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# The Use of Group Work in the Teaching of Writing Skills in Secondary Schools in Keiyo North Sub County, Kenya

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*Abstract:*
*Writing plays a significant role in the school curriculum. However, studies have pointed out that secondary school students lack basic skills of writing. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to assess the use of group work in the teaching of writing skills in secondary schools in Keiyo North sub county, Kenya. The objectives were to: find out teachers' knowledge and understanding of group work as a teaching strategy and to determine the nature of learning activities teachers engage learners in when using group work to teach writing skills. The study was guided by the constructivist theory by Jerome Bruner. The study utilized descriptive survey research design and it targeted 43 teachers of English and 3,574 Form 4 students drawn from 19 secondary schools in Keiyo north Sub County. Purposive sampling was used to select 13 teachers of English while stratified, proportionate and simple random sampling procedures using the lottery technique were used to select a sample size of 364 Form 4 students. This study used the questionnaire, interview and observation schedules to collect data. Quantitative data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics including: frequencies and percentage and was presented in tables, figures and descriptions. Qualitative data were categorized and analyzed using content analysis procedures and reported in emergent themes based on study objectives and variables. The study found out that majority of the teachers did not utilize group work in teaching of writing skills.*

*Keywords: Group work, writing skills*

## 1. Background of the Study

Group work can be an effective method to motivate students, encourage active learning, and develop key critical-thinking, communication, and decision-making skills. But without careful planning and facilitation, group work can frustrate students and instructors and feel like a waste of time. Use these suggestions to help implement group work successfully in your classroom (Race, 2000). Group work is one of the teaching strategies available to teachers attempting to make their teaching more effective (Geliş, 2003). Group work is also essential for learning since it helps the students involved to effectively learn from each other (McGourty & DeMeuse, 2001).

In all British classrooms, students are grouped in some form. The benefits or disadvantages of these various grouping practices have aroused much comment by the UK government (DfES, 2004) and among researchers (Blatchford et al., 2003). These groups help students to interact with each other as they build on their understanding, learn new ideas and concepts, and develop their cognitive skills (Vygotsky, cited in Arends, 2000). Thus, pair and group activities are essential in the classroom as they provide students with an opportunity to work collaboratively; and when working on pair and group activities, more capable students can work with those who find it difficult to complete the tasks on their own. Group learning has become a common practice in schools and tertiary institutions in New Zealand (Ward & Masgoret, 2004). Students are divided into small groups to learn content knowledge, to explore or discuss an assigned topic, or to complete cases, projects and group assignments, to answer a few challenging questions, or to engage in an exchange of ideas, and share some insights with group members. The frequently used techniques include Socratic questioning, problem-based learning, case studies, role playing, critical thinking, and behavioral analysis (Porter, 2006)

In Asian countries, group learning is believed to provide a more comfortable and supportive learning environment than solitary work and helps to develop individual writing skills (Schofield, 2006). Some research indicates that, regardless of subjects, students who work in groups achieve better results and are more satisfied with their learning experiences than those who do not work in collaborative groups (Springer, Stanne & Donovan, 1999). Other benefits of this group learning include promoting retention rates, transferring knowledge, providing counseling to students with

cognitive, physical, social, and emotional problems, and enhancing their intercommunication skills (Porter, 2006). Therefore, the group learning approach prepares students in problem-solving in a collaborative way and provides them with experiences which could be utilized in their future careers (Gupta, 2004).

In Kenya, Magut (2000) investigated the use of process approach in teaching writing skills and observed that most teachers find it difficult to teach writing. They used poor approaches and majority lectured students on how to write. It is against this backdrop that the current study set out to determine influence of group work on writing skills in secondary schools in order to provide way forward in improving learning of writing skills among learners.

### 1.1. Statement of the Problem

Despite the significant role played by writing in the school curriculum, studies point out that secondary school student's lack of basic skills of writing. Their performance in writing continues to be unsatisfactory as evidenced by school leavers' lack of communicative competence. Barasa (2008) asserts that universities have voiced concern about "fresher's, who are unable to speak, read, write or hold discussions in English".

