

Establishing the Pupils' Level of English Vocabulary Proficiency in Public and Private Rural Primary Schools in Kyuso Division of Kitui County

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ABSTRACT:

The purpose of this study was to answer the question of what is the pupils' level of English vocabulary proficiency in public and private rural primary schools in Kyuso Division in Kitui County. The study was an attempt to provide relevant data on English vocabulary proficiency in Kyuso area. This study focused on the English vocabulary proficiency in Kyuso area among children in classes' two to four. Learners from one class to the next depicted some changes hence a level of vocabulary proficiency manifestation. The study was limited to respondents within the sample in rural areas where the language of communication after school was purely Kikamba. The two categories of primary schools in the area were day schools, unlike secondary schools whereby 90% of them are boarding. The assumption was that the pupils had the same school hours, share the same locality and the same parents. The question was why there was a big difference in children from the two categories of schools. The study was based on primary schools, the level where the grammatical rules are initiated, and as the children grow up, they continue to utilize what they continue acquiring. It was observed that competent speakers show up right from primary schools. It is also at the primary level where a child can be 'modelled' to improve or change to a better person due to their language acquisition device (LAD). In both public and private primary schools there seem to be differences in pupils level of vocabulary proficiency.

Key Terms: Vocabulary Proficiency, Private schools, Public Schools, English Language

How to cite this article in APA (6th Edition)

Kalima, D. M. (2019). Establishing the pupils' level of English vocabulary proficiency in public and private rural primary schools in Kyuso division of Kitui County. *Editon Cons. J. Lit. Linguist. Stud.* 1(1), 37-48.

Introduction

English vocabulary proficiency (EVP) is a linguistic aspect in Second Language Acquisition, which the learners of a second language need to master for their competence in their written and spoken form. It refers to how learners are capable of using correctly English words as they interact with the language in the learning environment. Vocabulary proficiency refers to the degree of skill with which a person can use a language, such as how well a person can read, write, speak or understand a language.

There had been an elaborate distinction observed amongst pupils in the two categories of schools. The difference was observed when the pupils were taken for an outing or for games and competitions outside the district and while there is no room for the use of mother tongue. The pupils from public schools remained quiet. They seemed to have limited language to express themselves. This was not the case with their counterparts from private primary schools. They interacted, communicated freely and were joyous. That means a lack of language makes someone handicapped in speech.

Secondary school teachers perceived the same distinction. After the students joined form one, it was always easy to identify from which category of primary school students had come from. Those from public schools had marked identities such as limited short sentence structures and directly translated sentences. A case in point is:

'You take me there.'

The researcher wanted to compare pupils' level of EVP in those two categories of primary schools. As learners advance from one class to the other, there must be a level of proficiency gained or not gained which brings about the vast distinction at the end of the primary level. In the study, the researcher sought to establish if there are disparities between the pupils from the two categories of schools and therefore fill the gap that causes the distinction.

The study sought to find out levels of English vocabulary proficiency in both public and private primary schools in rural areas. This was because the two categories of schools in rural areas do not feature the same at the end of the course (class eight) as far as vocabulary proficiency. The researcher was motivated to study English vocabulary proficiency in rural areas because of the challenges noted as pertains teaching and learning of English vocabulary proficiency in rural areas. Learners from rural areas seem to have marked identities (unique identities) unlike their counterparts in urban areas. Their English language was usually full of mother tongue influence and short sentence structures, especially in Kyuso Zone.

In rural Kyuso Zone, it had been observed by many teachers that pupils in public and private primary schools are not the same. This meant that their mastery of the English language is not the same. Pupils who joined private academies performed better and also had better proficiency in vocabulary compared to those in public primary schools. This was evidenced in all the internal examinations done and also the KCPE exam because all the private schools topped in English. This means that they are better in the language.

Learners from the two categories of primary schools were easily identified as they advanced from class one. Children from public rural primary schools acquire vocabulary relatively slowly compared to those in private schools. Public school children had marked features such as very short ungrammatical sentences. The sentences at most contained noun and verb (which do reflect agreement in terms of tense and number). For example:

Dog eat instead of the dog ate.

