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A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF EARLY LANGUAGE COMPETENCIES BETWEEN BOYS AND GIRLS IN PRE-PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN BUSIA COUNTY, KENYA

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Abstract:
This study aimed to find out the difference in early language competencies between boys and girls in pre-primary schools. This study used Joyce Epstein's parental involvement model to inform the study, while correlation design was used to guide the study. The target population was pre-primary school children plus their teachers and parents in 67 public schools and 40 private schools. Out of these schools, 7 public schools and 4 private schools were sampled. Early language skills checklist, questionnaire, and interview schedules were used for data collection. A pilot study was conducted in two primary schools. Content validity was used to determine the research tools' validity, whereas the reliability of the instruments was established using the test-retest method. When analyzing qualitative data, thematic analysis was used, while quantitative data was analyzed using inferential statistics, where frequencies, percentages, and means were generated. A t-test and correlation were used to test null hypotheses. Results revealed that female pupils were better in early language competencies, with a mean score of 2.35, as compared to boys, who had a mean score of 2.28 with a mean difference of 0.07. This outcome implies that the mean performance for female children was a bit higher than that of boys. The average language competency of both boys and girls was 2.32. The results were not significant at 0.05 level of significance and, therefore, were rejected, meaning that there was no significant difference in early language competency between boys and girls. Therefore, these results imply that gender did not influence children's

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early language competencies. The differences in language acquisition competencies between boys (M = 2.30; SD = .843) and children in private school (M = 2.34; SD = 1.060); t (252) = -.639, p = .523, two-tailed) was considered not significant, indicating no significant difference in children's early language competencies between boys and girls. The study concluded that female learners acquired higher early language competencies than male learners. Female learners had an advantage over males in the acquisition of early language competencies. The study recommended that Public school administrators and managers should encourage parents to offer voluntary services that enhance the acquisition of language competencies, encourage parents to make frequent calls to the school to inquire about their children's acquisition of language skills and attend organized language functions. The Ministry of Education needs to begin programs in schools where parents are encouraged to be actively involved in the acquisition of their children's language competencies.

Keywords: early language competencies, gender, learning activities, pre-primary school

1. Introduction

Early language skills play an important role in developing children's ability to learn and read (Maaleki, 2018). Early language skills, especially reading skills, play an important role in enhancing learners' academic achievement in later school years (Mkandawire, 2022). Language typically has four basic skills (Aydogan & Akbarov, 2014). These are listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Sadiku, 2015). Children who fail to acquire appropriate language competencies in their early years are at risk of developing low academic outcomes, behavioral problems, and social and emotional problems, which are likely to persist to maturity (Winstanley *et al.*, 2018). Children with persistent language problems in kindergarten will have a low level of continuous reading by the time they begin formal schooling. Similarly, learners with weak language skills will have difficulty understanding the learning process (Rintaningrum *et al.*, 2017). Thus, the importance of early language competencies cannot be underrated.

Globally, millions of learners are not achieving the expected language competence level despite the significance placed on the acquisition of early language competencies. Research has shown that 250 million learners have not acquired basic language competencies (UNESCO, 2017). For example, in Iran, only 65% of grade four learners were able to read for understanding (Mullis, *et al.*, 2017). Similarly, in India, pupils in grades four and five were not able to tell stories in English (Trefters-Daller *et al.*, 2022). In Pakistan, Shakil (2020) reported that primary school learners have inadequate competencies in reading English. Adelaide *et al.* (2022) ascertained that the reading skills of grade two Filipino school children were very disappointing, raising concerns about the quality of preschool language acquisition, which is the foundation for learning.

In Lusaka, Zambia, Zulu (2019) found that on selective reading tests in grades one to five, 55.6% of fifth graders performed below average, and only 44.4% scored average

or higher, while in writing, it was found that 94.9% scored below average and only 5% scored above average. In South Africa, Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) results (2019) indicated that only 22% of grade four pupils could read and understand (National Centre for Education Statistics, 2020). In rural areas of eastern Congo, reading and learning outcomes were very low, which is an indication that these learners lacked foundational language skills (USAID, 2020). In Zimbabwe, Gumede (2018) found that students in grade 9 had lower writing comprehension levels in public schools than in grade 4, yet the students were in form two. Still, in Tanzania, lower primary school learners did not exhibit unsatisfactory language competencies in that 64% of the sampled learners could not read or write (Mmasa & Anney, 2016), while in Uganda, many learners demonstrated low literacy competencies (Ssentanda *et al.*, 2020). The low language performance in later years of schooling could be linked to the inadequate language competencies acquired in pre-primary school years, which are the foundational stage of language development.