The performance of English language in Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) over the years has not been good enough with 2016 recording one of the lowest performances in which no A grade was recorded (KNEC, 2016). The annual Kenya National Examination Council (KNEC) reports observation of English paper one, two and three thus: "performances over the years have been on low. A glance at the means (2011 – 36.42%, 2012 – 37.88%, 2013 – 27.42 % and 2014 - 38.84%) indicates that performance fell short of the ideal mean of 50% (KNEC, 2012, KNEC, 2013, KNEC, 2014, 2015 & KNEC, 2016). These papers require students to have strong mechanical and stylistic skills of writing. The reports indicate that students are weak at punctuation, word choice and make frequent construction errors. This therefore made necessary to probe the use of group work on writing skills in secondary schools in Elgeyo Marakwet County, in which the performance of English language in most of the schools was mean of C- and below this was related to poor writing skills (Keiyo North Sub County Office, 2016).

Group work helps students to be able to communicate clearly on intellectual and emotional levels (Levin & Kent, 2001), to explain their own ideas, express their feelings in an open but non-threatening way (Levin, 2002), listen carefully to others, ask questions to clarify others' ideas and emotions, can sense how others feel based on their nonverbal communication. Students will initiate conversations about group climate or process if they sense tensions brewing reflect on the activities and interactions of their group and encourage other group members to do so as well. This study was credence by poor English performance of Mean Grade C- among schools in Elgeyo Marakwet County, which may be associated with poor writing skills in composition exam. As such this study assessed the use of group work teaching writing skills in secondary schools in Keiyo North Sub-County, Kenya.

### 1.2. Objectives of the Study

The following were the specific objectives of this study:

- To find out teachers' knowledge and understanding of group work as a teaching strategy.
- To determine the learning activities involved when using group work to teach writing skills.

### 1.3. Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

- What is the teachers' knowledge and understanding of group work as a teaching strategy?
- What is the nature of learning activities teachers engage learners in when using group work to teach writing skills in secondary schools?

### 1.4. Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by constructivist theory by Jerome Bruner (1915); formalization of the theory of constructivism is generally attributed to Jean Piaget, who articulated mechanisms by which knowledge is internalized by learners. He suggested that through processes of accommodation and assimilation, individuals construct new knowledge from their experiences. Bruner's constructivist theory is a general framework for instruction based upon the study of cognition. Much of the theory is linked to child development research (especially Piaget). The ideas outlined in Bruner (1960) originated from a conference focused on science and math learning.

## 2. Research Methodology

This study adopted the use of mixed methodology. As pointed out by Creswell (2011) mixed methodology provides the chance for presenting a superior diversity of different opinions. In this study, questionnaires were used to collect qu2antitative information from students, lesson observation gathered information on nature of learning activities during group work and challenges encountered while interviews were used to collect qualitative data from teachers making the study to be a mixed methodology. The target population comprised of 43 teachers of English and 3,574 form 4 students drawn from 19 secondary school in the sub county (DEO office Keiyo Marakwet County, 2014). The sampling procedures which were used in this research included, stratified, simple random sampling and purposive sampling techniques. The Table 1 presents the sample size of the study.

| Types of school | School population | School Sample | Respondents | Population | Sample | Stratum sample |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sub County | 11 | 3 | Teachers | 11 | 3 | |
| | | | Learners | 268 | 84 | 87 |
| County | 23 | 7 | Teachers | 23 | 7 | |
| | | | Learners | 2126 | 196 | 203 |
| Extra County | 8 | 2 | Teachers | 8 | 2 | |
| | | | Learners | 844 | 56 | 58 |
| National | 1 | 1 | Teachers | 1 | 1 | |
| | | | Learners | 336 | 28 | 29 |
| | 43 | 13 | | 3617 | 377 | 377 |