Public rural schools teach in Kikamba up to class three as per the government's policy. This brings uneven timeframe for exposure. Ellis (1985) argued that there is a strong assumption that the first language L1 imposed most of the difficulties facing the L2 learners. It was assumed that where there were differences between the L1 and L2 the learners L1 knowledge would interfere with L2. Where the L1 and L2 were similar, the L1 would actively aid L2 learning. Therefore, it was assumed that learners in public schools (rural) could be affected by the different language structures learned from class 1-3, (Kikamba and English) in our case the L1 (Kikamba) does not aid in the acquisition of L2 (English) because of distinct structures. The assumption is yet to be proven true or false.

The researcher observed that a parent could decide to separate his/her children by having one child attend private and the other in the public school. In both categories, pupils are day scholars. This means a constant sharing of local language after school. Learners also shared the same parents and the same school hours. However, the distinction was observed after a few months that the pupils had different levels of English proficiency. That is why the researcher wanted to find out the pupils levels of vocabulary proficiency from class two up to class four in the two categories of rural primary schools.

Methodology

The research adopted a descriptive survey design to find out the levels of English vocabulary proficiency in children in both public and private primary schools. Special attention was given to the use of written tests (for all classes), compositions for class four, dictations for classes two and three (2-3). The study was carried out in Kyuso Division, Kyuso District, and Kitui County. Kyuso area is an area dominated by Kamba people and is a rural area.

The researcher was interested in comparing the two categories of schools and their pupils because in all the

exams done; private schools top in all the subjects in the district including those that have three classes (1 – 3). Pupils from four schools were targeted in the study. Half of them were from public primary and the other half from private primary schools. The choice of the pupils in both categories of schools was merit lists whereby the top ten pupils were identified among both boys and girls. Pupils of class two, three and four were used in all the four schools. Three English teachers from each school were identified.

A representative sample of seventy-two (72) pupils was adequate for the data analysis. The number was obtained from each class whereby we used six pupils' time's twelve classes (6X3X4). Six times three refers to six pupils in a class, times three classes in one school. Four stands for the four selected schools altogether. Four primary schools were selected using purposive sampling technique. Two of them were public primary schools and the other two private academies purposively selected.

From each school, three classes were identified that is, classes' two to four (2 – 4). From each class, a total of six pupils were used as respondents. This is because with a very large number it was hard to get the linguistic objectives. The researcher believed that a total of eighteen pupils was adequate from each school simply because private academies had low enrolment. Six pupils in a class make approximately eleven per cent (11%) of the class. But in public, this accounts for only ten per cent (10%). From the selected schools, pupils from classes' two to four were selected using performance lists. Six pupils were selected between positions one to ten (1 – 10). This is to have an even ability sample. Ten per cent (10%) is the percentage for the total class 2-4 pupils in the selected schools.

As for the teachers, a total of three English teachers from each school participated in the study. This was because language teachers know more about language teaching and the challenges faced in teaching and learning of the

Volume: 01 Issue: 01 | April -2019

Received: 25.02.2019; Accepted 30.03.2019; Published: 11.05.2019 at www.editonpublishing.org

Kalima, D.M., Editon Cons. J. Lit. Linguist. Stud., Double –Blind Peer Reviewed Journal

language. These teachers were taken from each class (2 – 4); therefore, for the four schools, a total of twelve English teachers were obtained. The interest was only in English teaching. Each teacher was able to give an account of his/her class. The teacher also helped in administering the written tests.

Table 1: Distribution sample of the schools

NAME OF SCHOOL	NO.OF PUPILS		NO.OF TEACHERS	NATURE OF SCHOOL
	BOYS	GIRLS		
A	3	3	1	PUBLIC
B	3	3	1	PUBLIC
C	3	3	1	PRIVATE
D	3	3	1	PRIVATE
TOTAL	12	12	4	

The following data collection instruments and procedures were utilized:

A. Written tests

A language test was administered to the pupils in the study, in each school. It was in the form of written tests - fill-in-blank spaces making words from given letters.

Example: Make words using the following letter sounds

Ch K..... P.....
B.....