In Kenya, low language proficiency was evident in results from various studies. In Vihiga County, Anyiendah *et al.* (2020) found that elementary school learners performed worse in English tests than their peers in neighboring counties over time. In Kisii District, Obunga (2016) found that 3rd graders read below their grade level. Ondimu (2018) reported that the implementation of a competency-based curriculum in preschools was not good, which lays the foundation for the acquisition of early language skills. Still, in Kenya, Karanja found that the majority of grade seven learners in Bungoma County were experiencing reading difficulties (Karanja, 2021). The low language performance witnessed in later levels of schooling could be attributed to inadequate early language competencies at pre-primary school levels, which was the focus of this study.

In Busia County, achievement in language competencies was unsatisfactory. For instance, Karogo *et al.* (2020) found that learners 'performance in English was 475.3 while that of Kiswahili was 493.1, which was below the national standardized mean of 500. The low performance in language competencies at higher levels of education raised concerns over children's early language competencies in pre-primary schools in Busia County. In addition, studies on language conducted in Busia County had mainly focused on teaching approaches in primary and secondary schools (Wakasiaka, 2022), language use (Oliwa, 2022), and literacy environment (Mugambi, *et al.*, 2021). The studies conducted in Busia County to investigate the factors contributing to low language competencies had mainly focused on teaching approaches in primary and secondary schools and literacy environments and not on parental engagement. There was, therefore, a need to establish children's early language competencies in pre-primary schools in Busia County with a focus on parental engagement.

1.1 Objective of the Study

To find out the difference in early language competencies between boys and girls in pre-primary schools.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Review

The study was guided by Epstein's Framework of Six Types of Involvement model developed by Joyce Epstein (2009). The model checks out the interrelationship between the parent, school, family, local area, and children's learning results. Identifying the interdependency of the critical conditions, the model has six levels of parental commitment, specifically positive or nurturing home conditions, imparting or communicating information, chipping in or partnering in home learning activities, dynamic or assertive shared decision-making actions within the school, and teaming up with the local area or community partnerships. This model, involves parents' input in providing family support, considering the child's behavior, family dynamics, and environmental factors to help development, advancement, and education in all its forms, at all ages and grades. Communication, as envisaged by Epstein, entails two-way correspondence channels between home and school.

Parents and caregivers actively participate in their children's academic development through activities like goal-setting, reading, and completing school assignments. Dynamic or assertive shared decision-making actions within the school, she views schools, families, and community sharing responsibilities as significant in terms of the advancement of the children and acquisition of early language competencies. It involves activities such as participating in parent associations. Community collaboration involves identifying and matching resources to help schools and families in the community support learning. In Epstein's view, schools, families, and community sharing responsibilities are crucial to the progress of the children and the acquisition of early language competencies. This model is relevant to this present study as children's learning is heavily influenced by their home and school settings.

2.2 Empirical Studies and Knowledge Gaps

According to this study, gender is either male or female. Different scholars have done studies on gender and language competencies. In Germany, Bernhard and Bernhard (2021) investigated gender differences in the host languages of humanitarian immigrants. The primary focus of the research was on the mechanisms that explain why women and men have such different levels of language proficiency. The study used a refugee survey. The data was collected from 4,500 refugees arriving in Germany. They also used personal and family questionnaires to gather data. The information was examined using a regression model. Research shows that women are more productive than men. The study under review focused on adult refugees who were learning a second language in Germany abroad and who lacked clear knowledge of the factors affecting preschool children living in their home country.

In Iran, Fattahi and Nushi (2021) designed research on the potential effects of gender and language proficiency on metaphors used in writing by EFL learners. The study involved 23 students at the upper intermediate level and 27 students at the

intermediate level. Respondents were tested. The collected data were analyzed using multiple regressions and t-tests. Research showed that gender does not play a role in influencing learners' language use. This document considered that adult learners sampled were not aware of differences in language acquisition in children during the formative period when language acquisition time was active; unlike this study, the current study was conducted among early childhood learners in the formative stages, thus filling in the gaps in the literature.

Syamsuri and Bancong (2022) did research in Indonesia to find out why there are gender and geographical gaps in students' reading abilities. They employed a mixed-methods design based on sequential explanation. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were incorporated into this design. The participants in this study were 240 pupils and 8 educators from both suburban and urban settings. Male and female students' reading scores differed significantly ($t = 4.007$; $p = 0.000$), and scores also differed significantly ($t = 4.889$; $p = 0.000$) between students from rural and urban areas. The literature review was conducted in a Western country that lacked the image of Kenya, unlike the present study, which was conducted in the local context of Kenya, which fills this gap in the literature.

