

Language Competence in Selected Functional Writing Skills in Selected Public Secondary Schools in Aguthi Division Nyeri County

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Abstract

Functional skills play a great role in a learner's life both at school and after school. At the end of the course, the functional skills are examined in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) in Paper One and it is usually the first question carrying 20 marks out of the 60 marks required in English Paper 1 (101 / 1). The Kenya National Examinations Council (K.N.E.C) has continually reported decline in this paper especially in Question One which is functional writing skill. In life after school, the form four leavers apply these skills in their everyday life as they join the job market. In consideration of this academic and operational importance laid on functional skills, the study sought to identify and describe learners' writing difficulties in selected functional writing skill areas, investigate and describe the kind of support and exposure teachers give learners in their functional writing tasks and establish how this support and exposure influence the teacher in assessing functional writing for effective communication in selected functional writing skills like internal memos and formal letters. The study was carried out in Aguthi division, Nyeri County.

Keywords: Language, Learning, Academic, Written, Spoken

1. Background to the Problem

English is a core academic subject and the official medium of instruction in all subjects except Kiswahili from lower primary level to the university level. In that case, a students' achievement in English highly depends on his / her ability to use the language effectively both in the spoken and written forms. This is by having a good command of its form and function. English is used in teaching other subjects in the curriculum like Chemistry, Biology, Mathematics, among others. This being the case, lack of competence in English will no doubt affect performance in the other subjects. Students need to be well drilled in the English language to be able to listen to it, speak, read and write well. English also plays a key role in the country's legal system in that it is the language mostly used in the Kenyan courts and also serves as the trade language between Kenya and the rest of the world. This makes it an international language.

The Kenya Secondary Education Syllabus (2002) identifies four major skills in the teaching / learning of English language. These are listening, reading, speaking and writing. They are categorized into receptive skills, that is, listening and reading. Productive skills include writing and speaking. All the four skills are examined by the Kenya National Examination Council. This therefore necessitates the need for teachers of English to properly equip the students in all the skills. The present study deals with writing skills specifically functional writing. In English as a foreign language (EFL, henceforth), writing is one of the important skills. This is because it allows writers to explore thoughts and ideas and then make them visible and concrete. It also encourages thinking and learning motivating communication and making thought available for reflection.

Freedman (1987) defines writing as a way of realizing language in communities that have acquired a writing system. It is characterized by its use of visible signs systematically ordered. In English, it is the alphabetic system in which letters and groups of letters correspond in fairly regular ways to vocal sounds of speech. The systems may be alphabetic as in most European languages or syllabic, as in Japanese, or logographic in which characters relate to the smallest units of meaning, as in Chinese. Most languages use systems which are predominantly one of the three types mentioned.

Freedman (1987) adds that writing is usually an individual process. A writer makes marks on a surface, which are looked at by someone else later. A piece of writing constitutes a visible permanent product so long as it remains unaltered. This is what makes it different from speech which is modified as it occurs. A writer has to consider that the meanings may be interpreted long after the words have been committed to paper. Moreover, he / she has to consider that they will be interpreted without the benefit of all the nods, winks, pauses, stresses, smiles, grimaces, repetitions and

rephrasing which go on all the time in speech. It occurs in space and in time independent of the physical context in which it was produced and will continue to exist so long as the ink and paper, or other marks on alternative surface, exist. Thus, the system has to convey meanings by means of techniques that produce permanent realizations of language.

Byrne (1979) argues that writing skills can be categorized into two broad groups: basic and advanced skills. Good handwriting, proper spelling and right punctuation constitute the primary skills that are needed to write well. Additionally, there are more advanced skills that relate to visual presentation, grammar, style and organization.

Byrne (1979) points out that visual presentation skills concern using specific formats such as formats of a letter, memorandum, minutes and reports, among others. They also concern use of appropriate punctuation marks as well as capitalization. Second, grammatical skills relate to the ability to use a variety of sentence patterns and constructions. Proficiency in this ability depends to a great deal on students' oral proficiency. Byrne adds that expressive skills which are also referred to as stylistic skills concern the ability to express precise meaning in a variety of styles and registers. This is done by selecting appropriate vocabulary and sentence structures. Students' reading habits, specifically reading widely, have a lot to contribute to the development of this skill. Lastly, organizational skills concern the ability to write coherently. It is also the ability to use linguistic cohesive devices, such as, use of right connectors in sentences. Note - taking and note - making skills as well as the ability to summarize, are closely related to this ability. Functional writing is under the advanced skills in relation to the writing skills categories mentioned.

The KIE (2002) secondary school syllabus divides writing into two broad categories of writing: creative writing and functional writing. Creative writing comprises dialogues, conversations, miniature plays, poetry, stories, and anecdotes. Functional writing is writing that is meant to fulfill real life purposes such as making a request or giving advice, inviting someone for a visit or to a function, applying for something among others. The writing activities carried out in functional writing resemble those done in real life for practical purposes. This kind of writing practice prepares learners for writing which they must do as part of survival in everyday life. For example formal letters fulfill official functions such as applying for a place as a pupil, applying for a job, apologizing to a senior person and others. According to recommended text by KIE, Head start book two (2003,pg 180) it has format items like ; sender's address at the top right hand side ,date below it, recipient's address left hand side below the date, salutation ,reference line, body and the closing tag. An internal memo on the other hand is a formal communication among people working within an institution. It is a note that is written by one person to another or to other persons to draw their attention to something that needs to be noted or acted upon. According to recommended text by KIE, Head start book three (2003,pg 210) its major features are; name of the institution at the top and centered, the words internal memo below it, date on the left side ,reference number, sender's title, recipient's name, subject, body and signing off.

Functional writing provide an individual with the essential knowledge, skills and understanding that enables one to operate confidently, effectively and independently in school, life and work. It requires learners to be able to communicate in ways that make them effective and convey their ideas and opinions clearly in a wide range of meaningful contexts; learning, in life and their communities. Language competence is therefore key. It involves meaningful use of the language and on language in context. The KIE syllabus (2002) indicates that the vocabulary, grammatical structures, text forms and social conventions necessary form part of language competence. Other than formal letters and internal memos, functional writing includes aspects of writing such as report writing, book reviews, articles, announcements, speeches, invitations, condolence messages, notices, advertisements among others. Both creative and functional writings are examinable at the national level at the end of the secondary course in K.C.S.E. Creative writing is tested in English Paper 3 (101 / 3) while Functional Writing is tested in English Paper 1 (101 / 1). Recently, there has been a worrying decline in English performance at K.C.S.E according to the K.N.E.C (2006, 2007, 2008, 2009 &2010) yearly reports especially in English Paper 1 Question 1 which is functional writing.

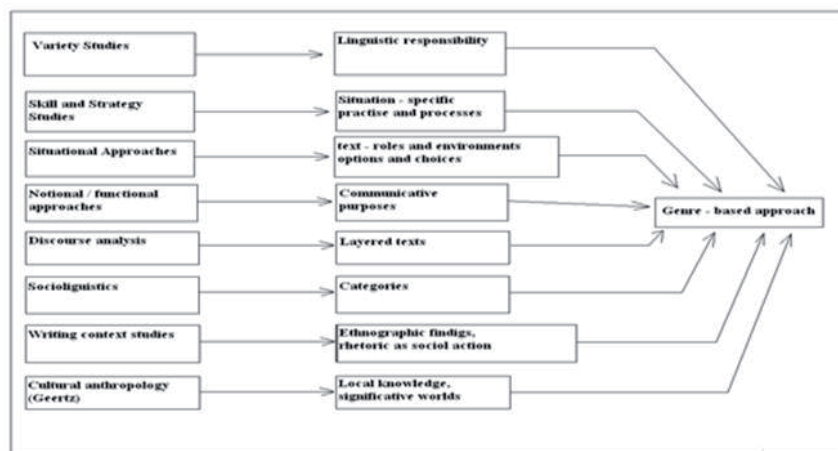
The KNEC yearly reports have indicated a downward trend in the performance of English language. This being the case, the learners require close and proper preparation and guidance to achieve competence in functional writing skills geared towards acquiring better results. It was against this background that the present study sought to investigate the kind of support and exposure teachers give learners in their functional writing tasks in Aguthi division Nyeri County. Through literature reviewed, the present researcher discovered that little research has been previously done in functional writing skills, more so in mixed day secondary schools in Aguthi division, Nyeri County. The researcher therefore sought to identify and describe the learners' writing difficulties in functional writing, investigate the kind of support and exposure teachers give their learners in their functional writing tasks and establish how this support and exposure influence the teacher in assessing functional writing for effective communication especially in internal memos and formal letters.

1.1 Theoretical framework

The present study employed the Genre theory which was developed by several scholars and schools of thought at different periods of time. They consisted of ;Sydney school of Genre Theorists, Russian formalists, Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), Romantic movement of the 18th and 19th century especially in German and North-America Genre studies.