The first stage involved dictation work for classes two and three. A list of English words was given to all the class twos and threes. The dictation required the learners to write words correctly. The words included the names of things learners interact with daily in school and at home. Below is a sample dictation test (exam one) done by class two. The dictated questions for class two were compiled and recorded.

nation, tough, country, swallowed, arrow, growth, Muslim, writer, blacksmith, utensils, ward, butchery, flute, weather, feathers, treasure, formation, generous, classroom, grandmother, pencil, generation, teeth, registered.

The test was written. Each class was given the same test the same day, same time. The test was then marked. The marks for each school were tallied separately by class. The results would bring out any difference in EVP. The total marks got from the tests were recorded, analyzed and presented. The indication was that those with sufficient vocabulary were able to make words unlike those without while others wrote in Kikamba or Kiswahili.

B. Composition

The pupils were given short composition (especially those in class four) on a given topic.

Those compositions were judged following the composition marking scheme. This included length, grammar, creativity and originality. From the composition, it was easy to tell the learners with enough vocabulary due to their usage of words in the compositions. Marks awarded were compiled and recorded for analysis.

C. Checklist

The researcher had a checklist to record the available resources for teaching and learning. The teaching resources helped in the acquisition of language skills including listening, speaking, reading and writing. The report from the checklist would help the teachers and the parents for future planning. That is, add or improve the teaching and learning aids to aid in the teaching and learning process.

Data analysis was done using the quantitative approach (Kombo & Tromp, 2006). As for the written tests, a

quantitative approach was utilised. The results were therefore analysed according to the performance in percentage (%). The discrete data from tests and dictation yielded countable data. The data was analyzed in tables for presentation. The data was used in establishing whether there are differences in the pupils' level of vocabulary proficiency in both categories of rural primary schools.

In data presentation, an attempt was made to present the findings on the level of English vocabulary proficiency from classes 2 – 4 using a table. Tables with percentage mean marks attained per test and per class were drafted. The use of the tables and bar graphs depicted the image from the sampled schools. Conclusions were made afterwards.

The researcher administered research instruments to the respondents to ensure total confidentiality. The researcher who is a teacher stationed herself in one of the schools then she visited the other schools frequently. Through the help of the class teachers, the tests were given to the respective classes. All the data collected from various schools were kept with a lot of confidentiality by the researcher for analysis and discussion.

Literature Review

Studies on English vocabulary proficiency are few and not as elaborate as those on general English teaching. This is evidenced in works of researchers like Ngumo (2007) *Evaluation of presentation of vocabulary*, Mecha (2005) *Evaluation of English language tests*, Nyamasyo (1985) *Acquisition of syntax* and Makeni (2006) *Acquisition of co-ordinal morphemes* among others. From the few examples given, it was clear that there is hardly any comparative study on vocabulary proficiency amongst pupils in rural primary schools, public and private.

The importance of teaching English has been emphasised by the English syllabus primary schools (Kenya Institute of Education, 1985, 1992, 1995). The syllabus has stressed the need for the learners of English to achieve mastery in

components like grammatical structures. Such mastery according to the syllabus is to be achieved through formal instruction in the classrooms, as well as through the informal efforts of the learner in and out of an English class. However, vocabulary is supposed to be acquired through intensive reading.

The researcher was interested in vocabulary proficiency. Proficiency is the learner's knowledge of the target language. In other words, it refers to how much English vocabulary the learners acquire at different levels of learning. Various scholars have stressed the importance of using language communicatively if proficiency is to be achieved. Andrew (1986) stressed that our ability to express ourselves in words is related to the extent of our vocabulary. This means that learners' ability to use a language will solely depend on the vocabulary acquired and one cannot be proficient if he/she does not competently use the vocabulary learnt. Therefore, vocabulary learning and proficiency is amalgamated. The two are inseparable. William (1989) supports this view by arguing that once a pupil knows many grammatical frames, then to expand the number of words, which can be operated in the same frame, is relatively a simple task. Expansion of words as stated means getting more vocabulary and as one gets more and more vocabulary, he/she becomes more proficient in that language.