McTigue (2020) conducted a study to explore variations in preschool reading proficiency by gender, focusing on Norwegian boys' responses to formal instruction. The study involved 5,816 Norwegian learners, of whom 48.1% were female students with an average age of 6 years. The study found that the girls outperformed boys at school entry, but as they approached grade 2, the gap narrowed, but the girls remained ahead. The majority of meta-analysis studies showed a close-to-zero, negligible effect of gender on children's language competencies or no effect at all. The reviewed study contradicts the findings of a study conducted by Rinaldi, Pasqualetti, Volterra, and Caselli (2021) in Italy, which showed that girls were superior to boys in terms of language competencies. Hence, there was a need for this study to establish whether there was a statistical significance in language competencies between boys and girls.

Fonseca *et al.* (2023) conducted a multi-country analysis to identify gender differences in first-grade reading and math achievement of 2nd and 3rd-grade students. The dataset was drawn from countries in the Middle East, Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Quantitative comparison scores between boys and girls were performed. Research results showed that girls consistently outperformed boys in reading, but boys were slightly ahead of girls in mathematics. The study discussed above was conducted at the primary school level without information on the effect of gender on the acquisition of early language skills that are so active in early development. Noor and Bepari (2023) looked into the impact of gender on L2 learning among college students in Bangladesh. Skills in speaking, writing, reading, and listening in English will be evaluated. A basic random sampling technique was used for the research. Learner achievement levels were utilized as a measure of data collection. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was utilized. The results of this study showed no statistically significant disparity in English proficiency

between female and male learners. The aforementioned research was conducted in the context of higher education in Bangladesh; it did not include preschool.

Wang (2023) conducted a comprehensive study in China to identify the influences on preschoolers' linguistic growth. Studies have shown that a child's gender affects how quickly they pick up basic linguistic abilities. Although similar to the current study in that it involved preschoolers, the aforementioned investigation was carried out in China. The present study filled this gap by performing a similar study in the Kenyan context, thereby filling the gap in the literature. In addition, although the study review identified gender as a factor affecting language acquisition, it did not identify which gender category is superior to the other in terms of language acquisition. The present study filled in this gap by identifying differences in language acquisition between boys and girls, thereby filling this gap in the literature.

In Rwanda, Uworwabayeho *et al.* (2021) mapped the progression of the gender gap in language skills in secondary and primary schools in Rwanda using a multi-level exploratory study design. Both quantitative and qualitative research methods were used. The interviews were semi-structured with the donor community, government, and stakeholders at the national level. The outcomes of this research suggested that in some districts, boys do better than girls, while in other districts, girls do better than boys. The literature reviewed yielded conflicting results without clearly understanding which gender outperformed the other in terms of language skills. This research addressed a gap in the existing literature.

In Tanzania, Ndijuye and Beatus (2022) used a simultaneous mixed design to examine the linguistic disparities between rural and urban first graders in Tanzania. The study sampled 120 parents, 20 instructors, and 200 early graders. Data collection was performed through the use of semi-structured interviews, parent questionnaires, Early Grade Reading Assessments, and documentary analyses. The data was analyzed using analysis of variance (ANOVA). This study established that urban learners performed better than rural learners in all language skills tested and that girls also performed better than boys regardless of their area of urbanity. Unlike this study, this particular study was carried out in Kenya, hence providing more literature and adding knowledge to the existing literature.

In Kenya, Cherobon and Atoni (2022) used a causal-comparative research method to examine students' reading abilities in public primary schools in Nandi County. Two hundred students in grades six and seven were randomly selected to provide data. To collect data, observation schedules, and reading tests were used. Both stratified and simple random techniques were used. The study findings showed a slight difference in mean scores; that is, the mean score of girls was 81.89%, which was slightly lower than that of boys, who had a mean score of 82.04%, implying that boys outperformed girls in language competencies. The reviewed literature was conducted among primary school learners lacking knowledge about early language competencies, which are formed at the early childhood level, foundation stage, to give us a clear understanding of whether there

exists a statistically significant distinction in early language competencies between boys and girls.

