

Challenges in Teaching Composition Writing In Secondary Schools in Pokot County, Kenya.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the challenges in teaching composition writing in Kenyan secondary schools. This was accomplished through the study objectives which were to: establish the challenges encountered in teaching and learning of composition writing, investigate if there are adequate resources to teach composition writing and find out the techniques teachers use to teach composition writing. The study was based on Selinker's (1975) Interlanguage Theory and Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis Theory. The Inter-language theory posits that learners develop an Inter-language in the process of second language acquisition; and teachers should view errors made by students as a step towards the target language. The Input Hypothesis stresses on the role of input (teaching) on mastery of a second language. The study employed descriptive survey research design. The research was undertaken in Pokot County.. The researcher used stratified random sampling to select the three categories of schools; 3 boys, 2girls and 3 mixed schools. Systematic random sampling was used to select 20 form three students from each of the selected schools. This formed about 30% of the accessible population, which Kerlinger (1973) recommends as being a representative sample for a descriptive research study. A total of 160 students and 16 teachers participated in the study. The teachers were selected purposively. Frankel and Wallen (2006) recommend at least 100 subjects in a descriptive study and 176 respondents were used in this study. Data was collected through student and teacher questionnaires and a writing task for the students. Both close-ended and open-ended questionnaires were used. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics. The study revealed that writing is not taught effectively in schools. It was also evident that both teachers and students face challenges which include inadequate resources, heavy work load on the part of the teachers, and lack of motivation, mother tongue influence and limited use of English both in school and at home. The study recommends that, teachers should give learners tasks that motivate them, use techniques that are learner centred such as dramatization, role- play and group writing. The schools management should provide adequate resources and develop school language policies that will encourage the use of English in the school compound. The teachers Service Commission should post more teachers to the schools to curb the issue of work load so that language teachers can have sufficient time to train learners on writing skills.

Key words: English language, Composition writing, techniques, resources, competence.

1.1 Introduction

Today, English is the language of globalization, international communication, commerce and trade, the media and pop culture. It is no longer viewed as the property of the English speaking world but as an international commodity referred to as English as an International Language (EIL) (Robins 1999). Proficiency in English is required for employees to advance in international companies and to improve technical knowledge and skills needed in the work place. Writing is one of the language skills that enable learners to think critically and creatively as he or she responds for academic discipline. It is a life long process and part of personal development whose usefulness stretches beyond the classroom (KIE, 2006).

Despite the significant role played by writing in the school curriculum, studies point out that secondary school students lack basic skills of writing. Their performance in writing continuous to be unsatisfactory as evidenced by school leavers' lack of communicative competence. Barasa (2008 p:17) asserts that universities have voiced concern about "freshers who are unable to speak, read, write or hold discussions in English". The Kenya National Examination Council (KNEC) Report (2002) states that students are weak in both mechanical and stylistic skills of writing. They are also weak at punctuation, word choice and make frequent construction errors .This therefore made necessary to probe the challenges in teaching and learning of composition writing in secondary schools. One way of enhancing writing skills is by effective teaching of composition writing and this

study set out to determine the challenges in teaching and learning composition writing in secondary schools in Kenya, in a bid to suggest ways of addressing these challenges.

The study was based on Kreshen's input hypothesis and Selinkers (1973) inter-language theory.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature reviewed indicated that writing is a technical skill that cannot be acquired by chance but via instruction, (Kembo-sure, 1982). It needs instructional methods, teaching strategies and materials that only a trained teacher can handle (Ibid 1982) and (Bryne, 1988). Omulando, (1979) studied factors influencing language proficiency in Kenyan primary schools and their effect on performance. His study revealed that there are both quantitative and qualitative factors militating against performance and acquisition of language proficiency. Additionally, Magut (2000) investigated the use of process approach in teaching writing skills and observed that most teachers find it difficult to teach writing. They used poor approaches and majority lectured students on how to write. Other studies pointing to lack of proficiency in English both written and spoken include: Omulando (2002), Barasa (1997) and Omboto (2004). It is against this backdrop that the current study set out to determine the factors that influence the teaching and learning of composition writing in secondary schools in order to provide a ways forward in improving the writing skills among learners.