The mastery of the language for proficiency has not been the same in rural primary schools. If competence is to be achieved through formal and informal instructions, the public rural primary schools should emphasize on both formal and informal efforts. Informal efforts seem to be left to the learners. On the other hand, it seemed that private primary children put a lot of effort into informal instructions. That is, a lot of emphasis is done on spoken English. This was observed through the efforts of spoken English outside the classroom, and therefore a difference was noted at the end of the primary level. Concerning

vocabulary acquisition, intensive reading and extensive reading should be emphasised in both categories of rural primary schools.

In the Kenyan syllabus for the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education, not much had been mentioned about vocabulary teaching for proficiency K.I.E (1995). However, a few suggestions for the teaching of vocabulary and speech are listed down. The primary school level English syllabus suggests the following methods:-

- i. Explanation method when teaching new terms/vocabulary.
- ii. Discussion method e. g discussion of characters in a story and sentence structures
- iii. Role-play e. g students act an event/story.
- iv. Question and answer methods. Example, questions from comprehension.
- v. Storytelling sessions.

The assumption was that teachers never follow the prescribed methods of teaching like storytelling, library sessions among others. So due to this, some skills are delayed or are never acquired. The ministry of education stipulates that local vernacular languages should be used as a medium of instruction from standard one to three (1 – 3) in areas that are predominantly occupied by one ethnic group. This has not been the case in all rural areas, especially Kyuso Division. Public schools teach mother tongue up to class three while private schools never teach it right from class one. The implication to this is a distinction in the English vocabulary right from class one in the two categories of schools.

Anderson (1983) found out that nativisation is any process whereby the learners create a grammar of his /her own from the input. It adopts the language that is being acquired to build – in universal tendencies. It progresses towards an ‘internal norm’ set by the learner’s mind. Likewise, the learners in public primary schools seem to

suffer from nativisation during language transfer. In both spoken and written grammar, they apply Kikamba hence direct translation. Example,

‘You take me there.’

Krashen (1981), points out that student’s length of residence in a foreign country correlates with cloze tests score. The length of the “time abroad” of the learner goes with the level of foreign language proficiency. This proves that time of contact is directly proportional to the amount of proficiency attained. Krashen and Terrd (1983) also claim that reading skills improve according to the amount of reading done and listening to stories helps the vocabulary acquired in the L1. Sheer exposure without comprehension is often useless to acquisition. The researcher, therefore, sought to find out whether what Krashen claims could be the case in the categories of schools in rural Kyuso.

Oller (1980) found no relationship between speaking and second language proficiency as measured by dictation. In fact, according to him, there was no relationship. The research was carried out in Sweden. This research thus sought to find out whether the truth lies amid the conflicting stands regarding the pedagogical relevance of speaking English exclusively in the school compound for proficiency.

Another relevant study is Mwanzi (1979) who also concurred with other scholars. He claims that no section of the society should be allowed to be less exposed than another yet sit the same exam at the end of the course! The researcher felt that public rural primary schools should be allowed to stop teaching mother tongue up to class three to avoid inequality in SL challenges. I strongly believe the mother tongue learnt before joining school is sufficient in aid of L2 acquisition. There is an implication that public schools are affected by much time (three years) spend in learning mother tongue. The private rural primary schools tend to be like the urban ones because the children are

exposed to the English language right from class one without any Kikamba hence their level of proficiency starts rising to class eight.

Caroll (1967) carried a similar study. He studied the second language proficiency of Americans and discovered that there was a strong relationship between performance and time spent in an environment rich in the L2. The performance was even better when English was spoken both at home and in college.

Vihman (1982) is yet another study. In his research, he indicates that different learning strategies can produce different acquisition patterns in individuals acquiring the same target language. Therefore, in our rural schools, if teachers of English adopt different teaching and learning strategies, it can bring about the difference.

As for Vode (1981, 1999), he supports SL acquisition. He argues that the learner's first language (L1) can make the acquisition of certain forms in a target language more complicated if the two languages are different. The researcher sought to find the truth of the statement because Kikamba, which is quite different from English grammar, can affect its proficiency in a great deal. For instance the structure of a sentence – demonstrative form
Ulanuu? That is who?

Most students were noticed following the Kikamba form directly translated (literal translation) in class eight especially in rural public schools.

Larsen – Freeman (1976) further adds that the frequency of certain words in the speech that the learner hears can affect developmental sequences. This means that there could be differences in what learners hear in both categories of rural primary schools.

