

# **Evaluation of factors influencing the performance of Kenyan Secondary School Students in English Grammar: A Case of Nyamaiya Division, Nyamira County, Kenya.**

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## **Abstract**

This study assessed the factors influencing the performance of secondary school students in English Grammar in Nyamaiya Division, Nyamira County. The study employed 31 public Secondary schools of which seventeen are day and fourteen are boarding schools. Sex was not a factor in the study. There were 150 respondents (31 head teachers, 31 deputies, 30 students and 58 teachers of English). Purposive and simple random sampling techniques were used in selecting the sample for the study. Five point likert type scale questionnaires were used to obtain data for the study. 150 questionnaires were administered to 150 respondents which covered the following areas: influence of mother tongue, problem areas in English grammar, academic and professional qualifications and experience of these teachers. The objectives were: to investigate the attitude secondary school students have towards English grammar, to find out how mother tongue impacts on learning English grammar in secondary schools, to establish the areas in English grammar that are problematic to students in secondary schools and to find out the academic and professional qualifications of teachers teaching English grammar to students in secondary schools. Teacher's responses on attitude indicated that most of the students did not like English grammar. Regarding influence of mother tongue on performance in English grammar, the study showed that most of the students were influenced by mother tongue while others were not. On problem areas in English majority of the students experienced problems in the use of phrasal verbs and the use of auxiliaries. Other problems experienced are the use of punctuation marks, poor handwriting of the students and lack of practice in English. Majority of these teachers had degrees and some had KCSE certificates and very few had a master's degree. Most of the sampled schools had not taught the subject for more than five years and some had taught the subject for more than 20 years. The data collected was analyzed by use of descriptive statistics and the chi – square test using the SPSS package. Recommendations based on the findings were made to guide policy makers to find appropriate ways to improve on performance in English grammar.

**Key words:** evaluation, English Grammar, Nyamaiya Division, Nyamira County

## **1.0 Introduction**

The performance of students in English as second language (ESL) has been the subject of ongoing debate among educators, academics, and policy makers. Researches carried out elsewhere showed that hard work, previous schooling, parents' education, family income and motivation have a significant effect on the performance of students in English. Most of these studies have focused on students' performance in the U.S and Europe (Olsen, 2000).

Students who are admitted to High schools in African countries, like Kenya have no ample opportunity to study English language except those who are admitted to study English and other related subjects such as Linguistics and literature in English. Students admitted to Universities in Nigeria are encouraged to take few courses in English. The content of these English courses are grossly inadequate for the students to acquire requisite skills in the use of language for communication and to take up social experience. In order to study English as a second language and be successful in it, the student must be helped by the teacher to acquire skills in the four language skills; namely: speaking, reading, listening and writing. Fotos (2001) indicated that a student is automatically placed at a disadvantage when he already has a language of his own and he is asked to learn another language. Rural – based public secondary schools in Kenya lag behind in teaching English as a second language (Magoma, 1999). The teaching of English in Kenyan secondary schools has undergone some changes in the last few years in an attempt to improve the quality of its performance.

The current secondary school's English syllabus is a result of the syllabus review of 1984/85, which was later revised in 1992 to match with the changes brought about by the 8-4-4 system of education. Among the changes

the 8-4-4 system of education brought about was an integrated course of English language and literature. Before the integration, literature and English language were taught separately. Despite the efforts to improve the performance in English in Kenyan secondary schools, there has been persistent low attainment in the secondary schools. In Nyamira District, for instance, scrutiny of 2011 KCSE performance revealed that the mean score in English was 5.312 while in Nyamaiya Division, it stood at 3.915.

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

Students in Nyamaiya Division learn English as their second language which means acquiring a system of rules, but just as very little is known about these rules, even less is known about how such rule systems are acquired. These students do not know proper pronunciation, spellings and grammatical rules. The students do not know the importance of learning English as a foreign language. In the past, in rural areas, English was introduced to students in the fifth class. If we compare a graduate of present time with a graduate of the past, the result is shockingly amazing. The emphasis on passing the exams lies heavily on students and they opt for the cramming method. Such an approach helps unscrupulous elements to flourish to help the students in achieving their goals of passing the exams. The inter – disciplinary relation of teaching and learning process brings home the fact that the problems of the teachers can be solved if we concentrate on the causes of the problem of the students in public forum like school symposia. Many students in Nyamaiya Division fail to express themselves in proper English, probably due to their poor grammar, which translates to dismal performance in the national examinations. If this trend continues, chances are that many of these students may end up not joining lucrative careers. It is against this background that the researcher sought to establish the factors that influence the performance of secondary students in English grammar in Nyamaiya division of Nyamaiya district.