2.3 Conceptual Framework

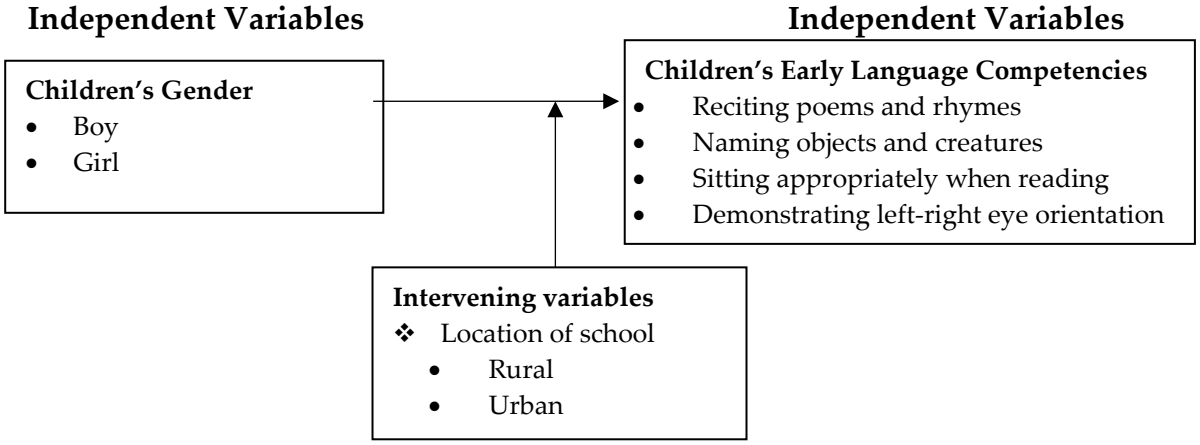

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

3. Methodology

3.1 Study Locale

The study was carried out in Samia Sub-county, Busia County. In the sub-county, children's ability to acquire early language skills in the early years of schooling was reported to be below the national standard average of 500 (Karogo *et al.*, 2020). Based on this available information, the site was selected for this study. Currently, the teacher: pupil ratio stands at 1:100. Although by the year 2018, the county had 71,519 pre-primary populations, only 51,160 attended pre-primary schools (Busia County, 2023). Samia Sub-County has a total of 50,821 males, 56,341 females, and 14 intersex individuals, totaling 107,176 persons (Rok, 2019).

3.2 Research Design and Target Population

The current study utilized a correlational explorative design to investigate the relationship between parental engagement and early language competencies. The correlational explorative design was utilized for fundamental and exploratory examinations to gather, sum up, present, and decipher information with the end goal of explaining. The study used a correlational explorative approach to show the relationship between school type, learners' gender, parental engagement, and learners' acquisition of language competencies. The target population for the study incorporated all 67 public and 40 private pre-primary II units, as well as all pre-primary II teachers, parents, and pre-primary II pupils, as per Busia County Director of Education Office (2020) records.

3.3 Sampling Techniques and Sample Size

The multi-stage sampling (multi-stage cluster sampling) method was employed to generate an appropriate sample size in three stages. A purposive sampling technique was utilized to choose Busia County and Samia Sub County. A stratified random sampling technique was used to group schools into public and private schools. The sub-county has 107 preschools affiliated with primary schools, including 67 public schools and 40 private schools. Public schools had a population of 2,540 PP II learners. Using a random sample method, the Samia Sub-County was chosen from sub-counties found in Busia County. Also, a random selection of the required number of pre-primary II teachers, pre-primary II pupils, and their parents in each school was done. Since there were 67 public and 40 private pre-primary schools in Samia Sub County, a simple random sampling technique was used to pick 7 schools based on their category (public or private). Seven public schools and four private were then picked on a random basis with eyes closed. The study involved a sample size of 7 (10%) out of 67 public-sponsored pre-primary school II (PP2) teachers domiciled in primary schools as well as parents of PP2 pupils and 4 (10%) out of the 40 private ones in the four wards in Samia Sub-county in primary schools. For pre-primary II school pupils, 172 (10%) out of 1,720 from pre-primary public schools and 82 (10%) out of 820 privately sponsored ones formed the sample size. According to Gay and Airasian (2000), a minimum of a 10% sample size is acceptable for descriptive research. For pre-primary II school teachers, one (1) respondent was sampled from every school (Table 1).

Table 1: Sampling Frame

Participants	Categories of Sponsorship	Populace (n)	Sample size	% Sample Size
PP II Teachers	Public	67	7	10%
	Private	40	4	10%
Parents of PP II Children	Public	1,720	172	10%
	Private	820	82	10%
PP II Children	Public	1,720	172	10%
	Private	820	82	10%
Total		**5187**	**519**	**60%**

3.4 Research Instruments

A questionnaire for parents of PP II learners, an interview schedule for PP11 teachers, and an early language competency assessment checklist for children were used to collect data. The questionnaires were appropriate for providing cheap, quick, efficient, and large amounts of information from a large sample and also allowed for standardization. The research used an early language competencies assessment checklist to ascertain whether some language competencies were attained during class activities. To get more in-depth information, a semi-structured interview was conducted with pre-primary II teachers.

3.4 Pilot Study

Before actual data collection, questionnaires, an interview schedule guide, and an early language assessment checklist were piloted in two schools randomly sampled from the sub-county. One was public, and the other was private. Two preschool teachers, six parents, and six learners who were not involved in the main study to prevent too much familiarity with the final data were used. The questionnaire, interview schedule, and observation checklist were all evaluated for their "face validity," or whether or not they measure what they claim to measure. All of the incorrect materials were revised or discarded (Bui, 2009). After the piloting phase, adjustments were made to ensure the face's authenticity.

