Problems of Writing in Kiswahili: A Case Study of Kigurunyembe and Morogoro Secondary Schools in Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

This study attempts to identify and discuss writing problems in Kiswahili in Tanzanian secondary schools. The study uses data from two schools specifically selected as case studies. The study submits that pedagogically, unlike speaking which is acquired without explicit instructions, writing as a skill has to be taught. Failure to appreciate this difference leads to communicative writing problems. The present study reveals six glaring writing problems, namely: capitalization and punctuation problems, inexplicitness or fuzziness, poor organization or illogical sequence, spelling problems and grammatical errors. The study argues that most of these writing problems arise from pedagogical reasons. To a greater extent, these problems are not limited only to the two schools involved in the study, but apply also to other schools and higher learning institutions as well. Thus, the study advocates that writing problems can be minimized if the students are taught writing as a skill by professional Kiswahili language teachers.

1. INTRODUCTION

The current state of writing Kiswahili essays in some secondary schools in Tanzania leaves a lot to be desired. It appears that a large number of students do not differentiate between writing as an activity and writing as a skill. Every writing is an activity but not every writing is a skill. Failure to appreciate this correctly causes some students to write Kiswahili essays the way they speak. The differences between writing and speaking are discussed in section 2 below. Examining writing problems in Kiswahili essays in some Teacher Training Colleges and the University of Dar es Salaam, Mkude (1980), Qorro (1988) and Msanjila (1990) note with great concern that students have writing problems in expressing themselves systematically and logically. Not only that, students mix English structures and expressions with those of the Kiswahili language. Under these circumstances, comprehension becomes difficult and the intended meaning is highly affected. How serious is the problem of writing now? Indeed, this is the focus of the present study.

The study involved 60 students of form three at the *Kigurenyembe* and *Morogoro* Secondary Schools in Tanzania as our case study. According to the Tanzanian Kiswahili syllabus, writing skills are taught in the first two years of secondary education. It is assumed, therefore, that form three students have

acquired the necessary writing skills needed in writing academic essays. The students under study are Tanzanians who use Kiswahili as their Second Language (henceforth called L_2) but with different mother tongues. It is interesting, however, to note that students in schools and colleges often use Kiswahili not as L_2 in its strict sense but as a working language in their everyday communication. It is common to find that many students' linguistic competence in Kiswahili is higher than in their mother tongues (Mochiwa 1979). This is so because the students and the population at large exclusively use Kiswahili as their language of day-to-day communication. Thus, basically, the aim of this study is threefold:

- to identify the writing problems in Kiswahili essays from a sample of form three students and to assess how serious they are;
- to describe and discuss the writing problems in respect to their categories; and
- to find out the reasons for these problems and discuss how the problems could be eliminated or reduced.

The following section reviews the pedagogical aspects of writing in relation to the basic language skills which form the basis of our discussion.

2. PEDAGOGICAL ASPECTS OF WRITING

From a pedagogical point of view, writing is one of the four basic language skills, namely: speaking, listening, reading and writing which the teacher, as an instructor, ought to know. Unlike speaking, writing is not a natural activity. While speaking is acquired by all normally endowed human beings without explicit instruction, writing, on the other hand, has to be taught. Stubbs (1980: 117) distinguishes formal features which are used in written language or in spoken, but not in both:

Speaking: intonation, pitch, stress, rhythm, speed of utterance, pausing, silences, variation in loudness; other paralinguistic features including aspiration, laughter, voice quality, timing, including simultaneous speech; co-occurrence with proxemic and kinesic signals; availability of physical context.

Writing: spacing between words; punctuation, including parentheses; typography, including style of typeface, italicization, underlining, upper and lower case, capitalization to indicate sentence beginnings and proper nouns; inverted commas, for example to indicate that a term is being used critically (Chimpanzees' "language" is…); graphics, including lines, shapes, borders, diagrams, tables, abbreviations; logograms, for example; and layout, including paragraphing, margination, pagination, footnotes, headings and … sub-headings….

It is evident, therefore, that formal features of writing and speaking which speakers use when organizing their linguistic operations are quite different from those available to writers. This means that teachers and communicators first and foremost need to understand these differences and to be able to apply the skills correctly and appropriately.

Writing as a skill involves a number of complex rhetorical and linguistic operations which must be taught. While speaking can rely on a number of situational factors to help convey meaning and intention, the act of writing is deprived of an immediate context of communication. Thus, for effective writing, the writer has to use a large number of formal features in order to help his/her readers infer the intended meaning. Failure to use these features correctly causes vagueness, ellipsis and ambiguity in some writings. However, in speaking, these features are tolerated to a high degree because mistakes and miscomprehensions can always be rectified by the speaker or by his interlocutor.