### 1.2 Purpose of the Study.

This study assessed the factors influencing the performance of secondary school students in English grammar in Nyamaiya Division, Nyamira County. For this objective to be attained the researcher examined the availability of the necessary resources and the teachers' and learners' preparedness in teaching and learning English Grammar. The researcher too was interested in establishing the attitude of high school students and stakeholders in making English an easy subject and how this impacted on the performance of English grammar among secondary school students in Nyamaiya division of Nyamira County.

### 1.3 Significance of the Study.

The findings of this study may provide secondary school teachers, educators, policy makers, the Ministry of education, Kenya Institute of Education and other stakeholders in the education sector with a framework for review of English curriculum for secondary education in Kenya. Besides, it may provide a new body of knowledge that may be useful in planning for teaching of English in public secondary schools in line with the government funding.

## 2.0 Methodology

This was an *ex – post facto* descriptive survey design. The scope of the study covers some selected day and boarding schools. Purposive and simple random sampling techniques were employed in selecting the sample for the study. The sample size consisted of 150 respondents, 31 head teachers, 31 deputies, 30 students and 58 teachers from each of the selected schools making a total of 150 respondents.

### 2.1 Instrumentation

Three different five – point likert type scale questionnaires were designed by the researcher to obtain data for the study. These were:

- i) Secondary school students questionnaires (SSSQ)
- ii) Secondary school teachers questionnaire (SSTQ)
- iii) Secondary school head /deputy teacher questionnaire (SSH/DTQ)

SSSQ consisted of two sections viz:

Section A: This consisted of 8 items eliciting information from respondents about attitude of students towards English Grammar

Section B: This consisted of 10 items requesting information from respondents about the influence of mother tongue on performance of English grammar.

SSTQ consisted of two sections viz:

Section A: Consisted of 11 items eliciting information from respondents about attitude of students towards English grammar.

Section B: consisted of 9 items eliciting information about problem areas in English grammar.

SSH/DTQ consisted of two sections viz.

Section A: consisted of 10 items eliciting information from respondents about academic and professional qualifications of teachers.

Section B: consisted of 9 items eliciting information from respondents about years of experience of teachers of English.

The respondents in each case were requested to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed to each item.

The scoring of the instruments was as follows:

Strongly Agree (SA)	4
Agree (A)	3
Disagree (D)	2
Strongly Disagree (SD)	1

This was the case for all positive worded items while the reverse was the case for all negative items.

## 2.2 Validity and reliability of Instruments

Both construct and face validity was established from the pilot study. The reliability coefficient of 0.55 was established for the instrument for students (SSSQ) the reliability coefficient of 0.60 for the teachers (SSTQ) and an alpha coefficient of reliability of 0.70 for the head teachers instruments (SSH/DTQ) .

### 2.1.2 Administration of the instruments

Permission was sought from the District Education Office and the school authorities before the administration of the instruments which was done personally by the researcher to the respondents in the various secondary schools selected for the study.

## 2.3 Analysis of Data

Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data. Some of the data obtained was nominal and the chi – square test was used for analysis. The chi – square was performed at a significance level of 5%.

## 3.0 Results:

### 3.1. Attitude of Students towards English Grammar

The researcher wanted to find out the attitude secondary school students had towards English Grammar. As such the teachers were asked to state their opinion on what they thought was the attitude of learners in their classes towards English Grammar. The following responses were obtained.

**Table 3.1: Attitude of Secondary School Students towards English Grammar**

Attitude	Frequency	Percentage
Negative	36	72%
Positive	10	20%
Not Sure	4	8%
Total	50	100%

From table 3.1, it was evident that most of the teachers of English (72%) thought that students in their classes did not like English Grammar, owing to the complexity and boring nature of English Grammar. On the other hand, 20% of the teachers indicated that their students liked English grammar, explaining that they instituted comprehensive coverage of content areas and always gave their students individual attention in the English Grammar.

From the teachers who indicated that their students disliked English Grammar, it was clear that negative attitude adversely affected the performance of students in the subject, resulting into poor grades in the examinations. On the other hand, the teachers who indicated to the contrary further indicated that the positive attitude enabled the students to improve on their grades in the subject as they were able to correct the mistakes pointed out by the teachers. This translated into good grades and motivation in the subject.

The teachers of English were further asked if they were making any effort to change the attitude of their respective students towards English grammar. All of them indicated in the affirmative. However, the explanations differed. For those whose students had positive attitude towards the subject, it was reported that the teachers were making efforts to ensure that the students are more motivated in order to improve their performance in the subject. On the other hand, for the teachers who indicated that their students disliked English grammar, it was reported that they were in the process of implementing various strategies like symposia, debates,

individual attention, regular exercises and remedial teaching in order to make these students like the subject. From the data obtained above, it was evident that in many schools, the students disliked English grammar probably due to the reluctance of the teachers to institute measures that would enable them improve their performance. It was therefore likely that the teachers ignored the pivotal role English Grammar plays in the communication competence of their students.