*Table 1: Sample Size of the Study*

As shown in Table 1 Schools were grouped (stratified) either as National, Extra County, County or Sub County schools. Stratified sampling was opted for because it has an advantage of built in assurance that the sample will accurately reflect the numerical composition of the various sub groups (Kothari, 2008). Like in this study where sub groups included national, extra county, county school, and sub county school. Proportionate sampling was then used to select 3 Sub County Schools (11/43 x 13), 7 County Schools (23/43 x 13), 2 Extra County Schools (8/43 x 13) and 1 National school (1/43 x13). Individual schools were then arrived at using simple random sampling. Purposive sampling was used to select 3 teachers of English from sub county schools, 7 teachers of English from County schools, 2 from Extra County and 1 from National school. Purposive sampling was opted for because teachers of English have critical information on matters related to grouping of students and writing skills among students. Ten percent (10.1% of 3574 = 364) of the students' population was used to get students. 28 students were then picked from each school (364/13=28 per school) using simple random selection. This lead to a selection of 84 students from sub country schools, 196 students from county schools, 56 students from extra county schools and 28 students from National school. This gave rise to the selection of 364 students and 13 teachers of English in 13 schools leading to a sample size 377. Closed and open ended questions were administered to sampled secondary school students through the questionnaires. Interview was used in collecting data from the teachers of English from the 13 secondary schools. An observation schedule was prepared by the researcher in order to establish the use of group work in teaching writing skills in secondary schools, since it is best to observe what is actually happening.

To improve on the face validity, a pilot study was conducted after which responses to each item were scrutinized to identify any misunderstandings and ambiguity. Items found to be unclear or ambiguous were modified thereby improving face validity. To determine the content validity of interview schedule and questionnaire items, a team's judgmental panel from Moi University examined them. Suggestions and advice offered were used as a basis to modify the research items and make them more adaptable in the study. Their feedback was used to revise the instrument. In addition, the researcher conducted all the study in person in order to ensure systematic validity. Co-efficient alpha of 0.84 was obtained indicating that the research instruments were reliable and therefore adopted for data collection. According to Oluwatayo (2012), a reliability index of over 0.80 is considered ideal for a study.

## 3. Findings

*3.1 .Teachers' Knowledge and Understanding of Group Work as a Teaching Strategy*

The first objective of this study was to find out teachers' knowledge and understanding of group work as a teaching strategy. To achieve this objective, first teachers of English were asked to indicate whether they used group work or not. Their responses were tabulated and the results are presented in Figure 1.
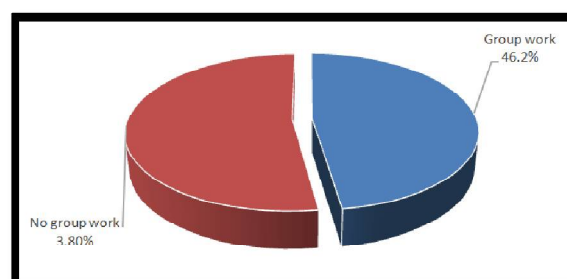


*Figure 1: Teachers' Responses on Use of Group work*

Figure 4.1 shows that 7(53.8%) teachers reported that they were not using group work during the teaching process while 6(46.2%) teachers acknowledged that they used group work while teaching. The responses pointed out that majority (53.8%) of the teachers acknowledged that they did not utilize group work in teaching of writing skills. The above data indicates that the English teacher gave less emphasis for group work in the teaching of writing skills. These sentiments are supported by findings from the observation which pointed out that most teachers don't use group work because they feel it takes most of their time during the lessons.

During the interview, one teacher indicated that:

In most cases, as a classroom teacher of English I assign groups to work during grammar sections as opposed to writing skills (Teacher, 002).

The above points out that even though group work is considered to have positive effects on learning, most teachers do not use it during the teaching and learning process. In addition, the researcher sought to establish the frequency of use of group work by teachers while teaching. Teachers noted that they used group work less often while teaching English. This implies that the positive effects associated with group work were not well utilized in teaching of English in secondary schools in the study area. This led to difficulties among students in advancing their writing skills.

