the content is too abstract to decipher' or, 'I know people who have good Secretarial jobs yet they did not pass in shorthand': this is likely to influence their potential behaviour and attitude towards the subject. They will, most likely, develop a negative attitude towards the subject or dismiss it as 'unnecessary bother'. Such students may as a result not do well in the subject.

Maritim (1979) concluded that when a student views self as being incapable in a subject, they develop a negative attitude towards the subject and will most likely not do well in it. Their previous performance can play a role in shaping attitude to studies even at the entry level to start a course. Reitzes and Mutran (1980) argue that high school grades form a background that influences a learner's academic performance in college. The self-variables are directly associated with both expectations and academic performance, and students may use self-concepts to interpret behaviours. These concepts may serve as motivational forces towards behaviours and plans consistent with their self-meanings. Admission for any course is pegged on high school achievement. The researcher sought to establish the Secretarial Student's entry grades for the course, in a bid to judge their potential for their training as well as explain the final outcome after the course. Sometimes, the type of student as depicted by entry grades determines their optimal academic potential irrespective of attitude.

Finally, although having a positive self-concept does not always cause a high academic achievement, it is sometimes a necessary and a vital personal quality for one to have prior to achievement. Hamachek (1971) found out that self-concept and achievement are mutually reinforcing to the extent that a positive change in one facilitates a positive change in the other.

Since curriculum developers have continued to maintain that shorthand is a key component of the

secretarial career, there is need to establish the learners' attitude towards the subject so that positive attributes can be inculcated for the students to excel.

Theoretical framework: The symbolic interaction theory refers to a process by which individuals relate to their own actions or the actions of others. Blumer in Kombo (1988) observed that interactionism consists of three basic premises. First, human beings perceive events on the basis of the meanings that the events have for them. Second, the meanings are a product of social interaction in human society; and third, these meanings are modified and handled through an interpretive process that is used by each individual in dealing with the signs one encounters.

This theory is applicable to the study in that it explains how a student interprets different contexts in a school situation. First, the meaning, (interpreted here as value) of a subject to a learner is influenced by the job market demands. Second, with reference to Cooley's notion of the concept of the 'looking glass self' in Downey (1977), students will interpret their academic abilities with reference to how the 'significant others', namely peers and teachers, treat them and see their academic ability. Once this interpretation is internalized, one develops an opinion on their academic ability which becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy to shape their attitude towards a subject. Social interaction thus influences final product by shaping attitude which can be changed significantly by that of the significant other.

A schematic diagram representing the various factors influencing students' attitude towards shorthand is as shown in Fig. 1.

Students are vulnerable to external anxieties especially those wielded by teachers and peers on their academic potential. Although their entry behaviour may have been positive towards a subject, the opinions of the two will, thorough interaction, soon become the learner's self-concept of their academic ability.

Table 1: Summary of students' mean grade at KCSE

Class	Mean grade						Total
	C+	C	C-	D+	D	D-	
Diploma II	-	2	3	-	-	-	5
Diploma III	-	1	4	-	-	-	5
Certificate I	-	1	1	9	4	1	16
Certificate II	-	-	3	6	3	2	14
Total							40

Table 2: Summary of students' English subject grades at KCSE

Class	Grade								Total
	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D+	D	
Diploma II	-	-	1	1	-	1	2	-	5
Diploma III	-	-	-	-	1	2	2	-	5
Certificate I	-	-	-	1	1	4	9	1	16
Certificate II	-	-	-	-	-	3	10	1	14
Total									40

METHODOLOGY

The researcher used the case study design to collect information and data from the target population of students and lecturers. Responses were obtained through questionnaires, interviews and document analysis. All students pursuing secretarial studies (both at diploma and certificate levels) and all their lecturers formed the study population. Studying students at both levels was not done for comparison purposes but for the researcher to realise a sizeable study population because enrolment for Secretarial Studies is quite low as highlighted in Table 1. The numbers were forty students and six lecturers.

Data analysis was done both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitative analysis involved use of frequency distribution tables and percentages to ensure scientific validity and to avoid subjectivity during analysis. Attitude questions were set against the Likert type scale which is important in research to measure perceptions, attitudes, values and behaviour in order to minimize subjectivity in the analysis. Favourable and unfavourable items were arbitrarily numbered to ensure that respondents did not form a pattern in scoring. Qualitative approach analysed data in relation to themes and categories as highlighted in the questionnaire.

Study locale: Thika technical training institute was selected for the study because it is a technical institute of long standing and has been teaching secretarial studies at both diploma and certificate levels.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondents: Questionnaires were administered to 40 students but two did not return. The discussion thus analysed 38 responses thematically as per the Likert type scale questions on attitude. Document analysis however covered 40.

Learner's academic potential: While admission for most Technical Institution courses is not only pegged on the mean grade attained at KCSE but also on attaining set grades in certain key subjects, admission for the Secretarial Courses is silent: KCSE results are not even looked at when registering for KNEC Business Single and Group Exams while for Diploma, it is simply attaining the C-(minus) aggregate. Teaching shorthand is however intertwined with teaching English, as McNicol (1967) asserts that:

“...teaching of shorthand cannot be separated from the teaching of English. This is because shorthand is a linguistic skill and words are the very stuff of which it is made. A well developed skill in English is a contributory factor to success in the total shorthand skill (both writing and transcribing). The extent to which a shorthand teacher can help students to improve their skill in English depends on the type of students.”

The learner's entry behaviour for the course shows that the most of the diploma students just met the minimum requirement of C- (minus) while their counterparts in the certificate classes had a mean of D+ (plus) as depicted in Table 1.

Performance in English as analysed in Table 2 puts majority as lying between D (plain) and D (plus) categories.

