

**CHALLENGES STUDENTS FACE IN LEARNING ESSAY WRITING SKILLS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN MANGA SUB COUNTY, KENYA.**

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to investigate challenges students face in learning essay writing skills in English language in secondary schools in Manga Sub County, Kenya. The motivation for the study was the persistent poor performance in Kenya Secondary Education Certificate National Examination Council (K.C.S.E) in English creative writing paper. A descriptive survey research design was adopted in this study. The respondents of the study were Form three students plus their teachers of English in 10 selected secondary schools using purposive and stratified random sampling techniques. Data was collected using questionnaires and interview schedules. The study indicated that lecture, question and answer and teacher demonstration were the most used methods in teaching and learning of essay writing skills. The results further revealed that inadequate content mastery, incorrect use of grammar and first language (L1) interference were the common challenges students face in learning essay writing skills in English language. It was recommended that teachers should be sensitized on the use of learner centred teaching methods such as group writing and peer teaching in order to enhance writing competence among students.

**Keywords: Challenges, Learning, Teaching methods, writing skills.**

**1. Introduction**

Writing is one of the most important skills that students of English as a second language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) need to develop in order to enhance their efforts to learn the target language and enhance their L2 proficiency ( Alqurashi, 2015). Writing well entails the ability to convey ideas and facts using clear, accurate and appropriate written language (Hashim, 2011).Teaching writing skills in ESL classrooms is not only a foundation for improving educational outcomes, but also play a key role in preparing learners to cope with the communicative demands of real life situations (Ismail, 2011).Therefore, ability to write well is essential. Little-wood (2014) emphasizes that writing is fundamental to effective communication in work places. Besides Muodumogu and Unwaha (2013) contend that in the global economy and in an increasingly demanding

world of literacy, the importance of ensuring learners' proficiency in writing cannot be overstated. This raises concern for teachers to help learners to become better writers.

In Kenya, English language is learnt and taught as a second language and it is also the country's official language, as well as the language of instruction in schools, colleges and universities. Assessment of learners' achievement in English language and other subjects in the curriculum is done through writing. For instance, the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education school curriculum by the Kenya Institute of Education (KIE), writing is one of the language skills that enable learners to think critically and creatively as he or she responds to academic discipline. It is a life long process and part of personal development whose usefulness stretches beyond the classroom (KIE, 2006). In spite of the significant role played by writing in the school curriculum, students fail to achieve proficiency in writing. Their performance in writing continues to be unsatisfactory as noted by the Kenya National Examination Council (KNEC) reports. KNEC report (2012) states that students are weak in both mechanical and stylistic skills of writing. They are also weak in punctuation, word choice and make frequent construction errors. This has greatly affected the mean scores not only in the composition writing paper (English paper 3) but also in English as a subject as shown in the Table 1:

**Table 1: Trends in performance in KCSE English**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>
2011	36.42
2012	37.88
2013	27.47
2014	38.84
2015	40.29

**Source: KNEC 2011- 2015**

Data in Table 1 shows that performance in English in the National Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) examination has been below average for five consecutive years and yet English language is the medium of instruction and a compulsory subject. Therefore, little mastery of writing skills can be a serious impediment to the acquisition of skills and knowledge for other subjects that require an English background for teaching and writing (KNEC, 2013). It is against this background that the study investigated challenges students face in learning essay writing skills in English language in secondary schools in Manga Sub County, Kenya.

### **1.1 Statement of the problem**

Learning to write well is a problem for significant number students in ESL learning context. Students' dismal performance in English language and in academics has been partly blamed on their abysmally low proficiency in writing (KNEC, 2013). Part of the problem lies with methods used in teaching and learning of English writing skills in secondary schools (Koross, et al. 2013). Considering the need to improve learners' proficiency in the writing skills, it becomes necessary to ex-

plore challenges students face in learning essay writing skills in English language in secondary schools in Kenya, in a bid to suggest ways of addressing these challenges.

### **1.2 Objectives of the study**

The study addressed the following objectives:

1. Determine methods teachers use in teaching and learning essay writing skills.
2. Establish challenges students face in learning essay writing skills.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **Challenges in teaching and learning English writing skills in secondary schools.**

Various studies have been carried out on challenges in teaching and learning of writing skills. Wanjala (2015) investigated challenges teachers and students face in using the integrated writing skills approach in secondary schools in Bungoma North Sub County of Kenya. The study established that the main challenges in using this approach by both teachers and learners were that the learners' language level was very low; the approach called for more time than time allocated for writing. Moreover, some of the schools did not have enough texts to be used by both teachers and students.

