



INFLUENCE OF PEER RESPONSE GROUPS' STRATEGY ON WRITING ACHIEVEMENTS IN KISWAHILI LANGUAGE AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN KISII COUNTY, KENYA

Abobo Francisⁱ

Doctorate Student, School of Education,
Department of Educational Management,
Policy and Curriculum Studies,
Kenyatta University, Kenya

Abstract:

Writing is fundamental to effective communication particularly in this era in which e-mail and other word processed documents are the norm rather than the exception in a workplace. Writing apprehension is a result not a cause. It is a result of lacking knowledge or understanding necessary to complete the writing task and the students' belief that writing is hard work. Writing is one of the four skills in Kiswahili language needed for written communication. However, previous studies point out that poor instructional strategies in Kiswahili language; not only limit the writing skills but also reduce students' curiosity in writing. Until then, little was known about the influence of peer response groups' strategy on students' writing essays. The purpose of this Paper, therefore, was to determine the influence of peer response groups' strategy on writing achievements in Kiswahili language among secondary school students in Kisii County, Kenya. To achieve this purpose, this paper sought to achieve the following objectives: to determine teachers' competence in applying peer response strategy in classrooms and describe how response peer groups' strategies impact writing in Kiswahili language. This paper adopted qualitative design. This paper was conducted in Kisii County secondary schools. The paper targeted secondary schools, teachers and form three students. The paper used interviews, observations and focus discussions to collect data. The paper held face to face interviews with teachers. Qualitative data was analysed thematically and findings were quoted directly in text. The major findings of this paper were that: peer response strategy enhance students' drafts, lead to meaningful revisions, increase learners' vocabulary and encourage students to write and revise drafts. This paper recommends that teachers ought to apply peer response groups' strategy in the teaching of Kiswahili language in classrooms so that to enhance students' writing achievements.

ⁱ Correspondence: email abobofrancis@yahoo.com, francisabobo7@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

Yan (2005) confirmed that education systems all over the universe emphasise writing for taking examinations only. Therefore, the main reason of writing is to pass examinations. This reduces writing to a product and receiving a grade from the teacher. Previous studies revealed that the most frequently used instructional strategy is lecture method. This was also confirmed by Mahmud (2010) who contended that realities of the 21st century present learners with the twenty-first century skills which demand learners to study skills which curriculum scholars call 21st century skills. Moreover, Mohmod (2010) argued that learners by their nature cannot be kept in a classroom where everything is monotonous and boring. Excitements and practices that support really life situations should be everyday experiences in the language classrooms. One of the instructional strategies that can help teachers to do these is peer teaching.

Greenward, Persky, Campell and Mazzaq (1999) revealed that writing is one of the most difficult skill that learners are expected to master in learning institutions. The difficulty in learning how to write competently is reflected in the data collected by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. For example, at the 4th grade level, slightly more than 60% of the learners evaluated were classified as "basic" writers, demonstrating that they only mastered partial skills and knowledge needed at the grade level. Another 16% of the 4th-grade learners scored below this basic achievement level. Similar findings were obtained at the 8th and 12th-grade levels. Their results point out that the average American learners who performed are not proficient writers, as the percentages of students who performed at or above the proficient level remained approximately 25% at each level.

Msanjila (2005) argued that poor teaching methods in Kiswahili language not only reduce the writing skills but also reduces students' interest in writing. Furthermore, he pointed out three crucial writing problems noted amongst students at Kigurunyembe and Morogoro secondary schools in Tanzania: misuse of capital letters, inadequate use of punctuation marks and explicitness. Their effect is more serious than the other problems because the intended meaning is misconceived. Moreover, he reiterated that these crucial problems arise from instructional strategies, and he suggested that writing problems can be reduced to a greater extent if students are taught writing skills through peer teaching.

Trappes-Lomax (1990) as cited in Michieka (2010) contended that a foreign language is a language which is non-indigenous to a particular community. It is not a mother tongue of its speakers, and unlike a second language; it is not used within the speech community. This specified the situation of either English or Kiswahili in many parts of Kenya. For most learners in Kenya, the school is the primary domain in which they get most of their exposure to English and Kiswahili language, often delivered by teachers who in most cases themselves may not be very proficient. From the

researcher's own experience of being nurtured in rural setting, he believed that English language was solely encountered in schools. Even though the use of English was strongly imposed in the schools, for practical grounds, teachers often applied mother tongue languages in the classrooms to get their messages across to learners. The same issue affects Kiswahili language too. Although majority Kenyans claim to be proficient in Kiswahili, there are still several people in Kenya who can hardly sustain a coherent conversation in either English or Kiswahili language, especially if they have not been raised anywhere close to the multilingual urban areas.