It is the Romantic movement of the 18th and 19th centuries that influenced the philosophic reflection on genre. Around 1920, reappraisal of genre started with the Russian formalists led by Shlovsky. They relied heavily on the linguistic techniques of Ferdinand de Saussure and the symbolist notion concerning the autonomy of texts. Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) began to write his theories which were critical to the formalists. Bakhtin broadened the field to extra-literary genres. Swales (1990) argues that the genre-based approach owes a substantial debt to previous work in both applied and non-applied fields. He says that whatever small measure of originality the approach may possess, probably lies as much in integrating the work of several different traditions. It has borrowed profitably from the activities of several distinct discourse communities which include: variety studies, skill and strategy studies, situational approaches, notional / functional approaches, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, writing context studies and cultural anthropology (Geertz). Figure 1.7a summarizes how these activities have influenced the genre-based approach.

Figure 1.7a Influences on a genre-based approach



Swales (1990) identifies 'genre' as a "class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes". This definition offers the basic idea that there are certain conventions or rules which are generally associated with a writer's purpose. For example, the letter of application shows an interest to get a vacancy in a particular institution, while an internal memo has the intention of communicating certain information to members of a particular institution.

Burns (2001) argues that when it comes to explaining writing development using the Genre approach, a wheel model of a teaching learning cycle having three phases of modeling, joint negotiation / construction (between learners and the teacher) and independent construction (by the learner individually) is employed. The modeling phase is the time when the target functional writing that students should construct is introduced to them. At this stage, the educational and social function of the functional writing is introduced, while analysis focuses on its structure and language. In the present stage, during the teaching / learning of the application letter, the teacher would introduce the genre, explain its function which is to show interest in applying for maybe job vacancy, transfer, scholarship and others. He / she could also explain how marks are awarded by KNEC in this Functional writing. He / she also explains its structure citing the format items and language used in it. For example, in the letter of application, the teacher could discuss format items like sender's address, date, recipient's address, salutation, reference, body and the closing tag. He / she could use a sample formal letter which displays all these items. This modeling would also apply in the internal memo and other functional writing documents. This phase covers the second objective of the present study which is to investigate the support and exposure given by the teachers to the learners in their functional writing tasks.

The second stage is the joint negotiation of the text / Functional writing. In this stage, learners carry out exercises which manipulate relevant language forms. This is a negotiation process between the learners and their teacher as they

actively discuss the given item of functional writing. During this discussion, reading, research and dissemination of information takes place. Functional writing is dependent on these activities. The present study would also employ this phase in joint construction of the two in the teaching / learning of internal memos and letters of application. The discussion would be of great importance to the learner who would seek clarifications on areas they do not understand. The teacher would in turn identify the weak areas of his / her students and therefore pay more attention on them. This phase will cover the second objective of the present study which is to investigate the support and exposure teachers give learners in their functional writing tasks.

Finally, in the independent construction phase, learners produce actual functional writing/text through choosing a topic, researching and writing it. This stage would help in achieving the first objective of the present study which is to identify and describe the learners' writing difficulties in Functional writing. Through writing, these writing difficulties will be portrayed and thus easy to identify them and then describe them. It also covered the third objective which was to establish how the support and exposure given by teachers influence the assessing of functional writing for effective communication.

The Genre theory has been supported by various authorities as the best in teaching / learning of functional writing; for example, Swales (1990) argues that rhetorical instruction plays a pivotal role in writing improvement as prior knowledge. In this context, he notes that the Genre approach is very beneficial because it brings together functional and formal properties of a language in writing instruction and it acknowledges the strong association between them. Kim & Kim (2005) recommend that it is meaningful for writing instructors to tie the formal and functional properties of a language together in order to facilitate students' recognition of how and why linguistic conventions are employed for particular rhetorical effects.

The Genre model therefore was the most appropriate to use in the present study. This is because it defines its scope and nature and offers an approach to how the study is described and investigated. The present study would benefit much from this theory for genre can only be realized in completed texts for it does more than specify kinds of codes extant in a group of related texts; it specifies conditions for beginning, continuing and ending a text.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Learners' difficulties

In a second language situation, writing skills are the most difficult to master. Students can for example, achieve a high degree of correctness in spoken English when they concentrate on one or two grammatical features on single sentence exercises. But these students cannot hope to achieve the same standard in continuous writing because the skills are not the same. Students encounter various difficulties as they try to master the writing skills as discussed below.

2.1.1 Sentence structures and paragraphing

Byrne (1979) argues that second language learners often have great difficulty in understanding what is expected in continuous writing in English. This is particularly so, when the written style and conversations of their mother tongues are very different from English as in the case of Gikuyu (Kenya), Sukuma (Tanzania), and Luganda (Uganda). Hence, these learners need help with the choice, planning and arrangement of content, which may be referred to as content organization. He adds that a good writer plans and organizes what to write before she / he starts writing. The learners may have ideas, but if those ideas are presented in a jumbled way, then it may pose difficulties of comprehension on the part of the reader.

Byrne (1979) points that certain grammatical features which are very important in continuous writing do not occur in the study of single sentence grammar. Learners find themselves thrown into a nightmare of expression when introduced to these features of continuous writing. He gives the following as reasons as to why a learner's writing may be difficult to understand as a result of the difficulties in writing: the sentences may not have clear punctuation - there may be commas and full stops without any good reason or there may be no punctuation where there should be one; the ideas may not have been presented in an order that easily makes sense to the reader (scrambled sentences); the relation between ideas may not be clear because of the absence or inappropriate use of linking words and phrases such as *although, for example, lastly*, among others; the ideas may not be grouped together into distinct paragraphs, or the learner may begin practically every line on a new line.

Gardner & Lambert (1972) argue that learners' interest is central in the development of writing skills. Often times, learners lack confidence and motivation, especially where the type of content chosen neither motivates nor gives

opportunities for some element of personal communication. Unless they are properly motivated, they might not see the need to write. They will only put effort into improving their skills if they feel that they have something worthwhile to write about. For example, if they feel that the person they write to might have interest in what they write (such as, friends, parents, relatives, their teachers), then they will be motivated to write. In the same way, learners feel motivated when the communication is purposeful as when the writing is for informing, inviting, applying for a vocation, or giving a report.

Gardner & Lambert (1972) add that in order to arouse learners' interest, the teacher can use a variety of stimuli which include: visual stimuli, that is, use of pictures, maps, charts and diagrams from various sources; oral stimuli like anecdotes, discussions, debates, speeches, stories, songs, poems; reading interesting and well selected types of writing which may be used in class; different forms of viewpoints like looking at events from a different angle, for example, a learner may be asked to write about an event in or near their school. The teacher then asks different groups to write about the same event in different forms, such as, a letter home, a report to the police, a dialogue between a journalist and an eyewitness among others; selecting of the audience, when learners are given a chance to select their audience.

These act as good stimulus for the students to write well. The teacher should therefore give the students a chance to choose the audience. To maintain the motivation, the best learners' written work could be displayed on a wall, presented to the rest of the class, included in a school magazine, or displayed on the school notice board. Gardner & Lambert (1972) continue to add that motivation is also affected by self-confidence. Lack of good preparation on the part of the teachers that could make learners responsible for correcting their own work is part of what hinders such confidence in them.

2.1.2 Mother tongue interference

Language transfer is an important cognitive factor related to writing error. Odlin (1989) defines transfer as the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously acquired. Ellis (1994) argues that the study of transfer involves the study of errors (negative transfer), facilitation (positive transfer), avoidance of target language forms, and their over-use.

Selinker (1972) adds that behaviorists' accounts claim that transfer is the cause of errors, while from a cognitive perspective, transfer is seen as a resource that the learner actively draws upon in interlanguage development. The source language can have a direct effect on interlanguage development by influencing the hypotheses that learners construct. Ellis, (1994) & Mclaughlin (1988) argue that transfer errors can occur due to: learners' deficiency of the necessary information in the second language or the attention capacity to activate the necessary second-language routine. Widdowson (1990) adds that when learners write under pressure they may call upon systematic resources from their native language for the achievement and synthesis of meaning. Fried (1990) also says that learners sometimes use their native language when generating ideas and attending to details. When learners lack enough vocabulary in the target language, they tend to borrow much from their L1. This constitutes a gross error which hinders communication between the reader and the writer. Therefore, this literature reviewed relates to the present study in that it aids in identifying the learners' writing difficulties and also describes them.

2.1.3 Cohesion in – and - between sentences

Gardner & Lambert (1972) argue that to make a text, we need to ensure that cohesion exists between and among the sentences. The devices one can use to enable them ensure that cohesion is preserved within a sentence include the following:

- (a) The way we mark agreement between subjects and verbs, to produce, such as, "Students write assignments everyday" and not "Students writes assignments every day."
- (b) Maintaining the agreed conventional sequence of tenses in verb forms.
- (c) Avoidance of ambiguity in pronoun use. For example, sentences like, "My uncle told my brother that my aunt had called him". Here we do not know whether 'him' refers to 'my uncle' or 'my brother'.
- (d) The kind of grammatical punctuation, such as, "John, the bus conductor was very rude" versus "John, the bus conductor, was very rude."