Kemboi, et al. (2014) found out that writing is not taught effectively in secondary schools in Kenya. It was evident that both teachers and students face challenges which include inadequate resources, heavy work load on the part of the teachers, and lack of motivation, mother tongue influence and limited use of English both in school and at home. Eyinda and Shariff (2010) carried out a similar study to investigate the teaching of writing in an ESL classroom in secondary schools in Kenya. The findings of the study indicated that most teachers dominated in the classroom interaction. It was also reported that teaching methods used were mainly teacher centered such as lecturing and question and answer. The study's findings further indicated that although teachers use a variety of teaching and learning activities in their writing lessons, most of the activities used give teachers overwhelming control of the class proceedings. Teachers also face challenges such as lack of knowledge, skills and interest to teach writing, inadequate teaching and learning resources, large classes and lack of learners' interest in writing. A study by Koross, et al. (2013) set out to establish perception of teachers and students towards methods used in teaching and learning of English writing skills in secondary schools. The study revealed that both teachers and students had negative perception towards methods used in teaching and learning of English writing skills.

Okwara (2012) investigated factors related to achievement in written English composition among secondary school students. The study revealed that certain factors affected achievement in written English composition. Some of these factors were the linguistic environment of students, lack of adequate preparation of students for examinations, lack of adequate reading materials, the poor quality of students, lack of a proper foundation in primary schools, lack of concerted efforts by teachers, limited time for learning English, poor interpretation of In addition, Muriungi (2013) carried out a study on the influence of L1 on the acquisition of English language skills among secondary school students in Kenya. The study established that L1 influenced the acquisition of English language skills among secondary school students.

Koross (2012) researched on the use of oral language approaches in developing writing skills in English language among students in Rift Valley secondary schools in Kenya. The findings of the study revealed that problems found in schools were associated with students' attitudes, teachers' methodology of teaching, inadequate instructional materials and inability of learners to express themselves orally. This, hindered development of competence in writing among students. It is against this background that the current study set out to establish the students face in learning essay writing skills in secondary schools in order to devise strategies of improving the writing skills among learners.

### **3. Research Methodology**

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. According to Orodho (2004) a descriptive survey research design enables the researcher to collect information about people's opinions; attitude or any of the variety of education or social issues that affect them. This study was carried out in public secondary schools in Manga Sub County of Kenya. Like many other parts of Kenya, many secondary school learners are not proficient in English writing skills. This justified the selection of the area for the study. The population from which the sample for this was drawn consisted of 32 public secondary schools, 52 teachers of English language and 1800 form three students. Stratified random and purpose sampling techniques were used to select respondents for the study. A total of 180 students and 10 teachers participated in the study. Frankel and Wallen (2006) recommend at least 100 subjects in a descriptive study is enough sample to be used. Data was collected using questionnaires for students and interview schedules for teachers. Validity and reliability of the instruments was established through piloting and expert review of the instruments. Both qualitative and quantitative data were generated. Qualitative data was organized according to the study themes and presented descriptively on the basis of research objectives. Descriptive statistics (percentages and frequencies) were used to analyse quantitative data. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 17 was used to process the data. The results are presented in form of tables and figures. Data from interview schedules was reported using direct quotations from teachers.

### **4. Data Analysis and Findings**

#### **4.1 Methods used in teaching essay writing skills**

The first objective of the study was to determine methods teachers use in teaching essay writing skills. The findings are presented in Table 2:

**Table 2: Methods used in teaching essay writing skills**

Method	Frequently		Sometimes		Rarely		Never	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Lecture	8	80	2	20	0	0	0	0
Question and answer	6	60	2	20	2	20	0	0
Group discussion	2	20	3	30	5	50	0	0
Role play	0	0	1	10	2	20	7	70
Brainstorming	2	20	2	20	4	40	2	20
Debating	0	0	2	20	6	60	2	20
Demonstration	7	70	3	30	0	0	0	0
Peer teaching	0	0	2	20	1	10	7	70
Oral presentation	2	20	3	30	4	40	1	10

Results from Table 2 reveal that English language teachers use some teaching methods more frequently than others. Majority of the teachers 8 (80%) indicated that they use lecture method frequently, 7 (70%) demonstration while 6 (60%) frequently use question and answer. Reinforcing this observation, during face to face interview a teacher commented that:

“I prefer lecture method because most of the students remain passive during the lesson and can only contribute when asked questions to respond to in class and this makes me to resort to lecturing.”