Data from the observation schedules support this information indicating that indeed the few teachers mentioned used group work. From the observation the few teachers started from beginning. The teachers determined the topics and themes for the group work. It is at this time that the instructors thought about how they will form their groups, help negotiate the group process, and decide how to evaluate the final product. Johnson, Johnson and Smith (1991) suggest that group tasks should be integral to the course objectives. This means that the group work should complement the learning objectives outlined in the syllabus. If one of the learning objectives is to promote critical thinking skills or writing enhancement, then the group work should support these areas.

The findings here pointed out that those teachers who frequently used group work had a better chance of enhancing the achievement of writing skills among secondary school learners.

Interviews with the teachers of English further pointed out that use of group work had positive effects on students' learning. However, they pointed out that group work required time for it to be effectively used. One of the teachers interviewed noted that:

There is no doubt that group work improves the writing skills in the English language. Particularly, it plays a great role in the language learning. In group work, students share ideas, express their feeling and attitude thus enhancing their learning (Teacher 013).

Further, one other teacher of English added that:

If students practice writing skills in groups, they tend to improve their paragraph writing skills and develop confidence in both writing and speaking skills. These help them in improving their writing skills both in the English classroom and outside class room (Teacher 001).

Findings from the observation prove that "More hands make for lighter work." "Two heads are better than one." "The more the merrier." These adages speak to the potential groups have to be more productive, creative, and motivated than individuals on their own. On the part of the students the group projects seemed to help students develop their writing skills. Students were able to come up with a host of ideas that were important in their writing. This is similar to what National Survey of Student Engagement (2006) explained that positive group experiences have been found to contribute to student learning, retention and overall school. The observation further indicated that complex writing tasks were broken into parts thereby simplifying students writing. It is important to note though that not all groups were guaranteed success. From the observation it was noted that groups that were not well designed, supervised and assessed did not develop students writing skills. Observation also noted that apart from students, teachers gained in terms of assigning more complex, authentic problems to groups of students than they could to individuals. Group work also introduced more unpredictability to teaching, since groups may approach tasks and solve problems in novel, interesting ways. This was seen to be refreshing for teachers. The above shows use of group work by teachers of English results in improved writing skills among secondary school learners.

*3.2. Learning Activities Involved When Using Group Work to Teach Writing Skills*

The second objective of this study was to determine the learning activities involved when using group work to teach writing skills. To achieve this objective, the respondents were requested to rate their level of agreement on a five-point Likert scale items in the questionnaire on learning activities involved when using group work to teach writing skills. Their responses were tabulated and the results are presented in Table 2.

| Statement | SD | | D | | U | | A | | SA | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | F | % | F | % | F | % | F | % | F | % |
| We are encouraged as groups to provide meaning of words and make sense of what it means in sentence | 12 | 3.6 | 23 | 6.8 | 9 | 2.7 | 164 | 48.8 | 128 | 38.1 |
| We are made to share ideas together on understanding the words | 32 | 9.5 | 20 | 5.9 | 16 | 4.8 | 137 | 40.8 | 131 | 39.0 |
| We are made to focus on different meanings of words; why certain words are written the way they are, not just how | 40 | 11.9 | 48 | 14.3 | 10 | 3.0 | 129 | 38.4 | 109 | 32.4 |
| We are allowed as groups to summarize a text from the text book, critique, rectify and come up with new vocabularies | 35 | 10.4 | 46 | 13.7 | 17 | 5.1 | 111 | 33.0 | 127 | 37.8 |
| We are encouraged to rework in groups on words that seem difficult to us as individual | 21 | 6.3 | 39 | 11.6 | 18 | 5.3 | 125 | 37.2 | 133 | 39.6 |
| We are allowed as students to devise our own strategies for writing words | 56 | 16.7 | 40 | 11.9 | 19 | 5.7 | 104 | 30.9 | 117 | 34.8 |

