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An appraisal of the sources of language input in selected English lessons by teacher trainees in Kenya

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Abstract

Chomsky's Language Acquisition Device (LAD) theory postulates that language acquisition and/or learning takes place when the learner is immersed in an environment where the target language is used. The linguistic environment triggers the LAD which, in turn, facilitates the acquisition process. In language classrooms, the language teacher is expected to create an environment rich in the target language to function as the sources of input that learners need to acquire the language. But what sort of language input sources do teaching practice teachers put in place in their language classrooms? This paper assesses the nature of such sources with a view to determining their effect on the teaching and learning of English in the classroom. The paper reviews the lesson plans by nine Bachelor of Education students on teaching practice in secondary schools in Nairobi, Kenya. It specifically analyses the lesson objectives, reference materials used, classroom activities, and assessment strategies employed in selected lessons with a view to determining whether they provide the kind of input that can translate into good English learning practices. Drawing also from classroom observations of the said the lessons, the paper reports that the lesson objectives, the classroom activities, and the teaching aids employed by the student teachers did not provide sufficient linguistic input necessary for language learning. The paper suggests ways of creating richer language input sources for effective teaching and learning of English.

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Introduction

In the Kenyan Graduate Teacher training programme, a student takes four years to study for a Bachelor of Education degree. The trainee enrolls undertakes to study three disciplines which include two teaching subjects and education. The student also enrolls for English teaching methods and communication technology courses in the Third Year of study in preparation for Teaching Practice. The trainee then proceeds for teaching practice for a three-month school term after their fourth year of study. By the time of graduation, a student must have studied 52 units (courses).

For those students who are enrolled to study English language as one of the teaching subjects, the expectation is that training must prepare them for teaching the subject in secondary schools according to the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) English syllabus. The syllabus is organised around a number of skills including pronunciation, reading comprehension, grammar, oral literature (songs, proverbs, riddles...), written literature (poetry, short story, the novel, play), and functional writing.

In the Kenyan secondary schools, there are three terms per academic year. The first term starts in early January to late March; the second term from early May to late July; and the third term spans from early September to late November of every year. In Forms 1 and 2, English is allocated six 40-minute lessons per week while in Forms 3 and 4 the subject is allocated 8 lessons each. In Forms 1 and 2, each of the 6 skills noted above is allocated one lesson per week with the two additional hours in Forms 3 and 4 devoted to written literature. Teacher trainees in Kenyan universities normally go out for teaching practice during the first term. The practice has also been that they be allocated forms one and two while the fulltime teachers handle forms three and four owing to their longer experience. As apprentice teachers, the trainees are allocated between eight and sixteen forty-minute lessons per week with the average load for fulltime teachers being twenty eight.

As these teacher trainees practice teaching in respective schools, one notable thing is that they lack a common approach to this undertaking which raises concerns whether they possess adequate understanding of the intricacies surrounding language acquisition and/or learning. Chomsky (1965) for example, notes that every normal child has a language acquisition device (LAD) which has three characteristics. First, it is species specific, is specific to language learning as opposed to acquisition of other forms of behavior, prestructures the properties of grammar (innateness). Language input (data) available to the child serve to activate latent components of grammar (setting the parameters). The innate structures of language are common to all languages constituting Universal Grammar

However, the specific features (phonology, morphology, vocabulary and syntax) of a target language must be inferred from the linguistic data made available to the learner in the course of learning (Noonan, 2004; Krashen, 2002; Thornbury, 1999). Chomsky argues that after the age of puberty, language acquisition becomes an arduous and difficult experience. The implication is that we must employ effective methods of teaching after the critical period (2 years to puberty). Two things are therefore critical. First is the way L2 material is presented to the learner and the opportunities offered for an application of the repertoire available to the learner.

In addition to the Chomskyan views on language teaching and/or learning, Widodo (2006, p. 126) points out that deductive and inductive approaches have been found to the most applied in language teaching and learning. A deductive approach is derived from the notion that deductive reasoning works from the general to the specific. In this case, rules, principles, concepts, or theories are presented first, and then their applications are treated. In conclusion,

when we use deduction, we reason from general to specific principles. Dealing with the teaching of grammar, the deductive approach can also be called rule-driven learning. In such an approach, a grammar rule is explicitly presented to students and followed by practice applying the rule. This approach enjoys a monopoly in many course books and self-study grammar books (Fortune, 1992).