3.0 Research Design and Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey design. This design reports the state of affairs as it is. Kerlinger (1973) points out that, descriptive studies are not restricted to fact finding but may lead to formulation of important principles of knowledge and solutions to significant problems. The design was chosen because it is used to collect data about attitudes, opinions and a variety of educational issues (Kombo and Tromp, 2006)

3.1 Area of Study, Sample size and sampling procedure

The study was conducted in Pokot County, formerly West Pokot district. The largest part of the district is semi-arid area and falls under the marginalized regions in the country. Pastoralism is the main economic activity of the Pokot people, and this impinges on learning and performance in national exams. The sample consisted of 160 form three students and 16 teachers of English in the selected schools. This sample was settled on basing on Frankel and Wallen (2006) who recommend a minimum of 100 subjects in a descriptive study. Teachers of English were selected purposively while the students were systematically random sampled.

3.2 Data Collection Instruments

The main research instruments were the questionnaire (both student and teacher questionnaire) and writing task for the students. Both open-ended and closed ended questionnaire were used. Both instruments were pre-tested through piloting to determine their validity and reliability. Questionnaire was selected because it enabled the researcher to collect data from a big sample of the population and also gives objective data since participants are not manipulated in whichever ways by the researcher as they fill the questionnaire.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics which include: frequency distribution tables and percentages. From the frequencies, the researcher made conclusions and recommendations.

4.0 Findings

The study revealed that both teachers and students face challenges in teaching and learning of composition writing respectively. Despite the fact that form 3 students are expected to have mastered the various aspects of writing, as stated in KIE syllabus (2003), the situation in the study area was quite different. Most students used mother tongue, Kiswahili and 'Sheng' both at home and at school and this made it difficult for them to communicate effectively in writing. Most of the students also came from rural primary schools where either mother tongue or Kiswahili was dominant and this contributed to their problem in vocabulary and expressing ideas. The written task revealed that where learners could not pick the right English words, they appealed to Kiswahili words such as 'rungus' 'nyamaza' 'pangas' etc. Poor coordination, wrong use of words and poor sentence structures were also rampant in students' compositions. The following table shows the previous primary school category and language mostly used at home by learners.

Table 1.0 Previous Primary School and Language spoken at home.

Language used at home	Location of previous primary school			
	Rural		Urban	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
English	0	0.0	2	1.3
Kiswahili	43	26.8	16	10.0
Mother Tongue	57	35.6	9	5.6
Sheng	6	3.8	6	3.8
English/ Kiswahili	0	0.0	1	0.6
Kiswahili/Mother Tongue /Sheng	16	10.0	4	2.5
Total	122	76.2	38	23.8

Despite the fact that English is the language of instruction and examination for the majority of subjects, it is not being used outside class in most schools. Instead, Kiswahili, which is apparently used to instruct and examine only one subject, takes the lead in usage outside class. Results indicated that 47.1(percent) of respondents said they use Kiswahili, 28.4% respondents said they use Mother tongue, while 23.5(percent) respondents said they use Sheng. Interestingly none of the respondents said they use English regularly. Fig 1 summarizes these responses. These findings explain why learners have difficulties in expressing themselves in writing compositions.

