LEVEL OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE OF CLASS SEVEN LEARNERS WITH HEARING IMPAIRMENT IN ENGLISH COMPOSITION WRITING IN NYANZA PROVINCE, KENYA

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ABSTRACT

The Kenya Certificate of Primary Education results over the years show that learners with hearing impairment perform poorly in English compared to their hearing counterparts. In Nyanza Province schools for learners with hearing impairment, the highest mean score in English in the period 2005-2007 was 47.72%. A summary of the national examination scores in 2009 and 2010 put English composition scores at 40.48% and 42.70% respectively. The purpose of this study was to establish the level of English communicative competence of class seven learners with hearing impairments in Nyanza Province, Kenya. A descriptive survey design was used in this study. The study was carried out in Nyanza Province. Target population comprised 71 learners and 5 teachers of English. Saturated sampling technique was used to select 64 learners and 4 teachers of English. Data was collected using document analysis guides and questionnaires. To establish reliability, a pilot study was carried out with 1 teacher and 7 learners which constituted 10% of the population who did not form part of the study. Research instruments were presented to experts in the department of Special Needs Education, Maseno University for face validity judgment. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, means and percentages were used to analyze quantitative data. Results revealed that learners with hearing impairment had low level communicative competence in creative writing in spelling, vocabulary choice, vocabulary range, sentence construction, coherence and punctuation. Further, learners exhibited ability to recognize format in functional writing. This study concluded that the level of learners’ communicative competence in written English was below average. The recommendations of this study were that; teacher should be consistent and proficient in English, English language vocabulary acquisition and use should be deliberately taught and that more visual aids be used to enhance understanding of concepts. The outcome of this study may be useful to educators in the improvement of teaching and learning English composition writing among learners with hearing impairment.

Key words: communicative competence, discourse, grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, composition, writing
Introduction
Communicative competence is made up of four interrelated and interdependent components; grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence. Therefore, both the teacher and the learner ought to possess a level of competence in all four components of communicative competence for meaningful discourse to go on in the classroom. Citing Cummins (1984), Brown (2000) argues that there is a distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). He argues that BICS is the communicative capacity that all children acquire in order to be able to function in daily interpersonal exchanges. On the other hand, CALP is the dimension of proficiency in which the learner manipulates or reflects upon the surface features of language outside of the immediate interpersonal context. Therefore, grammatical competence includes knowledge of lexical items and rules of morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar, semantics and phonology, which means, mastering the linguistic code of language. Discourse competence complements grammatical competence. It is the ability to connect sentences in stretches of discourse and form meaningful text out of a series of utterances. Sociolinguistic competence is the knowledge about the socio-cultural rules of language and discourse. Sociolinguistic competence requires the understanding of social context in which language is used, roles of participants, the information they share and the function of the interaction. Children learn socio-cultural rules of language and discourse naturally as they learn to communicate with family members. Citing Mitchell & Karchmer (2004), Medell and Flexer (2008) observes that over 90% of children with HI are born to hearing parents who have no prior experience of sign language and cannot provide the sign language input required. Therefore, with a common communication ground missing, children grow up impoverished in the rules of their first language.

Literature review
Hochgesang (2007) reported that learners with hearing impairment do not always have good English writing skills because they did not have an accessible first language. In her argument she says that learners with hearing impairment are not stupid as some presume, rather, it is their lack of readiness to work with a second language like English that disadvantages them. In addition, the teachers in the schools for the deaf in Kenya are usually inadequately trained and unmotivated and the community does not understand learners with hearing impairment either. On the other hand, Adoyo (2004) reports that teachers with hearing impairments often have a teaching style that enhances the attention learners with hearing impairment pay to classroom instruction, so they deliver more time on task. The success of teachers with hearing impairments is seen as a result of both the language competence and use of deaf-world attention-getting behaviors like tapping the pupils on the shoulders and turning the lights on and off appropriately. These studies (Hochgesang, 2007; Adoyo, 2004) considered the language used for teaching learners with hearing impairment but did not establish the communicative competence of learners with hearing impairments in English composition writing. This study proposed to establish the communicative competence of class seven learners with hearing impairment in English composition writing.

Research has shown that language development is important when considering factors that are important in teaching children with hearing impairment because language development plays an important role in a child’s literacy learning. Children with hearing impairment acquire language in different ways depending on the home environment. Language development is contingent on...
frequent, consistent, and accessible communication (Sandra, 2005). Children with hearing impairment need linguistically rich environments in order to acquire sign languages. Most children (90%) with hearing impairment have got hearing parents and are therefore language deprived whether the language is spoken or signed until they start school leading to a delay in language development. The early development of language enables a child to develop effective and orderly reasoning which is important in composition writing (Medell & Flexer, 2008).