The deductive approach maintains that a teacher teaches grammar by presenting grammatical rules, and then examples of sentences are presented. Once learners understand rules, they are told to apply the rules given to various examples of sentences. Giving the grammatical rules means no more than directing learners' attention to the problem discussed. Einestein (1987) suggests that with the deductive approach, learners be in control during practice and have less fear of drawing an incorrect conclusion related to how the target language is functioning. To sum up, the deductive approach commences with the presentation of a rule taught and then is followed by examples in which the rule is applied. In this regard, learners are expected to engage with it through the study and manipulation of examples.

An inductive approach, on the other hand, comes from inductive reasoning stating that a reasoning progression proceeds from particulars (that is, observations, measurements, or data) to generalities (for example, rules, laws, concepts or theories) (Felder & Henriques, 1995). In short, when we use induction, we observe a number of specific instances and from them infer a general principle or concept. In the case of pedagogical grammar, most experts argue that the inductive approach can also be called rule-discovery learning. It suggests that a teacher should teach grammar starting with presenting some examples of sentences. In this sense, learners understand grammatical rules from the examples. The presentation of grammatical rules can be spoken or written. Eisenstein (cited in Long & Richards, 1987) maintains that the inductive approach tries to utilize the very strong reward value of bringing order, clarity and meaning to experiences. This approach involves learners' participating actively in their own instruction. In addition, the approach encourages a learner to develop her/his own mental set of strategies for dealing with tasks. In other words, this approach attempts to highlight grammatical rules implicitly in which the learners are encouraged to conclude the rules given by the teacher.

One can draw relationships between the deductive and inductive approaches learning and acquisition in SLA theory. Firstly, the deductive approach is related to the conscious learning process in which this approach tries to place a great emphasis on error correction and the presentation of explicit rules (Krashen, 2002). Such an approach is applied for the reason that it is an efficient and elegant way to organize and present the rule that is already understood. The deductive approach is often used with adult learners. Through the deductive approach, a teacher tries to teach the rule explicitly to the learners so that they are ready to cope with exercises given. The explicit rule presentation can enhance the learners' confidence in doing certain tasks. To be successful in applying the approach, the teacher needs to provide numerous exercises (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

Secondly, the inductive approach relates to subconscious learning processes similar to the concept of language acquisition. According to this approach, learners learn the system of language (for example, grammar or sentence rules) in the same way as children acquire their first or second language. In this regard, meaningful interaction in the target language (that is, natural communication) is more important than the form of the language. For this reason, error correction and explicit teaching of the rule are de-emphasized (Ur, 1999). Most importantly, utterances are easily understood. In other words, when the inductive approach is applied, the learners learn the rule unconsciously.

Chomsky's views on language learning coupled with both the deductive and inductive approaches need to be realised by levels of learning according to Benjamin Bloom (1950s) and refined by his student Anderson (1990s). The levels are: *Knowledge* which tests whether a student has gained specific information from the lesson; *Comprehension* which tests not only recall of facts but understanding of the information; and *Application* which involves the application and use of the knowledge they have learned. Others are *Analysis* which focuses on the patterns that learners can use to analyze a problem; *Synthesis* testing use of the given facts to create new theories or make predictions; and *Evaluation* which tests assessment of information to determine its value or the bias behind it.

Anderson changed the names in the six categories from noun to verb forms slightly rearranged them (Pohl, 2000) as expressed below:

Table 1.0: Levels of knowledge

Original domain	New Domain
Evaluation	Evaluating
Synthesis	Creating
Analysis	Analysing
Application	Applying
Comprehension	Understanding
Knowledge	Remembering

Reflecting on this background, there is need for an audit into the nature of teaching and learning that teacher trainees facilitate during practice teaching sessions. This information will be of help to curriculum developers and materials designers in coming up with texts that could enhance the quality of training in the universities. As such, this paper addresses the following concerns.

- Did the choice of action verbs used to form objectives by teacher trainees reflect the all levels of knowledge?
- What lesson development strategies did the teacher trainees employ in the classroom?
- Did language input opportunities employed create a rich language culture favourable for learning by immersion?
- How did assessment opportunities employed in the lessons facilitate language learning?