In developing writing as a communicative skill, students should constantly be made aware that particular topics in writing fit particular situations and conform to particular conventions. Conventionally, legal writings use long sentences, formal language and precise definitions to avoid ambiguity and misinterpretations. In the context of physical sciences, writing is characterized by short sentences and short forms or symbolic signs. The role of the language teacher, therefore, is to teach his students to master not only the language skills but also to master the standard language which is free from grammatical errors. We use the terms *standard* to mean the language which is standardized and accepted for use in formal communication. For this study, the reference is based on standard Kiswahili. Thus, to identify writing problems among form three students, a sample corpus of 60 Kiswahili essays with an average of 500 words each, were carefully examined from the two schools involved in the present study.

The study uses *writing problems* instead of errors, the traditional concept for one reason. Error analysis, so to speak, confines itself to grammars per se and does not give the communicative aspect much attention (Richards 1971). It is on this basis that we use *writing problems* so as to include the communicative aspects in the overall analysis. The analysis is based on similar grammatical errors and the use of inappropriate communicative norms of writing. The explanation for each writing problem is first offered as a working hypothesis and then it is discussed under the given circumstances and contexts in order to explain why and how these writing problems occur. The following section discusses glaring writings problems noted in the corpus under their respective categories.

3. CLASSIFICATION OF WRITING PROBLEMS

Some studies (Lado 1957; Richards 1971; Lim Ho Peng 1976; Abbort 1981) classify the learner's errors into two general categories: those which result from

mother tongue interference and those which result from within L_2 interference system itself. Both categories of errors (writing problems) are discussed and analysed in appropriate contexts. Table 1 gives a statistical summary of the main writing problems noted from the students' essays arranged on the basis of raw frequencies rank order starting with the highest to the lowest frequencies.

Table 1. Classification of *Writing Problems*

	Category of *Writing Problems*	Frequencies of *Writing Problems*
1.	Capitalization problem	171
2.	Punctuation problem	147
3.	Inexplicitness/Fuzziness	72
4.	Poor organization / illogical sequence	63
5.	Spelling problem	31
6.	Grammatical errors	24

3.1 CAPITALIZATION PROBLEM

As can be seen from Table 1, the misuse of capital letters is the most common writing problem noted in this study. It ranks number one out of six. It appears that the source of this problem is neither from the mother tongue nor from L_2 interference. Using capital letters correctly is a writing norm which is required in all languages. It is a pedagogical problem which can be handled appropriately by professional teachers in schools. However the corpus reveals that many students (about 54.5%) use capital letters instead of small letters and vice versa. See the following examples:

1. **j**umla ya hayo yote imekuwa ni **K**uhatarisha na kuyaweka **K**atika wasiwasi maisha ya mkulima na mfanyakazi na hivyo kuchochea na kushawishi jamii iingie katika mkondo wa kutatanisha *… (Serial No. 15).*[1]

   (**s**umming up, the life of peasants and workers has been **T**hreatened and **E**ndangered hence inciting the people to take a controversial side *(Serial No. 15). (My translation))*

2. … **M**fano wa kulima mashamba makubwa ya **P**amba na **K**ahawa ili waweze kupata dawa *… (Serial No. 19).*

   (… **F**or example the big farms of **C**otton and **C**offee need pesticides *… (Serial No. 19). (My translation))*

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[1] Students' essays were assigned *Serial* Numbers 1 to 60 instead of using their names.

The anomaly of using small letters at the beginning of a new paragraph and using capital letters in the middle of sentences are typical examples noted in the essays. It should be noted here that I put emphasis on proper usage of capital letters not for exercises and examinations only but for communicative purposes as well. Among notable roles, capital letters signify the beginning of a sentence, denote a proper noun, and a title (such as rank, status, book, play, poem, etc.). Failure to use writing norms appropriately may lead to misinterpretation of information. For this study the misuse of capital letters may partly be due to bad handwriting.