Palestone (1974:72) found out that children do not seem to learn a language well if it is only taught as a subject matter

with second language techniques. "Unless a child understands and can use a language to communicate he/she will not gain proficiency in that language" likewise Rivers (1983:4) says that students should be given a chance to use language for the normal purpose of language if proficiency is to be achieved.

The notion could be that in primary public schools, children could not have been applying language for communication to attain proficiency. Therefore, the researcher wanted to find out whether there are differences in the levels of proficiency at lower classes. This is because a difference is observed in class eight.

Findings and Discussion

The objective of the study was to generate a detailed record of the vocabulary proficiency in two categories of primary schools, public and private in Kyuso. It was carried out to establish the pupils' level of EVP in public and private rural primary schools. This was discussed from all the tests given.

Pupils Level of English Vocabulary Proficiency (EVP) in Public and Private Rural Primary Schools

The above was objective one of the study. It involved finding the levels of EVP in both public and private rural primary schools. The data was collected using written tests. In the written tests, there were two sections in the lower classes namely dictation part and language part. Dictation work was first done and analyzed separately after which the second part with 40 marks was presented later in this chapter. The second part involved language practice, also called the grammar part. This grammar part is usually done from class two to class eight. Below is the table of summary for the dictation work for classes two and three mean marks.

(A) Dictation work table summary for classes 2 and 3

SCHOOLS	CLASS TWO	CLASS THREE
A (public)	60%	63%
B(public)	53%	56%
C(private)	88%	75%
D(private)	89%	91%

Table 2 summary for a dictation test

From table 2 above, letters A, B, C and D stand for schools

A and B are public schools

C and D are private schools

The information above was gathered using written tests which were part one of the English test given. As stated above, the first ten marks are obtained from dictation work (Numbers one to ten). The dictation required the learners to write words correctly. These were words derived from the names of the things learners interact with daily in schools and at home.

Explanation of the Findings

Table 2 summarizes the average marks obtained in the dictation test by class 2 and 3 in the schools (A-D) under the study. In school (A) which is a public school, pupils obtained lower marks (60%) and (63%) respectively. This was marks for class two and three. School (B) which was also a public school obtained the following average percentage marks for their classes two and three: 53% and 56% respectively. Marks for class two were slightly below those in class three in both public schools.

In category two, which consisted of private schools, school (C) obtained 88% marks for class two, but scores for class three dropped to 75% (still higher than those in the public schools). School (D) attained the following (89%) and (91%) respectively.

Discussion of the Findings

From the table given above, we find that the public schools (A and B) had their class two with lower marks than class three. This depicts a level of EVP, that is, the pupils had acquired more vocabulary in class three than in class two in

those two schools (public and private). The performance variation shows that at class two they had acquired less than in class three where they scored better. Concerning schools C and D, their class three scored very high marks compared to their counterparts in public schools. There was also a difference between class two and three:

SCHOOL A Class two= 60% three 63%

B Class two= 53% three 56%

C Class two= 88% three 75%

D Class two=89% three 91%

Palestone (1974:72) said children do not seem to learn language well if only taught as a subject matter with SL techniques. The researcher believed that in all the four schools English was taught well, but other factors brought about the differences in their levels. Therefore, Palestone adds that, unless a child understands and can use a language to communicate he/she cannot gain proficiency in that language. The situations in the two categories of primary schools show a varied understanding of the language for proficiency. This is depicted in situations like in C and D whereby speaking in English is strongly emphasized. For schools A and B, the issue of language use in school shows lack of practice and therefore low marks. But the fact that they are taught makes them acquire slightly slowly.

From the table, it is also clear that the objective of the study was proved true. In all the classes there seemed to be an average level of EVP. In all the class twos it is assumed that pupils had little vocabulary from class one and that is why they got little marks in classes two than in class three. Krashen argues that comprehensible input is the route to acquisition and information about grammar in the target language is automatically available when the input is understood. Krashen adds that the language teacher should not deliberately try to teach the next structure in the natural order, but rather provide a sufficient quantity of comprehensible input for students,

Volume: 01 Issue: 01 | April -2019
Received: 25.02.2019; Accepted 30.03.2019; Published: 11.05.2019 at www.editonpublishing.org
Kalima, D.M., *Editon Cons. J. Lit. Linguist. Stud.*, **Double –Blind Peer Reviewed Journal**

hence resulting in an automatic review of what they have learnt.

