

LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES USED BY STUDENTS IN LEARNING ESSAY  
WRITING SKILLS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN MANGA  
SUB COUNTY, KENYA

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**Abstract:** *Writing is considered as an important skill to be achieved by learners in secondary schools in Kenya. This skill is important for its implications in learners' academic achievement and life beyond the classroom learning context. However, recent studies show that majority of students in secondary schools in Kenya fail to write effectively in English language. This raises concerns regarding the strategies of learning writing skills. This study establishes language learning strategies used by students in learning essay writing skills in English language in secondary schools in Manga Sub County, Kenya. The study employed a descriptive survey research design. Data was obtained from 15 teachers of English and 120 students in 15 selected secondary schools in the study area. Data was collected by use of semi structured interviews with selected teachers and structured questionnaires for students. The study revealed that metacognitive strategies were used most by students in learning essay writing skills. Social strategies that enhance interactive learning were rarely used. An implication for the study is that teachers need to train students to appropriate language learning strategies and encourage them to use the strategies as frequently as possible to help them write successively in English language.*

**Key Terms:** *English language, essay writing, learning strategies.*

### **Background to the Study**

The ability to achieve communicative competence in writing is a major facet of language development and academic success among students at all levels of the education system. Ismail (2011) argues that writing is an important skill in English as a second language learning (ESL) contexts. It is a skill that teachers are expected to prepare learners to cope with the communicative demands of real life situations. Undoubtedly, the purpose of teaching writing skill is to prepare ESL learners to become better writers. Additionally, Muodumogu and Unwaha (2013) argue that proficiency in English language skills especially in the current trends of globalization and technological advancement writing is a necessity. Considering the fast moving global and national context, the Ministry of Education Science and Technology (MoEST) of Kenya has put considerable emphasis on writing with the other language skills in

order to enhance acquisition of communicative competence of learners and prepare them for future professional development.

However, learning to write in a first (L1), second (L2) or foreign language (FL) seems to be the most difficult skill for language learners to acquire in academic contexts (Negari, 2013). Similarly, Richards (2008) notes that learning to write in either first or second language is one of the most difficult tasks students encounter and one that few people can be said to fully master. Mojica (2010) adds that writing is a complex process which involves use of the cognitive, effective, psychomotor and social domains, each of which influences a writer's writing success. Thus, the quality of teaching determines students' achievement in writing. Therefore, teachers are expected to expose learners to appropriate learning strategies during writing instruction in order to help them develop their writing proficiency.

The aims of teaching English language in Kenyan secondary schools is to enable learners acquire a sufficient command of English Language in both spoken and written forms. The secondary English language course is meant to address itself to the four basic language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Of the four language skills, writing is the most important skill that enables learners to think critically and creatively as he or she responds for academic discipline. It is a life long process and part of personal development whose usefulness stretches beyond the classroom (Kenya Institute of Education, 2006). Despite the significant role played by writing in the school curriculum, studies point out that secondary school students lack basic skills of writing. Their performance in writing continues to be unsatisfactory as evidenced by school leavers' lack of communicative competence. Barasa (2005) cited in Kemboi et al. (2014) asserts that universities have voiced concerns about "freshers who are unable to speak, read, write or hold discussions in English". The Kenya National Examinations Council (KNEC) Report (2014) states that students are weak in both mechanical and stylistic skills of writing, they are also weak at punctuation, word choice and make frequent construction errors. It is therefore important to critically look into issues concerning teaching and learning of ESL writing in secondary schools in Kenya. Research studies have shown that one way of enhancing writing skills is by training and exposing learners to a variety of language learning strategies (Griffiths, 2006; Oxford, 2010). Therefore, the study set out to determine the language learning strategies used by students in learning essay writing skills in English language in secondary schools in Manga Sub County, Kenya.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Learning to write well is a problem for a significant number of students in ESL learning contexts. Students' dismal performance in English language in Kenya and other subjects of the school curriculum whose medium of instruction is English has been partly blamed on their abysmally low proficiency in writing (KNEC, 2014). Part of the problem is attributed to teaching and learning strategies prevalent in the instruction of writing skills in secondary

schools. Considering the need to improve learners' proficiency in the writing skills, it is crucial to establish language learning strategies used by students in learning essay writing skills in English language in secondary schools in Manga Sub County, Kenya.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. Establish the nature of learning strategies employed by students in learning essay writing skills in English language.
2. Find out how often teachers train students in the use of language learning strategies during essay writing instruction.

