

# The Influence of Language use in Functional Writing Skills on Students' Performance in Kiswahili in Secondary Schools in Kenya.

\*Consolata Ojwang<sup>1</sup>, and Kisilu Kitainge, PhD<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>PhD student, University of Eldoret, Kenya

<sup>2</sup>Senior Lecturer, University of Eldoret, Kenya

\*Corresponding Author

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## ABSTRACT

Functional writing has been given prominence in the Kenyan Secondary school Kiswahili syllabus. This study investigated the influence of functional writing skills on students' performance in Kiswahili in Elgeyo-Marakwet County. The need for this study was based on the fact that functional writing is an area faced with challenges. The main objective of the study was to examine the influence of functional writing skills on students' performance in Kiswahili. Theoretical framework is based on Jane Emig's Process Theory of Composition Writing of (1971). The study employed descriptive research design and data was collected using questionnaire, observation schedule and document analysis guide. The area of study was Elgeyo-Marakwet County. The target population included all Form Four students and all teachers of Kiswahili from the 122 secondary schools. From this population, stratified, purposive and simple random sampling was used to get a sample. There were 9852 Form Four students in secondary schools in Elgeyo-Marakwet County as of October, 2020. During the entire study 579 students in Form Four class and 35 teachers of Kiswahili participated. The study used both primary and secondary data. Lecturers in the School of Education, at the University of Eldoret determined the validity of the research thesis instruments. Reliability was tested using a test-retest method in four secondary schools in Uasin Gishu County. The study used qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. Data from the questionnaire was presented in frequency tables and percentages using descriptive statistics, narrative and verbatim. The research established that incorrect use of language in functional writing skills have a negative effect on students' performance of Kiswahili in secondary schools. The findings would be used for reference by other researchers and would also give guidance on how to improve in the writing of functional essays. The study recommended that teachers should emphasize the appropriate choice of vocabulary while teaching and evaluating learners in functional writing.

## INTRODUCTION

Functional writing which is the subject of study is a vital item in communication and instruction. Functional writing is a significant skill in Kiswahili. Kenya Institute of Education syllabus (2002) lists functional writing known as *Utungaji wa Kiuamilifu* in Kiswahili under writing skill. Functional writing is taught across the classes in secondary schools from Form One up to Form Four. Some of the compositions recur in different classes. From the arrangement of content in the syllabus the teacher is expected to teach writing, which includes functional writing after listening, speaking and reading skills. Functional writing is not only an examination item,s but also a life skill aspect.

The Kenya Institute of Education (K.I.E.) Kiswahili Secondary Teacher's guide (2006) outlines that functional writing be taught in Form One, Form Two, Form Three and Form Four under writing skills. These are skills that a learner requires in life even if he/she completes studies at Form Four level. It is

essential that the learner internalizes the skill of writing different types of functional texts such as warnings, notices, memos, curriculum vitae, minutes, reports, announcements and even letters.

Kenya National Examinations Council (KNEC) (2006-2022) outlines functional writing as a compulsory question in a Kiswahili paper coded 102/1. This paper comprises four questions for testing under formative and summative evaluation at secondary school level. A candidate is required to answer two questions. Question one is a compulsory question and candidates can choose one out of the remaining three questions so as to answer a total of two questions. KNEC Report (2023) on the 2022 KCSE examinations outlines the expectations attached to the questions which include, but not limited to, the following aspects: the correct format, good flow of ideas, issues which are mentioned or listed, should be explained and developed fully. Themes should be relevant to the topic or title of the question given and should be clearly communicated. There is also a need of using grammar correctly. The language being used should be interesting and captivating so that it captures and sustains the interest of the reader. The writer can employ stylistic devices such as idioms, sayings, proverbs, similes and even synecdoche so as to make the composition interesting.

Functional writing is an essential skill as it is a skill of writing which is used to perform a function. It is a life skill since it can be used to write items for use in daily and a real-life spheres. For example under functional writing one can attain skills of writing minutes, reports, speeches, letters and memos among others. For learners to realize good performance in functional writing, it calls for full involvement in continuous evaluation by both the learners and teachers so as to ensure its acquisition and development.

Abdalla (2014) explains that functional writing relates mainly to communicative-pragmatic uses of English while writing to accomplish some realistic goals or needs. That is writing activities carried out resemble those done in real-life for practical purposes. Hence functional writing is about applying writing to real examples, situations and tasks, and accordingly, learners should produce realistic and meaningful documents. It is also about 'quality' rather than 'quantity' and learners should be able to work on a document until they are satisfied with it. This, therefore, implies that functional writing can be short in length but serves the purpose of communicating the intended message rather than being very long without tangible information.