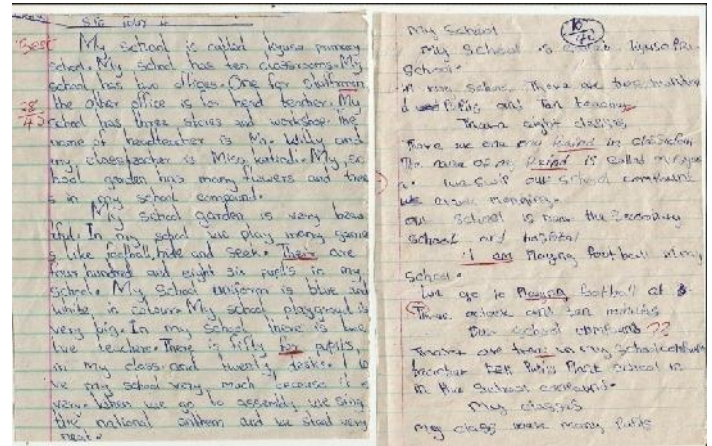
This study concluded that there are average levels of EVP. In all the class twos it is clear that pupils had acquired some vocabulary from class one which enabled them to get class two vocabulary right.

O'Dell (1997) put it that, the teaching/learning of vocabulary if given high profile in the syllabus, students will see its importance and understand that learning a language isn't just about grammar. This affirms Wilkins's (1972) view that without grammar very little can be conveyed, and without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed. For class three performances, it is clear that respondents improved a lot and we can conclude that little by little vocabulary is gained but differs with individuals although they learn the same content at the same time. The improvement is assumed to have been brought by the time taken. The duration from class two to three enabled pupils to acquire class three vocabularies.

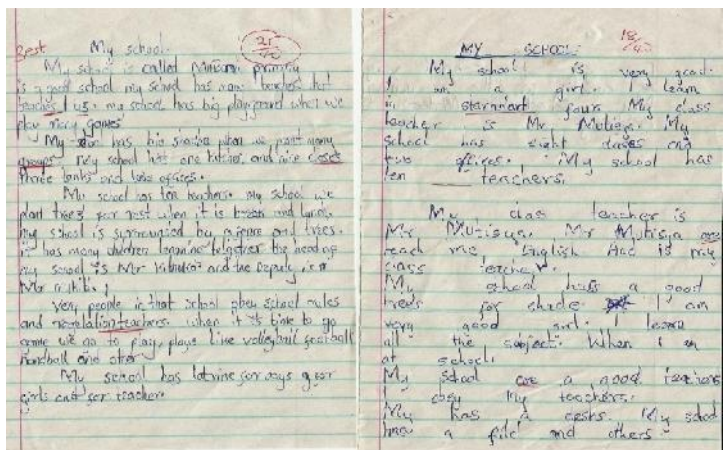
(B) Compositions-Class 4s

The researcher administered compositions for class fours only. The compositions were marked out of forty (x/40). Below are sample compositions. The researcher scanned the best and the worst from each school. Later the marks were added to the written tests and total marks were written in % for compiling.