### 3.2 Influence of Mother Tongue

The teachers were asked to state their opinion on the extent to which mother tongue influences learning of English Grammar. The following data was obtained.

**Table 3.2: Extent of mother tongue influence on learning of English Grammar**

Extent of Influence	Frequency	Percentage
Very large extent	45	90%
Large extent	3	6%
Small extent	2	4%
No at all	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 3.2 indicate that most of the teachers (90%) were of the opinion that mother tongue, to a very large extent, influences the learning of English Grammar. Generally, all the teachers indicated that mother tongue has an influence in the learning of English Grammar, albeit to varying degrees. This explains the reason that most of the teachers of English in this Division, including the researcher, have concerns about the poor performance of students in English Grammar. However, all the teachers indicated that they do not use mother tongue in their instruction. This, they explained was due to the fact that they wanted to ensure that students under their care develop competence in the use of English language as well as exhibit a mastery of English Grammar. The teachers were asked to state what action they take when a learner uses mother tongue instead of English to express self. They all indicated that they applied a variety of punishments, ranging from buying story books to physical aversive punishment.

### 3.3 Problem Areas in English Grammar

The researcher sought to find out the major problem areas in English grammar. This was done by asking the teachers to instruct the students to write 500 word essay on the following topic: How I spent my last holiday and mark. The major problem areas that were identified by the teachers were as follows:

**Table 3.3: Major Problem Areas in English Grammar**

Grammar Aspect	Frequency	Percentage
Phrasal verbs	50	100%
Functions of auxiliaries	48	96%
Tense, aspect, and mood	41	82%
Modal verbs	40	80%
Collocations	36	72%
Size of lexicon	31	62%
Idiomatic usage	18	36%
Word derivation	11	22%
Slang and Colloquialisms	10	20%
Articles	0	0%

From the table 3.3, it is evident that all the teachers indicated that their students experienced problems in the use of phrasal verbs, while 48 of them representing 96% of the total respondents indicated that their students experienced problems in the use of auxiliaries. However, the teachers indicated that none of their students experienced problems in the use of articles. The teachers further explained that the other challenges that they faced in teaching English grammar in their schools included punctuation problems, poor handwriting of the students, inadequate time for practice, large classes and inadequate text books to cater for all the students during and after the lessons. Moreover, the measures that were reported to be put in place by the teachers in order to assist the learners overcome the challenges that they face in the specific areas in grammar were: peer tutoring, individual coaching for the above average students, punishment for careless mistakes and occasional remedial teaching.

### 3.4 Academic and Professional Qualifications of Teachers

The teachers were asked to state their peak professional qualification. The following response was obtained.

**Table 3.4: Peak Professional Qualification of teachers of English.**

Peak Professional Qualification	Frequency	Percentage
B.Ed	36	72%
KCSE	10	20%
Diploma	2	4%
Masters	2	4%
B.Sc	0	0%
P1 Certificate	0	0%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100%</b>

From table 3.4, the responses indicated that most of the teachers of English who taught in the sampled schools were holders of a bachelor of Education Degree (72%), followed by KCSE holders (20%). The finding further revealed that only 2 teachers, representing 4% were holder of a Masters Degree; while no teacher had either a Bachelor of Science Degree or a P1 Certificate. Moreover, the teachers indicated that they had never attended other trainings and workshops/ seminars related to the teaching of English in the last five years.

As far as years of teaching experience are concerned, the following data was obtained.

**Table 3.5: Years of Experience of Teachers of English**

Years of Teaching	Frequency	Percentage
Below 5 years	20	40%
6 – 10 years	15	30%
11 – 15 years	5	10%
16 – 20 years	5	10%
Above 20 years	5	10%
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100%</b>

The data in table 3.5 shows that most of the teachers of English (20%) in the sampled schools had not taught the subject for more than five years, while only 5 teachers, representing 10% had taught the subject for more than 20 years. For this reason very few teachers have experience in handling English Grammar completely.

### 4.1 Discussion

The purpose of this study was to establish the factors affecting the performance of secondary school students in English Grammar in Nyamaiya Division, Nyamira District. The objectives were to: investigate the attitude secondary school students have towards English Grammar; find out how mother tongue impacts on learning English grammar in secondary schools; establish the areas in English grammar that are problematic to students in secondary schools; and find out the academic and professional qualifications of teachers teaching English grammar to students in secondary schools in the study locale.