A considerable number of teachers 7 (70%) indicated that they never use role play and peer teaching as methods of teaching essay writing skills. Another 5 (50%) said that they rarely use group discussion. In addition, 4 (40%) of the teachers rarely use brain storming while 2 (20%) never use it, 6 (60%) rarely use debating whereas 2 (20%) never use it at all. Further, majority of the teachers 7 (70%) never use peer teaching as a method of teaching essay writing skills while 4 (40%) cited that they use oral presentation rarely and 1 (10%) never use it. Other methods teachers suggested they use in teaching essay writing skills include: drilling, assignments and dictation of notes. During an interview session one the teachers had the following to say:

“Students show unwillingness to contribute in a debate, share ideas in a group discussion and participate in an oral presentation in a class since some of them their spoken English is even worse.”

Based on these results, it shows that most frequently used methods in teaching essay writing skills include: lecture, demonstration and question and answer. However, process based methods which are considered effective to teaching L2 writing skills such as group work, role play, debate, peer teaching and oral presentations are not frequently used by teachers and this may pose challenges to students in learning essay writing skills. The findings of this study concur with those of Eyinda and Shariff (2010) which indicate that challenges students face in L2 writing are partly attributed to

use of teacher centred teaching techniques such as lecturing and question and answer which are frequently indifferent to students' writing needs.

#### 4.2 Challenges students face in learning essay writing skills

The second objective of the study was to investigate challenges students face in learning essay writing skills. The information on this variable was obtained from both teachers and students. The findings are presented in Tables 3 and 4 respectively.

**Table 3: Teachers' responses on challenges students face in learning essay writing skills**

<b>Challenge</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Inadequate teaching and learning resources (set text books)	5	50
Limited vocabulary	6	60
Problems in use of grammar (tenses, sentence structures)	7	70
First language (L1) interference	7	70
Challenges in the use of correct spelling	6	60
Misinterpretation of set questions	4	40
Difficulties in content mastery of the essay writing set texts	8	80
Problems in cohesion and coherence in L2 essay writing	6	60
Lack of adequate revision on the learnt content	3	30
Negative attitude towards learning essay writing skills	2	20

Based on the results from Table 3, majority of the teachers 8 (80%) stated that content mastery is the greatest challenge students face in learning essay writing skills. Another 7 (70%) of the respondents indicated use of grammar and the first language (L1) interference respectively, 6 (60%) stated limited vocabulary and problems in cohesion and coherence. In addition, 5 (50%) of the teachers cited inadequate teaching and learning resources. Further, 4 (40%) of the respondents stated that misinterpretation of set questions as a challenge in learning essay writing skills whereas 3 (30%) cited lack of adequate revision and 2 (20%) indicated negative attitudes towards learning essay writing skills.

Based on these findings, in an interview session one of the teachers remarked the following:

“Most students do not devote themselves to reading literary set texts hence they demonstrate a low level of content mastery whenever given an assignment in essay writing. They also commonly use mother tongue in school hence they always resort to L1 when they fall sort of appropriate words in attempting to express their ideas in L2 writing. As a result, they demonstrate poor word choice and wrong sentence construction.”

These findings supports the KNEC report for year 2012 results which indicated that many students showed low level of content mastery, demonstrated poor word choice, use of wrong grammar and lacked logical argument and coherence. A study by Kemboi,Andiema and M'mbone (2014) also showed that inadequate teaching and learning resources and lack of learners' interest are some of the challenges encountered in teaching composition writing in secondary schools .

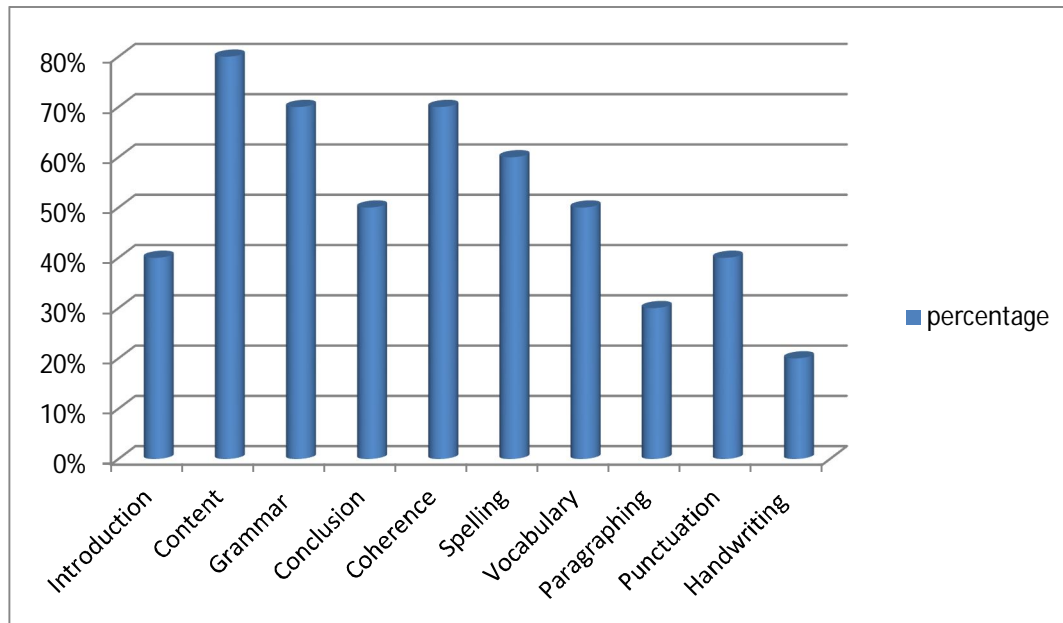
**Table 4. Students' responses on challenges faced in learning essay writing skills**