From the analysis made above, it is necessary to keep in mind certain basic principles of concern including preserving word structure and order in currently accepted Standard English, indicating the relationships of sentence components so as to produce currently acceptable sentence structure; and lastly, preserving cohesion in and between sentences which is a key factor in Functional writing.

The literature reviewed will aid the current study in identifying the learners' difficulties in creation of cohesion in and

between sentences which will also help in describing these writing difficulties.

2.1.4 Vocabulary

Mclaughlin (1988) argues that acquisition of academic vocabulary and discourse style is difficult. According to the Cognitive theory, communicating orally or writing is an active process of skill development and gradual elimination of errors as the learner internalizes the language. Acquisition is a product of the complex interaction of the linguistic environment and the learner's internal mechanisms. With practice, there is continual restructuring as learners shift these internal representations in order to achieve increasing degrees of mastery in second language.

2.1.5 Collocations

Collocations in English refer to the tendency for words to occur regularly with others. For example, nouns and verbs that go together (ride a bike / drive a car). Native speakers tend to use chunks of collocations and the ESL learners make mistakes with collocations in their writing which sometimes results in awkwardness. In the present study, collocations if not observed by learners, could become a writing difficulty whereby the communication between writer and reader becomes difficult also. This literature will also aid in identifying the learners' writing difficulties associated with which words should be used with which one.

2.1.6 Spelling

Gardener & Lambert (1972) note that over the years there has been a very strong social convention with regard to the use of standardized spellings. She adds that writing wrong spellings in words in no way affects the meaning or the clarity of a given text. Similarly, beginning a sentence with the lower case presents no particular difficulty in text comprehension. What should be considered is the powerful effect of adult expectation. Many people equate deviant spelling with ignorance, or lack of intelligence.

Most instances of misspelling arise out of ignorance and carelessness. Some instances of misspelling are out of pronunciation, where wrong pronunciation effects wrong spelling. Correct spelling is held to be important by many adults who may make decisions affecting a learner's future. As Functional writing involves spelling of words as one writes, this literature will shed light on the reasons behind learners' difficulties in Functional writing.

2.2 Support and exposure given to learners in functional writing tasks by teachers of English.

Maroko (2010) argues that there are two main purposes for writing: writing for academic purposes and writing for functional or operational purposes. Writing for academic purposes aims at certification at school, college or university. On the other hand, writing for functional purposes provides specific directions or information related to workplace tasks. Examples of writing for academic purposes includes expository, argumentative and descriptive essays.

In Functional writing, examples include letters (both formal and informal), memoranda, recipes, reports and minutes, among others. Learners must be conversant enough with the purpose and audience to effectively produce the functional writing skills. This is because the format or layout used depends on the purpose and the audience. Guided by this knowledge, the present study sought to investigate the teaching strategies used in functional writing skills. In the teaching of the functional writing, Byrne (1979) argues that different approaches have been used. One of them is the traditional approach which most teachers were taught during their own education. It is referred to as the product-oriented approach to writing because of three common features: a title is given by the teacher; learners are asked to write a composition of, for example, 400 words, and to hand it in at the end of the lesson or following day; then compositions are handed in by learners, teachers mark them, return them to the learners after some time and they are forgotten. The traditional or product-oriented approach, from a modern practitioner's point of view is deficient in a number of important aspects: first, the teacher views the student's writing as a product. There is an assumption that the student knows how to write and what the student produces is used as a test of the ability to write. Second, the teacher concentrates on form, which is syntax, grammar, mechanics and organization rather than content.

Another approach used is the modern approach to writing which is direct contrast to the product-oriented approach and it is referred to as the process-oriented approach to writing. It is based on the following assumptions: first, people write to communicate with readers; second, people write to accomplish specific purposes; and third 'writing is a complex process. Hence, writing is perceived as a communicative act. Learners are encouraged to think of their audience

(reader) and the purpose of writing. Meaning rather than form is stressed. Writing is treated as a process which can be divided into three stages: prewriting, composing, and revision.

At the prewriting stage, learners are given the freedom to think and create ideas on the basis of their interests, experiences, knowledge without much interference and restrictions from the teacher. It is a very active stage in which learners are encouraged in their pairs and groups to freely exchange ideas and opinions concerning the information structure, language, supporting arguments, and the best approach required.

The composing stage is the writing stage which is also a writing workshop because the learners are encouraged to work together, consulting one another, while the teacher facilitates and provides guidance where needed. Revision is important because learners can edit as well as proof read what they write. In this modern approach, learners are actively involved from beginning to the end. This approach best fits the present study as the learners need to be actively involved in the teaching / learning of functional writing for them to register good performance.

Results of a study carried out by Iyamu & Aduwa (2006) on factors affecting quality of English language teaching and learning in secondary school in Nigeria revealed that English language teachers do not frequently use modern instructional technologies and variety of teaching techniques in their English language lessons. This study also revealed the dominance of textbooks, dictionaries, chalkboards, workbooks and posters in the teaching of English language in secondary schools in Nigeria.

Maroko (2010) suggests the use of authentic materials that could be used in the actual classroom teaching of functional skills. He classifies them into audio, visual, and printed materials. These authentic materials include television programming, radio programming, taped conversations, photographs, pictures from magazines, newspapers' (articles, movie reviews, advertisements and others), minutes of a meeting, memoranda and letters. All these materials have various advantages like exposing learners to a wide range of natural business language that is employed in the composition of functional texts in the work place making learners aware that functional writing has a register that varies from general English; they bring reality to classroom and make learning interactive and meaningful. They also make teaching and assessment to focus on skills rather than facts of language among others. These materials could be used in the teaching of internal memos and application letters. They could be some of the resources used in teaching of functional writing thus covering the second objective in the present study.

Dwi Tanti (2010) argues that authentic materials support English as a foreign language (EFL) learning environment in which exposure to the target language is needed as in the first language acquisition. He adds that they also help teachers provide their students opportunity to learn according to their needs and interests, and facilitate teachers to introduce various types of texts, language styles, and vocabularies to their students. According to him, they also make learning writing more meaningful since they help teachers create a pleasant learning environment.

Wathika (2013) points out that one hallmark of teaching as an organized activity is the process called planning. The teacher must decide on what and how she / he wants their students to learn. A well organized teacher, she argues, plans the goals, objectives and teaching - learning materials that would help them communicate effectively. The teacher should ensure that all classroom materials provide a supportive educational environment for the learner. The teaching and learning process entails strategies, outcomes and evaluations. Each lesson should have sufficient and appropriate resources to support the classroom instruction. The materials include both text books and authentic materials. In the teaching of functional writing, all these are required. This reviewed literature on teaching strategies would aid the present study in its second objective in that the researcher would be able to identify the kind of support and exposure teachers give their learners in their functional writing tasks.

2.3 Influences of the support and exposure given to learners by teachers of English on their assessment of functional writing for effective communication.

The KIE teachers' handbook (2006) defines assessment as a means by which the teacher measures how far the learners have acquired the desired knowledge, skills and attitudes. Nyang'acha (2006) argues that the teachers of English rarely assess the students' written work especially functional skills. This affects the learners for they fail to perfect the skills for nobody is bothered to assess what they do. Wathika (2013) identifies some of the assessment strategies that are used in schools.

One of the assessment strategies is the diagnostic test, which is carried out before instruction to test the learners' strengths and weakness. It is also used to identify problematic areas in teaching and learning. It consists of several short but reliable sub-tests measuring different language skills. It could be a formative test, which helps the teacher to adjust the teaching methods, give individual attention to weak students or even adjust the learning resources previously used.

The second one is the achievement test / evaluation test which measures the extent of students' achievements of instructional goals. It monitors learning and students' progress. It also evaluates the effectiveness of instruction and assesses the degree of success of the instructional programme. It also motivates learners and it could be formative or summative.

There are also the criterion - referenced tests which measure the extent to which prescribed standards have been met. They examine students' mastery of educational objectives and are used to determine whether a student has learnt specific knowledge / skill.

Norm - referenced tests are also used as assessment strategies to compare student's performance of a test with that of other students of his / her level. Lastly, there are the aptitude tests which measure the degree to which students have the capacity to acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes. Wathika (2013) argues on the need for assessment as follows: to identify / diagnose problem areas in students' achievement so as to strengthen the weak points in the learning process; to determine the level of students' performance so as to reward them, thus motivate them to learn; to evaluate students' progress at school; to determine how much the students have learnt; to provide information to teachers about the effectiveness of the teaching methods; to help monitor knowledge, skills and attitudes of the students; to predict students' performance in the future; to select students for placement in a given group or stream for better instruction or for selection to secondary schools; to stimulate teachers to clarify and refine course objectives; to evaluate the teachers' teaching methods and competence and determine students' special abilities.