In a study by Burman, Nunes, and Evans (2006), it was noted that children with congenital-profound hearing impairment whose First Language (L1) is British Sign Language (BSL) need to be literate to communicate effectively in a hearing society. They hold that both spelling and writing skills of such children can be limited to an extent that no assessment method could adequately appraise their competence. There is need therefore for instruments to be created that could aid assessment to support teachers in setting objective for their learners with hearing impairments’ writing development. Otieno (2010) agrees that learners with hearing impairments’ lack of proficiency in English are affecting their performance in examinations. In addition, the choice of teaching strategies and availability of resources such as teacher aides, nursery aides, interpreters, note-takers and audio-technicians have an effect on how much learning takes place (Petty, 2004; Otieno, 2010). Petty (2004) suggests a wide range of strategies from which a teacher can choose: demonstration, discussion, questioning, group work, games, role play and drama, shared reading and guided discovery.

According to a study by Abaya (2006), English composition writing requires a mastery of grammatical rules that can only be achieved through the instructional process. Abaya further argued that if the general objective of teaching English is to be met, learners need to learn not only the effective use of the main grammatical structures like sentences, clauses, phrases and words, but also the ability to write logically and coherently. Proper sequencing of lexical and grammatical items enhances coherence and cohesion of ideas. This position is supported by Gathumbi and Masembe (2005), who hold that a good writer should observe patterns of word order and word structure, demonstrate a good command of sentence structure and preserve coherence both within and in between sentences to give meaning to text. These are requirements for teaching and learning both creative and functional writing. Functional writing is an exercise in which the learner is expected to use a specified format. The learner is expected to use the format correctly in order to score marks (Bullon, Fox, Manning, Murphy, Urbom, Marwick and O’shea, 2005). For learners with hearing impairment, mastering the proper sequencing of lexical and grammatical rules requires patient and deliberate instruction. Choice and use of appropriate strategies is important in their learning. Studies by Petty (2004) and Otieno (2010) explored the strategies that may be used to teach hearing learners and learners with hearing impairment in general. The current study however, proposed to establish the strategies used in teaching English composition to learners with hearing impairment.

The absence or inadequacy of effective communication is a major problem especially for those with pre-lingual deafness. Failure by learners with hearing impairment to measure up to required standards is embedded in the lack of teachers competent in classroom language. Teachers of learners with hearing impairment have a common complaint about teaching their pupils to write English (Hochgesang, 2007). According to them pupils with HI fail to grasp how a written language has its own grammar and that they cannot simply transcribe Kenya Sign Language (Adoyo, 2002; KDRC, 2009). Learners are expected to show communicative competence in both creative and functional writing. Creative writing refers to the type of compositions in which
learners are free to imagine and produce new ideas and stories. Apart from the topic provided, the learner is responsible for the direction the story takes. It is generally presented in prose form though the writer may use dialogue once in a while to break monotony or emphasize a point (Bullon et al, 2005).

**Methodology**

The study used a descriptive survey design. Kothari (2004) defines survey as a procedure or a combination of procedures such as questionnaires, interviews and observations. Surveys are research that is concerned with describing, recording, analyzing and interpreting conditions, relationships, opinions, processes and effects that exist or existed. Saturated sampling technique was used to select 64 learners and 4 teachers. Saturated sampling is a non-probability sampling technique in which all members of the population are selected because they are too few to make a sample out of (Orodho, 2009). Tools of data collection used in this study were; document analysis guides and questionnaires. Descriptive survey was used in this study to seek opinions and find out facts on communicative competence of class seven learners with hearing impairment in English composition writing.