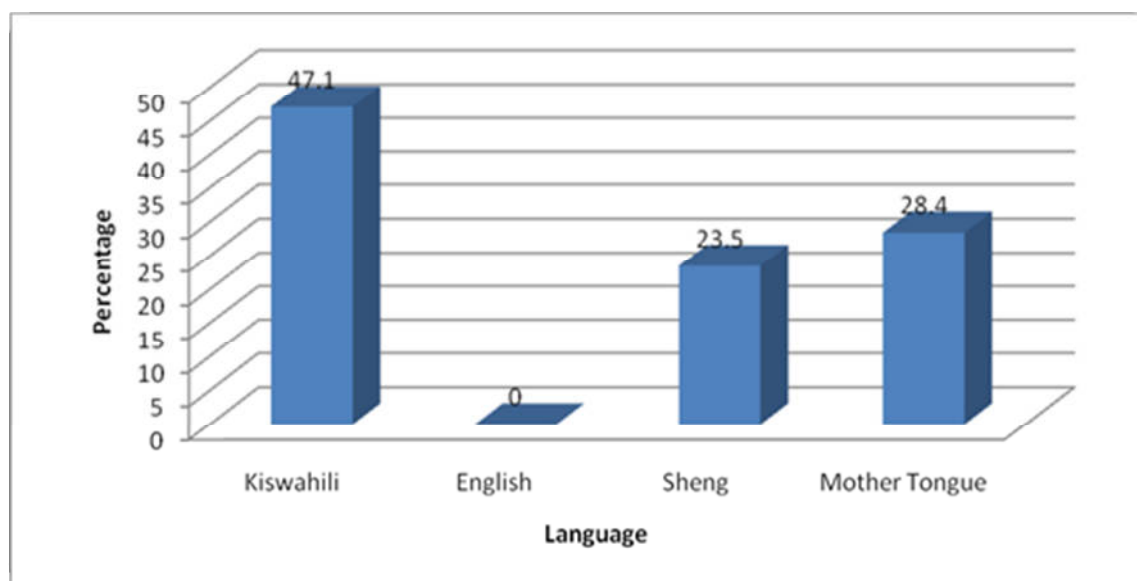


Fig1.0: Language Mostly Used at School

The study further probed the language the teachers used outside class with students and the findings in figure 1 indicate that, the majority (76percent)) said their teachers used Kiswahili, 18.5 (percent) said that teachers addressed them in ‘Sheng’, while 2.0 (Percent) and 3.5 (percent) indicated that their teachers used English and mother tongue respectively.

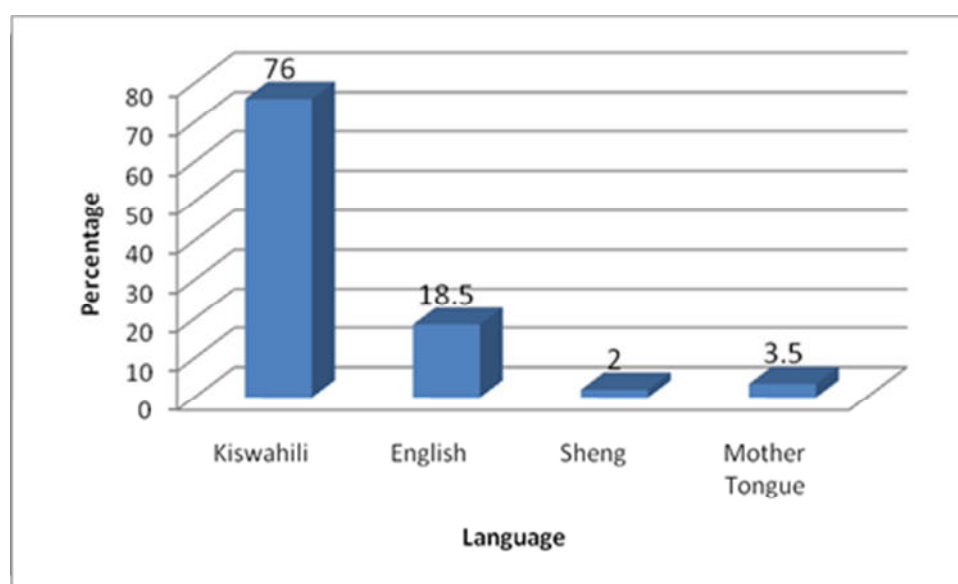


Fig4.2: Language Used by Teachers outside Class

On the drawbacks to the teaching of composition, teachers cited a number of factors which they felt gave them a challenge in teaching composition. They include lack of skills, negative attitude, limited time and marking students work. Table 4.7 summarized the distribution of these factors by frequency and percentage.

Additionally, they also cited students' challenges including negative attitude, mother tongue influence, and lack of exposure, poor reading culture, poor entry behavior and poor grammar. This is clearly shown in table 1.2

Table 1.2: Problems Students Face in Writing

Factor	Frequency	Percentage
Negative attitude	3	18.75
Mother tongue influence	4	25
Lack of exposure	1	6.25
Poor reading habits	5	31.25
Poor entry behaviour	2	12.5
Poor grammar	1	6.25
Total	16	100

Reasons for Difficulty in Composition Writing

Most students felt that composition writing is a difficult endeavour. When asked to give reasons for difficulty, they pointed out that teachers do not explain concepts, that they found writing boring, they lacked regular practice, inability to express themselves and in some cases, they found the topics difficult. The distribution of these factors is summarized in Table 1.3.

