

## **Strategies Used in Teaching Written English Language to learners with Hearing Impairment: A case of Njia Special School in Meru County, Kenya.**

**Author: Chabari Patrick  
Department of Special Needs Education  
Kenyatta University, Nairobi.**

**Corresponding Author: Dr. Beatrice Bunyasi Awori  
Kenyatta University  
Department of Special Needs Education  
Email: bawori@yahoo.com**

### **Abstract**

*In schools, learners with Hearing Impairment (HI) are often exposed to American Sign Language (ASL), while also developing literacy skills in English. ASL does not have a written form, but is a fully accessible language to the learners with HI through which is possible to mediate understanding, draw on prior experiences, and engage critical thinking and reasoning. The results of Kenya Certificate Primary Education conducted by Kenya National Examination Council in Kenya since the year 2010 showed that learners with hearing impairment at Njia Special School performed poorly in English Language. The purpose of this study was to establish strategies used in teaching written English to learners with at Njia Special School. A descriptive survey design was used in this study. A sample of 5 English language teachers, 8 learners with HI and one head teacher were involved in this study. Data was collected using questionnaires, observation schedules and interview schedules. The data was analyzed majorly using excel, a computer program that makes number manipulation easy. Qualitative data was presented in narrative form. It was established that teachers did not have good knowledge of strategies and projects that could be used to improve writing among learners with hearing impairment. Instead they used teaching of new words and using them in sentences, copying sentences and continuous writing that was not done frequently. This could not bring learners up to the desired level of writing. The study recommends that; teachers for learners with hearing impairment should be frequently inducted on strategies for teaching writing, teachers for learners with hearing impairment should be fully exposed to ways of identifying learners with writing difficulties, the school administration should ensure that learners with hearing impairment are given adequate writing practices, learners should be exposed to Kenyan Sign Language structures early enough and English language teachers should constantly evaluate the effectiveness of their remedial programs.*

**Keywords:** Hearing Impairment, strategies, Literacy, Writing Difficulties, Written Language

## **Introduction**

Learners who are deaf and hard of hearing have historically experienced significant hard time in developing literacy skills past elementary grade levels since they are often learning to read and write in English while simultaneously establishing a language for communicative purposes (Clark, Gilbert & Anderson, 2011). Burman, Nunes, and Evans (2006) noted that children with congenital-profound hearing impairment whose First Language (L1) is British Sign Language (BSL) need to be literate to communicate effectively in a hearing society. They hold that both spelling and writing skills of such children can be limited to an extent that no assessment method could adequately appraise their competence.

Research has shown that language development is important when considering factors that are significant in teaching children with hearing impairment because language development plays an important role in a child's literacy learning (Sandra, 2005). Children with hearing impairment acquire language in different ways depending on the home environment. Children with hearing impairment need linguistically rich environments in order to acquire sign languages. In the United States, most learners who are deaf (roughly 80 percent) are placed in a mainstream public environment with hearing peers (Salend, 2001). Their first and second language acquisition and literacy development affect their educational success.

Although some progress has been made in improving the literacy achievement of students in American schools during the last twenty years, majority of the students still do not write well enough to meet grade-level demands (Lee, Grigg & Donahue, 2007). Among those who graduate, many will not be ready for college or a career where reading and writing are required. In Uganda, English Language is the only official language. At School, the learners who are deaf are instructed through use of Signed English (S.E). Sheilla, (2011) in a study on Teaching of Reading to Deaf Learners in primary schools in Uganda found that learners who are deaf make the same kind of mistakes in writing as those made by learners learning English as a second language.

Written English is an important part of the English curriculum in Primary Schools in Kenya. There are four language skills taught in the English syllabus, namely; listening (or reception of signed information), speaking (or production of signs), reading and writing. The objective of the primary English curriculum expects all pupils to acquire sufficient command of English in spoken and written forms to enable them to communicate fluently, independently and accurately in everyday

life. Pupils are also expected to acquire writing skills to be able to express their own ideas meaningfully and legibly in English, to convey information and to communicate effectively. Both secondary and primary school English syllabi have been adapted to cater for learners with hearing impairment (KICD, 2004). Most children with hearing impairment (95%) have hearing parents and are therefore language deprived whether the language is spoken or signed until they start school leading to a delay in language development. The early development of language enables a child to develop effective and orderly reasoning which is important in composition writing (Adoyo, 2002).