3.2 PUNCTUATION PROBLEM

Punctuation problem may also be the result of inadequate learning or poor teaching. Results show that 51% of the students under study use punctuation marks inappropriately. Their writings seem to indicate that these students do not understand how to use the punctuation marks correctly in conveying information accurately and effectively. It is the *full stop* which has been used adequately and correctly. The *commas* which are used extensively in order to help the readers convey the intended meaning in long sentences are not adequately used. This reduces not only understanding but also accuracy. The students under study do not seem to appreciate not only the *commas* but also the value of using *semicolon* and the *colon* in places where punctuations are absolutely necessary. The problem of punctuation is repeatedly noted in Mkude's (1980) study with the Kiswahili undergraduate students. This inference from the above statement implies that the problem of punctuation is not limited to the Kigurunyembe and Morogoro secondary schools alone but is also a problem at other schools and higher learning institutions as well.

3.3 INEXPLICITNESS OR FUZZINESS

The problem of inexplicitness or fuzziness ranks third in terms of raw frequencies. However, one can argue that it is one of the serious problems facing students in schools and colleges. Assessing the effectiveness of writing as a skill with the students studying Kiswahili at the University of Dar es Salaam, Mkude (1980: 62) reports:

> They do not seem to appreciate the value of explicitness in written communication. Relationships of elements within and across sentences are not clearly marked. The syntax is predominantly elliptical and markedly paratactical. The reader is left to infer the intended relationships.

Although Mkude specifically refers to the Kiswahili language, his observations are applicable to the English language as well. Among other findings, Qorro (1998) discovered that some of her students of English Communication Skills seemed to lack the necessary writing skills for coping with academic demand at university level.

In the corpus it was noted that 43% of the students under study were not observing the writing norms of being explicit. Writing features which are necessary in order to help the readers to understand the intended meaning were inadequately used. For example, the relationships of elements within and across the sentences were not effectively exploited. See the example below:

3. Kuhusiana na suala hili la uchumi kuwa duni limeathiri utamaduni wa jamii. ***Kwa sababu*** mtu hujitafutia mbimu za kuweza kuendeleza maisha yake. Mzazi anatafuta mbinu zozote, mfano: kama kuna duka la kijiji anaiba pesa zilizopo ili kutosheleza mahitaji yake.

   (The cultural values of society have been affected by the poor economy. **Because** one has to find other means to maintain his life. For example, a parent can steal from a village shop in order to sustain his needs *(Serial No. 34*). *(My translation))*.

4. ***Umesababisha*** watu kutokuaminiana hata kama ni ndugu. Mtu hathamini ile kazi aliyopangiwa au anayoifanya kwani hutafuta afanye mbinu gani au njia gani ili aweze kuyaweka maisha yake vizuri *(Serial No. 34).*

   (***Has caused*** people not to trust each other even if they are relatives. A person does not value his prescribed job or work; rather he/she looks for other means of survival which will make his/her life better *(Serial No. 34). (My translation))*

Much can be said about the two paragraphs quoted above. For instance, the second sentence of the first paragraph which starts with ***Kwa sababu*** (Because) does not explicitly mark the direct relationships with the preceding sentence. The second sentence states something quite different from the first sentence. This implies that the element ***kwa sababu***, which functions as a link device has not been used appropriately. Furthermore, the use of ***Umesababisha*** (Has caused) at the beginning of the second paragraph implies that the writer is making an assumption that the readers know the cause he is referring to. But while reading the first paragraph one fails to decipher the writer's intended cause.

Considering the above accounts, the problem of inexplicitness or fuzziness may be said to originate either from poor teaching and a poor learning environment or from the poor social background of the students themselves. It will suffice to say here that, where there are good language teachers with relevant

resource materials and that students are willing to learn the skills of writing, such writing problems may be reduced to a great extent.

3.4 POOR ORGANIZATION / ILLOGICAL SEQUENCE

This problem is as serious as the problem of inexplicitness or fuzziness. From the corpus 32% of the students under study were found to have this problem. If this problem is not addressed seriously, the conveyed messages would be totally distorted. In order for the readers to understand the intended written messages in Kiswahili essays, the sentences and paragraphs should be systematically organized and logically arranged. Mkude (1980: 62) noted this problem with great concern. He reports that:

> They often fail to appreciate the value of organizing linguistic material strategically so as to secure maximal impact. Again, this weakness can be seen within and across sentences.

Like the problem of inexplicitness, poor organization or illogical sequence may also be said to originate from poor teaching in schools. The problem could be reduced by effective teaching, the creation of a wider reading and writing habit, and involvement in discussions and debates.

3.5 SPELLING PROBLEM

Using wrong spelling is another serious problem noted in this study. It ranks fifth in hierarchy. The following are some of the common spelling problems noted in the corpus.