3.5 Data Collection Procedures

The researcher first visited the sampled schools for familiarity and the issuing of consent forms to the head teachers, pre-primary II teachers, and parents through teachers for signing. The researcher, in collaboration with a pre-primary II teacher, set a date for carrying out the research. Data was collected in three stages within three weeks. During stage 1, the questionnaires were administered to preschool parents in their children's schools by the researcher during the morning hours. Before filling out the questionnaire, their informed consent was obtained, and an appropriate time to fill out the questionnaire was agreed upon. Rapport was also established with the respondents before administering the questionnaire by clarifying the intentions of the study and how to fill out the questionnaire. Questionnaires were administered to the parents. The researcher waited for them to fill the instruments and ensured that every item was filled before collecting them on the same day. With the help of the teacher, fill out a language competencies checklist to establish the language competence levels each sampled learner achieved in each identified and specified learning experience. After the administration of the questionnaires and language competence assessment checklist, selected pre-primary II teachers were interviewed after their informed consent was obtained. The interviewees were asked questions as per the interview schedule, maintaining the order and manner of asking questions among all the interviewees.

3.6 Data Analysis and Presentation

Subjective and quantitative information was used to break down information. Data was summarized using descriptive statistics, such as counts, averages, and percentages, and displayed in tables and figures within the text. Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). Interview data was evaluated for recurring themes. The following 0.05 significance level null hypotheses were developed and tested.

H01: There is no significant correlation between parental engagement and children's early language competencies.

Pearson's Product Moment Connection Coefficient was utilized to test null hypothesis H01.

4. Results And Discussions

4.1 Bio-Data of the Respondents

Bio-data of the respondents were analyzed descriptively using frequency and percentage as shown under the following sub-sections:

4.1.1 Distributions of Parents by Type of School

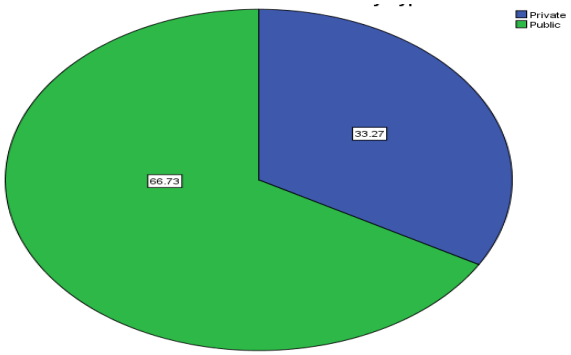

Figure 2: Distributions of Parents by Type of School

Figure 2 indicates that 66.73% of the parents were from public primary schools, while 33.27% of the remaining parents were from private primary schools. This is because public primary schools were in the study area compared to private schools. Hence, many public schools were selected to provide a fair data representation of the sampled schools.

4.1.2 Distributions of Children by Type of School

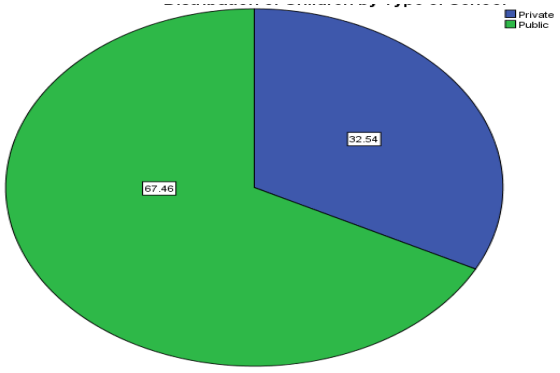

Figure 3: Distributions of Children by Type of School

Figure 3 shows that the majority of the children were in public primary schools (67. 46%), while (32.54%) were in private primary schools. This is because public schools were the majority of the sampled schools. Free education requires minimal financial support like buying uniforms and providing few academic requirements, unlike private education, where fees and facilities are bought by the parents.