Salem (2013) indicates that writing becomes an effective means of communication with others and not merely a means of displaying academic knowledge. Functional writing is strongly enhanced when instruction is explicitly designed to address learners' specific needs and objectives. It becomes the main device for self-expression, shaping ideas and convincing others.

Daelyn (2016) says that functional writing is the practice of expressing specific information meant to mirror real-life scenarios such as how to make or do something or telling what happened in a specific situation. Functional writing often turns a complex subject into something that is more understandable to the reader. Teachers can help students master this type of writing by assigning various functional writing activities. Daelyn further explains that functional writing is meant to equip learners with the skills needed to demonstrate their writing and communication skills in various contexts. It requires learners to be able to communicate in ways that make them effective and involved citizens, operate confidently and convey ideas clearly.

Koross and Murunga (2017) point out that functional writing refers to essays that are used for specific functions in life. This kind of writing can be used for official or unofficial functions. Functional writing can be used to relay some information, give instructions or directions to readers or listeners, letter writing, minute writing, writing of telegrams, lists, dialogue, speeches, recipes, diaries, memos, warnings and notices, advertisements, filling of forms, questionnaire and even short messages on mobile phones. These are important skills that learners require even after completing school as they assist them in communication

of different information.

Walibora and Wang'endo (2018) define functional writing as the kind of writing that has the objective of performing a specific task such as relaying some information, warning or even cautioning. They further outline the expectations when writing this kind of composition as follows: the writer must clearly understand the objectives of the question, have cohesion of ideas, explain the themes exhaustively, use interesting and clear language, punctuation marks have to be used appropriately, to creatively write the composition and use vocabulary that will be easily understood by the reader and also employ the use of stylistic devices that will make the composition interesting and captivating.

While marking Kiswahili composition, during both formative and summative evaluation, the examiners are guided by a marking scheme which outlines major elements: themes, vocabulary and its usage, style, structure as well as flow and cohesion of ideas. KNEC (2019) defines themes as the message that is being discussed, explained or narrated by the writer in relation to the topic or question. The writer is expected to give the message that is original which is creatively written. The other element in the marking scheme is on vocabulary and its usage. In this section, the candidate is expected to put emphasis on the choice of vocabulary, correct grammar and spelling. The vocabulary which is chosen and used should be related to the topic. KNEC (2023) states that the candidate is expected to be creative, develop the content for the question, make appropriate choice of vocabulary that answers the question asked. Besides the vocabulary, the candidate is expected to use correct grammar considering its different aspects such as tenses, the noun classes, punctuation marks, correct use of capital and small letters, the classification of words and the correct sentence structures. KNEC Report (2023) explains the need for candidates to use the appropriate style and structure of the functional writing which give the composition the form and appearance. Style is used to distinguish and differentiate types of functional texts from other compositions. These aspects of style and structure give unique characteristics of the functional writing.

Collins (2022) says that functional writing has specific characteristics that differentiate it from other writing styles because it has a fixed format. The other crucial element is flow and cohesion of ideas in a composition. It is expected that a composition displays a good flow and cohesion of ideas from the beginning of the composition until the end. Ideally, a well-developed composition text should display the above elements. Collins (2022) further says that functional writing should have some economy; this means that writers need to present necessary information without flowery and excessive words. It therefore implies that the content in functional composition should be concise.

The functional writing skills accordingly have to be taught by the teacher adhering to some teaching strategies. The teacher should clearly state what the students should know and be able to do at the end of the lesson. KIE (2002) refers to this as the specific objectives of the lesson. A teacher can work on how students can improve in any subject by explicitly teaching them how to use the relevant strategies. The teacher should give guided practice before asking them to do exercises independently.

It is therefore expected that as candidates write functional compositions, an aspect of uniformity should be exhibited in themes, style and structure and language use. Candidates who do not adhere to these requirements are bound to score low marks in functional writing. These aspects are important in functional essays as they are supposed to be clearly displayed in the essays.

The question on functional writing has been a major challenge to the candidates. According to KNEC (2023) with reports of 2012 to 2022 on the KCSE examinations have shown that performance in this question has been dismal as displayed by the major deviations of the learners' marks from the mean. The table 1.1 shows how candidates performed in Kiswahili paper 102/1 where functional writing is tested. (Refer to table 1.1). This table shows the national performance of learners' deviation from the mean score of the three papers of Kiswahili subject.

