

Effectiveness of Language of Sexuality Used in Youth Peer Education Programme in Kericho Municipality, Kenya

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J. agric. pure appl. sci. technol. **11**, 1-7 (2012); received March 20/May 27, 2012

This paper examines the effectiveness of language of sexuality as used by peers in the youth peer education programme. Peer education is a process that involves similar people learning together. Peer education works on the premise that people are most likely to change their behavior if they know and trust the people persuading them to do so. Since the school features many students with common socio-cultural education characteristics, peer education may work well. Peers are also known to have greater influence on each other than non-peers—a significant factor in lending credibility to behavior change communication.

Key words: Sexuality and peer education

Introduction

The issue of sex education has become a major issue in Kenya and furthermore it has been worsened by the issue of HIV/AIDS. There has been a tug of war between the government and churches on who should communicate most effectively the necessary information. On the same vein, parents have not been spared the blame of neglecting the youth or not telling them the truth.

Several initiatives have been launched to provide the youths with the necessary information on sexuality. These initiatives have been both government sponsored as well as privately sponsored (non-governmental organization, churches among others). Media campaigns have also been launched. One of the proposed channels is the government initiative of the youth peer education program in both primary and secondary schools. While those initiatives are commendable, their effectiveness is yet to fully assess. Considering the key role of language in communication, this study focuses on assessing the effectiveness of the language of sexuality as used by youth peers in the youth peer education programme. This is with a view of establishing the effectiveness of language in delivering vital information on sexual development and sexuality.

Language and Sexuality

When the language on sexuality changes, it can have profound effect on the way people think and behave. There is need to use the appropriate terminology and vocabulary when discussing sexuality. The right word should be used at the right time (Reiss, 1986).

In Kenya today there is an increase in the number of unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections and abortion (NOPE, 2005). This is evidence that the majority of youths

engage in adolescent sex. Misinterpretation of the language used to talk about sexuality is one of the major ways in which our view of sexuality has been influenced.

Sexual Euphemism

Euphemism are words that are used to soften the reality of what is being communicated to a given listener or reader. They are a universal feature of language usage .all cultures typically use them to talk about things they find terrifying because anthropologically, “to speak a name was to evoke divinity whose power then had to be confronted” (Neeman and Silver , 1983). Similarly euphemism is used to express taboos, as we feel, on some instinctual level, that the euphemism keeps us at a safe distance from the taboo itself. In general we use euphemism to express what is socially difficult to express in direct terms.

Sexual euphemisms are more common in reference to sexual practices or orientations particularly non heterosexual ones. Virtually all other sexual terms are still considered profane and unacceptable for use even in a euphemistic sense.

Theoretical Framework

The theories that were used in this study were the Grecian pragmatics. In Grecian pragmatics, speaker /listener environment is of paramount importance. This is the context in which the utterances are made. Two central concepts of the Grecian pragmatics to be concentrated on in this study include the speaker meaning and the cooperative principles.

Grecian Pragmatics

Grecian pragmatics is based on a set of four maxims that show both speakers and hearers how to organize and use information offered in a text along with background knowledge of the world to communicate. The maxims thus constrain the speakers’ choice and speakers’ intention by relating what is being said to the text and context. Hence in the Grecian pragmatics, the speaker meaning is central. The speaker’s meaning suggest a particular view of human communication that focuses on intentions. Grice (1957) separates non-natural meaning from natural meaning.

In the teaching of peers too, the roles of the speaker and the hearer are vital. There should be negotiation of meaning between the two so as to arrive at the intended meaning. Communication amongst peers should be natural and that which makes sense of their world. This was what the researcher intended to find out from the study.

Grice (1975) proposes a general principle which participants are expected to ob serve. “Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which occurs by the accepted purpose or direction of the take exchange in which you are engaged”. The principle is labeled “the cooperative principle” consists of four maxims namely quality, quantity, relation and manner

The first maxim which relates to quantity is concerned with the amount of a speaker’s contribution in a conversation. The contribution should be as informative as is required for the purpose of an exchange. On the other hand it should not be more informative than required. The researcher therefore assessed messages regarding sexuality as used in the peer education program, whether or not they were adequate and informative and whether or not they obscured the intended message thus violating the maxim of quantity.

The second maxim which relates to quality advocates for truthfulness of utterances made by the speaker. The researcher established whether the utterances made were true, and had adequate evidence to support them.