4.1.3 Distribution of Parents by Age

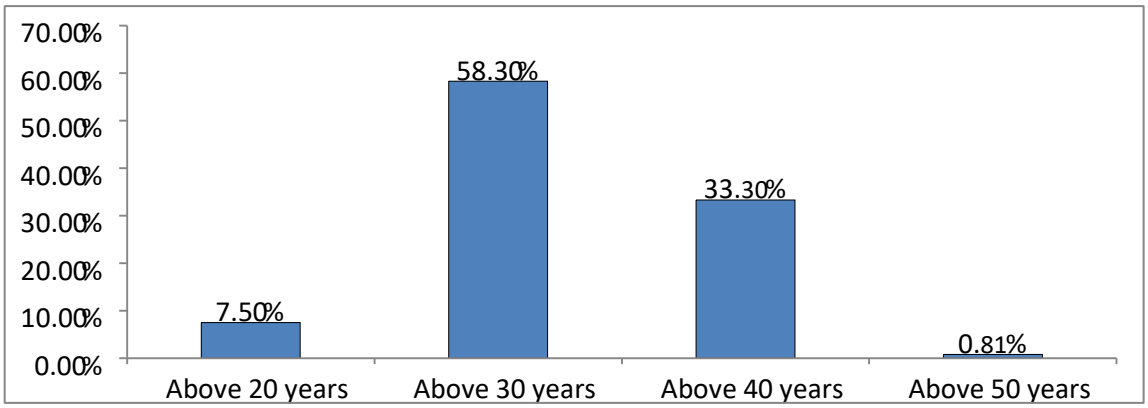

Figure 4: Distribution of Parents by Age

Figure 4 shows that the majority of the parents (58.30%) were aged above 30 years, 33.30% above 40 years, and the minority aged above 50 years (0.81%) and 7.60% above 20 years. This implies that at the age of 30 years and above, many young parents have started taking their children to lower primary school, including PP1, PP II, and grades 1 to 3. At the age of 40 years and above, the majority of the parents were parents in upper grades and secondary schools (UNESCO, 2020).

4.1.4 Distribution of Parents by Level of Education

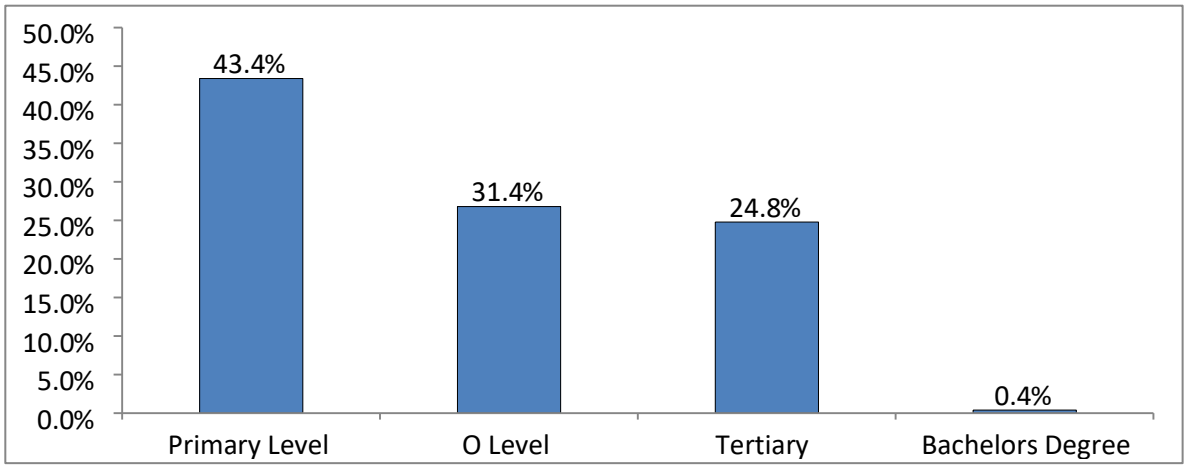

Figure 5: Distributions of Parents by Level of Education

The majority of parents (43.4%) had a primary level of education, as indicated in Figure 5. Secondary level (O level) was 31.4%, 24.8% had diplomas or certificates from tertiary institutions and only 0.4% were university graduates. This implies that most parents with low education levels either dropped out of school or did not continue due to the poverty observed in most parts of Busia County.