Kang'ahi and Indoshi (2012) observed that teaching methods influence Kiswahili performance in secondary institutions in Kenya and they further argued that the frequent application of the lecture methods in Kiswahili language in classrooms is one of the grounds for poor performance in Kiswahili language. The same comments are confirmed by the Kenya National Examinations Council (KNEC) report (2012) who revealed inconsistency performance in Kiswahili language in the following: firstly, in grammar, the examinees proved insufficient and they showed cases of mother tongue interference; secondly, most students could not construct sentences in compositions. The worst performed paper was paper 102/1 Insha (Composition). Furthermore, the reports contended that more than half of the candidates scored less than half of the total score of (40). This requires students to construct syntactically correct sentences, which should pass the message across. Hence, the student has no choice but to master the grammar of the language where the syntax is the backbone. In addition, the KNEC (2012) report pointed out a sharp decline in performance in Kiswahili language especially in Kiswahili insha.

Kobia (2009) argued that although the 2002 Secondary Kiswahili Curriculum (SKC) was supposed to be skill-based curriculum as opposed to academic-based curriculum, however, there is inadequate time provided to acquire and practice the skills. For instance, students in form three are expected to own their creative writing skills by involving themselves in functional writing like writing short stories, composing poems and drafting plays. But it is hardly practised in classroom because time allocated is not enough to cover all these skills. The performance for more than half of the candidates who take national exams every year is less than half of the total score which is (40) marks in Kiswahili insha (KNEC Reports, 2010, 2011 and 2012). The performance in Kiswahili insha is dwindling with average score being 15.05 percent (KNEC Report, 2010). The report argued that the country cannot afford to carry on producing secondary school graduates who cannot write or express themselves articulately in Kiswahili language.

The same comments are confirmed by Koross, Indoshi, and Okwach (2013) who revealed that writing is the least used of the four skills by the average language learners. However, the development of writing skills among learners depends on the instructional strategies applied in classrooms. Previous surveys of writing competence among learners in learning institutions point out that majority of the learners cannot write coherently. This increases concern regarding instruction approaches used in classrooms. The performance of secondary school students in Kiswahili language has

been an issue of great concern among many Kenyans. This paper therefore, determined the influence of peer groups' response strategy on students' writing achievement in Kiswahili language among secondary schools in Kisii County.

2. The Level of Literature Review

Anderson (2004) pointed out teacher's competency enhances a teacher's ability to create an environment that is fair, understanding, and accepting of diverse students, ideas, experiences, and backgrounds. Teachers have been found to be the most single important element determining students' achievement. Concerning the teaching approach, he argued that teachers ought set realistic objectives, give incentives to students for learning, apply various teaching methods, select participative forms of teaching, test and create didactic material, present information in a clear manner, combine words with pictures, use various teaching aids, maximise teaching time through systematic measures, assign work that will arouse the interests of the learners, monitor and evaluate the progress of students, set evaluation criteria for students and inform the students about them, and provide feedback to the students.

Oser et al (2006) observed that teacher classroom practices relate to student achievement. He noted that the government of Greece authorizes for student achievement through various examination bodies; therefore, learning institutions are held accountable through state-wide evaluations of all learners. Teachers are held accountable for performance of students in classrooms. Furthermore, he argued that the idea of highly qualified teachers is a good one, but compliance has not been widespread. Moreover, he revealed that some States in Greece have set low expectations for teacher quality, and sometimes it depends on what curriculum level in which a teacher teaches. The question which begs to be asked is what determines teacher quality? If a student is asked about a teacher who is highly qualified, they will most likely say that it is the teacher who spend extra time with them and who makes the classroom content clear and attainable. However a study by Beyer (2002) conversely noted that the unqualified teachers are the ones who are boring and don't connect with the learners. Lastly, he concluded that students don't care about educational certificates or years of experience in schools.