Method

Twenty eight teacher trainees from a university in Nairobi were observed as they taught Integrated English in Form 2 in secondary schools in Nairobi. The teachers were on Teaching Practice between January, 2011 and April, 2011 during the schools' first term. I purposively focused this research interest on these teachers since they were the trainees I actually observed in class. Each trainee was observed in an actual 40-minute lesson. The observation was guided by a schedule including interactive activities, teaching materials, and assessment opportunities.

During the in-class observation, Lesson Plans for the lessons assessed were collected for further analysis. Particularly, I was interested in finding out if classroom practice reflected the information on the lesson plans. In addition, with the lesson plans, it was easier to elicit action verbs used to formulate lesson objectives and/or learner outcomes.

After each lesson observation, I engaged in a 30-minute discussion on general issues arising from the teaching practice experience. This discussion was also a forum for the teacher trainees to raise any concerns about the practicum. The forum was also an opportunity to discuss areas that the candidate needed to improve upon.

Results and discussion

(a) Choice of action verbs

In the 28 lessons that were observed, there were a total of 59 lesson objectives. Out of these, the lower levels of knowledge according Bloom's (1956) categories namely knowledge, comprehension and application had a combined incidence of 58 occurrences representing 98.3% while the higher levels of analysis, synthesis and evaluation recorded a single occurrence representing 1.7% of the total. The patterns are summarised in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2: Incidence of Action Verbs

Levels	Frequency	%
Knowledge	23	39.0
Comprehension	22	37.3
Application	13	22.0
Analysis	1	1.7
Synthesis	-	0.0
Evaluation	-	0.0
Total	59	100

The following examples are typical illustrations of the levels of knowledge covered in the trainee teachers' objectives.

1. The learner should be able to **explain** the importance of information technology. (Comprehension)

- 2. The learner should be able to **respond** to the questions given (**Comprehension**)
- 3. The learner should be able to **construct** sentences using collective nouns (**Application**)
- 4. The learner should be able to **identify** the position of adjectives in the sentence. (**Knowledge**)

Lack of analytical objectives means that learners might not have the ability to separate language materials or concepts into component parts so that their organizational structure may be understood while absence of evaluative objectives means inability to make judgements about language use (Bloom, 1956). Finally lack of synthetic objectives implies the learners' inability to use language creatively to express complete and new meaning.

(b) Lesson development strategies and language input

An assessment of the number of materials used in the teaching and learning of English revealed only two textbooks were used as reference materials while chalk and chalkboard were the most preferred teaching aids. Results for this are displayed in Tables 1.3 and 1.4 respectively.

Table 1.3: Textbooks of choice

	Textbook	Frequency
1	New Integrated English for Students (Book 2)	9
2	Excelling in English (Book 2)	15
3	Headstart Secondary English (Form 2)	12
4	A KCSE Guide to Composition Writing	1
	Total	37

Table 1.4: Teaching aids of choice

Teaching aid	Frequency	%
Chalk and chalkboard	25	69.4
Chart	1	2.8
Flashcards	2	5.6
Samples of paragraph	1	2.8
Group of students	3	8.3
Furniture (lockers and chairs)	1	2.8
English dictionary	1	2.8
Class readers	2	5.6
Total	36	100

The patterns emerging in Tables 1.3 and 1.4 raise concerns as to whether teacher trainees ever evaluate materials for fitness for teaching purposes or simply use any material at the disposal of the school they are teaching in. It is highly probable that learners will not acquire a second language at a faster rate when only a limited number of materials are used to

provide language input to them. A limited number only suggests that the learners' needs will not be satisfactorily met. As such, during lesson preparation, the language teacher needs to ask oneself these questions: "which materials am I going to use for this lesson?; might different learners need different materials; are my lesson objectives adequately catered for in the materials selected?" The importance of adequate materials in the teaching/learning process cannot be over-emphasised. In fact, materials are embodiments of whole learning programmes.

The limited choice of materials for teaching and learning probably influenced the application of very few learning activities in the lessons observed. Accordingly, note taking, oral question and answer sessions, explanation by the teacher, individual and collaborative tasks were the main classroom activities. It was interesting to note that of the four language skills (Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing), reading was not catered for while speaking was only minimally represented as summarised in Table 1.5.