In Kenya, English language is very important because it is an official language that is commonly used in various formal sectors such as courts of law, parliament, civil services, education, media, business and personal correspondences. However, the use of Signed English (S.E), Signed Exact English (S.E.E) and Kenyan Sign language may be a source of confusion to the learners who have hearing impairment. According to the K.C.P.E analysis report, the number of schools that dropped in performance increased from 16 (39%) in 2012 to 20 (47.6%) in 2013 (Ministry Of Education, 2013). The overall mean score in 2013 for all subjects was 158.48. This was far much below the expected average mean score of 250 compared to the performance of schools for learners who are hearing.

Writing is taught from standard one to standard eight syllabuses, but many learners with hearing impairments have left school without any meaningful ability to communicate in written English (Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development, 2004). More than 30 % of learners who are deaf leave school functionally illiterate and that at the same time, there are many adults and learners who are deaf but are excellent readers and writers. It is against this background that this study looked at strategies used in teaching written English to learners with Hearing Impairment (HI), a case of Njia Special School in Meru County, Kenya.

### **Background to the study**

Research has shown that learners who are deaf or hard of hearing have difficulty with written language and develop writing skills at a slower pace than their hearing peers. Learners who are deaf or hard of hearing score within the low-average range when tested on contextual conventions, contextual language, and story construction. The learners produce shorter and less structurally variable sentences than their hearing peers. The studies that have been carried out on written English of second language (L2) learners in Kenya have shown that learners exhibit errors in their written English. . Children with HI do not catch up without intervention with regards to vocabulary

development understanding words with multiple meanings. This study sought to establish strategies used in teaching written English to learners with Hearing Impairment (HI) at Njia Special School in Meru County, Kenya.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to evaluate strategies used in teaching written English to learners with hearing impairment, a case of Njia Special School Meru County, Kenya.

### **Objective of the Study**

To establish strategies used in teaching written English to learners with Hearing Impairment (HI)

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was guided by the theory of second language acquisition developed by Schumann (1976) which advocates that a learner's social and psychological factors are equally as important in acquisition of a second language. Schumann hypothesizes that the greater number of negative social factors affecting a second language learners (SLL) relationship with the target language (TL), the more difficult it will be for the second language learner to acquire the target language. On the other hand, Schumann points out that if the learner associates with the target language and feels highly motivated to learn the language, the learner will have greater ease in acquiring the language.

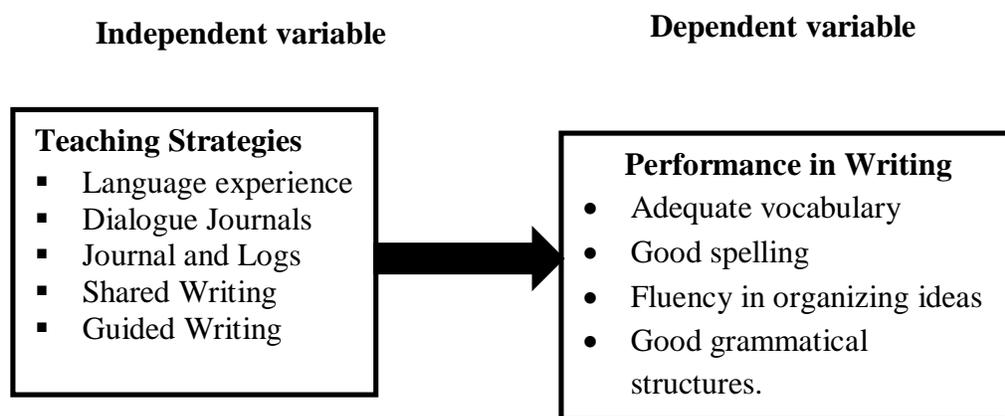
Schumann (1978) helps to show how learners with HI respond to English language learning. They find themselves rejecting its use and prefer to use Kenyan sign language in their communication. Schumann however indicates that if the SLL receives assistance and support during the culture shock phase and is encouraged to continue studying the TL, they will eventually acquire proficiency in the TL. This means that the teachers have a role to support the learner including enriching their environment and remediating their difficulties.