Other assessment strategies have been suggested by Cumming (1995) and Maroko (2010) and they include the following:

- a) Portfolio assessment and self - review check lists which is a folder or box in which students store significant pieces of class work that mark their progress. Students are able to reflect on and track their progress if they kept successive pieces of a task in a folder. Mohammad (2013) notes that keeping portfolios can contribute to progress of the students in terms of writing ability and it can be used as a promising testing and teaching tool in English language classes like in the teaching of internal memos and application letters.
- b) Teacher observations. When introducing a new concept on functional writing or supervising class writing exercises, the teacher needs to informally observe and record those areas where the learners are doing well and where they are going wrong. This will help him / her in lesson planning.
- c) Peer critiquing is another method of assessment. Each student could present their written work and others critique to make the learners improve in their writing skills. Grabe & Kaplan (1996) argue that students should be given opportunity to participate in transactions with their own texts and the texts of others. Kern (2000) adds that by guiding learners towards a conscious awareness of how an audience will interpret their work, learners then learn to write with a 'readerly' sensitivity.

The mentioned assessment strategies are important to the present study in its third objective which seeks to establish how the support and exposure given to learners influence the teachers' assessing of functional writing for effective communication.

2.4 Studies on second language teaching

The present study reviewed other researchers' studies as follows: Njoroge (1996) did a research on morpho - syntactic errors in the written English of first year undergraduate students in Kenya. This level of learners portrays what they have just acquired from the secondary level; therefore, they make a perfect portrayal of the secondary students' competence in language. He notes that errors related to verbs are very common in the language performance data in Kenyan learners. The present study hoped to establish whether the same applies to Form Three students in functional writing. This study covers the first objective in the present study about the learners' difficulties in writing

Mundui (2002) researched on the teaching of spoken English in Kenya secondary schools. This study is related to the present study in that spoken and written skills are both productive skills. She argues that in language learning one must make an effort to understand, to repeat accurately, to manipulate newly understood language and to use the whole range of known language in conversation or writing. The learners should therefore be able to manipulate grammatical forms accurately to form correct sentences and to transfer the knowledge to real life settings. This will be the first step in acquiring proficiency / competence in the language. This is also the aim of the present study.

Ng'ang'a (2002) did a research on treatment of errors in Standard Seven learners and recommended that teachers should not only underline the written errors by the learners but also make a follow up to ensure that the individual learners have understood how to correct the errors. This study would cover the third objective of the present study in as far as assessment strategies are concerned.

Mungai (2012) researched on vocabulary learning strategies used by Form Three students in high schools. The study deals with the same level of students as the present study. The vocabularies are also related to writing because the learners have to appropriately use them depending on their meanings. This study differs from the present one in that it concentrates mostly on learners unlike the present one which deals with both teachers and learners. It also differs with the present one in that the vocabulary strategies it mentioned are more learner – centred, thus, creating an independent learning environment on the side of the learner unlike the present study where the teacher has to actively participate in the learning.

Wanjiku (2012) did a study on teaching of writing in English in Standard Four which is somehow related to the present study for a similar skill is covered though at a different level. She explains that the learners' L1 should be treated as positive resource rather than an inhibiting factor. She argues that when the learners have acquired L1 competently, acquiring the L2 becomes easier since the learner is able to detect the rules of the language more easily. This differs with the present study in that L1 in present study interferes with the smooth communication between the learner and the reader. Thus, in the present study the L1 creates a writing difficulty.

The Wathika (2013) study, also researched on teaching and assessment strategies in Functional writing in secondary schools. She researched on the teaching resources used in teaching functional writing and the verbs used by the teachers to introduce functional writing, besides others. This study differs from the present one in that it focuses much on how the teachers of English apply the action verb in writing their objectives for functional writing. Secondly, it refers to types of functional writing in general rather than narrowing down to a particular one.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research design

This study used a mixed design in which both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used in the data collection. This was deemed useful because of the type of data collected which was mainly qualitative and quantitative in nature collected through class observation, oral interviews and tests. Creswell(2003) states that quantitative research design gathers data in numerical form which can be put into categories, or in rank order, or measured in units of measurement. This type of data can be used to construct graphs and tables of raw data. In the present study it was used whereby tests were administered to learners, observation schedules for teachers were used and interviews for sampled teachers of English were conducted to produce both quantitative and qualitative data.

3.2 Target population

Burns &Grove (1997) define the target population as the entire aggregation of respondents that meet the designated set of criteria. The target population in this study constituted all the two hundred and sixteen (216) form three students in the five day secondary schools and five teachers of English in public day secondary schools in Aguthi division in Nyeri County.

3.3 Sampling procedures

Aguthi division has got five mixed day schools of which one is where the present researcher was teaching and therefore it was deliberately omitted to make the study more objective. Four day secondary schools were therefore purposively selected for this study. This was assumed to form a representative sample of the mixed day secondary schools in Nyeri County and also in Kenya. This is because the four schools were assumed to be typical of the mixed day secondary schools in Kenya. Orodho (2005) argues that purposive sampling could be used in cases where the respondents represent a typical case of the information required in the research. Form Three students were selected on the basis that they have been subjected to various aspects of Functional writing skills like packing lists, price lists, letters of apology, formal and informal letters. A total of 40 students who formed the sample for this study were randomly selected.

3.4 Research instruments

The present study employed three research instruments in the collection of the data. The first instrument was a written test for the learners. Carroll (1968) defines a test as a psychological or educational procedure designed to elicit certain behavior from which one can make inferences about certain characteristics of an individual, therefore a test is a

measuring tool. The present study employed this instrument to collect the quantitative data which was meant to establish the learners' difficulties in functional writing. The test was appropriate for learners for it was through it that the researcher could discover the language competence of the learners by establishing the difficulties they encountered in writing like spelling errors, punctuation difficulties, format placement difficulties among others in functional writing which define the learners' language competence in writing.

The Observation schedule for teachers of English meant to study behavior and interaction in a structured and systematic fashion was used in the field where the researcher made an observation on the kind of support and exposure teachers give the learners in their functional writing tasks. The observation schedule aided the present researcher in covering the second objective of the present study which was to identify the kind of support and exposure teachers give the learners in their functional writing tasks. This also aided in the collection of quantitative data in the present study.

The interview guide was used in conducting interviews for the teachers of English to establish how the support and exposure given to the learners influence the teachers in assessing functional writing for effective communication. This tool was found suitable for teachers because it aided in collecting the data on how the assessment of the learners functional writing was conducted which could not be collected through the tests or observation. This tool was convenient for both the interviewer and the interviewee for each could seek clarification and one readily check the validity of the information given. It was also found suitable in that people are usually more willing to talk than to write.

3.5 Data analysis

An essential component of ensuring data integrity is the accurate and appropriate analysis of research findings. The data collected in this study was analyzed using the qualitative approach. Mugenda (1999) argues that qualitative analysis analyzes information in a systematic way in order to come up with useful conclusions and recommendations. The data collected was analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The qualitative data collected was analyzed by descriptive prose. After marking the 40 scripts on the functional writing test, the data generated from them was categorized according to the type of errors identified. There were the format errors found in various items in the format which involved errors of omission and commission. These were found in the writing of the sender's address, recipient's address, date, salutation and the complementary close in the letter of application. The language errors were also categorized according to the language error they portrayed, therefore the error found determined its category, for example, misspelling of words, wrong punctuation and others. The same process was employed in identifying and describing errors in internal memo test. After establishing the number of occurrences for each error from the tests, the totals were then put into percentages using frequency tables and percentages. From the observation schedule, the data collected was interpreted in terms of the most frequently used strategy of teaching. The identified strategies seemed to be used by the four participants and the ones not used applied to all the four participants therefore the researcher did find the need of using the frequency tables. The data collected through the interview schedule, which had three items, was interpreted and tallies for each assessment strategy were made. After establishing the number of occurrences for each strategy, the totals were then put into percentages and a frequency table was used to describe these strategies. This was followed by verification of data collected and assessment of the outcomes with respect to the proposed objectives and questions, after which presentation of synthesized data and findings was done through description and frequency tables.

4. Data Presentation and Interpretation

4.1 Respondents' difficulties in functional writing

The researcher distributed two tests which were administered to the 40 sampled respondents and marked. The first test involved the respondents writing a letter of application while the second test required the respondents to write an internal memo. The respondents wrote the two tests which revealed several anomalies in their writing.

4.1.1 Respondents' difficulties in writing letters of application

The test that was administered to the respondents was intended to establish their difficulties in Functional writing skills. Out of the 40 respondents it was found out that 32 respondents, comprising 80%, of the respondents, wrote the letters of application while 8, comprising 20% of the respondents, failed to write the test in that they only copied the question and their scripts were not therefore satisfactorily written. When asked the reason, the respondents claimed they were not able to interpret the question for they had not been frequent in class. The researcher therefore did not consider the eight

scripts in the analyses. The question that was administered read as follows:

Soma na Bidii Educational Foundation is offering scholarships for those interested in joining a local college. Write an application for the scholarship showing reasons why you should be given the scholarship.