4.1.5 Distributions of Parents by Occupation

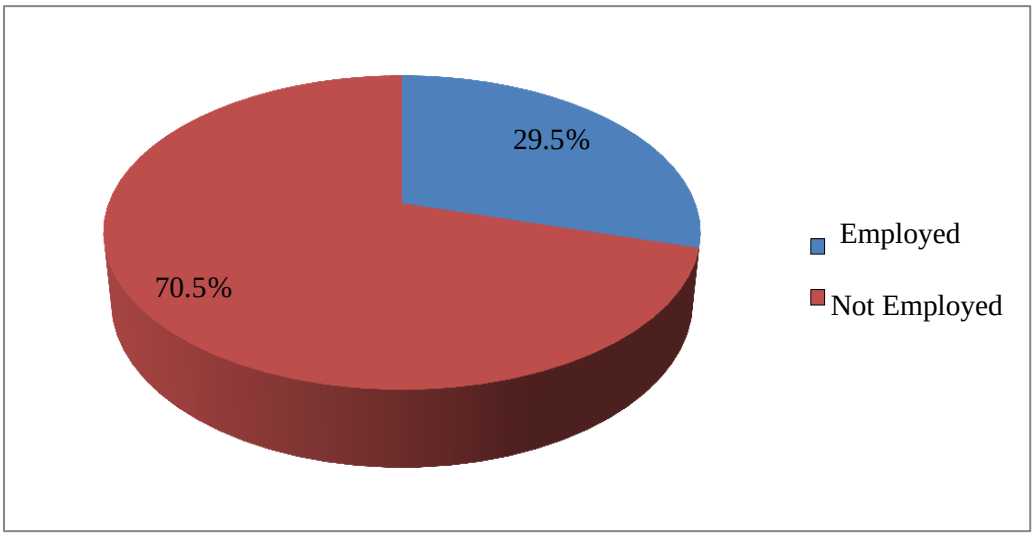

Figure 7: Distributions of Parents by Occupation

Figure 4.5 indicates that the majority of the parents (70.5%) were not employed, while the minority who were 29.5% were employed.

4.1.6 Distributions of Parents by Gender

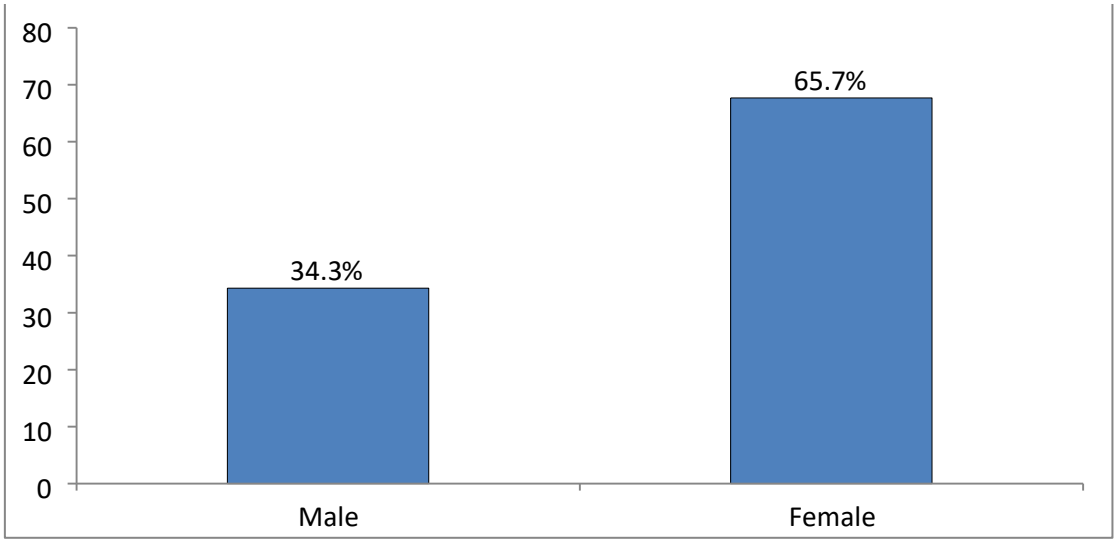

Figure 8: Distributions of Parents by Parents by Gender

From Figure 8, the majority of the parents (65.7%) were female compared to (34.3%) who were male.

4.2 Parental Engagement in Learning Activities and Children's Language Competencies

The key aim of this study was to explore differences in children's early language skills between boys and girls. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Mean Scores in Children's Early language competencies by gender

	No	Male Mean	Std dev	N.o	Female Mean	Std dev
Address questions after listening	122	2.04	.720	132	2.10	1.076
Retell a brief story	122	2.03	.749	132	2.09	1.007
Name objects, creatures, and colors	122	2.26	.870	132	2.32	1.029
Solve simple riddles	122	2.10	.786	132	2.22	1.06
Sit appropriately when reading	122	2.61	.868	132	2.64	1.027
Demonstrate left-right eye orientation	122	2.33	.876	132	2.40	.972
Read short syllables	122	2.25	.965	132	2.31	1.167
Write three to four-letter words	122	2.39	1.016	132	2.45	1.225
Match uppercase and lowercase letters	122	2.57	.852	132	2.67	1.015
Write simple cursive patterns	122	2.50	.836	132	2.55	1.141

Average mean scores of male and female learners were computed. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Mean Scores in Children's Early language competencies by gender

	Gender	N	Mean	Std Dev
Average Language Competencies	Male	122	2.28	.654
	Female	132	2.35	.945

Tables 3 indicates average language competencies between boys and girls. The result shows that female pupils were better in early language competencies, with a mean score of 2.35 as compared to boys, who had a mean score of 2.28 with a mean difference of 0.07. This outcome implies that the mean performance for female children was a bit higher than that of boys. The average language competency of both boys and girls was 2.32.