Table 1.5: Learning activities

Activities	Language skill	Frequency	%
Note taking	Listening/Writing	16	13.1
Question/answer	Listening/Speaking	9	7.4
Explanation by teacher	Listening/Writing	55	45.1
Individual tasks	Writing	15	12.3
Collaborative tasks	Listening/Speaking	27	22.1
Total		122	100

As Table 1.5 indicates, the reading and speaking skills were not emphasised in the classroom activities implying the purpose behind the integrated approach to the teaching of English is not being fulfilled by student teachers. This reflects inadequate reflection during the lesson preparation. Even the limited number of classroom activities involved suggests that learners might not acquire features of the second language adequately through immersion as propounded by Chomskyan innateness theory (Krashen, 2002). In fact the classroom activities can only facilitate fact-transfer and information recall (the lowest level of learning). Hence, higher levels of learning (analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) are not addressed.

May I refer to two examples from my data. In the first case, the student was teaching about the position of adjectives in sentences. Lesson development strategies and/or activities included explanation by the teacher, note taking, and answering questions. In the second case, the student teacher was teaching about paragraph development where lesson development was based on explanation of comparison and contrast in paragraph development followed by students writing a paragraph in groups of three. It is notable from these illustrations that an effort at employing the integrated model is made but not all language skills are involved.

(c) Assessment opportunities

Observation of testing practices in the classroom revealed that some trainee teachers selected assessment opportunities that were not in tandem with the title of the lesson, objectives, and learning activities.

It also emerged that the students were not given a variety of assessment opportunities make to evaluate learning progress in a number of language areas. The most preferred form of assessment was reading comprehension given as a take-away (home) assignment. Often the students would be asked to read a passage and answer the questions that follow. For instance, a student teacher asked his students to read a passage entitled: "The sweetness of stories", and answer the comprehension questions "that follow." In another case, the student teacher gave instructions on a reading passage and asked students to answer questions in their exercise books. One wonders from these tasks what type of reading skill the student wanted to test in the learners.

To select appropriate assessment tests, teachers should ask themselves the following pertinent questions: why do I want to test? What do I want the test to show me? What knowledge and skills are to be included in the content of the test? How should I design the test? The result would be tests that discover the knowledge of the candidate on individual distinct point of phonology, syntax, and lexis of the language. In addition to such discrete tests, trainee teachers need to give their learners enough integrative tests which attempt to test several elements and skills at the same time. This is mostly seen in the complex area of testing comprehension where among other skills, learners are required to make an inference of information provided in the text (Ellis, 2004).

Conclusions

A number of conclusions can be drawn from practices in the teaching internship sessions. First, the language input that trainee teachers provide in the language classroom is shockingly inadequate for proper language teaching and/or learning. Acquisition by immersion can only take place in learning settings that have rich language inputs encompassing the four language skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing.

Secondly, trainee teachers are yet to learn how to integrate the four language skills in teaching. There is over reliance on teacher-centred approach to learning thereby denying learners opportunities to practice the language. One would expect that any single language lesson should provide a platform where learners can practice the four language skills. This implies that the Kenyan English syllabus is not adequately implanted by trainee teachers. In turn, this raises concerns whether the training institutions have aligned their language curricular to the integrated mode they supposed to implement in the secondary schools.

Thirdly, a conclusion can be made regarding the limited choice of action verbs. The fact that higher levels of knowledge were not represented in the trainee teachers' objectives presupposes that learners of English will not handle the language competently. This scenario

suggests that the trainee teachers do not give due attention and commitment to the important lesson preparation stage.

Implications for language teaching and research

To improve teaching and/or learning of English, selection of action verbs for lesson objectives should reflect knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. It should follow that the choice of learning activities and assessment opportunities should be based on action verbs used to state the objectives. In the design, delivery or evaluation of teaching, learning and lesson plans, Bloom's Taxonomy is useful as a template to ensure one is using the most appropriate type of training or learning in order to develop the capabilities required or wanted. In other words, the learner outcomes should be at the centre of every lesson preparation

Teachers should expand teaching aids to include authentic materials. Besides giving learners a chance to see how language is used in real world situations, this intervention measure will also ensure a rich culture of language input that can facilitate language acquisition through immersion.

Arising from these implications for teaching and to strengthen such efforts in future, a number of research efforts should be intensified. Particularly, it will be of help to investigate how teacher trainees prepare for their lessons during Teaching Practice. It might also be of interest to assess the kind of mentoring that more experienced teachers offer the apprentice teachers and how such activities shape and guide the operations of the teacher trainee. Thirdly, managers of training institutions should made aware on the relationship between field experiences of teacher trainees and future teacher trainee preparation for Teaching Practice. In line with this, it might be of beneficial to find out how differences in school cultures and practices may be used to redesign the teacher training curriculum.