From the data collected, it was reported by 72% of the teachers that students in their classes disliked English grammar, while 20% indicated that their students liked the subject. However, 8% of the teachers were not sure of the attitude their students held towards the subject. It was further established that the negative attitude correlated with poor performance and vice versa. The evidence as brought out in the study concurs with the study of Mahamer (2004) that language learning attitude is one of the factors that affect the learning of the language. Moreover, it was established unlike the study in Japan, where the attitudes of 601 students toward their high school English learning experience were examined (Long & Russell, 1999), that students were relatively positive, with 70% indicating that their teachers could teach grammar effectively. However, more than 50% were negative in their response when questioned regarding their teacher's ability to teach oral communication effectively or make classes interesting and innovative. When questioned regarding their enjoyment of English class and level of confidence, the negative responses of students were double that of the positive ones.

The current study established that mother tongue, to a very large extent, influences the learning of English Grammar among students in Nyamaiya Division. This is reflective of the claims by Brown (2000) that "first language can be a facilitating factor and not just an interfering factor", and Schweers (1999) encourages teachers



to incorporate the native language into lessons to influence the classroom dynamic, and suggests that “starting with the L1 provides a sense of security and validates the learners' lived experiences, allowing them to express and themselves”. Generally, all the teachers indicated that mother tongue has an influence in the learning of English Grammar, albeit to varying degrees. However, all the teachers indicated that they do not use mother tongue in their instructions, unlike the findings of Schweers (1999) and others that it is common for EFL teachers to use the students' mother tongue as a tool for conveying meaning as a means of interaction both in English language institutes and in the classroom. This, they explained was due to the fact that they wanted to ensure that students under their care develop competence in the use of English language as well as exhibit a mastery of English Grammar.

In addition to the above, the teachers indicated that the major problem areas in English Grammar were phrasal verbs, auxiliaries, tense, aspect and mood, while articles did not pose a challenge to the students. The findings of the study confirmed the observation by McGuinness (2004) that phrasal verbs in English can cause difficulties for many learners because they have several meanings and different syntactic patterns. The problem areas, especially in tense, aspect and mood could have been due to a relatively large number of tense–aspect–mood forms with some quite subtle differences as reported by McGuinness (2004), which seems to be a universal problem. The teachers further indicated that the other challenges that they faced in teaching English grammar in their schools included punctuation problems, poor handwriting of the students, and inadequate time for practice, large classes and inadequate text books to cater for all the students during and after the lessons. It is a well known fact that inadequate resources have a direct negative impact in the outcome of learning in any subject. Just like in other schools, the poor performance in English Grammar among students in Nyamaiya Division might have stemmed from the inadequacy of educational resources, apart from the inherent student-specific factors that influence learning of a second language.

Munyao (2003) asserted that since the level of education attained by each individual varies, teachers of English also vary in their qualifications. In the present study, it was established that many of the teachers in secondary schools in Nyamaiya Division (72%) had a Bachelor of Education qualification. This, in Kenya, is the basic qualification for secondary school teachers. As Gaston (2006) observed, to be able to work as a professional, there is need for good training of teachers of English in which the student receives constant training, directed towards the objectives fixed by the society. This was reflected in the findings of this study. However, the teachers reported not to have attended workshops and seminars that boost their teaching skills. It therefore means that the teachers lacked in-service training in the field of English. According to Peraton et al., (2002) in-service training is beneficial to the teacher as it improves the teacher's general educational background, knowledge and understanding of their teaching subjects, developing teaching strategies and how to use new technologies, improved professionalism and ethics, providing knowledge and skills linked to the ever changing needs of a dynamic society.

## 5.1 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to establish the factors influencing the performance of secondary school students in English Grammar in Nyamaiya Division, Nyamira District. It was established that the poor performance by secondary school students in English Grammar in Nyamaiya Division was due to negative attitudes towards the subject, negative influence of mother tongue, inherent problem areas that are not well resolved by the teachers and inadequate resources for teaching English Grammar.

## 5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the researcher wishes to make the following recommendations:

- Teachers of English in Nyamaiya Division ought to implement strategies that would enable the secondary schools to foster a positive attitude towards English Grammar. These include remedial teaching, individualized attention, regular and age-appropriate exercises, public forums like symposia and joint tests.
- Given the extent to which mother tongue influences learning and performance in English, teachers of English and secondary school administrators in Nyamaiya Division ought to formulate language policies in their schools that would ensure that the students use English in most cases as this would boost learning and performance in the subject.
- The areas that are challenging to the students should be demystified by the teachers of English so that the students can see and appreciate their achievement in such areas.
- The school administrators ought to ensure that English is only taught by qualified teachers and that the teachers of English are allowed to attend workshops and seminars that would act as capacity-building

opportunities in order to sharpen their teaching skills.

The researcher recommends further research in the teaching and learning of English and particularly in the following aspects;

- The role of teachers in encouraging students to speak in English.
- The role of debating clubs in enhancing learning of both written and spoken English.
- The contribution of learning resources in enhancing mastery of English language.
- The role of parents in promoting the learning of English by their children.

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