Schumann explains that motivation is psychologically essential in acquiring a second language. The learner must have a desire to learn the second language for reasons such as furthering a career, gaining employment or college admission. Research by Lambert (1975), found out that motivation played a great role in language acquisition. This is very crucial to the learners' who have hearing impairment because they are so demotivated to learn the English language. The teacher has a big role to motivate them to learn the language through experiences that encourage acquisition of the

language. The teachers also need to bear in mind that some of the learners with hearing impairment may have other disabling conditions and hence teachers ought to develop suitable teaching methodologies to facilitate the acquisition of English language to learners with HI.

### Conceptual Framework

Conceptual framework is described as a network or a plane of associated models that demonstrates a procedure of theorization for building associations based on grounded theory. The conceptual framework indicates that writing performance highly depends on teaching strategies. The teaching strategies include language experience, writing, shared writing, guided writing and writers workshops.



**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study**

## **Teaching approaches in written English language and performance among learners with HI**

Koutsoubou (2004) reported that the use of sign language in the writing process had positive effects only on specific groups of learners with hearing impairment and on specific aspects of writing. Learners with hearing impairment were divided into groups according to different abilities in sign language and written Greek. Both groups were presented with sign language video stimuli and directed composition writing from picture stimuli. It was realized that picture stimuli benefited others while others benefited more from sign language video stimuli. This indicates that learners with hearing impairment have individual differences among themselves and in order to meet the need of every child, the teacher must diversify teaching strategies

Hedge (2005) suggests three main teaching methods that can be used in teaching Written English and the activities involved. These are; shared teaching and learning which involves exchanging of letters, sharing journals; cooperative teaching and learning which involves, keeping a class journal, making a class magazine, working together on a project, sharing cultural information and reading together; finally role play which Hedge says involves news casting and peer teaching. These methods are discussed with reference to teaching hearing learners but there is no indication that they have been successfully used to teach Written English to learners with hearing impairment. Other strategies suggested as effective in teaching and learning Written English are shared reading and scaffolding writing (Trupe, 2001; Hedge, 2005; Medwell, Coates, Wray, Griffiths, & Minns, 2006).

Research with 325 children who are Deaf in grades 4–10 showed that writing instruction taught as a *process* is more effective than instruction where the focus is on the creation of a writing product (Kluwin & Blumenthal, 1992. pp. 41–53, quoted in Shirfin & Polania, 2007). Teaching writing as a process means instructing students to work through the same stages of composing that skilled writers employ. Generally, writing processes include pre-writing or planning phase, composing, revising for clarity and organization, editing, and publishing. Far from being a linear sequence of stages or steps, a process approach is fluid and includes feedback throughout the creation of text. Learners are encouraged to use a variety of strategies as they create text. The focus is on the process of formulating and expressing ideas, rather than on the end product. Although research into the effectiveness of a “process approach” shows mixed results in terms of improved writing conventions (grammar and mechanics), a process approach leads to an emphasis on the thinking processes which accompany composing. A process approach leads to higher scores on aspects of

writing such as content and ideas, organization, awareness of audience, and voice. In the study, a process approach to writing instruction often resulted in changes in grammatical complexity. The researchers indicate that this increased complexity may be a result of the students' greater sense of freedom of expression (Kluwin & Blumenthal, 1992, cited in Brown, 2000).

Typically, group brainstorming takes the form of recording all ideas generated by the group on a whiteboard or flip chart paper. Brainstorming with a large group can be effective, as there is synergy created by a free flow of ideas. One person's idea will prompt another to connect and contribute (Burgstahler, 2008). In addition, brainstorming in a group should expose learners to a wider variety of vocabulary than they might generate on their own (Paulus, 2006).