The third maxim which relates to relation also referred to as maxim of relevance advocates for the appropriateness of utterances made. The researcher established whether messages on sexuality used in peer education were significant and applicable and whether they were drawn from the world of the peers.

The maxim of manner advocates for orderliness in utterances made by the speaker. In this research too, the researcher assessed if there was orderliness in the utterance made. Whether there was obscurity of expression and ambiguity.

These maxims allow speakers to lead their hearers to interpretations of their communicative intent that go beyond the logical meaning of what is being said. The violation of one or combination of these maxims therefore contributes to rendering an exchange ineffective.

These maxims therefore came in handy in analysis and interpretation of the data collected from the field. The researcher based the utterances collected on the four maxims.

Research Design and Methodology

Study Design

The study was a survey research. Kerlinger (1978) espouses the use of surveys as they are useful for educational fact finding. This is mainly because they provide a great deal of information which is accurate.

Further justification for the choice of the survey is drawn from Cohen and Marion (1978) who states that the intention of the survey research is to gather data at a particular point in time and use it to describe the nature of existing conditions. Since the aim of the study was to analyze the effectiveness of language of sexuality in the youth peer education program, a survey design was found to be most suitable for the study.

Location of the Research

The study was conducted in Kericho Municipality in Kericho District of the Rift valley province of Kenya. Like in other parts of the country, Kericho Municipality has a big number of youths indulging in pre-marital sex; as a result there are many cases of school drop-outs, teenage pregnancies, H.I.V/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases among them. Cases of abortion have also been reported. This gave the researcher a challenge to determine the kind of language used to address the issue of sexuality among the youth in the area. Another reason that made Kericho Municipality suitable for the research was that the researcher was familiar with the area. The researcher and all the research assistants used in the study were all based in the municipality.

Study Population

Since the study targeted the youth peers, the population of the study comprised of youths between the ages of 13-17 and exclusively students in secondary schools. There were three schools involved.

The study population consisted of three peers from each class in the four classes' i.e. Forms 1-4 from each of the three secondary schools. Although the researcher's original intention was to pick 36 peers, only 31 responded. The schools included; A girls' boarding school which was coded as school **A**, a boys' boarding school which is coded as school **B** and a mixed day school which is school **C**.

The emphasis on the different types of schools was to allow the researcher to get a sample representative of schools found in Kenya. The schools chosen were all public (government-run) schools so as to limit other variables that might interfere with discourse such as economic differences.

Research Instrument

The data collection instruments that were used in this study were questionnaires, a word list, tape recording and an interview schedule. The researcher chose the questionnaire as a basic research tool for some because firstly, the questionnaire speeded up the data collection process from the respondents. This was so because they were made to sit together and answer the questions hence speeding the exercise. The questionnaire also gave the respondents the freedom in answering the questions.

Results and Discussion

It is evident from the research that the youth peers use certain sexual slang to make reference to sex, gender, sexuality, sexual activity, sexual organs or matters closely related to them. The slang term ‘screw’ is used to mean sexual intercourse, ‘jerk off’ to mean male masturbation.

In the popular jargon of many cultures, the use of sexual slang is a form of humor or euphemism that often creates controversy over its public use. Sexual humor has been seen in many circles as crude and unsophisticated as well as insulting towards the subject it describes. Nevertheless, sexual humor has been popular since the earliest days of human society, and crude humor is seen as having a place in popular culture. Sexual slang is often used by adolescents’ youths in the rituals of growing up. It often is one way for youths to test the limits of tolerance in their society, both in their own families and in the larger community. Foul language and sexual humor are also used as a form of male bonding in traditionally masculine vocations and sports. But generally, they were often seen as form of taboo in which much of the appeal lies in the shock value of daring to speak “forbidden” words in public.

Interpretation of Sexuality Messages

There were five sexual messages to be interpreted by the youth peers who had presumably undergone teaching of sexuality in the youth peer education programme. They were expected to either agree with or disagree with the messages.

Message A

Sexuality means sexual intimacy and physical sexual activity only

The intended objective of the research was to establish whether youth peers understand what the word sexuality refers to. To determine whether at the mention of the term or expression, the youth peers would think of sexual intimacy and the physical sexual activity only or if there was more to it. The interpretation was as below; CI represents correct interpretation and WI fob wrong interpretation.