Collins (2022) states that functional writing skills taught in the classroom relate to activities and actions students will need to take as adults in their daily lives. These skills go beyond the essay and report writing common in school lesson plans and focus on the life skills that require writing. They include writing reports, creating lists, sending letters and even texting friends. He further gives characteristics of functional writing which differentiate it from other writing styles such as fixed format; these writing activities follow a fixed structure, such as formatting for a formal letter.

Despite the importance attached to functional writing, its' results in the national exams country wide have been dismal. KNEC (2020) reports that a large percentage of the candidates scored below 19 out of 40 in Kiswahili Composition examinations of 2019. It further explains that analysis of the candidates' work showed that most of the candidates did not answer the question on functional writing appropriately. KNEC Report (2023) noted that the year 2022 KCSE results in Kiswahili were dismal; the average mark in Kiswahili paper one was 19.70 out of 40. Only four candidates scored the highest mark of 37/40, but the majority of the students scored 22/40. However there were 13,793 candidates who scored marks ranging between 1 and 5 out of 40. The report further indicates that the candidates' performance in question one was dismal as candidates were not able to develop the expected themes and lacked creativity. This therefore implies that results in functional compositions affect the overall performance of students in Kiswahili since it is a compulsory question and also because of the integrated approach of grading. This is the kind of grading whereby the average mark of the three papers of Kiswahili is given as the final mark for Kiswahili results. This in turn affects the candidate's overall performance in KCSE as Kiswahili is one of the major subjects in group one together with English and Mathematics and is therefore used for calculating students' performance to get an overall mean grade.

Table 1.1. Performance in Kiswahili in KCSE Examinations in Kenya (2012-2022)

Year	Paper code	Candidature	Maximum marks	Average	Standard deviation
2012	102/1	433,886	40	<b>10.43</b>	<b>3.63</b>
	102/2		80	29.06	10.77
	102/3		80	32.14	15.15
			200	71.62	25.71
2013	102/1	445,555	40	<b>18.46</b>	<b>5.44</b>
	102/2		80	29.92	12.68
	102/3		80	34.82	14.92
			200	83.19	29.77
2014	102/1	482,122	40	<b>20.17</b>	<b>5.26</b>
	102/2		80	32.27	12.60
	102/3		80	42.93	15.81
			200	95.36	29.88
2015	102/1	521,159	40	<b>20.86</b>	<b>5.19</b>
	102/2		80	36.12	13.50
	102/3		80	38.80	15.38
			200	95.76	31.02
2016	102/1	571,176	40	<b>18.23</b>	<b>5.53</b>
	102/2		80	34.11	13.83
	102/3		80	25.67	12.87
			200	77.97	29.07

<b>2017</b>	102/1	<b>610,392</b>	40	<b>18.84</b>	<b>5.23</b>
	102/2		80	25.45	11.79
	102/3		80	25.15	13.42
			200	69.43	27.49
<b>2018</b>	102/1	659,465	<b>40</b>	<b>16.98</b>	<b>4.82</b>
	102/2		80	27.22	10.88
	103/3		80	22.20	11.95
			200	66.40	24.96
<b>2019</b>	102/1	<b>694,982</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>19.88</b>	<b>5.43</b>
	102/2		80	36.50	12.64
	102/3		80	21.08	12.64
			200	77.46	28.03
<b>2020</b>	102/1		40	20.19	
	102/2				
<b>2021</b>	102/1	<b>822267</b>	40	19.44	6.28
	102/2		80	31.46	12.93
	102/3		80	31.19	19.48
			200	82.09	35.34
<b>2022</b>	102/1	<b>876,916</b>	40	19.70	5.69
	102/2		80	35.73	12.45
	102/3		80	31.21	17.42
			200	86.64	32.15

(Source: KNEC reports of 2012-2022)

### Statement of the Problem

Functional writing in Kiswahili is a compulsory section in Kiswahili Paper coded 102/1 by the Kenya National Examinations Council. Despite the great significance attached to this section, students' performance in Kiswahili remains dismal. The problem of dismal performance has really become a major concern among teachers, students, parents and education officers as well as the general public. Performance in functional writing in Kiswahili has an effect on the general performance in Kiswahili subject because of the integrated approach of grading. Kiswahili subject comprises three papers which are examined separately, but the final mark is an average mark of the three papers.