**Research Results**

Level of communicative competence was considered as a factor that may affect the communication between the learner and the teacher during the learning process and as a result, pose as a challenge to the learner. Learners were asked to indicate whether their teachers were competent in both English and Kenya Sign Language. On teachers’ communicative competence, results from Table 18 shows that 17 (26.56%) of the learners were undecided on whether their teachers were competent in KSL and SEE. Another 14 (21.88%) disagreed, 11 (17.19%) agreed, 9 (14.06) strongly disagreed and only 10 (15.63%) of the learners strongly agreed that their teachers were competent in both KSL and SE. These results are an indication that teachers of learners with hearing impairment lacked the level of competence necessary for communicating concepts in English composition effectively to the learners. This is supported by Adoyo (2004) who reports that the reason for failure of learners with hearing impairment is lack of an appropriate language of classroom communication. He further suggests that KSL be used for instruction of learners with hearing impairment. Therefore, if teachers lack proficiency in the languages used in the classroom, learners may not easily access the curriculum content.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement:</th>
<th>SA n</th>
<th>A n</th>
<th>U n</th>
<th>D n</th>
<th>SD n</th>
<th>T n</th>
<th>mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use of KSL interferes with English Composition writing</td>
<td>19(29.65)</td>
<td>10(15.65)</td>
<td>2(3.12)</td>
<td>12(18.75)</td>
<td>18(28.15)</td>
<td>61(95.3)</td>
<td>3.0000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I prefer KSL for instruction in English composition</td>
<td>28(43.75)</td>
<td>20(31.25)</td>
<td>5(7.81)</td>
<td>7(10.93)</td>
<td>1(1.56)</td>
<td>61(95.3)</td>
<td>4.0984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our English teacher is proficient in giving</td>
<td>15(23.43)</td>
<td>10(15.65)</td>
<td>11(17.18)</td>
<td>15(23.43)</td>
<td>10(15.65)</td>
<td>61(95.3)</td>
<td>3.0820</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Instruction in English composition

It does not matter what language the teacher uses provided he/she can sign.

Our English teacher is proficient in both KSL and SE.

I prefer SEE for instruction in English composition.

I can write well in English.

Table 1 shows that most learners 28 (43.75%) preferred the use of KSL as a language of instruction as compared to 19 (29.68) who preferred SE. Many learners 20 (31.25%) were not of the opinion that SE should be used for instruction. On whether their English teacher was proficient in using English for instruction, the learners were of divergent opinions. There was an equal number 15 (23.43%) who strongly agreed and who disagreed respectively. There was also an equal number 10 (15.65%) who either agreed or strongly disagreed. Few learners 11 (17.18%) were unsure whether their English teacher was proficient in English.

Learners’ communicative competence was established by use of document analysis guides. The documents analyzed were creative compositions and functional writing exercises. The guides outlined the various aspects to be analyzed. Learners’ competence on various English language and formatting skills were summarized in graphs.

Concerning spelling, 27 (42.19%) of the learners had low level competence, 19 (29.69%) had very low level competence while 16 (25%) had medium level competence. Only 2 (3.13%) of the learners had high level competence and none 0 (0.0%) had very high level competence in spelling. A summary of learners’ competence in various English language skills are presented in bar graphs. Figure 1 summarizes learners’ competence in spelling English words.
From Figure 1 the results show that a majority of the learners 27 (42.19%) had low level ability to correctly spell the words they knew and used. There were 19 (29.69%) learners with very low level spelling ability. Only 16 (25%) of the learners had medium level competence in spelling words in English. However, there were 2 (3.13%) of the learners who had high level competence in spelling and none had very high level competence. This indicated that learners had challenges in spelling English words. Deviant spelling is equated with ignorance, lack of intelligence or carelessness. Gathumbi and Masembe (2005), hold that some instances of wrong spelling are caused by wrong pronunciation. Learners with hearing impairment may not benefit from pronunciation because they lack auditory feedback. The following examples support the fact that wrong pronunciation may lead to wrong spelling:

1. **siade** instead of **said**
2. **prombles** for **problems**
3. **lrean** for **learn**
4. **harnwork** for **hardwork**

It would be possible to excuse such spelling mistakes if they appeared in the text once or twice, but since they appeared many times, it was clear that the learner wrote what they knew and did not think they were writing the wrong spelling at all. Learners with hearing impairment showed that they knew the words because they used all the letters required. However, their inability to arrange these letters correctly maybe attributed to the fact that they may never have heard the word before. Figure 2 summarizes the learners’ competence in vocabulary choice.
Fig.2: Levels of Learners’ competence in vocabulary choice

Figure 2 revealed that forty two 42 (65.63%) learners had very low level competence in vocabulary choice which made their written work irrelevant and incoherent. There were 16 (25%) learners with low level competence in vocabulary choice, another 3 (4.68%) with medium level competence and only 3 (4.68%) learners had high level competence in vocabulary choice. There were 0 (0.0%) learners with very high level competence in vocabulary choice. These results revealed that learners with hearing impairment had challenges in choosing the right vocabulary required to write on specific subjects. This is supported by Hochgesang (2007) who reported that learners with hearing impairment are not stupid but lack readiness to work with a second language. Learners of a second language would need proper instruction and a lot of practice before they are ready to work with a second language. Figure 3 summarizes the learners’ competence in vocabulary range.