*Table 2: Students' Responses on Learning Activities Involved When Using*
*Group Work to Teach Writing Skills*

Table 2 shows that 164 (48.8%) students agreed with the statement that they are encouraged as groups to provide meaning of words and make sense of what it means in sentence, 128 (38.1%) students strongly agreed with the statement, 23 (6.8%) students disagreed with the statement and 12 (3.6%) students strongly disagreed with the statement while 9 (2.75) students were undecided on the statement. The study showed that majority (86.9%) of the secondary school learners in Keiyo North Sub-County reported that they were encouraged to provide meaning of words and make sense of what it means in sentence. This shows that students were able to develop their learning strategies and can make learning practical and enjoyable. Working as a group is characterized by common effort, the utilization of the group's competence, and the presence of problem solving and reflection. This implies that when students work in groups while providing meaning to certain words, they will be in a position of providing the right meaning to the word and using it clearly in sentence construction.

One of the teachers interviewed pointed out that:

In high school, engaging in group work while learning the English language may help students in understanding things in a systematic way, may facilitate the meaning of words and make sense of what it means in a sentence (Teacher, 011).

In addition, 137 (40.8%) students agreed with the statement that they are made to share ideas together on understanding the words, 131 (39.0%) students strongly agreed with the statement, 32 (9.2%) students strongly disagreed with the statement and 20 (5.9%) students disagreed with the statement while 16 (4.8%) students were undecided on the statement. The responses showed that majority (79.8%) of the secondary school students cited that through group work, they were made them to share ideas together on understanding the words. This implies that group work enabled students to have a discussion and come up a clear understanding of words in English.

In supporting of this view one participant mentioned:

Sharing ideas together on understanding words is beneficial because students share their experiences to one another and make the teaching and learning process of writing skills more enjoyable, easier and faster for them to understand. During the process of drafting a composition, lots of discussions takes place. It encourages students to think in the English language (Teacher, 009).

Similarly, 129 (38.4%) students agreed with the statement that they were made to focus on different meanings of words; why certain words are written the way they are, not just how, 109 (32.5%) students strongly agreed with the statement, 48 (14.3%) students disagreed with the statement and 40 (11.9%) students strongly disagreed with the statement while 10(3.0%) students were undecided on the statement. From the responses, it emerged that majority (70.9%) of the secondary school students reported that they were made to focus on different meanings of words. This implies that from the group works students are able to achieve certain skills in English as a result of collaborations.

Moreover, 127 (37.8%) students strongly agreed with the statement that they were allowed as groups to summarize a text from the text book, critique, rectify and come up with new vocabularies, 111 (33.0%) students agreed with the statement, 46 (13.7%) students disagreed with the statement and 35 (10.4%) students strongly disagreed with the statement while 17 (5.1%) students were undecided on the statement. The responses showed that majority (70.8%) of the students in secondary schools in Keiyo North Sub-County reported that they were allowed to summarize texts from the text book, critique, rectify and come up with new vocabularies. This implies that through group work students are able to develop vocabulary skills in English.

Interviews with one of the teachers pointed out that:

In promoting writing skills in the English class rooms, we usually give students the opportunity as groups to summarize a text, critique, rectify and come up with new vocabularies and make class presentations. In so doing, the students are able to rectify the error of punctuation, spelling, and writing words in logical order in a meaningful way (Teacher, 012).

Further, 133 (39.6%) students strongly agreed with the statement that they were encouraged to rework in groups on words that seem difficult to them as individuals, 125 (37.2%) students agreed with the statement, 39 (11.6%) students disagreed with the statement and 21(6.3%) students strongly disagreed with the statement while 18 (5.3%) students were undecided on the statement. From the responses, it can be shown that majority of the secondary school learners in Keiyo North sub-county reported that they were encouraged to rework in groups on words that seem difficult to them as individuals. This implies that students were encouraged to be in groups so as to solve individual problems. Similarly, 117 (34.8%) students strongly agreed with the statement that they were allowed as students to devise their own strategies for writing words, 104 (30.9%) students agreed with the statement and 96 (28.6%) students were in disagreement with the statement while 19 (5.7%) students were undecided on the statement. From the responses, it emerged that majority (65.7%) of the students in secondary schools in the study area reported that they were allowed to devise their own strategies of writing words.