The year 2019 KCSE Examination Report states that the results of Kiswahili composition have been fluctuating. The evaluation of the learners' compositions indicates that the students do not use enriched language. Besides that, the report further states that most of the candidates scored lower marks than the mean mark of 19 out of 40. Further evaluation of the candidates' work showed that most of the candidates did not answer the functional compositions adequately. It states: *"Tathmini ya kazi za watahiniwa pia imeonyesha kwamba watahiniwa wengi hawamudu tungo za kiuamilifu.* This statement is translated as; "The analysis of the candidates' work has shown that majority of the candidates did not tackle the functional composition adequately."

Dismal performance in functional writing has a major impact on performance in the subject and therefore affects KCSE results in Kiswahili subject and in turn affects the general performance of students in the county.

### **Significance of the Study.**

The study established the influence of functional writing skills on students' performance in Kiswahili. The study outlined how functional writing should be developed to enable the students to write appropriate composition.

Findings of the study will be useful for giving recommendations towards improvement of teaching and acquisition of functional writing skills. They will also be useful in guiding the teachers on the steps to be followed while teaching functional writing texts and what can be done to alleviate the problem of dismal performance in functional writing.

In addition, the study exposed strengths and weaknesses in the teaching and evaluation of functional writing. For this reason, therefore the recommendations can be used by educationists to design appropriate methods of instruction in teaching of essential aspects of functional writing in Kiswahili in secondary schools. The study may also create chances of improving performance in English Language generally as its teaching is similar to teaching of Kiswahili because they have some functional items, for example, the writing of minutes and reports.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was based on Janet Emig's Theory of Composition of (1971). In the theory Emig says that this is a field of composition studies that focuses on writing as a process rather than a product. Emig explains that the process is centered on the idea that students determine the content of the course by exploring the craft of writing using their own interests, language techniques, voice and freedom, and where students learn what people respond to and what they don't. Classroom activities often include peer work where students themselves are teaching, reviewing, brainstorming and editing.

## **LANGUAGE USE IN FUNCTIONAL WRITING**

Language as a medium of communication is an essential item in writing of any composition. Oxford University of Advanced Learner's Dictionary of current English (2004) defines language as a system of communication in speech and writing that is used by people of a particular country. Hakim (2018) defines language as a system of conventional, spoken or written symbols, signs, sounds, gestures or the like used or conceived as a means of communicating thought emotion among others.

In the marking of functional essays and other compositions in KCSE in both formative and summative items, language use is considered as a major factor in conveying the ideas in the composition. As concerns the aspect of language use, the learner is expected to adhere to choice of vocabulary. The writer is expected to make an appropriate choice of the vocabulary that conveys the intended message. Besides the choice of the vocabulary, the learner is expected to use it correctly. The choice of the vocabulary entirely depends on the question that has been asked.

Braun (2015) emphasizes on integrating vocabulary when teaching writing. She says that writing is a perfect place to incorporate some vocabulary instruction. A teacher is expected to choose two or three words that might be useful to students for the topic that they are writing about. The teacher should teach the words, give an example of a sentence and share sentences where students can work on them. The teacher can either

teach the words before students write their rough draft or teach them before students revise. It is also important for the students to keep a record of these words in a notebook. The teaching of words related to the topic will assist the learners to use the appropriate vocabulary in the writing of the functional texts.

Besides the choice of the vocabulary, a candidate is also expected to adhere to grammatical rules of the language being used and in this study the learner is expected to display mastery of Kiswahili grammar. This can be done by the candidate being able to classify the words in Kiswahili into different categories such as: nouns, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, verbs, conjunctions, prepositions and interjections (KNEC, 2018). These words should also be used appropriately in the writing of functional compositions.

Other aspects of language use in functional writing include punctuation, tenses, spellings of words and syntax. Punctuation is vital as it makes writing to convey the intended message. The learner is expected to use the different punctuation marks correctly. The writer is also expected to use capital and small letters appropriately to avoid being penalized by the examiner. Syntax is an integral aspect in writing. Nordquist (2019) defines syntax as the rules that govern the ways in which words combine to form phrases, clauses and sentences. It is, therefore, important for the learner to display syntactic knowledge of Kiswahili language to write meaningful functional texts. The learner is expected to show correct usage of these aspects to enable him/ her to write a good composition on the topic asked. The learner is also expected to use interesting and captivating language that captures and sustains the interest of the reader where the writer employs stylistic devices such as idioms, sayings, proverbs, similes and even synecdoche. These idiomatic expressions should be used within the context of the question tested. This study, therefore, looked at aspects of choice of vocabulary, the sentence structures and punctuation among others and showed how they affected the writing of functional writing items.