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24-25 Sentember 2011

An appraisal of the sources of language input in selected English lessons by teacher trainees in Kenya

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> 6th Matsu Conference on Teaching (Ehime University 24-25 September 2011 Matsuvama)

Graduate teacher training situation in Kenya

- Student takes four years to study for a BEd degree
- Enrolls in three disciplines: two teaching subjects and education
- Undertakes English teaching methods and communication technology courses in Third Year of study in preparation for TP
- Proceed for teaching practice for a threemonth school term after their fourth year of study
- By the time of graduation time, student must have studied 52 units (courses)

24-25 September 2011

English Language Curriculum in secondary schools

The KCSE syllabus is organised around the

following skills

- (a) Pronunciation
- (b) Reading comprehension
- (c)Grammar
- (d) Oral literature (songs, proverbs, riddles…)
- (e) Written literature (poetry, short story, the novel, play)
- (f) Functional writing

24-25 September 2011

English language curriculum...

- There are three terms per academic year:
 - (a) First term (Early January to late March)
 - (b) Second term (Early may to late July)
- (c) Third term (Early September to late November)
- In Forms 1 and 2, English is allocated six 40-minute lessons per week while in Forms 3 and 4, the subject is allocated 8 lessons each
- In Forms 1 and 2, each of the 6 skills noted above is allocated one lesson per week with the two additional hours in Forms 3 and 4 devoted to written literature

24-25 September 2011

Chomsky's innateness theory

- Every normal child has a language acquisition device (LAD) which has three characteristics:
 - (a) is species specific
 - (b) is specific to language learning as opposed to acquisition of other forms of behaviour
 - (c) prestructures the properties of grammar (innateness)
- Language input (data) available to the child serve to activate latent components of grammar (setting the parameters)
- The innate structures of language are common to all languages constituting Universal Grammar

24-25 September 2011

Chomsky's theory...

- However, the specific features (phonology, morphology, vocabulary and syntax) of a target language must be inferred from the linguistic data made available to the learner in the course of learning.
- Chomsky argues that after the age of puberty language acquisition becomes an arduous and difficult experience.
- The implication is that we must employ effective methods of teaching after the critical period (2 years to puberty)
- Two things are therefore critical:
 - (a) the way L2 material is presented to the learner
 - (b) the opportunities offered for an application of the repertoire available to the learner

24-25 September 2011

Chomsky-Bloom Link

Chomsky's views on language learning can be realised by levels of learning according to Benjamin Bloom (1950s) and refined by his student Lorin Anderson (1990s). The levels:

- (a) Knowledge: Tests whether a student has gained specific information from the lesson.
- (b) Comprehension: Tests not only recall of facts but understanding of the information
- (c) Application: Tests application and use of the knowledge they have learned.

24-25 September 2011

Chomsky-Bloom link...

- (d) Analysis: Tests the patterns that learners can use to analyze a problem.
- **(e) Synthesis:** Tests use of the given facts to create new theories or make predictions.
 - (f) Evaluation: Tests assessment of information and come to a conclusion such as its value or the bias behind it.
- Anderson changed the names in the six categories from noun to verb forms slightly rearranged them, (Pohl, 2010)

Modified representation of BT Original Domain New Domain Evaluation Synthesis Analysis Analyzing Application Comprehension Knowledge 24-25 September 2011

The issues

- Did the choice of action verbs used to form objectives by teacher trainees reflect the all levels of knowledge?
- What lesson development strategies did the teacher trainees employ in the classroom?
- Did language input opportunities employed create a rich language culture favourable for learning by immersion?
- How did assessment opportunities employed in the lessons facilitate language learning?