### **Literature Review**

Language Learning Strategies (LLS) are specific actions, behaviours or steps that students use to improve their progress in developing L2 skills. They are procedures that facilitate the learning task and they vary considerably within each individual learner (Oxford, 2011). According to Rubin (1997) LLS are processes which contribute to development of the language system which the learner constructs and affects learning directly. Richards and Lockhart (2006) affirm that LLS determine, to great extent, the success level of learners in L2, arguing that absence of appropriate strategies results in low achievement in language. Interactive learning strategies which include: working in groups, peer teaching and role play provide constructive knowledge that promotes use of target language efficiently and clearly. Brown (2007) notes that learning strategies are classified into three categories: metacognitive, cognitive and social affective. Metacognitive strategies are those that involve planning for learning, thinking about the learning process as it is taking place, monitoring of one's production or comprehension, and evaluating learning after an activity is completed. Cognitive strategies are more limited to specific learning tasks and involve more direct manipulation of the learning material itself. They involve strategies such as: translation, grouping, note-taking, auditory representation, deduction, imagery elaboration, transfer and inference, that is, using available information to guess meaning of new items, predict outcomes or fill in missing information. Social affective strategies have to do with working with one or more peers to obtain feedback and asking questions for clarification.

Language learning strategies (LLS) are taught and the learners can benefit from being coached in their use (Griffiths, 2004). This practice is what is commonly referred to as "strategy training". This approach according to Cohen (2003), is based on the belief that learning will be facilitated through making learners aware of the range of strategies from which they can choose during language learning and use. Thus, second language learners are encouraged to learn and use a wide range of LLS through the learning process. Lessard-clouston (1997) suggests that focusing on the language learning process itself is important because it helps learners understand the process, the nature of the language communication, and the language learning resources that are available to them. In addition, they will know the specific LLS they might use in order to

improve their own vocabulary use, grammar knowledge, and L2 skills in reading, writing, listening and speaking.

A study by Omulando (2009) investigated the teaching and learning strategies used by teachers and learners respectively; and how they influence the manner in which language teachers conduct instruction in English language in secondary schools in Kenya. The results indicated that learners did not appropriately use the LLS. English language teachers were aware of LLS and their usefulness but they did not appropriately apply this knowledge in training learners on the use of appropriate LLS during instruction. It was recommended that teachers should train learners on the use of LLS as a means of motivating learners into language learning process.

From the foregoing it is evident that teacher's role in strategy training is very crucial for successful language learning. This implies that lack of adequate training of students on the use of learning strategies is likely to bring about challenges in learning L2 essay writing skills. It is on this perspective that the study sought to establish strategies students employ in the process of learning L2 essay writing skills.

### **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. Stratified random and purpose sampling techniques were used to select respondents for the study. A total of 120 students and 15 teachers participated in the study. Frankel and Wallen (2010) 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 analyze 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 the respondents.

## Findings and Discussion

This section focuses on data presentation, analysis and discussion. Data and findings were presented and discussed under the following themes: Theme 1: Strategies employed by students in learning essay writing skills. Theme 2: Frequency of training students on the use of language learning strategies during essay writing instruction.

### Theme 1: Strategies students employ in learning essay writing skills.

The findings are presented in Table 1 below.

Strategy	Frequently		Sometimes		Rarely		Never	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Taking notes	65	36.1	78	43.3	22	12.2	15	8.3
Seeking for clarification from teachers on concepts not understood	63	35	74	41.1	36	20	07	3.9
Peer teaching	17	9.4	23	12.7	31	17.2	109	60.5
Group discussion	53	29.4	64	35.6	38	21.1	25	13.9
Role play	14	7.7	19	10.5	28	15.5	119	66.1
Making corrections to rectify mistakes on written essays	66	36.7	83	46.1	17	9.4	14	7.7
Revising work learnt in class	46	25.6	84	46.7	39	21.7	11	6.1
Writing extra essays and giving them out for marking	42	23.3	51	28.3	45	25	42	23.3
Reading widely other materials in English e.g Newspapers, story books	29	16	36	32.8	83	46.1	32	17.8
Making summary notes on the set texts for essay writing	74	41.1	32	17.8	36	20	28	15.6
Proof reading written essays	57	31.7	68	37.8	24	13.3	31	17.2
Planning or organizing ideas before writing	66	36.7	59	32.8	31	17.2	24	13.3

The results displayed in Table 1, reveal that making notes is the most frequently used learning strategy by students 74 (41.1%) with only 28 (15.6%) never using it. Other learning strategies frequently used include: planning or organizing ideas before writing and making corrections to rectify mistakes 66 (36.7%) respectively whereas 65 (36.1%) indicated taking notes. Relatively small number of students 17 (9.4%) indicated that they frequently use peer teaching and only 14 (7.7%) of the respondents frequently employ role play as a strategy for learning essay writing skills.