While shorthand is a phonetic language where sounds are presented using designated strokes, dots and dashes, a learner is expected to transcribe the work into longhand and present it in English. This simply becomes an uphill task for both the teacher and the student especially where poor mastery of English language makes the learner unable to identify the correct spelling, pronunciation, use of tenses and the diverse vocabulary. The entry behaviour depicted above is thus not a fertile ground for realizing

Table 3: Shorthand grades obtained in previous term's end term exam (Jan-March '04)

Class	Grade				Total
	Distinction	Credit	Pass	Fail	
Diploma II	-	-	2	3	5
Diploma III	-	-	-	5	5
Certificate I	-	-	2	14	16
Certificate II	-	-	1	13	14
Total					40

Table 4: Students' love for shorthand

	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	8	21.1
Disagree	5	13.2
Undecided	2	5.3
Agree	21	55.3
Strongly agree	2	5.3
Total	38	100

Table 5: What students believe their shorthand teacher thinks of their academic ability

	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	19	50.0
Disagree	8	21.1
Undecided	4	10.5
Agree	2	5.3
Strongly agree	5	13.2
Total	38	100

Table 6: Relevance of shorthand to the secretarial career

	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	12	31.6
Disagree	11	28.9
Agree	4	10.5
Strongly agree	11	28.9
Total	38	100

Table 7: Student's self believe in not having the academic ability in shorthand

	Frequency	%
Strongly agree	2	5.3
Agree	8	21.1
Undecided	2	5.3
Disagree	6	15.8
Strongly disagree	20	52.6
Total	38	100

good performance in shorthand. It is no wonder then that the performance as at the time of the study as shown the above Table 3 exhibits mass failure with only 12½% pass.

Poor results are seen not only recorded among the older students but also the new that have hardly covered adequate and complex content.

Love for shorthand: Respondents were asked to indicate on a five Likert type scale their love for shorthand. The results are as shown in Table 4.

They indicate that 60.6% of the population love shorthand. This shows that the students are not negatively disposed towards the subject. While the researcher's assumptions are that love for a subject should translate to

hard work and devotion to the subject and consequent good performance, tabulated results in Table 3 negate this. The results raise valid questions: if the students love the subject, why is their performance so poor. The answer definitely lies elsewhere.

My shorthand teacher believes I do not have what it takes to do well in shorthand: The item sought to find out if learners' poor performance in shorthand could have been influence by their teachers' beliefs. The results are tabulated in Table 5.

A 71% disagreement with the statement as depicted above shows that shorthand teachers in the study were perceived by their students as believing in their capability and potential. This implies that shorthand teachers had not played a role in discouraging students in the subject.

Shorthand is not necessary for my career as a secretary: This item sought to establish whether students understand the importance attached to shorthand in the job market. Results are analysed in Table 6.

The results indicate that 39.4% agree with the statement while 60.5% differ. Those who agreed argued that shorthand is no longer used in organizations. Those who disagreed saw shorthand as imparting skills of work organization and mental alertness that are crucial in the undertaking of the multiple tasks of a secretary irrespective of whether there will be shorthand dictation or not.

I believe I do not have what it takes to do well in shorthand: Since performance is not only influenced by how intelligent an individual actually is but also by how intelligent one thinks he is, the item sought to find out how the learners feel about their academic potential. Table 7 summarises the findings.

The responses show that 26.4% of the respondents believe that they do not have what it takes to excel in shorthand. This displays a negative perception of their self-concept of academic worth. They do not consider themselves intelligent enough to excel in shorthand. Majority of the respondents (68.4% however believe they can do well. Since a person tends to act like the sort of individual he conceives himself to be, it is expected that this group of students approach their work with optimism and high hopes. Though the results displayed in Table 3 reflected poor performance, majority of the students are self motivated. The reason for the poor results thus lies elsewhere.

Table 8: Older students' positive influence into liking shorthand

	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	24	63.1
Disagree	8	21.1
Agree	2	5.3
Strongly agree	4	10.5
Total	38	100

Table 9: My shorthand teacher believes that I can do very well in shorthand

	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	7	18.4
Disagree	2	5.3
Agree	4	10.5
Strongly agree	25	65.8
Total	38	100

When I started the course, older students assured me that shorthand was easy to pass: The aim of this item was to establish the role played by older shorthand students in shaping the perception of new students about shorthand. Received data is tabled in Table 8:

An 84.2% disagreement with the statement suggests that older students have imparted negative sentiments to new students on the subject. This appears to be the foundation of the negative attitude towards shorthand.

My shorthand teacher believes that I can do very well in shorthand: The item sought to establish whether students felt that their teacher's had labeled them 'unable to do well in shorthand' given that their admission grades were quite poor. Table 9 gives the data.

It appears that 76% of the respondents believe that their teachers believe in their academic potential. They had not played a role in labeling them as low academic ability group, a tag which would have made them wallow in self pity.

CONCLUSION

- Shorthand students have a positive attitude towards the subject although their performance in exams was poor.
- Labeling the subject as difficult has influenced the students negatively towards the subject hence greatly contributing to continued poor performance in the subject.
- Teachers have immensely contributed to developing a positive attitude in the learners towards the subject by believing in their potential.
- Older students taking the secretarial studies course have played a great role in influencing new learners negatively towards shorthand.
- Poor performance in shorthand can be attributed to students believe that shorthand is not necessary for their career progression.

RECOMMENDATION

- The aims and objectives of teaching/learning shorthand should be re-assessed in view of technological advancements.
- A study of the secretaries' actual performance in the job market is necessary. This would help to find out whether shorthand is truly useful in the day to day running of the organization or it is actually obsolete.

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