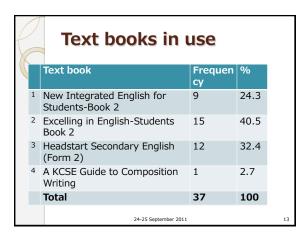
24-25 September 2011

Method

- 28 teacher trainees from Kenyatta University were observed as they taught Integrated English in in Form 2 in secondary schools in Nairobi
- The teachers were on Teaching Practice between January, 2011 and April, 2011 during the schools' first term.
- I purposively studied theses teachers since they are the trainees I actually observed in class
- Each trainee was observed in a 40-minute lesson and Lesson Plans collected for further analysis
- After each observation, each teacher was engaged in a 30-minute discussion on the lesson

24-25 September 2011

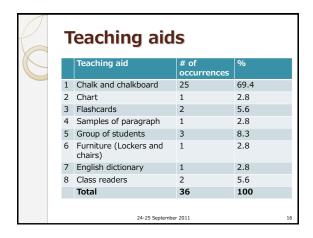
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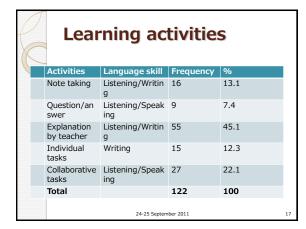


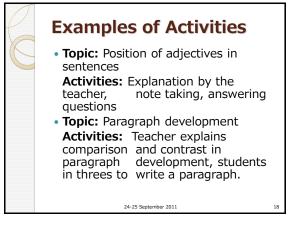
Action verbs				
	Levels of knowledge	Frequen cy	%	
1	Knowledge	23	39.0	
2	Comprehension	22	37.3	
3	Application	13	22.0	
4	Analysis	1	1.7	
5	Synthesis	-	0.0	
6	Evaluation	-	0.0	
	Total	59	100	
	24-25 Septembe	r 2011		14

Examples of objectives The learner should be able to explain the importance of information technology. (Comprehension) The learner should be able to respond to the questions given (Comprehension) The learner should be able to construct sentences using collective nouns (Application) The learner should be able to identify the position of adjectives in the sentence. (Knowledge)

24-25 September 2011







Assessment opportunities

	Language skill	Frequency	%
1	Listening	-	0.0
2	Reading	13	39.4
3	Speaking	4	12.1
4	Writing	16	48.5
	Total	33	100

24-25 September 2011

Example ...

Topic: The sweetness of stories

Objectives: (a) Read the story (passage)

(b) Answer comprehension questions.

Activities: (a) Teacher to give

instructions on

reading the passage

(b) Teacher will facilitate a discussion on the

comprehension questions

Assignment: The learners will answer the comprehension questions in their

exercise books '

24-25 September 2011

Conclusions

- Listening and speaking skills given inadequate attention i.e. focus is on competence as opposed to performance.
- Student teachers are yet to learn how to integrate the four language skills in teaching
- · Learners had limited choice of action verbs
- There was a disconnect between lesson objectives, learning activities, and assessment opportunities
- Language input/data provided was limited and this inhibited acquisition through immersion.

24-25 September 2011

Conclusions...

- There is over reliance on teacher-centred approach to learning thereby denying learners opportunities to practice the language
- The teachers stuck mainly to two texts.
 In some schools upto 12 students shared a textbook in group tasks
- Objectives and classroom activities focused on fact-transfer and information recall (the lowest level of learning). Higher levels of learning (analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) were nonexistent.

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Conclusions...

- Learners were not given enough room to practice language skills. They were reduced to passive listening note takers.
- Over-reliance on chalk and chalkboard as teaching aids. Little effort was made to employ authentic-materials to show learners how language is used in real situations.

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Implications for teaching

- Selection of action verbs for lesson objectives should reflect knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation
- Teachers should expand teaching aids to include authentic materials.
- Teachers should expose learners to a variety of text books to create a rich culture of language input
- Choice of learning activities and assessment opportunities should be based on action verbs used to state objectives

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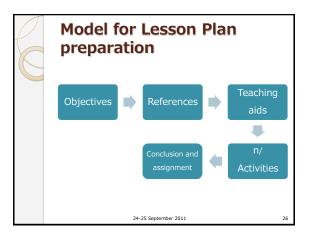
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Cont...

- Action verbs must indicate learner outcomes (Ability to do)
- In the design, delivery or evaluation of teaching, learning and lesson plans, Bloom's Taxonomy is useful as a template to ensure one is using the most appropriate type of training or learning in order to develop the capabilities required or wanted.
- The following model should guide lesson plan preparation

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Implications for research

- How do teacher trainees prepare for their lessons during Teaching Practice?
- How do more experienced teachers shape and guide the operations of the teacher trainee?
- How can the field experiences influence future teacher trainee preparation for TP?
- How can differences in school cultures and practices be used to redesign the teacher training