Fig.3: Levels of Learners’ competence in vocabulary range
Figure 3 shows that most learners 44 (68.75%) displayed very low level competence in English vocabulary range, fifteen learners 15 (23.44%) had low level competence vocabulary range and 5 (7.81%) learners had medium level competence in vocabulary range. None of the learners 0 (0.0%) had either high or very high level competence in vocabulary range. This meant that they used the limited vocabulary they had repeatedly. Constant repetition of words and phrases by learners could be attributed to learners’ lack of adequate knowledge of the second language, English. As a result, Learners’ ability to communicate effectively was hindered. This is supported by Irokaba (2006) who reported that communication between teachers and learners is hindered because of learners’ limited knowledge of the second language (L₂).

Learners’ competence in sentence construction was also considered as one of the skills necessary for composition writing. Figure 4 summarizes the learners’ competence in sentence construction.

Figure 4 shows that many learners 47 (73.44%) had very low level competence in sentence construction while 13 (20.31%) had low level competence and only 4 (6.25%) had medium level competence in sentence construction. None of the learners 0 (0.0%) had either high or very high level competence in sentence construction. This indicated that learners had challenges constructing correct sentences in English. This further hindered their ability to communicate their ideas effectively. Many sentences were written in KSL structure revealing serious mother-tongue interference. Learners’ low level competence in sentence construction could be attributed to their lack of knowledge of rules of morphology, syntax, semantics and discourse competence. This is in contrast to the view held by Brown (2000) that, for learners to write correct sentences, they need knowledge of discourse competence, that is, the ability to connect sentences in stretches of discourse and form meaningful text out of a series of utterances.

Learners’ low level of competence in sentence construction affected their level of competence in coherence. Fig. 5 presents the findings.

**Fig.4: Levels of Learners’ competence in sentence construction**

Figure 4 shows that many learners 47 (73.44%) had very low level competence in sentence construction while 13 (20.31%) had low level competence and only 4 (6.25%) had medium level competence in sentence construction. None of the learners 0 (0.0%) had either high or very high level competence in sentence construction. This indicated that learners had challenges constructing correct sentences in English. This further hindered their ability to communicate their ideas effectively. Many sentences were written in KSL structure revealing serious mother-tongue interference. Learners’ low level competence in sentence construction could be attributed to their lack of knowledge of rules of morphology, syntax, semantics and discourse competence. This is in contrast to the view held by Brown (2000) that, for learners to write correct sentences, they need knowledge of discourse competence, that is, the ability to connect sentences in stretches of discourse and form meaningful text out of a series of utterances.

Learners’ low level of competence in sentence construction affected their level of competence in coherence. Fig. 5 presents the findings.
Fig. 5: Levels learners’ of competence in coherence

Results from Figure 5 reveal that 43 (67.19%) learners had very low level competence in coherence. There were 20 (31.25%) learners who had low level competence only 1 (1.56%) of the learners who displayed medium level. There were 0 (0.0%) learners with either high or very high level competence in coherence. These results reveal that learners had very little knowledge of all the rules required to produce coherent compositions. Low level competence in coherence could be attributed to inconsistency in the languages used in the classroom and the difference between sign language and English structure. Lozanova and Savtchev (2009) support the results of this study when they report that sign languages have a grammar and syntax that differs from that of spoken languages, which can confuse learners. Further, Ali, Okwaro and Adera (2003) support the results of this study when they point out that because of the gaps that exist in the relationship between KSL and English, a native KSL signer, who is learning English, is likely to make some grammatical and lexical mistakes.

Low level competence in coherence was closely related to low level competence in punctuation. Figure 6 summarizes the learners’ competence in punctuation.
Fig. 6: Levels of learners’ competence in punctuation

Results in Figure 6 show that learners 44 (68.75%) had very low level competence in punctuation. There were 16 (25%) learners with low level competence and 4 (6.25%) with medium level competence in punctuation. There were 0 (0.0%) learners with either high or very high level competence in punctuation. The results on the level of learners’ competence in punctuation of this study is negated by Vikiru, Omwoyo, Oburu, & Oyoo (2007) who report that punctuation is the use of certain set marks in a piece of writing to bring out the meaning clearer to the reader. The marks include; capitalization, final marks (full stop, question mark, exclamation mark), the comma, quotation marks, hyphen, apostrophe, the semi-colon the colon and parenthesis. Learners presented compositions that often had whole paragraphs without any of the basic punctuation marks such as; the comma, the capital letter, the full stop or the question mark. This made their compositions difficult to comprehend.