One objective for writing in the KIE (2002) high school syllabus is that learners should be able to use the appropriate format in Functional writing skills. The present study guided by this objective sought to find out the Form Three learners' difficulties in writing the format items in letters of application. In marking the letter of application question, these points of interpretation as pointed out in the KIE approved Form Two text, *Head Start Book Two*(2003pg,) were used:

... sender's address at the top right hand corner (no name is to appear here), below is the date (not part of address), the recipient's address below the date but at the left hand side, salutation (Dear Sir / Madam) below that, reference line follows, the body appears below which is to have an introductory paragraph and two others on education background and other personal details. The closing tag is to have the signature and name of the sender below it. The language checked is the correct spellings of words, correct paragraphing where the body should have at least three paragraphs as mentioned earlier, tenses and punctuation. The tone is supposed to be formal.

a) Anomalies in the addresses

According to head start book two (2003 pg 180) ,the approved text by KIE, in the writing of addresses in formal letters two addresses should be present .One is the sender's address at the right hand corner of the writing pad where the name of the sender should not be included, P.O. should be well punctuated with the two dots ; one after 'P' and the other one after 'O', every line of the address should be well punctuated. The second address is the recipient's address in which the title and not the name of the recipient is included and punctuation done as in the sender's address. The format used is either block or indented but not a mixture of the two. Table 4.1 shows analyses of how the Form Three respondents presented the two addresses found in letter of application, that is, the sender's and recipient's addresses. It indicates the crucial items left out or added by the respondents.

Table 4.1 Anomalies found in addresses

| Address Item | Frequency | % |
|---|-----------|-------------|
| Missing full stop in P.O. | 17 | 38% |
| Person's name put as part of Address | 3 | 7% |
| Missing punctuation at the end of each address line | 16 | 36% |
| Mixing block and indented designs | 8 | 18% |
| One address missing | 1 | 2% |
| Total | 45 | 100% |

Table 4.1 shows that the respondents had the greatest problem in punctuating the items in the address where the P.O. registered the highest number 38% of the total number of anomalies discovered in addresses, followed by end punctuation of each address line which accounted for 36% of the total anomalies in addresses. It was also noted that 3 respondents, did not know where to place their names and they placed them in the address accounting for 7% of the anomalies discovered in the addresses. Only 1 of the written script missed one address which recorded an insignificant 2% of the total anomalies in the address.

The respondents' difficulties in punctuating and placing format items correctly is portrayed in the above data which indicates that a number of learners had little grasp in punctuation and placing of format items in application letters. The literature reviewed indicates that learners should be encouraged on the need to correctly punctuate their work and place the format items correctly to create a positive image of themselves on the reader. They should always have the reader in mind as they write.

b) Presentation of the salutation

Guidelines for marking learners' competence in format item salutation by *Head Start Book Two* (2003 pg 180) indicate that the 'D' in dear should be capitalized while the rest of the letters are lower case and there should be a comma after 'Sir' or 'Madam' as punctuation marks. Most of the Form Three respondents did not observe this when writing the test. Table 4.2 shows how the salutation as a format item was presented by the respondents.

Table 4.2 Anomalies in presentation of salutation

| Salutation(Dear sir/madam) | Frequency | % |
|---------------------------------------|-----------|-------------|
| Missing comma after Sir/Madam | 19 | 76% |
| All letters capitalized | 5 | 20% |
| Salutation and reference on same line | 1 | 4% |
| Total | 25 | 100% |

Table 4.2 shows that 19 of the scripts written by the Form Three respondents did not have a comma as punctuation mark after the 'Sir' or 'Madam'; while 5 respondents had all letters in the salutation capitalized; and only 1 had the salutation and the reference put on the same line. All this indicated that the anomalies recorded in the sampled Form Three respondents in writing letters of application was a true picture of their difficulties in writing the format items in formal letters.

Out of the majority of the anomalies found in the format item salutation, 76% of the total anomalies emanated from lack of correct punctuation of this item. This indicated that most respondents had difficulties in punctuation of this item. On the same item, 20% of the total anomalies were recorded where learners used capital letters in writing this item instead of capitalizing only the first letter 'D' in word 'Dear'. This was also a punctuation anomaly for capital letters are part of punctuation indicating also that punctuation was a challenge to the Form Three respondents. There were few respondents who recorded the anomaly where the salutation item was placed alongside the reference. This last anomaly in salutation was minor for it accounted for only 4% of the total number of anomalies. Table 4.2, therefore, shows that the greatest challenge that respondents have is on punctuating their work.

It is noticeable from the foregoing that the respondents' difficulty in punctuation of format items is a recurring problem. The literature reviewed from Byrne (1979) cites punctuation difficulties in form of wrong use of commas, full stops and capitalization to be only found in sentence constructions but the findings in this section implies that these difficulties can also be reflected in format items as shown in Table 4.2.

c) Presentation of the Reference line

Head Start Book Two (2003 pg 180) gives the guidelines for marking the reference line in letters of application where it indicates that the reference line should be written in capital letters and then underlined. These guidelines were used in the present study but some of the respondents as shown in Table 4.3 did not adhere to these guidelines. Table 4.3 shows how the scripts written by the respondents portrayed anomalies in the reference line.

Table 4.3 Anomalies in the reference line

| Reference Line | Frequency | % |
|--|-----------|-------------|
| Not written in capital letters or underlined | 12 | 75% |
| Missing reference line | 4 | 25% |
| Total | 16 | 100% |

Table 4.3 above shows that 12 respondents did not use capital letters in the reference line neither were they underlined. This indicates a difficulty of Form Three respondents in writing this format item. There were 4 scripts without the reference line which also shows further difficulty in some of the Form Three respondents in the writing of letters of application.

The anomalies recorded in the reference line indicate that the greatest challenge the learners had just like previously discovered was in punctuating their work correctly. Table 4.3 shows that 75% of the anomalies were registered in the punctuation of the reference line while just 25% were in omission of the line. This shows weakness on the area of punctuation as far as the learners' work is concerned.

The learners' difficulty in correct punctuation of the format item recurs in Table 4.3 implying that some of the learners have little grasp or understanding on how punctuation should be carried out in the mentioned format item. The literature reviewed fails to address punctuation in format items but only deals punctuation at sentence level thus creating a lacuna for the present study.

d) Presentation of the complimentary close by Form Three respondents

Guidelines for marking the above format item in *Head Start Book Two* (2003 pg 180) indicates that the 'Y' in the word 'yours' should be capitalized, the 'F' in the word 'faithfully' should be in the lower case, there should be a comma after 'faithfully', followed by a signature below it and then the sender's name. These rules were not completely followed by

the Form Three respondents in writing the letter of application.

Table 4.4 shows how the complimentary closure was written in the respondents' scripts putting into consideration the guidelines given in the *head start book two (2003 pg 180)* mentioned earlier in this section.

Table 4.4 Anomalies in complimentary closure

| Item in Complimentary Closure | Frequency | % |
|-------------------------------------|-----------|-------------|
| Missing comma after "faithfully" | 18 | 51% |
| No complimentary closure | 1 | 3% |
| Signature on same line with "yours" | 1 | 3% |
| 'Y' not capitalized | 11 | 31% |
| 'F' capitalized | 2 | 6% |
| Apostrophe put in "yours" | 2 | 6% |
| Total | 35 | 100% |

Table 4.4 indicates that 18 of the scripts written did not have a comma after 'faithfully' thus failing to observe the approved text by KIE *head start book two*(2003 pg 180) expectations; in 1 of the scripts the complimentary closure was missing; the same number had the signature in the first line of the complimentary closure instead of writing it on the second line; in 11 of the written scripts the letter 'Y' in 'Yours' was not capitalized; letter 'f' in 'faithfully' in 2 of the scripts was capitalized instead of being lower case; and an apostrophe in 2 of the scripts was put in the word 'Yours'. This is an indication of the difficulties that Form Three respondents faced in the writing of letters of application.

Table 4.4 shows that the highest percentage of the anomalies, that is, 51% in complementary close were recorded in punctuation of the closing line, where the punctuation marks were left out. This was an indication of the respondents' ignorance of importance of punctuation marks. This is followed by another anomaly of the same nature which accounts for 31% of the total anomalies found in this item. The same challenge recorded previously in other discussed format items of punctuation recurs indicating that the respondents had a weakness in this area.