Finding from the observation supported these responses. Teachers told students the purpose of the project, the learning objective, and the skills that needed to be developed through group work. The teachers reinforced the writing skills.

## 4. Conclusion of the study

Based on the study findings and in line with objective one it can be concluded that teachers have knowledge and understanding of group work as a teaching strategy though they have not fully utilized group work in teaching writing skills. It could be that the teachers find it a challenge to effectively group students with differing rates of teaching and diverse ability to study in groups. Besides, group work can be time consuming and difficult to implement. Despite these

challenges, students were able to provide meaning of words and shared ideas together on understanding words. The implication is that students have a lot to gain in terms of acquiring knowledge on writing skills when done in groups.

In relation to objective two, the study concluded that there is a wide array of activities that the teachers engage learners in when using group work to teach writing skills. These included punctuation, handwriting, spelling and paragraphing. As a result, the students have insights on how to organize ideas in a coherent manner. Students also read set books which improve on their vocabulary, sentence construction as well as grammar. There are also comprehension activities and role play which encourage participation of each student and increase their understanding on writing skills.

## 5. Recommendations of the Study

Based on the study findings the study recommends that teachers of English should enhance their knowledge and understanding of group work as a teaching strategy. Particularly, teachers need to group students in smaller groups so that it is easier to cater for the needs of each and every member of the group. Also, the teacher should be able to check the participation of the students and identify the areas of weakness with regard to writing skills. Moreover, teachers of English should take advantage of differing student ability by providing a program of balanced activities that will be motivational and most beneficial to the students. Precisely, by knowing the needs of the students and their ability, the teachers will adjust the mode of grouping to meet the needs of the learners.

In order to reap the benefits of learning activities such as writing skills, comprehension activities, listening skills and communication skills, the study recommends that teachers need to encourage ideas from students and carefully listen to them so as to identify their strengths and weaknesses with regard to writing. Besides, it is of utmost importance for the teacher of English to maintain a positive atmosphere by observing the manner in which students are participating so as to enhance students focus on the learning materials.

With respect to group work the study recommends that teachers should effectively utilize it in teaching writing skills. Through group work, students can practice a wide range of language functions such as verbs and adverbs and vocabulary. As well, students can be autonomous, self-reliant and more engaged in writing skills through discussions and have the opportunity to articulate their explanations to the whole class. In so doing, students can assess their understanding and gain new knowledge through interactions with each other and the course content of the English language.

Finally, to overcome the challenges in the use of group work for teaching writing skills, teachers of English need to ensure that there is compatibility among the group members so that there is no misunderstanding in the groups. There should also be a good communication network and teachers need to take an initiative to share their experiences so as to enhance a conducive learning atmosphere. Consequently, learners will be able to learn more through sharing their experiences to one another and enhance the comprehensiveness of different writing concepts by discussing together.

## 6. Areas for Further Research

This study focused on the use of group work in the teaching of writing skills in secondary schools in Keiyo North sub county, Elgeyo-Marakwet County. It can be replicated with a larger, more representative sample.
Furthermore, it would be interesting to know whether the observed findings hold for secondary schools in other counties. More research is needed in this subject area with the use of both descriptive and inferential statistics to establish the relationship between the study variables.
Moreover, major contextual and settings to be considered in future researches should consider insights from this study influencing development of students' writing ability including teachers' knowledge and understanding of group work, nature of learning activities teachers engage learners in when using group work, teachers utilizing group work and challenges teachers of English face in the use of group work.

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