Interviews with teachers revealed some of the reasons why the means for girls were higher than that of boys. Some of the views were as follows.

> *"You find that girls have better listening skills than boys. This gives them an advantage over boys. Most of the girls in this class are good listeners. They are more attentive compared to their male counterparts. They often ask for clarity in case of failure to understand something well."* (Public School Pre-Primary Teacher 4)

> *"Girls' brains are wired in such a way that they have an advantage than boys. Because of this genetic makeup, they outperform boys."* (Private School Pre-Primary Teacher 8)

Findings from interviews with pre-primary school teachers in both private and public schools pointed out key reasons that may be responsible for girls outperforming boys in language activities. The reasons raised included; that girls possess better listening skills, girls are hardworking and mature than boys, girls are more of the opinion that language learning is fun than boys, girls are more obedient than boys, girls are more agreeable than boys, girls typically have more positive learning strategies than boys and lastly, female are more motivated to learn language than boys and differences in brain activity. The above-identified reasons give girls an advantage over boys concerning the acquisition of early language competencies. To determine the differences in the early language skills of boys and girls, a null hypothesis was stated and tested.

The null hypothesis was:

H_{01}: There is no significant difference in children's early language competencies between boys and girls.

The hypothesis was tested using a t-test at a 0.05 significance level. The result is presented in Table 4.

Table 4*:* Independent Samples Test of children's early language competencies by gender

		Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Average Language Competencies	Equal variances assumed	43.837	.000	-.639	252	.523	-.066	.103	-.268	.137
	Equal variances are not assumed.			-.648	34.029	.518	-.066	.101	-.265	.134

From Table 4, the difference in early language competencies was -.066 with a p-value of 0.523, two-sided). The results were not significant at 0.05 level of significance and, therefore, were rejected, meaning that there was no significant difference in early language competency between boys and girls. Therefore, these results imply that gender did not influence children's early language competencies.

The results of this study corroborate with those of Rinaldi *et al.* (2021), who did a study to compare the language skills of boys and girls. The results indicated that girls perform better than boys in language skills. Similarly, McTigue (2020) conducted a study to explore gender differences in early literacy, focusing on Norwegian boys in response to formal instruction. Research showed that girls perform better than boys during the preschool years. In addition, Fonseca *et al.* (2023), who performed a multinational analysis to identify gender differences in the math and reading achievement of 2nd and 3rd graders, found that girls consistently outperformed boys in reading ability. However,

the results of this study are not supported by the study of Uworwabayeho *et al.* (2021), who conducted a study to determine the gender gap in language skills. The results of this study indicate that boys learn better than girls. Similarly, Cherobon and Atoni (2022) conducted a study investigating the reading skills of students in public elementary schools. Research results showed that boys outperform girls in language skills. Mwoma (2017) also conducted a study to test children's reading skills. The results of the study showed that boys had slightly higher average reading scores than girls. Therefore, boys performed better than girls in terms of language skills, the results of which are contrary to the findings of this study.

In contrast, in Bangladesh, Noor and Bepari (2023) conducted a study to investigate the influence of gender on second language acquisition among university learners, and the findings showed that there was no significant difference between female and male learners in English skills. Interview results from the present study revealed that the following factors favored girls in language acquisition. These factors include girls possessing better listening skills, girls being more hardworking and mature than boys, girls having more of the opinion that language learning is fun than boys, girls being more obedient than boys, girls being more agreeable than boys, girls typically having more positive learning strategies than boys and lastly, female are more motivated to learn language than boys and differences in brain activity. This finding is supported by a study by Burman, Bitan, and Booth (2008), who found that the girls' brains processed and connected more than the boys' brains did.

5. Conclusions

This study revealed that there was no significant difference in early language competencies between boys and girls attending pre-primary schools in Busia County, Kenya. This finding suggested that current educational practices in the region effectively support both genders in acquiring foundational language skills during their early years of schooling. The results highlighted the importance of inclusive teaching strategies that cater to diverse learning needs, irrespective of gender. It was concluded that female learners acquired higher early language competencies than male learners. Female learners had an advantage over males in the acquisition of early language competencies.

6. Recommendations

1) The findings revealed low parental engagement from public schools compared to parents from private schools. Therefore, there is a need for public school managers and administrators to create organized functions where parents are actively involved in enhancing learners' acquisition of language competencies.
2) Public school administrators and managers should encourage parents to offer voluntary services that enhance the acquisition of language competencies,

encourage parents to make frequent calls to the school to inquire about their children's acquisition of language skills and attend organized language functions.

3) The Ministry of Education needs to begin programs in schools where parents are encouraged to be actively involved in the acquisition of their children's language competencies. The language activity programs should have activities where learners are supposed to work with their parents/guardians to accomplish the language tasks.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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