<b>Challenge</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Inadequate learning resources	105	58.3
Lack of frequent written feedback from teachers	65	36.1
Lack of adequate practice in L2 writing	93	51.7
Limited attention to individual learner differences	39	21.7
First language (L1) interference	101	56.1
Limited vocabulary	99	55
Problems in use of correct spelling	97	53.9
Difficulties in content mastery of the essay writing set texts	115	63.9
Negative attitudes towards learning essay writing skills	24	13.4
Problems in use of grammar (tenses, sentence structure)	111	61.7
Inadequate interpretation of set questions	85	47.2
Lack of adequate explanation of points by teachers during essay writing lessons	49	27.2
Inadequate revision in essay writing by teachers	46	25.6

Findings from Table 4 reveal that most of the students 115 (63.9%) indicated that they face challenges in content mastery, 111(61.7%) use of grammar, 105 (58.39%) inadequate learning resources, 101(56.1%) first language (L1) interference, 99 (55%) limited vocabulary, 97 (53.9%) use of correct spelling and 93 (51.7%) lack of adequate practice in L2 writing.

Students further indicated that other challenges they face in learning essay writing skills include: inadequate interpretation of set questions 85 (47.2%), lack of frequent written feedback from teachers 65 (36.1%), lack of adequate explanation of points by teachers 49 (27.2%), inadequate revision in essay writing by teachers 46 (25.6%), limited attention to individual learner differences 39 (21.7%) and negative attitudes towards learning essay writing skills 24 (13.3%). This implies that students face various challenges that affect their learning of L2 essay writing skills. This partially concurs with a study Koross (2012) and Muriungu(2013) which established that students face difficulties in L2 writing due to a number of factors involved in the learning process such as limited vocabulary, L1 interference and learners' attitudes towards composition writing.

In addition, on the same variable teachers were asked to give information concerning the areas in essay writing students find most challenging. The responses were as in Figure 1



**Figure 1 Areas in essay writing students find most challenging**

Figure 1 shows that the majority of the teachers 80% indicated that content mastery is the most challenging area in essay writing, 70% stated use of grammar and coherence, 60% spelling while 50% cited conclusion and vocabulary as challenging areas. The least challenging areas stated include paragraphing 30% and handwriting 20% respectively. In an interview, one of teachers remarked, “Students find it hard to express their ideas coherently in essay writing due to limited vocabulary”. Another said, “Students have problems with use of capital letters, quotation marks and full stops and some of these problems are due to students’ negligence.” These findings partly concur with KNEC (2012) report which noted that most candidates in KCSE English paper 3 demonstrate poor use of grammar resulting to frequent construction errors.

## 5. Conclusions

1. Teacher centred methods such as lecture, teacher demonstration and question and answer are the common methods used in teaching L2 essay writing skills. These methods lead to rote learning which inhibit the development of learners’ writing competence.
2. Major challenges students face in learning essay writing skills in English language are influenced by the nature of teaching methods used by teachers, inadequate content mastery on the part of learners and lack of adequate teaching and learning resources such as set books.
3. Challenges in learning essay writing skills impact on students’ achievement in essay writing paper and English as a subject.



## 6. Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Teachers should embrace the use of learner centred techniques such as group discussion, role play and peer editing in their writing lessons.
2. There is need for workshops and in-service training to equip teachers with necessary skills and motivation to effectively teach writing skills
3. Teachers should regularly provide ample practice to learners, by giving them writing tasks that motivate them and guiding them during the writing process.
4. Resources for writing should be provided by school management boards and their use be monitored.
5. There is need to develop language policies in schools that will encourage the use of spoken English in and outside classroom. This will lay a foundation for enhancing learners' writing proficiency.

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