Brain writing or electronic brainstorming allows individuals to share ideas with a group through the exchange of ideas written on paper, or to share ideas through a computer network. Some of the social interaction dynamics that can interfere with the free flow of ideas in large group brainstorming are avoided in brain writing or electronic brainstorming. One member of the group writes an idea, another reads it and adds feedback and his or her own idea, and then passes it on to another. In computer labs, students can contribute to a group discussion online through a threaded discussion. An added benefit of this strategy is that learners have time to generate and compose their ideas. This strategy is likely more effective with learners at advanced literacy levels. A limitation is that learners who struggle with spelling or lack of vocabulary may find it difficult to express their thoughts in text form. It may also be difficult for some learners to fully comprehend the ideas expressed by their classmates without the facilitative role of the instructor (Enns, 2006).

One-to-one support during the process of generating ideas can be very helpful. Deaf educators who advocate a bilingual/bicultural approach contend that concept building and discussion should be conducted in the student's first language (ASL) so that the student can fully explore her thoughts on the subject. The facilitator of the discussion scribes key ideas in English (as a web, outline, or notes) for the learner during the discussion (Paul & Quigley, 1994, cited in Brokop & Persall, 2009). It may also be helpful to discuss and list vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and phrases that the student may want to incorporate into her writing on a specific topic.

Luckner, Sebald, Cooney, Young, and Muir (2006) and Luckner and Handley (2008) note a significant lack of evidence-based practices for instruction that specifically addresses the language and literacy needs of students with HI. Moreover, there is a significant lack

of research on instructional approaches or interventions that address expressive language development, bilingual development, or development of metalinguistic awareness among learners with HI. Based on Cummin's theory of interdependence and a consideration of the specific language needs of learners with HI, we suggest that language and literacy instruction with learners with HI should aim to accomplish three goals. First, it should be interactive and dialogic in nature in order to expose students to an accessible language and create language learning opportunities by repairing communication breakdowns and pairing new language with shared understandings. Second, it should aim to develop linguistic competence. In this case, students' abstract implicit patterns and structures of English through repeated readings of grammatical and complex English, and they develop greater competence in ASL through classroom communications and discussions with others who are proficient in ASL. Finally, it should aim to heighten metalinguistic awareness, for example, by making explicit comparisons between ASL and English. As demonstrated by Wolbers (2008)

Strategic and Interactive Writing Instruction (SIWI) is an example of an instructional approach for learners with HI that is designed to address each of these principles. According to Gathumbi and Masembe (2005), there are many strategies a teacher can choose from in teaching Written English namely; field trips, hands on activities, songs, project work, group work, and pair work, storytelling, discussions, poems, debates and presentation. However, they do not specify which of these strategies is applicable to teaching of Written English to learners with hearing impairment. Kenya Deaf Resource Centre (KDRC) (2009) identifies five strategies that may be used in teaching learners with hearing impairment; language experience, dialogue journal, shared writing, guided writing and writers workshop.

There is need therefore for instruments to be created that could aid assessment to support teachers in setting objective for their learners with hearing impairment's writing development. In addition, the choice of teaching strategies and availability of resources such as teacher aides, nursery aides, interpreters, note-takers and audio technicians have an effect on how much learning takes place (Petty, 2004; Otieno, 2010). Petty (2004) suggests a wide range of strategies from which a teacher

can choose: demonstration, discussion, questioning, group work, games, role play and drama, shared reading and guided discovery. This study proposed to find out the strategies used in teaching written English to class seven learners with HI.

### **Methodology**

The study used a descriptive survey design. Descriptive survey was used in this study to seek opinions and find out facts on the strategies used in teaching Written English to class seven learners with hearing impairment. The study targeted 75 learners with hearing impairment, 8 English teachers and 1 head teacher in Njia Special School. A sample of 5 English language teachers, 8 learners with HI and 1 head teacher were used in this study which represents 17% of the target population. For the purpose of this study, questionnaires, observation schedules and interview schedules were used to collect data.

