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The role of distance education materials in addressing the professional development needs of high school English teachers in Rwanda.

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2015-05-19
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/17807

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Abstract

Distance education is being used increasingly for both pre and in-service teacher education in both developed and developing countries (Robinson & Latchem, 2003; Kwapong, 2007; Perraton, 2010). In Rwanda, the Kigali Institute of Education (KIE) introduced its first distance education programme in 2001 with the aim of upgrading the qualifications of under-qualified high school teachers, including those who teach English, using printed materials as the main teaching/learning resource. This study has aimed to investigate the role of the 2010 version of these materials in addressing the professional needs of high school English teachers. It was centrally informed by theories of the sociologist of education, Basil Bernstein (1996, 1999), about curriculum and of the sociocultural psychologist, Lev Vygotsky (1978), on mediation, by Shulman's (1986, 1987) work on pedagogic content knowledge and by literature on English language teaching, on language teacher education and on distance education materials design.

The investigation involved textual analysis of a selection of KIE's distance education materials for English teaching and focused on the content selected for these materials and on the mediation of this content on the page. After this analysis, one section of these was re-designed by the researcher. Nine teacher-learners enrolled in the programme for English teaching were interviewed to determine their responses to both the KIE materials and to the redesigned section. The findings suggest that Kigali Institute of Education's distance education materials for English do not adequately address the academic and professional needs of high school English teachers for four main reasons. Firstly, the content selected for the materials does not respond sufficiently to the interests and needs of foreign language teachers of English. Secondly, it is not externally aligned to the curriculum at the level that these teachers are supposed to teach. Thirdly, the mediation of this content does not adequately support the development of subject and pedagogic content knowledge and skills of teacher-learners and encourages surface rather than deep learning (Biggs, 1987). Lastly, with the exception of sections on some literary genres, the materials list useful ideas and language teaching approaches and methods but consistently fail to explain to the teacher-learners how to teach different aspects of language. These findings suggest that these materials do not adequately assist teacher-learners to develop pedagogic content knowledge (Shulman, 1987) for the teaching of English. The limitations identified may result from a lack of knowledge, skills and experience in distance education materials and graphic design among the KIE materials designing team and from inadequate resource provision (including time) by the institution and suggest that there is a need for changes to the KIE distance education materials designing process.

Key words

Distance education, distance education materials, language teacher education, curriculum, pedagogy, mediation, materials design and redesign