Table No 1: Sexuality means intimacy and physical sexual activity only

		Frequency	Percent (%)	Valid (%)	Cumulative (%)
Valid	CI	4	12.9	12.9	12.9
	WI	27	87.1	87.1	87.1
	Total	31	100.0	100.0	100.0

About 12.9% of the peers gave correct interpretation while 87.1 % gave the incorrect one. This indicates that according to the majority of the peers, sexuality meant intimacy and physical sexual activity which is not the case.

Message B

Strong sexual urge is experienced by adults only

This message was to establish in the youth how they relate to the issue of sexuality. Whether they distanced themselves altogether and believed that sexual urge was an adult experienced or if they took it to be for all ages. What follows is the score of the interpretation.

Table No 2: Strong sexual urge is experienced by adults only

		Frequency	Percent (%)	Valid (%)	Cumulative (%)
Valid	true	4	12.9	12.9	12.9
	false	27	87.1	87.1	87.1
	Total	31	100.0	100.0	100.0

Considering that 12.90% of the peers gave correct interpretation and 87.1% incorrect interpretation, it was evident that according to the majority of the youth peers, strong sexual urge is experienced by adult only.

Message C

Long term abstinence does not lead to impotence

The intended objective of the researcher in using this message was to gauge whether the youth peers have knowledge of the terms abstinence and impotence and their relationship. Given below is the score

Table No 3: Long term abstinence does not lead to impotence

		Frequency	Percent (%)	Valid (%)	Cumulative (%)
Valid	true	4	12.9	12.9	12.9
	false	27	87.1	87.1	87.1
	Total	31	100.0	100.0	100.0

Given that 12.9 % was the incorrect interpretation and 87.1 % the correct one. It was evident that according to the majority of the peers, long term abstinence does not lead to impotence.

Message D

One can have sexy thoughts without sexual activity

One can have sexy thoughts do not necessarily lead to the sexual activity. The objective of this message was to establish how the youth peers relate the two ideas of sexy thoughts and sexual activity.

Table No 4: One can have sexy thoughts without sexual activity

		Frequency	Percent (%)	Valid (%)	Cumulative (%)
Valid	true	30	96.8	96.8	96.8
	false	1	3.2	3.2	3.2
	Total	31	100.0	100.0	100.0

At 3.2 % incorrect interpretation and 96.8% correct interpretation it was evident that according to the majority of the youth peers, one can have sexy thoughts without necessarily the sexual activity.

Message E

Masturbation is physical stimulation of the genitals

This message was intended to establish whether or not the youths interpreted well the terms ‘masturbation’ of the genitals.

Below is a summary of how they scored in interpreting the message

Table No 5: Masturbation is physical of the genitals

		Frequency	Percent (%)	Valid (%)	Cumulative (%)
Valid	true	22	71.0	71.0	71.0
	false	9	29.0	29.0	29.0
	Total	31	100.0	100.0	100.0

At 29% incorrect interpretation and 71% correct interpretation it was evident that according to the majority of the youth peers, masturbation is physical stimulation of the genitals.

Overall, the table below shows how the youth peers scored in interpretation of the five sex messages.

Table No 6: Overall, interpretation of the five sex messages

	Frequency	(%)	Valid (%)	Cumulative (%)
Valid C	87	56.1	56.1	56.1
I	68	43.9	43.9	43.9
Total	155	100.0	100.0	100.0

At 43.9 % incorrect interpretation and 56.1% correct interpretation it was evident that the majority of the youth peers correctly interpreted the five sexuality messages given.

Conclusion

Results of the peer trainers show that there is a specific diction of sexuality recommendation to the peer trainers when addressing issues of sexuality .That in order that messages are interpreted correctly, it greatly matters what language is used in the message. Moreover it was established that the use of polite sex terms and expression affect interpretation of sexuality messages by the peers. This is so because, in their attempt to express what they consider as socially difficult to express what they consider as socially difficult to express in direct terms, they end up misinterpreting the messages of sexuality. The findings reveal a lot on the effectiveness of language of sexuality of the youth peers. There is an urgent need therefore by all stakeholder of the peer education programme and especially the peer education facilitators to impress upon all peers with adequate information explaining to them the importance of correct language use which results in correct interpretation and comprehension. This relationship between correct language use and interpretation of sexuality expression should be emphasized so as to counter the problems that arise from misinterpretation of terms of sexuality that the pees face in the course of growing up.

Acknowledgement

The authors thank Kenyatta University for the support.

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