Table 1.3: Reasons for Difficulty in Composition Writing

Statement	SA		A		U		D		SD	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Teacher does not explain concept	16	10	18	11	15	9	50	31	61	38
Composition writing is not interesting	9	6	13	8	20	13	39	24	79	49
The teacher does not give regular practice	56	35	50	31	16	10	33	21	7	4
The teacher does not correct work	17	11	15	9	18	11	47	29	63	39
I have problems expressing myself	42	26	52	33	19	12	23	14	24	15
Sometimes I find the topic difficult	56	35	65	41	13	8	14	9	12	8

Resources for Teaching Composition Writing

A number of resources can be used to enhance the teaching of writing; they include newspapers, pictures, cantons, and extracts from story books, poems, maps and taped speeches. Although teachers were aware of the fact that these resources enhance teaching of composition, majority of the students indicated that their teachers rarely used them, while some never used them at all. Table 1.4 summarizes these findings.

Table 1.4: Use of Pictures, Newspapers, Cartoons, Charts, Extracts, Graphs and Tapes

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Always	31	19.4
Sometimes	40	25.00
Rarely	55	34.40
Never	20	12.50
Nil	14	8.75
Total	160	100

It was also clear that although schools provided newspapers and story books students in the study area rarely read newspapers and if they did, it was only sometimes. Although 34(percent) indicated that they read story books, this could be set texts bearing in mind that study respondents were form three students who are introduced to set texts for examination purposes. Lack of readership clearly explains the poor performance in the compositions decried by KNEC.

Techniques for Teaching Writing

A good teaching technique should be learner centred, since learners' participation and enthusiasm will depend purely on the method and technique employed by the teacher. Most teachers attested that they used techniques such as group discussion, dramatization and group writing. Table 1.5 shows the frequency and percentages of the techniques mostly used by teachers. The findings indicate that majority of the teachers used group discussion while dramatization and group writing were least utilized.

Table 1.5: Techniques for Teaching Writing

Technique	Frequency	Percentage
Group discussion	138	86.3
Dramatization	18	11.2
Group writing	4	2.5
Total	160	100

5.0 Discussion of Findings

Accruing from the findings presented, a number of issues emerged with respect to the teaching of composition writing. The study revealed that both students and teachers have a negative attitude towards composition writing. In addition, large classes and many lessons handled by the teachers in the study area did not allow teachers ample time to cover writing adequately.

Mother tongue and Kiswahili influence is also a challenge. Majority of students came from rural primary schools and had difficulties expressing themselves. This made their compositions jerky and incoherent. Most learners used Kiswahili structures where they failed to pick the right English structures. This justifies the idea of language transfer and overgeneralization of target language rules advanced by Selinker, (1973) which formed the basis for this study.

On the resources for teaching writing, the study concludes that the same are inadequate. Despite the fact that some resources for teaching writing such as pictures and story books are available in schools; teachers do not utilize them adequately. Teachers are also aware of the various techniques for teaching writing such as role-play, dramatization and group discussion; but they do not use them well in their writing lessons. They also gave difficult topics and did not explain the concepts entailed in the topics. The same is supported by Magut (2000) who conducted a research on the use of the Process Approach in Teaching Writing and observed that the teachers used poor methods in teaching writing. They simply gave topics and asked students to write compositions.

Recommendations

The study recommends first that there is need to develop good language policies in schools that will encourage spoken English both in and outside class. This should not only be limited to the teachers of English Language and their students, but the school community at large. Teachers' and students' attitude should be enhanced by giving incentives to best writers. Writing contests can be organized and best writers and instructors rewarded. Teachers should encourage learners to write regularly, by giving them tasks that motivate them and guiding them through the topics given. Resources for writing should be provided by schools and their use be monitored. Additionally, the commission should consider posting more teachers to the study area since the area suffers acute shortage of English language teachers. Lastly, the current mode of employment should be put under check to ensure that teachers are not posted to their locality so as to curb the overuse of mother tongue and transfer of language problems to students in schools.

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