Reliability and validity of the instrument was determined through a pilot study with similar population who did not form part of the study. Content validity was done through expert judgment approach. The pilot study involved 3 English language teachers, the Head teacher and 3 learners in class 7. Reliability of the instruments was determined by test-retest method on the pilot sample. It involved administering the instruments to the pilot subjects twice with a break of two weeks maintaining the same initial conditions.

### **Data Analysis**

Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequency counts and percentages. Data was presented in form of tables, and pie charts from which conclusions were made based on the variables of the study. Qualitative data from observation schedules was transcribed and reported. The qualitative data generated was organized into themes and categories pertinent to the study. The data was then presented in narrative form in an effort to discuss the findings. From this, the researcher closely evaluated the usefulness of the information in answering the research questions.

### **Discussions**

#### **Strategies Used in Teaching Writing**

The purpose of this study was to establish strategies used in teaching written English to learners with Hearing Impairment (HI). Strategies used for teaching were important to consider because

learners with hearing impairment may not benefit from some of the strategies used with hearing learners. The findings are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Strategies used in teaching writing**

Strategy	Respondents	Percentages %
Teaching new words & using them in sentences	2	40.00%
Continuous writing	2	40.00%
Copying sentences	1	20.00%
Total	5	100.00%

From the results in Table 1 all the respondents only knew a few strategies to teach writing to learners with hearing impairment. Teaching new words and using them in sentences and continuous writing both help in writing skills development and learners responses as explained by Badger and White, (2000). This however shows that the respondents have no broad knowledge of many other strategies that they could use to teach writing English Language. Such strategies have been outlined by Harrison & Warnke, (2004). They include; Language experience/writing, Dialogue journals, Journal and logs, Shared writing, Guided writing and writers workshop. In fact, Harrison & Warnke (2004) even identified some of the writing projects that might hook students. They include; writing wall stories on posters or manila papers and big books, stories, essays and poems, retelling or rewriting stories, class journal entries and shared experience. The findings are not in line with the studies conducted by Conway (1985) and Williams (2004) in America who looked at the purpose of writing for learners who are deaf or hard-of-hearing. An important common trend reported in the studies is that learners who are deaf or hard-of-hearing can and do write when given authentic opportunities to do so. Williams (2004) also suggested that approaches to teaching writing to children who are hearing may be also appropriate for learners who are deaf or hard-of-hearing. The teachers don't appear to have explored methods of teaching writing to learners who are hearing. The most likely reason as to why the respondents had limited strategies would be because nearly three quarters of the respondents had no special training on education for learners with hearing impairment. Furthermore, the number of composition written monthly was sought through observation using the observation schedule. The findings are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2: Number of compositions written monthly**

Class	No	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
4	1	-	-	-	√
5	2	-	-	-	√
6	2	-	-	-	√
7	3	-	-	√	-
8	3	-	-	√	-

From the findings in Table 2, observation on the number of compositions written by learners monthly indicated that they were below average. It is expected that learners would write at least one composition in a week. The rate of writing was not adequate enough for language experience. They need to write more often in order to get used to correct sentence structures and in creating coherent form. As Farooq, UL-Hassan and Wahid, (2012) explains, learners face difficulty in combining two complete sentences because of the traditional style of teaching grammar on the part of the teacher and lack of practice on part of the learner.

### Conclusions

The study concludes that teachers of learners with hearing impairment relied more on the use of traditional strategies such as; continuous writing and teaching new words and using them in sentences. It is clear from these results that teachers sometimes choose strategies which are different from learners' preference contributing to low performance in learning Written English. Therefore, teachers did not have good knowledge of strategies and projects that could be used to improve writing among learners with hearing impairment. This study is important for the teachers and curriculum developers because, it demonstrates that not all the strategies they use or recommend are necessarily appropriate to those with hearing impairments.

### Recommendations

Based on the study findings and conclusions, the following recommendations have been made:

- It is recommended that teachers for learners with hearing impairment should be frequently inducted on strategies for teaching writing and projects that could be used to improve writing.
- Teachers need to develop empathy towards students with hearing impairment so that they design activities, and strategies that ensure that these students learn the subject under study.

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