Darling, Hammond, Barak and Snowden (2005) confirmed that competent teachers are the most critical instruments in enhancing learners' achievement and ending the achievement gap. The difference between the most and least effective classrooms is the teacher. The most important component on students' learning is the quality of the classroom instruction, yet most learning institutions don't define what good teaching is? However, Ingvarson (1998) argued that not even teacher's quality has been defined, teachers also have not been given the opportunity to improve their practices in classrooms; and if not done; it is the student's achievement that might be harmed as a consequence.

Ambuko (2008) pointed out that a teacher is an investigator of the writing processes adopted by the students; teachers ought to use observations and discussions to identify successful methods to teach different aspects of the writing process. The same views is confirmed by Richard (1990) who asserted that teachers play different roles in classroom through different ways; he further presented a comprehensive list for teachers' role in a writing programme. The roles included: keeping writing task clear, simple and straight forward, teaching the writing process, developing meaningful assignments, outlining goals for each writing assignment and teaching the principles and guideline of writing. He reiterated that these would make a learner who has a good command of English language to effectively present ideas in an organized form, understandable to the examiner and this would logically translate into a better examination scores.

Hansen and Liu (2005a) confirmed that peer response help students to source for extra information and interact with each other'. Peer response groups' strategy is also an integral part of most composition classes. Earlier studies on Second language (L2) have revealed that implementation of peer review has the ability to improve student drafts, Furthermore, they noted that peer response strategy enable students to make comments that could lead to meaningful revisions: Revisions based on peer comments could improve students' vocabulary, organization and content. In addition, they observed that leading teachers and scholars have fostered peer response in writing classrooms as a way to encourage students to write and revise

Peckam (1996) argued that one productive way that a teacher can provide formative feedback for student writing is through the use of peer response groups. In these groups, students read and respond to each other's drafts of a particular assignment and may understand the assignment better. The same comments are confirmed by Sima (2001) who contended that in order for peer groups to be productive either in classroom or outside the class; the teacher needs to train students' specific procedures and objectives. Lastly, he noted that peer group response helps in generating rich information in matters of content, enhances inter-cultural communication, provides the learners a strong sense of group unity; and develops values of caring and sharing among students.

Steendam (2006) affirmed the effect of training in peer revision on revision and writing ability. He further observed that there are two categories of trained revision: the first category is the practice of letting students discuss each other's written work in progress and the second category is training in peer response when revising texts. The findings of these peer response showed that the two forms led to better writing and the results further pointed out that training have a positive significant effect on students' writing, because the essay reviewed by trained peers improved much more than the one reviewed by untrained peers.

Al-Jamal (2009) suggested on how peer response strategies could enhance learners' writing skills English language in the ninth-grade in Jordan: one of the suggestions is to take into consideration student's behaviour in planning peer response session. For example, when the discussion is unfocused and the comments are not

particular enough; teachers require intervening and producing learners who can explain what they mean. The sessions need to be geared towards the students' needs. Moreover, he advocated for deeper analysis of peers' comments as well as incorporate students' essays to provide more a tentative explanation for the differences between the two groups.

Hansen and Liu (2005b) argued that students' comments are primarily positive but also criticise the content under discussion, however, students do not always revise according to the reaction of their peers, and sometimes students resent the criticisms. Later in the term, advice from peers is more likely to be heeded rather than general criticisms, the students offer each concrete suggestions for revision. Their discussion was based on effective use of peer review in improving students' writing skills in English as second language. Until then, little was known about the influence of peer groups' response strategy on performance in Kiswahili language. Therefore, the current paper determined the influence of peer groups' response strategy on students' writing achievement in Kiswahili language among secondary school students in Kisii County.

3. Statement of the Problem

Secondary school students are unable to express themselves articulately in Kiswahili language despite being in secondary school for four years, leave alone the eight years in primary level. As a result their writing skills are weak, they need to be trained in the skills of writing. From my own experience as a teacher for Kiswahili language over 22 years has made me conclude that the current teacher dominance style of teaching in crowded classrooms with little learner centred activities; have made little impact in improving students' writing skills in Kiswahili language and therefore, the current state of writing Kiswahili essays in many secondary institutions in Kenya leaves a lot to be desired! Many students do not differentiate between writings as an activity and writing as a skill. Failure to appreciate this correctly causes some students to write Kiswahili essays the way they speak. Despite diverse efforts of teachers to address this issue of writing Kiswahili essays, still, students' performance in Kiswahili insha (composition) is below average out of the total mark (40). However, previous studies reveal that peer response groups' strategy enhance performance in writing essays in English compositions, and therefore, there is a dire need for teachers to use peer response group strategy to improve students' writing achievement in Kiswahili language. These indeed, worry me a lot and drive me to fill in gaps in the existing literature to determine the influence of peer response groups' strategy on students' writing achievement in Kiswahili language among secondary school students in Kisii County.