These results indicate that students employ a variety of strategies in learning essay writing skills. However, it is evident that students have a limited knowledge about range of LLS available to them and thus depend on individualized learning strategies such as making notes. The responses reveal that interactive learning strategies such as group work, peer teaching and role play are not frequently used by majority of the students. This creates a situation where learners do not share knowledge and experiences. Richards and Lockhart (2006) argue that interactive LLS provide constructive knowledge that promotes use the target language efficiently and clearly and on the other hand, absence of appropriate strategies results in low achievement in language. Chamot (2005) also emphasizes the importance of providing multiple practice opportunities with the use of LLS so that the students can use them autonomously.

**Theme 2: Frequency of training students on the use of language learning strategies during essay writing instruction.**

The responses are shown in Figure 1

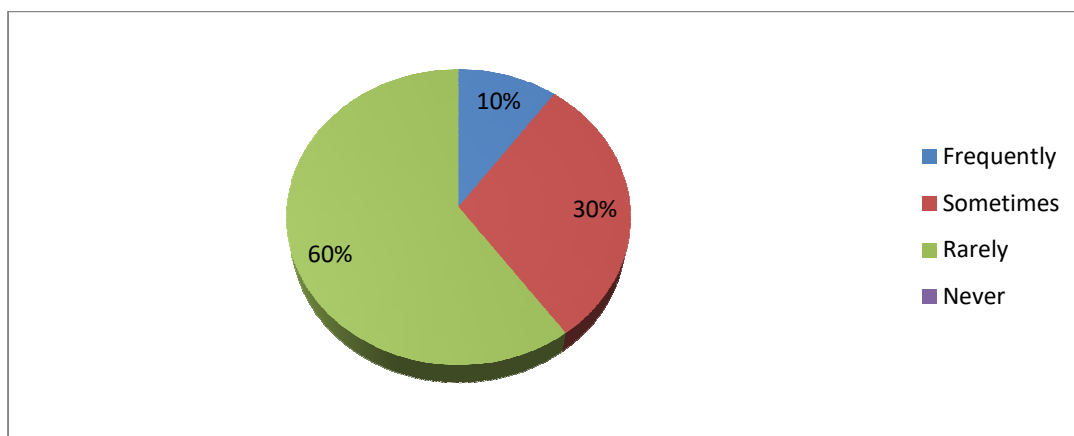


Figure 1: Frequency of training students on use of LLS

The results from Figure 1 clearly show that, only 10% of the teachers indicated that they train their students on the use of LLS frequently while 30% indicated the sometimes train whereas majority 60% do it rarely. In an interview, one of the respondents wondered aloud;” You mean students can be taught on how to use LLS!” She felt that LLS are so subjective and individualized to be taught in class of many students with different learning styles. This implies that a considerable proportion of teachers do not frequently train students on the use of LLS and this could likely bring about challenges in learning L2 essay writing skills. According to Lessard- Clouston (1997) training students to use LLS can help them become better language users and this is only possible in situations where the teacher trains and facilitates students on the use of a variety of LLS for greater success in L2 learning.

## 7 Conclusion

The study findings reveal that students employ a variety of LLS. However, they do not fully exploit these strategies when learning L2 essay writing skills. They tend to depend on individualized LLS rather than interactive LLS which promote the sharing of knowledge and experiences as noted by Richards and Lockhart (2006). On the other hand, the study established that a considerable proportion of teachers do not frequently train students on the use of LLS and this could likely bring about challenges in learning L2 essay writing skills. It is, therefore, imperative to note that LLS have a bearing on students' learning of essay writing skills. In this regard, language teachers need to incorporate language learning strategies into their teaching methods and approaches, train the students to apply the appropriate strategy for a specific purpose or a specific skill area, and encourage them to use the strategies as frequently as possible. Students can learn to use language learning strategies to improve their language skills.

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