## **METHODS**

This study employed Descriptive Research Design where the researcher investigated the influence of functional writing skills on students' performance in Kiswahili. Bhat (2019) defines Research design as a framework of methods and techniques chosen by a researcher to combine various components of research in a reasonably logical manner so that the research problem is efficiently handled. It provides insight into how to conduct research using a particular methodology.

The researcher used questionnaire, observation and document analysis in collecting data. It also made a critical inquiry into the influence of functional writing skills on students' performance in Kiswahili. This Research Philosophy is applicable to the present study as this study sought to see how the functional writing affected performance in Kiswahili.

The sample that was used in the research was from the secondary schools in the four sub-counties: Keiyo North, Keiyo South, Marakwet East and Marakwet West. The researcher then used stratified sampling to get 35 schools out of 122 from the four sub-counties.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The challenges of language use in functional writing were evident in the various functional writing texts of the learners. The language flaws outlined in the compositions included: punctuation errors, mixing up of tenses, incorrect use of stylistic devices, incorrect syntax, poor sentence structures, incorrect allocation of nouns into noun classes and even poor use of singular and plural forms. The table on aspects of language use outlines some of the language errors that were evident in the compositions.

Table 4.1 Aspects of Language Use that affect Functional Writing.

Aspect of language use	Agreed Frequency	%	Disagreed Frequency	%
Choice of Vocabulary	32	91.4	3	8.6
Use of capital letters	28	80	7	20
Punctuation marks	31	88.6	4	11.4
Tenses	32	91.4	3	8.6
Spelling	29	82.9	6	17.1
Stylistic devices	31	88.6	4	11.4
Syntax	30	85.7	5	14.3

Table 4.1 shows the aspects of language use that affect the writing of functional compositions: 91.4% (N=32) of the teachers strongly agreed that choice of vocabulary is essential in the writing of functional composition but 8.6% (N=3) of the teachers disagreed that choice of vocabulary affects the writing of functional composition. The same table also reveals that 80 % (N=28) of the teachers agreed that the use of capital letters affects the writing of functional composition but 20% (N=7) of the teachers disagreed with the fact that use of capital letters affect the writing of functional composition. Additionally, 88.6% (N=31) of the teachers agreed that punctuation marks affect the writing of functional compositions while 11.4 % (N=4) of the teachers disagreed that punctuation marks influence writing of functional compositions. A composition which is properly punctuated relays the intended message and also makes the writer score better marks. Some of the compositions of the learners did not have full stops at the end of the sentences and, therefore, making the work incomplete. Refer to Appendix XI to verify this error on punctuation in functional writing.

The table also shows that 91.4 % (N=32) of the teachers agreed that use of correct tenses is necessary in the writing of functional compositions while 8.6% (N=4) disagreed that tenses are essential in functional composition writing. The table also shows that 82.9% (N=29) of the teachers said that the aspect of spellings of words is important in functional writing skills but 17.1% (N=6) disagreed that spelling of a word influences functional writing. The table also reveals that 88.6 % (N=31) agreed that the use of stylistic devices is necessary in the writing of the functional composition, but 11.4% (N=4) of the teachers disagreed that stylistic devices are necessary in the writing of functional compositions.

The same table shows that 85.7% (N=30) of the teachers agreed that the aspect of syntax is important in functional writing while 14.3% (N=5) of the teachers disagreed on the importance of syntax on functional writing. The findings implied that most of the teachers agreed that the aspects listed in Table 4.13 have a major effect on functional writing. The findings concur with those of Braun (2015) who stresses the importance of choice of vocabulary, correct tenses, punctuation and syntax in the writing of functional compositions. The same views on the importance of punctuation were discussed by Okari (2016). This study, therefore, established that a candidate whose functional writing text was correctly punctuated scored high marks and this in turn enabled the candidate to perform in the composition as well as in Kiswahili language.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.

It was observed that the students had syntactic errors on classification of words in Kiswahili, incorrect use of capital letters whereby some students used it within the words. There were also errors in the use of noun classes and their prefixes. It is therefore clear that incorrect use of language impact the flow of ideas in the



composition hence leading to poor performance in functional writing.

The study recommends that the students should adhere to the specific structure and style of functional writing. Teachers should constantly guide learners on the format of different functional texts. They should use the guidelines outlined in the KICD and KNEC syllabi respectively. The teachers should also teach and prepare the candidates in all types of functional writing. Clear interpretation of the syllabi by the teachers will enable the learners to write functional texts with appropriate formats. The teachers should also guide learners to identify different types of functional writing texts to answer questions correctly.

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