3.1 Purpose of this Paper

The purpose of this paper, therefore, was to determine the influence of peer response groups' strategy on students' writing achievements in Kiswahili language in Kisii County. The specific objectives for this paper were: to determine teachers' competence in applying peer response groups' strategy in classrooms and describe how response

peer groups' strategy impact writing skills in Kiswahili language. This paper is significant: it might make teachers adopt peer response groups' strategy in classrooms, provide national curriculum developers with better strategies of teaching writing skills in Kiswahili language and provide necessary knowledge and skills to teacher trainees concerning the application of peer response groups' strategy in teaching of writing skills in Kiswahili language.

4. Theoretical Framework

This paper adopted Piaget's (1932) theories on socio-cognitive conflict in small group learning; suggest that children learn a lot from each other. As learners interact directly with others, they become strongly motivated as they reconcile differences. Children understand their peers' ideas as they are more personal and less threatening than their teacher's ideas. From a constructivist view, Vygotsky (1978) argued that students' mental functioning develops first at the interpersonal level as they learn to internalise and transform the content with others. This becomes important in the development of new understanding and skills. His theory involved the structured use of groups in the learning arena. Vygotsky (1986) reiterated that learning best occurs when learner could make their own meaning by sharing their experiences with others through collaborative interaction.

5. Research Methodology

This paper was primarily a case study of three secondary schools (purposely selected). It was designed a qualitative study to generate qualitative detailed information. This paper utilised the qualitative research approach to collect data from teachers of Kiswahili language and form three students. This study was conducted in Kisii County secondary schools because its secondary schools have posted poor results in Kiswahili language over the past five years. The secondary schools have been attaining below average mean score out of the 12.00 points from the year 2009 to 2013. The study targeted three secondary schools in Kisii County, 30 teachers teaching Kiswahili language and 540 form three students. Teachers were proactively involved in the instruction of students and, therefore, were better placed to offer valid information regarding all aspects of teaching Kiswahili language. Form three students were instrumental in providing first-hand information with regard to the influence of peer response groups' strategy on writing achievement in Kiswahili language. The paper sampled three secondary schools, 15 teachers of Kiswahili and 120 form three students. The paper used stratified sampling, purposive sampling and simple random sampling techniques to select the participants for the study.

I myself held face to face interviews with 15 teachers of Kiswahili language of the three selected secondary schools randomly selected to seek information on the application of peer response groups' strategy in the teaching of Kiswahili language. I myself observed schemes of work, lesson plan, lesson notes and peer discussions

during the form three classroom instruction in three secondary schools to ascertain whether teachers apply peer response groups' strategy in their teaching lesson; and focused group discussion guides held in order to verify, refine and finally explore further information, in order to shape the final analysis. The 120 form three students from the participating schools, who were observed; were also invited to the discussion, which lasted for two hours. The discussion addressed how peer response groups' strategy enhances students' writing essays in Kiswahili language. Three out of the four focused groups managed to come for the session. The tape recorder was used for recording the details of the focused discussions and interactions. It also served as a back up to the notes from the focused discussion

The content validity was enhanced by the use of triangulation of the three instruments which were compared and cross-checked with the responses from respondents on same the issues in the three instruments. The reliability from interviews, observation checklists and focus group discussion guides were tested through the application of triangulation of responses from the three instruments. The research instruments were pre-tested in two secondary schools which were not included in the actual study. Piloting enabled me to have meaningful observations because; it helped me detect deficiencies in the instruments before the actual study. I myself held face to face interviews schedule with the teachers of Kiswahili language and which were tape-recorded and written down in interviews schedule forms for future reference. I myself observed the Kiswahili classroom teaching lessons on writing essays in form three classrooms to confirm whether teachers used peer response groups' strategy during the teaching of the Kiswahili lessons and recorded down in the classroom observation schedule sheet. I also observed and tape-recorded the discussion of students from the focus group guides discussions. The data collection procedure lasted for a period of ten weeks. The Qualitative data from interview schedules, classroom observation schedules and focused group discussion guides on the influence of peer response groups' strategy on students' writing drafts were analysed thematically and were quoted directly in text.