The findings in this section bear the same sentiments with the previous one in that punctuation of the format item is wrongly done by majority of the respondents implying that some of the respondents had not understood how the format items should be punctuated. This could have contributed to the poor performance decreed by the KNEC in English performance at KCSE.

e) Respondents' difficulties in written language

In the present study, the respondents' writing in letters of application portrayed the characteristic defects which confirm Weir (1988) conclusions in his academic writing about the incompetence of learners in writing as cited by Moody (2002) in his discussion paper for the writing committee. The conclusions included the following:

1. High frequency of grammatical errors
2. Lack of variety in grammatical structures employed
3. Use of inappropriate vocabularies
4. Use of inappropriate grammatical structures
5. Poor spelling
6. Poor punctuation

Analysis of the data involved the separation and classification of errors to identify their type. Sentence-level grammatical errors committed by the participants included verbs, omission of articles and poor spelling, among others. Al-Buainain (2007) argues that many of these errors are common to all non-native users of English.

Njoroge (1996) observes that with regard to methods of error analysis there are basically mainly two main approaches. The first one is for the researcher to set up his / her own categories of errors on the basis of pre - conceptions about the learners' most common problems. The second is to classify identified errors into particular areas of grammatical and syntactic problem; that is, the errors determine the categories. The present study adopted the second approach through a process of sorting and resorting of errors written on cards. Examples of these errors are as follows.

(i) Spelling errors

These spelling errors were categorized as shown in Table 4.5 whereby some occurred due to vowel deletion, consonant deletion, vowel addition, consonant addition, interchange of vowels and consonants and joining words which should be separated among others.

Table 4.5 analyses of spelling errors

| Error Category | Frequency | % |
|---------------------------|-----------|-------------|
| Vowel deletion | 4 | 10% |
| Vowel addition | 1 | 3% |
| Consonant deletion | 8 | 21% |
| Consonant addition | 9 | 23% |
| Vowel interchange | 7 | 18% |
| Consonant interchange | 3 | 7.7% |
| Abbreviation | 3 | 7.7% |
| Joining independent words | 4 | 10% |
| Total | 39 | 100% |

Table 4.5 shows that most of the spelling errors at 23%, involved consonant addition followed by consonant deletion at 21%. The lowest category of spelling errors was recorded in abbreviation and consonant interchange which had 7.7% of the total spelling errors. These errors portrayed the difficulties of the Form Three respondents in Functional writing skills language use. This shows that they do not meet the *head start book two (2003)* expectations on correct word spelling as part of language use leading to poor performance in Functional writing skills.

Some of these errors drawn from this study data included the following:

1) **'For may application is to do may corse.'**

Example (1) shows both vowel deletion and vowel addition in that instead of the respondents writing the word "course", he or she deleted the vowel "u" and instead of he or she writing the word "my" the vowel "a" is added. This interference distorts the content being conveyed in the sentence and it makes it difficult for the reader to decipher the information. This type of problem emanates from language transfer, that is, the source language grammatical items being transferred to the target language.

2) **'Am an average students and displined one.'**

3) **'My mother is a cashual labourer.'**

In examples 2) and 3), the respondents recorded consonant addition in the words "students" and "cashual". The respondent in example 2) added 's' to the word 'student' making it plural instead of using the singular form, thus distorting the information and the learner in 3) added 'h' to 'casual' also interfering with the information. In the word "displine", there is consonant deletion where 'c' and vowel 'l' have been deleted. These spelling errors affect the message being delivered for the reader encounters difficulties in deciphering the information.

The findings show that the learners require more spelling drills to be able to overcome these problems. If enough tasks on spelling are conducted in class, the difficulty could be eliminated. The difficulties also indicate that the learners are not well equipped in reading widely which could help in improving their spelling.

(ii) Language transfer errors

Language transfer errors were portrayed by some of the participants. McLaughlin (1988) argues that transfer errors can occur due to learners' deficiency of the necessary information in the second language or the attention capacity to activate the necessary second language routine. Some examples of these types of errors discovered in data collected in this study were included the following:

4) **'I have enclosed my certificates of my curriculum vitae'**

5) **'I was called to join a college'**

In examples 4) and 5), direct translation took place. Instead of example 4) reading "I have enclosed my certificates and curriculum vitae", the respondent distorted the information making it hard to communicate to the recipient. In example 5), the same error occurred where the respondent directly translated the Gikuyu word 'called' which means 'to be admitted', thus making the information sound ambiguous.

(iii) Verb errors

The data collected in the present study portrays many cases of misuse of verb tenses and aspects in English. The respondents portrayed difficulties in selecting the correct verb form. The following are examples of such verb errors identified in this study data:

6) **'So as to pursue my education and became a better person.'**

7) **'I performed well in my exam and I achieve ahigh strade.'**

In example 6), the past tense used in the word '**became**' does not fit in the sentence. Instead, the respondent should have used the present simple tense form 'become' to communicate effectively. The same is repeated in example(

7) where instead of using the past simple tense form 'achieved', which fitted in that sentence, the respondent used the present simple 'achieve' thus affecting the meaning the sentence was supposed to communicate. All these errors observed in the Form Three respondents' Functional writing skills tasks, indicated the respondents' difficulties for they did not demonstrate enough competence in their use of the structures given in their sentences

Table 4.6 shows the analyses of these language usage errors noted in the writing of the Form Three respondents in the letter of application.

Table 4.6 Language usage errors

| Error Category | Frequency | % |
|-------------------|-----------|-------------|
| Poor spelling | 50 | 55.6% |
| Missing words | 7 | 7.8% |
| Wrong tenses | 6 | 6.7% |
| Language transfer | 18 | 20% |
| Poor punctuation | 9 | 10% |
| Total | 90 | 100% |

Table 4.6 shows that the most frequent errors were of spelling at 55.6% of the total language errors and this affected effective communication in the respondents' writing. Language transfer errors followed with 20%, poor punctuation 10%, missing words 7.8% and wrong tenses 6.7%.

Table 4.6 shows that spelling errors had the highest incidences of occurrence whereby they manifested themselves in form of many deleted vowels and consonants in words where they were supposed to appear, while others manifested themselves through added vowels and consonants where they were not required. There was also joining of words which should be independent words. Language transfer errors which were second with a frequency of 18 were characterized by a lot of mother - tongue interference as earlier discussed (See section 4.5). Punctuation deficiency occurred mostly in the format items like addresses, salutation and the complimentary close. Missing words occurred where pronouns were left out, where there were only 7 recorded instances. There was wrong tense use as previously discussed (See section 4.5) where learners used inappropriate tenses in sentences. The respondents recorded great difficulties in spellings as far as language usage in letters of application was concerned. This implied that little or no effort at all had been put to improve the respondents' difficulties in word spelling. This could also have contributed to the yearly decline in KCSE English performance as reported by the KNEC (2006)

4.1.2 Respondents' difficulties in writing the internal memo

In order to examine the respondents' difficulties in Functional writing skills, another test on internal memo was administered. Forty tests were distributed but only thirty one respondents wrote the test, while nine respondents never wrote anything and when asked the reason said they understood nothing for they had been absent from class for some period. The test was therefore written by 78% of the participants while 22% did not.

The present study was guided by guidelines in the *Head Start Book Three* (2003 pg 210), a KIE approved text, for marking the internal memo format. The marking points of interpretation included the name of institution which should be centered; below it was the subheading; the name 'internal memo' which should be capitalized and centered; the addresses (from..., to...); date; subject; reference number; salutation; body and signing off procedure. The language was marked the same as in the formal letter in marking the test on internal memo. The tone was formal.

The study found that most of the respondents were aware of most format items but many were not able to place them correctly as per the guidelines. Table 4.7 shows the anomalies found in the Form Three respondents' presentation of the name of the institution as one of the format items in internal memo.

Table 4.7 Presentation of name of institution

| Name of Institution | Frequency | % |
|---|-----------|-------------|
| Written below sub-heading internal memo | 8 | 50% |
| Not centered | 7 | 43.8% |
| Missing | 1 | 6.3% |
| Total | 16 | 100% |

Table 4.7 portrayed that 50% of the anomalies noted in the presentation of the name of institution occurred where the respondents put the institution name below the subheading 'internal memo' instead of it preceding it. This is an indication that not all Form Three respondents were able to meet the expectation of the guidelines in as far as writing this internal memo format item was concerned. Another 43.8% of the anomalies in the same item occurred where some Form Three participants did not center this format item while an insignificant number of 6.3% did not include the format item at all. All this portrayed the respondents' difficulties in the Functional writing task.

The findings in this section imply that some respondents were not conversant with the placing of the format item presented, thereby, encountering difficulties in its presentation. This indicates that they need thorough drilling in the placement of format items so as to register better performance even at KCSE.

a) Presentation of the sub - heading 'internal memo'

Guidelines in the *Head Start Book Three* (2003 pg 210) for the sub – heading 'internal memo' state that it should be capitalized, centered and written below the name of the institution. Many of the Form Three respondents had an idea about this format item but some were not able to place it correctly, showing difficulties in writing this format item. Table 4.8 shows the abnormalities that were noted in the writing of the Form Three respondents in the presentation of this format item.