Results from the documents analyzed indicated that learners lacked grammatical competence in English. Brown (2000) negates the results of this study as he states that grammatical competence is the understanding of lexical items of a language, rules of morphology, syntax, sentence structure and semantics. Learners also lacked discourse competence which requires connecting sentences in stretches of discourse to form meaningful text. This study found out that learners lacked communicative competence which could be attributed to inconsistency in the choice of languages used in the classroom during English composition lessons.

In functional writing, the study considered the learners’ competence in using the correct format and recorded results as to whether the features in the format were used correctly, incorrectly or were not used at all. A document analysis guide was used to find out learners’ competence in formatting a letter correctly. The following components were observed and rated as indicated; Correct usage = 3; Incorrect usage = 2; Not used = 1. Only three points were used in this guide because in formatting, features are either used correctly, incorrectly or not used at all. Table 2 presents a summary of the results.
Table 2: Learners’ competence in functional writing:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Correct usage</th>
<th>Incorrect usage</th>
<th>Not used</th>
<th>Total (N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Address</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>(68.75)</td>
<td>05</td>
<td>(07.81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Date</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>(65.63)</td>
<td>05</td>
<td>(07.81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Salutation</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>(32.81)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>(20.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Introduction</td>
<td>08</td>
<td>(12.50)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>(31.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Body/ paragraphing</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>(35.94)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>(21.88)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Conclusion</td>
<td>04</td>
<td>(6.25)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>(31.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Signing off</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>(37.50)</td>
<td>06</td>
<td>(09.38)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 indicates that most learners 44 (68.75%) were able to address the letters correctly and 42 (65.63%) learners dated their letters correctly. Many learners however, had difficulties writing an introduction and a conclusion to the letters they wrote. There were 20 (31.25%) learners who wrote the introduction incorrectly and 36 (56.25%) who did not write an introduction at all. Similarly, there were 20 (31.25%) learners who wrote the conclusion incorrectly and 40 (62.5%) who did not write a conclusion to the letters. It is also notable that learners ability in writing the general body of the letter and paragraphing was average with 23 (35.94%) paragraphing correctly, 27 (42.19%) missing paragraphs and 14 (21.88%) paragraphing incorrectly. Results in Table 20 reveal that learners were able to recall and apply more information from a lesson on functional writing than from a creative writing lesson. This was attributed to the standardized nature of functional writing formats or layout. Learners showed a mastery of the use of visually observable features such as; address, date, salutation, paragraphs and signing off than in the areas of writing an introduction and a conclusion.

Discussion
The objective of this study was to find out the level of communicative competence of class seven learners with hearing impairments in English composition writing in Nyanza Province, Kenya. Learners are expected to display communicative competence in both creative and functional writing. This study found out that:

i. Majority of learners with hearing impairments had very low level of communicative competence in the basic skills required for English creative composition writing; spelling 19(29.69%), vocabulary choice 42(65.63%), vocabulary range 44(68.75%), sentence construction 47(73.44%), coherence 43(67.19%) and punctuation 44(68.75%).

ii. Majority of the learners had a good mastery of the use of certain features of functional writing such as writing the address 44(68.75%) and date 42(65.63%) in the correct position. However, many learners 36(56.25%) had challenges writing the introduction, 40(62.50%) did not write the conclusion to the letter and 34(53.13%) did not sign off.

iii. Although 15(23.43%) learners strongly agreed and 10(15.65%) agreed that their English teacher was proficient in English, more learners were of the contrary view with 11(17.18%) undecided, 15(23.43%) disagreeing and 10(15.65%) strongly disagreeing.

Conclusions and Recommendations
This study concluded that learners with hearing impairments had challenges communicating in written English especially in creative writing. However, these learners had less challenges in
functional writing which laid emphasis on observable formats. This study also concluded that the learners’ lack of communicative competence in writing English composition maybe related to teachers lack of communicative competence in languages used for instruction and strategies for teaching writing to learners with hearing impairments. This study recommends that: English language skills be taught deliberately to learners with hearing impairments, emphasis be laid on use of more visual aids in teaching, teachers of learners with hearing impairments make deliberate effort to improve communicative competence and strategies for teaching.

REFERENCES