SCHOOL A

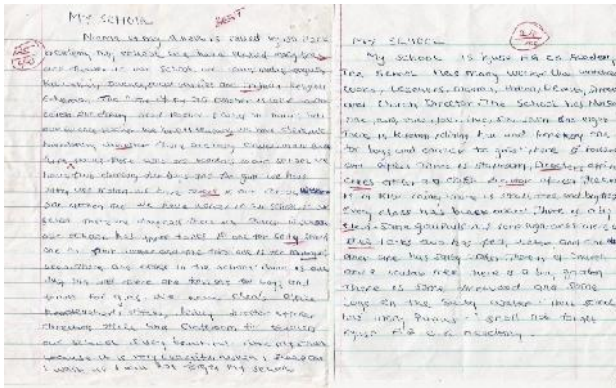


SCHOOL B

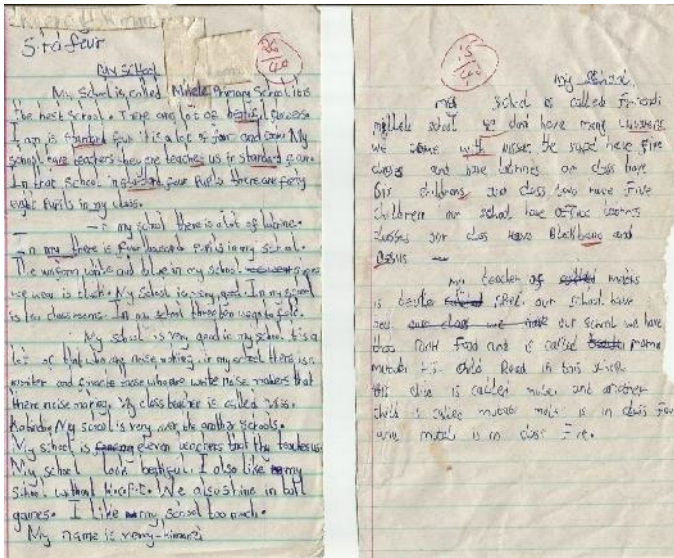




SCHOOL C



SCHOOL D



Explanation of the Findings

Below is the summary of the all the class four compositions

SCHOOLS	MARKS /40	%
A(public)	24	60%
B(public)	23	55%
C(private)	27	67%
D(private)	28	70%

Table 3 summary of compositions

The compositions given, a respondent in school A obtained an average of 60%. (Percent).The highest mark and the least had a big difference. Category B that is also a public school attained a mean mark of 55% (per cent). The two public schools had their first respondent with good vocabulary, but the rest had less vocabulary to express item. School C attained 67% while D attained 70% (per cent). This was because the samples C and D average mark per pupil was good. The difference between the first and the last pupil's performance was small.

Discussion of the Findings

In composition writing, pupils express themselves using the vocabulary they have acquired just like in communication. Wilkins's (1972) argued that without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed. Literature on vocabulary contends that the use of words is related to the way the words are learned. Ndung'u (2011) claimed those with little vocabulary have limited words of expression. From the findings on compositions, it is clear that pupils who had acquired more vocabulary had a lot when expressing themselves than those who had acquired less.

All compositions were marked out of forty, and then the average mark was converted to a percentage (%). The samples given above shows, the best and the worst pupil per school. The objective of the research was to compare the levels of EVP in the four sampled schools. Richards and Rodgers (1986) in the theory of Speaking Skills and Communication claimed that language is a system for expressing meaning. The structure of language is reflected in its functional and communicative uses.

The compositions reflected the vocabulary learners had and how well or badly they can use it. For public schools A and B, most learners had few language structures hence short compositions. Short compositions reflect inadequate word power for expression and therefore marked with low

compared to lengthy ones. Pupils in C and D could express themselves, and that's why their average marks were high.

to conclude, the analysis of marks shows that there is a different level of EVP in all the classes, in all the schools. The learners continue to acquire new vocabulary as it is taught, but due to other factors, levels of proficiency differ. This is manifested in pupils' ability in classes two, three and four whereby in lower classes they could only respond to a few dictated words, but at class four, they write their compositions. That is, they are capable of making their own stories using learned and acquired vocabulary without any assistance.

Conclusions

It is apparent that there is a level of vocabulary proficiency identified in both categories of primary schools in rural Kyuso. It is clear that pupils' advancement from one class to the next made them acquire vocabulary for proficiency. Right from class two in both categories, the findings reveal that there was a change taking place in all primary schools.

The change depicted was the pupils' mastery of new English words, the ability to use them in writing compositions and in word building especially in class three.

From the findings, the research has demonstrated that there are levels of vocabulary proficiency. At a certain stage, there is an elaborate proficiency level of EVP in all the rural primary schools. This is demonstrated in the way pupils from one class to the next can answer questions using new vocabulary. Further, it is clear that there is a distinction in the pupils' level of EVP. Private Primary children seem to be better than public children by far in rural Kyuso. This is also seen in the class mean-scores and the compositions written.

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