Table 4.8 Respondents' presentation of the sub - heading 'Internal memo'

| Anomaly | Frequency | % |
|---------------------------|-----------|-------------|
| Not capitalized | 2 | 8.7% |
| Missing | 6 | 26% |
| Not centered | 8 | 34.8% |
| Above name of institution | 7 | 30.4% |
| Total | 23 | 100% |

Table 4.8 shows that the highest percentage of anomalies was where 34.8% of the respondents did not center the sub-heading 'internal memo'. This was followed by the anomaly where 30.4% of the respondents wrote it above the name of institution. Only 8.7% of the respondents did not capitalize the sub - heading. These anomalies showed that some of the Form Three respondents had difficulties in writing this internal memo format item for they failed to follow the guidelines set for this item.

The present study discovered that the anomalies that the respondents had in the writing of internal memo were very conspicuous in the writing of the format items, that is, the name of institution and sub-heading 'internal memo'.

b) Respondents' difficulties in language use in the internal memo

Tennant (2001) in his academic writing suggests two methods of correcting students' writing: to write corrections on the paper using a red pen to make them clearly visible, and a more effective method, to write lengthy comments explaining grammar points, raising questions concerning meaning and logical development, suggesting alternative wording among others.

The present study used the first method in correcting the respondents' scripts and noted the same errors found in language use in the formal letters which confirms Moody's (2000) conclusions about the characteristic defects portrayed by students in their writing. The study discovered that only few Form Three respondents' did not have language difficulties in writing the test. The present study categorized these language errors into: spelling errors, verb tense errors, word deletion, language transfer and incorrect punctuation. This was based on the classification used by Njoroge's (1996) and Ferris' (2000) study on new evidence on effects of error correction in L2 writing classes. These errors are discussed in the sections below.

i) Presentation of spelling errors in writing of the internal memo

The present study categorized the spelling errors into two: those emanating from deletion of vowels and consonants; others occurred as a result of addition of unnecessary vowels and consonants to verbs and nouns, while others occurred as a result of joining independent words. Table 4.9 shows the spelling errors presented in the internal memo writing by the Form Three respondents.

Table 4.9 Spelling errors in internal memo

| Error Category | Frequency | Percentage |
|---------------------------|-----------|-------------|
| Vowel deletion | 2 | 5.6% |
| Consonant deletion | 8 | 22.2% |
| Vowel addition | 1 | 2.8% |
| Joining independent words | 4 | 11.1% |
| Vowel interchange | 12 | 33.3% |
| Consonant interchange | 3 | 8.3% |
| Consonant addition | 6 | 16.7% |
| Total | 36 | 100% |

Table 4.9 above shows that highest percentage of spelling errors 33.3% was recorded in vowel interchange. An example of such is as follows:

8) 'When you recieve this information correct the wastage.'

In example 8, instead of writing the word 'receive' the respondent interchanges the vowels 'e' and 'i' such that the word becomes 'recieve'.

The other category with a high percentage of spelling errors at 22.2% was consonant deletion followed by consonant addition with 16.7%.

9) 'Those who are leaving water runing.'

10) 'Make sure you have closed water taps.'

In example 9, there is consonant deletion where instead of putting double 'n' in the word 'running' one 'n' is deleted while in example 10 there is addition of a consonant where double 's' instead of single one has been added in the word 'close'. These errors make the written communication distorted.

Joining independent words was at 11.1% while the others were below 10%. These spelling errors portray little difficulty for the Form Three respondents in language usage in Functional writing skills.

These types of errors according to Ferris (2000) are 'treatable' if the learners are given grammar texts with grammatical rules to follow and they practice them in their writing.

ii) Comparison of language errors noted in writing of application letter and the internal memo

The present study also discovered that in both application letter and internal memo language errors in the respondents' writing were varied and ranged from language transfer errors, omitted words, wrong tenses to poor punctuation. A comparison of these errors was found necessary by the present study to find out which of the two portrayed more. All these errors together with spelling errors affect a learner's effective communication in Functional writing skills. Table 4.10 analyses these categories of language errors as they were recorded from the application letters and internal memos of the Form Three respondents.

Table 4.10 Comparison of Language use errors in application letter and internal memo

| Error | Application Letter (Frequency) | % | Internal Memo (Frequency) | % |
|-------------------|--------------------------------|------------|---------------------------|-------------|
| Poor spelling | 50 | 55.6 | 48 | 64.9% |
| Word omission | 7 | 7.8 | 1 | 1.4% |
| Wrong tenses | 6 | 6.7 | 8 | 10.8% |
| Language transfer | 18 | 20 | 12 | 16.2% |
| Poor punctuation | 9 | 10 | 5 | 6.8% |
| Total | 90 | 100 | 74 | 100% |

Table 4.10 indicates that the highest percentage of errors was from poor spelling at 50 in application letter and 48 in internal memo. It is followed by language transfer errors at 18 in application letter and 12 in internal memo which are caused by the respondents' L1 interference. In both functional writing skills tested the findings indicate that both application letter and internal memo share similar language problems which are likely to be found in other writing skills. These type of errors affect effective communication.

In this section, on the respondents' difficulties in Functional writing skills, many of the difficulties registered are in the following areas: format presentation of the two selected areas of Functional writing, that is, the application letters and internal memos. Paltridge (1996) refers to this format as the organizational structure and suggests the solution to learners' difficulties in this area is for teachers to introduce a variety of Functional writing to have students understand

and practice different sets of skills. The other difficulties are in linguistics features, that is, word order, relations between sentence elements, cohesion in and between sentences, spelling and punctuation. Learners' difficulties in this area according to Byrne (1979) could be eliminated by teachers consistently observing patterns of word order and word structure, demonstrating a good command of sentence structure and preserving coherence both between sentences and between sentences to give meaning to a text.

4.2 Actual classroom teaching of functional skills

To investigate how the actual teaching in functional writing skills takes place in the classroom, the present study carried out a physical observation of the sampled teachers of English as they taught. Hyland (2003) argues that teachers need to explore ways of 'scaffolding' students' learning, and using knowledge of language to guide them towards a conscious understanding of target genres and the ways language creates meaning in context. This is through creating scenarios in writing which are outside the usual classroom environment where language learnt in class could be applied. For example, work places like an organization with the manager and his juniors and a hospital environment, among others.

Burns (2001) suggests the genre - based approaches as the most appropriate in teaching Functional writing skills. Burns further points out the three stages to follow. Stage one involves modeling the generic structure of the model text. Stage two involves the joint efforts of a teacher and students to work out another text with same genre. Stage three involves students' individual work and the teacher's and learners' editing.

The present study found that the teachers of English employed various approaches in their classroom teaching. For example, teacher 'A' and 'D' began by first creating a conducive environment for learning through use of ice - breakers, then introduced the topic on formal letters and after the respondents portrayed understanding in this topic they then explained letters of application which are examples of formal letters. They allowed the respondents to discuss a sample that appears in the KIE recommended course book, that is, Head Start Book Three (2003 pg 210). One member from each group discussion made an oral presentation on the items found in the format of a letter of application. The teachers corrected where some format items were not clear. Later, the respondents were given individual assignment.

Teacher "B" and "C" started the lesson in a similar manner with ice-breakers. Teacher 'B' introduced the topic on internal memoranda by first asking respondents about the various modes of communication used within an institution. The respondents gave examples, such as, telephones, notices and others mentioned internal memos. He then asked one of the respondents who had mentioned the internal memo to mention some of the items found in an internal memo which he did. Teacher 'B' then lectured on this topic briefly asking questions now and then to test whether the respondents comprehended the concepts. Teacher 'B' then gave individual assignment to be marked later and the lesson was over.

Teacher 'C' after the ice-breakers introduced the topic immediately through lecturing then led a discussion on the various situations that the internal memo could be used. Learners suggested that a principal of a school could use it to communicate with members of staff or even the students. The learners also added that prefects could use the same to communicate with other students. Teacher 'C' then gave a question for discussion from the respondents' course text and one member from the discussion presented before the class on the various items found in internal memo format. Later, individual exercises were given.

Although the teachers are adopting the best teaching practices, the time and the number of lessons allocated for the English subject bearing in mind that the subject has wide coverage, hinders thorough preparation of learners in any given area of Functional writing. This could explain one reason for the low performance in the subject.

The four teachers used some of the authentic assessment tools that are intended to increase students' engagement and make learning more relevant. These include oral presentations and group work, among others. However, none of the teachers used teaching materials like charts, newspaper cuttings or the modern technology like audio-visuals like power point presentations which had been reviewed in this study. This could explain the many difficulties in writing the learners experienced for they were not shown authentic samples of what they were discussing, which they could have related to. According to Gardner (1972) good writing materials should bear the following characteristics: they should be learner -centered rather than teacher - centered. They should focus on helping students to develop their own strategies for learning; materials should allow the learners to be creative; they should provide stimulating activities that focus students' attention on the things to be learned; they should be interesting; they should be in all ways related to students' experiences and interests as well as be task-based. Teachers should use purposeful tasks to motivate students' learning and make them see the usefulness of writing. Finally, good writing materials should be authentic and deal with real - life communication tasks.