6. Findings and Discussions

Interview response granted 100 percent response rate. This was attributed to the fact that I myself personally interviewed the 15 teachers teaching Kiswahili language and those who were not present; I made follow up visits with the respondents. The paper sought teacher respondents' perspectives regarding teachers' competence in applying peer response groups' strategy in classrooms. In an interview with teacher respondents on teachers' competence in using peer response groups' strategy, two-third of the teacher respondents noted that many of the teachers are competent in areas such as: creating a conducive environment of diverse students, influencing students' achievements, providing incentives to learners, applying diverse teaching approaches, using student participatory strategies and peer response groups' strategies such as: peer editing, peer review on revision on writing ability, letting students discuss each other's

written in progress, peer response when revising the text and teaching students on how to revise response essays. The findings are in agreement with those of Anderson (2004). The same results were complimented with the researcher's observation on teachers' schemes of work, lesson plans and lesson notes. From the observation schedule, it was revealed that teachers' competence is exhibited through: setting evaluation criteria for students and informing students about them, providing feedback to the students and ability to recognise the diversity of learners and selecting the best instruction strategy possible for each of the student.

One third of the teacher respondents interviewed mentioned that a few of them teach writing skills through: investigating the learners' writing process, observing and discussing to identify successful methods in teaching different aspects of writings, keeping task clear, being simple and straight forward, teaching the writing process, developing meaningful assignments, outlining goals for each writing assignments and teaching the principles so as assist the learner have a good command of Kiswahili language. The results are in line with those of Ambuko (2008). Using observation schedules such as schemes of work, lesson plans and teachers' lesson notes during classroom instruction in form three in three secondary schools as case studies, it was noted that teachers investigate students' writing process, observe their writing keenly and discuss with the learners to discover productive strategies to teach diverse writing process, keep the instruction task clear, teach the writing process, develop meaningful assignments, outline goals for each writing assignments and teach guidelines of writing so as make students have good command of Kiswahili language. The outcomes are in accordance with those of and Richard (1990).

The paper sought teacher respondents' perspectives concerning on the impact of peer response groups' strategy on students' writing achievement in Kiswahili language. In an interview with 15 teachers. Half of the teacher respondents interviewed indicated that peer response groups' strategy enhance students' drafts, lead to meaningful revisions, increase learners' vocabulary, encourage students to write and revise, provide feedback for students' writing and make students read and respond to each other's drafts. The findings are in correspondence with those Peckam (1996). Less than half of the teacher respondents interviewed pointed out mixed results: students' comments were positive but included criticisms of the written content, however, a few students did not revise according to the reactions of their peers' and sometimes resented the criticisms. The paper outcomes are similar with those of Lui and Hansen (2005a).

The student focused group discussion sought information on how peer response groups' strategy impact their writing achievement. Three out of four of the groups which participated in the discussion mentioned that peer response groups' strategy helps in generating rich information in matters of content, enhances intercultural communication, provides the students a strong sense of group unity; and develops values of caring and sharing among students. The findings are in agreement with those Sima (2001).

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

From the findings of this paper, it can be concluded that many of the Kiswahili language teachers are competent in using peer response groups' strategy such as: peer editing, peer review on revision in writing ability, letting students discuss each other's written progress, peer response when revising the text and teaching students on how to revise response essay. It can also be concluded that peer response groups' strategy enhance students' drafts, lead to meaningful revisions, increase learners' vocabulary, encourage students to write and revise, provide feedback for students' writing and make students read and respond to each other's drafts, improve students' interaction with other students and promote peer teaching in classrooms.

Based on these conclusions, the paper recommends that teachers should be competent in applying peer response groups' strategy such as: peer editing, peer review on revision in writing ability, allowing peer discussion and peer response when revising the text.

The paper also recommended that teachers ought to apply peer response groups' strategy in the teaching of Kiswahili language in classrooms so that to enhance students' writing achievements.

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