4.3 Assessment strategies used by teachers of English in teaching functional skills.

In order to establish and describe the assessment strategies used by the teachers of English, the researcher conducted an oral interview with the four sampled teachers of English. Moore (1998) defines assessment as a method for following a student's advancement and demands the participation of the learner. Ferris (2002) writes about tactful correction of students' writing. He talks about different strategies used when responding to errors found in students' writing. Some of these are categorized into direct / indirect feedback, global / local errors and treatable / untreatable errors. According to him, errors that are repetitive should be put as samples on the board and then students should be asked to correct the errors.

The present study discovered various assessment strategies used by the four sampled teachers of English. To start with, Teacher 'A' when asked how the assessment of Functional writing skills was carried out the response was that introduction of the Functional writing skill was first done and then an exercise on the same given. The second question was whether the exercise was marked and the response was that after the students had done the assignment, peer marking was encouraged where they exchanged their books after which teacher 'A' explained to them how to correct the work. After this, checking whether the correction was done as expected was done. Ferris (2002) study is in relation with this finding as it portrays that students should be helped to develop their ability to evaluate their own work and to correct their errors. This helps students identify grammatical errors in own and other students' writing samples. Self-correction and peer - correction encourages the active role of student and promote cooperative learning in the class.

The third question was how he gave the feedback. Lile (2002) asserts that if students are not given a reward or credit for their efforts and no feedback is given to the student, then most students' intrinsic motivation would begin to decrease. Teacher 'A' responded that he commented on the students' work in the areas for correction. If it is a spelling error, he asked the students to correct it and hand in their books for re - marking. On corrections in areas of formats of Functional writing skills he would discuss with the students.

The last question was on the criteria for setting questions on Functional skills to which Teacher "A" said that he considered the terms that were very familiar to the learners using terms and situations they were familiar with. An example of such a question he said was: **"Imagine you are the library captain in your school. Write a memo to the class prefects asking them to ensure that students observe the library rules especially regarding silence and the prompt return of books."** This question has familiar terms and environment to the learners like the "library" and "class prefect".

Another interview was conducted with Teacher "B" and the first question was how she assessed Functional writing skills to which she responded that she first explained the given skill to the learners and then gave group questions. The learners discussed and then one of them would present to the rest of the class their findings. After the presentation, teacher 'B' then corrected the work presented by ensuring that they understood the correct format. This finding is in line with Ewing (1998) who states that authentic assessment allows for directly measuring student achievement on important, appropriate tasks through active and flexible methods like oral presentations and peer assessment, among other methods.

The last question to Teacher "B" was about the setting of the Functional writing skill questions, and the reply was that format was tested first to ensure that all items on format were understood. Teacher 'B' guided the learners on how to locate all items in the format. A mark for every item placed correctly was awarded. This finding is in line with Tanner's (2004) criterion - based standards which he states are necessary to maintain authenticity. These criterion - referenced assessments are designed to compare students' performance against learning task standards and that is what Teacher "B" employs.

Teacher "C" was also interviewed and the first question was how she assessed Functional writing skills. The response was that it was done by giving assignment to learners to do in groups, but in letter writing she gave individual assignments. When asked how work was marked, the response was that the format, language use and punctuation was checked. On giving feedback, correction for those who had used wrong formats was done, then the task was repeated. Teacher "C" therefore used authentic assessment tools that are intended to increase students' engagement and make learning more relevant which include group work. On setting questions only the exercise in the students' book was given.

Finally, the researcher interviewed Teacher "D". The first question was on how the assessment of Functional writing skills was done. The response was that learners wrote assignments and they marked. When asked how feedback, was given the response was that the grammar was checked, and whether the learners were able to link the introduction to the body and the conclusion, relevance to the subject and comments on the students' work were made. This teacher employs Tennant's (2001) methods for correcting students' writing which include: writing lengthy comments explaining grammar points, raising questions concerning meaning and logical development among others. When asked how the

setting of questions on Functional writing skills was done, the response was that familiar situations like the school environment where students and teachers are involved were used.

The various assessment strategies used by the four teachers of English are analyzed in Table 4.11

Table 4.11 Assessment strategies used by teachers

| Assessment Strategy | Frequency | Percentage |
|------------------------------------|-----------|-------------|
| Portfolios | 0 | 0% |
| Group work | 2 | 15.8% |
| Presentations | 1 | 7.7% |
| Peer marking | 1 | 7.7% |
| Criterion –based assessment | 1 | 7.7% |
| Setting questions | 4 | 30.8% |
| Writing comments on student's work | 4 | 30.8% |
| Total | 13 | 100% |

Table 4.11 shows that the majority of the respondents, that is, 30.8% of them, wrote comments on the learners' exercises as a direct method of assessing learners' Functional writing skills. The comments could be on spelling error spotted in the learners' writing or wrong verb tense. The same percentage 30.8% also set questions as an assessment strategy in Functional writing skills. The least employed assessment strategy used by 7.7% of the respondents was presentations, criterion - based and peer marking. In criterion –based assessment strategy, the teacher sets standards against which he / she awards marks for each learner. For example, the set standards for awarding marks in a letter of application could be a mark for each format item written correctly if it is for marking competence in letter of application format items. Peer marking occurs when learners are given exercises and then told to exchange their work and the teacher guides them on how they should correct the exercises. Group work was only used by 15.8% of the respondents. This indicates that the commonly used strategies are writing comments on students' work and setting questions in Functional writing skills. None of the respondents mentioned portfolios as an assessment strategy even though according to Mohammad (2013) in his research on portfolio keeping in English claims that, students usually have positive reactions towards the portfolio method; it helps learners to improve content knowledge, and grammatical competence. This could have been a better assessment strategy compared to others used in that learners are able to evaluate their progress in a given period.

The nature of the assessment in the classroom according to the findings proves to be more teacher - centered than learner - centered. From the literature reviewed in this study, Maroko (2010) indicates that it should be learner – centered, where learners should be more actively involved like using oral presentations, group work, portfolios and other methods which will involve the learner more.

5. Conclusions

To identify and describe the learners' difficulties in functional writing skills where the present study used tests which were personally administered to the sampled learners in Form Three day secondary schools selected in Aguthi division, Tetu sub-county, Nyeri County, Kenya. Two tests were set, one for each of the Functional skill areas, that is, the letter of application and the internal memo. Forty (40) respondents were expected to write them though eight (8) did not write the letter of application quiz and nine (9) did not write the memo quiz.

The scripts which were written by the respondents were marked and the study discovered that the learners had a great challenge in writing the format of the two Functional skills areas, especially where punctuation was involved. The study used the approved texts by KIE guidelines to mark this format and just a few of the scripts had format items written correctly. The language usage was also checked and the study found that the learners had great challenge in spelling words correctly and also language transfer problems. The researcher therefore concluded that learners' difficulties portrayed in the writing of the two tests in functional writing could be a contributory factor to their lack of language competence in functional writing. The study concluded that the learners were not having enough practice on this writing skill which contributed to the many difficulties in their writing.

Secondly, to identify the kind of support and exposure given by teachers to learners in their functional writing tasks, the present study carried out an observation during the actual teaching. This enabled the researcher to actually observe the teaching / learning activities and the resources used by the teachers of English in their classroom teaching of functional skills. Four (4) teachers of English who had been sampled for this study participated. The four (4) from the four

(4) sampled schools carried out each a lesson of forty (40) minutes on functional writing and the researcher observed how they conducted it with their permission to do so. They used various teaching and learning activities like lecturing, group discussion, and oral presentations among others. The only teaching resource that they used was the textbook. The conclusion made from this observation was that lack of adequate time to carry out a thorough discussion with the learners on any given Function writing area could be a cause to the learner' difficulties leading to lack of language competence in functional writing. Lack of sufficient teaching / learning resources could also contribute to the same due to the limited teaching resources, learners' exposure to various samples of given functional writing is also limited.

Lastly, the present study carried out an interview with the sampled teachers of English from the four (4) sampled secondary schools in order to establish how the support and exposure given to learners influence the teachers in assessing the functional writing for effective communication. The interview was a preferred instrument because it was conducted personally in the school compound outside school schedule and it took at most twenty (20) minutes; the researcher had a face-to-face interaction with the participants which enabled clarification of questions and answers on both sides. The interviewees mentioned various assessment strategies that they use like setting questions, marking learners' work, group work, peer marking, and others. The researcher concluded that failure to use more learner - centered assessment strategies like portfolios and others could be another factor that affected language competence of the learners in functional writing for they were hardly involved in marking their work and correct their own language difficulties.

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