		Correct		**Not Correct**
5.	(a)	**dh**ahabu (gold)	written as	**th**ahabu
	(b)	**H**ayupo (absent)	written as	**a**yupo
	(c)	Ka**la**mu (pencil)	written as	ka**r**amu

The above problems may be said to arise as a result of mother tongue interferences realized through phonological manifestations. Some ethnic community languages in Tanzania do not have the sound [ð] in their phonological systems (Massamba 1986). Such people use the spelling /th/ pronounced [θ] instead of the standard Kiswahili spelling /dh/ and pronounced [ð].

The coastal ethnic groups near Dar es Salaam city, like the *Zaramo* and the *Ndengereko*, drop the phonemic /h/ where standard Kiswahili word begins with the letter /h/. The *Kurya* ethnic group in Mara region does not have the sound [I] in its phonological systems (Massamba 1986). As a result, speakers use the phonemic /r/ in place where standard Kiswahili uses /l/. It appears, therefore that,

the wrongly spelled words cited in (a), (b) and (c) above are a result of influence from ethnic mother tongues. The wrongly spelled words are problems in the sense that, firstly, the words deviate from the standard Kiswahili orthography. Secondly, they make the words difficult to understand especially for the readers and hence it becomes difficult for them to decipher the intended meaning. This problem can only be minimized but we cannot say with certainty that it can be completely eradicated. It appears that the problem of spelling in writing is a persistent problem which applies even to professional writers, journalists and academics.

3.6 GRAMMATICAL ERRORS

The problem of grammatical errors ranks sixth in the hierarchy in terms of raw frequencies. Like other writing problems, grammatical errors seem to result from inadequate learning and poor teaching. The grammatical errors found in the corpus are what Richards (1971) calls *intralingual and developmental errors*. Intralingual errors are those problems which reflect the general characteristics of the rule learning, faulty generalization, incomplete application of rules and failure to learn conditions under which rules apply. Developmental errors, on the other hand, illustrate the learner's attempt to try to build up hypotheses about the target language from his limited knowledge learnt in schools or naturally acquired.

In the corpus, we note that 14% of the students under study were unable to apply correctly the relative markers in the subordinate constructions according to their noun classes referred to. The following are typical grammatical errors noted:

> 6. … na hii chanzo chake ni kuwa na hali ya uchumi inayoweza kukusanya madini mbalimbali ya kutengeneza silaha ambayo hupatikana zaidi Afrika ya Kusini, amba*vyo* taifa huweza kununua kwa haraka … *(Serial No. 22).*
>
> (… and the source is to have an economy which can provide different minerals for manufacturing goods especially from South Africa, **which** the nation can afford to buy *(Serial No. 22). (My translation))*

> 7. Na vile vile hazina viwanda mama (heavy industries) amba*zo* zinaziwezesha kuzalisha bidhaa … *(Serial No. 46).*
>
> (And likewise it has no heavy industries **which** can manufacture goods … *(Serial No. 46). (My translation))*

As can be seen above, the sources of these problems may be partly attributed to inadequate competence gained in the Kiswahili language or as a result of the poor social background of the students themselves. The inadequate competence in Kiswahili, which Richards (1971) calls intralingual errors, may arise as a result either of poor teaching and learning environment or from students who have had

less exposure to the Kiswahili language in their formative years. The way a language lesson is taught may at times be a source of grammatical errors. Considering the students under study, I am of the opinion that the cited grammatical errors may be said to arise as a result of the use of very long sentences, and in consequence some students fail to relate the grammatical particles in their proper concordial agreements, as shown in the two examples.

4. GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

To stimulate discussion, one would ask the question: *Why do writing problems still persist among students of Kiswahili at secondary school?* I do not intend to give definitive answers but rather my own views. I think that there are several factors in the Tanzanian situation which seem to reinforce the widespread persistence of such problems. Firstly, it appears that little is known about the differences between written and spoken Kiswahili, nor about the difference between the kind of Kiswahili used in formal and informal settings. As such, students tend to write as they would speak.

Secondly, most text books in Kiswahili scholarship which serve as models of the standard written form are prepared for the primary education level only. The few books written for the secondary school level are only for Kiswahili as a subject. As a result, the students at secondary schools do not read Kiswahili books widely in other subject areas to familiarize themselves with the general academic forms of writing. Thirdly, as Mbunda (1979) argues, the shortage of qualified language teachers, inadequate teaching materials and poor teaching methods together seem not only to reduce the writing skills but also to reduce the students' interest in writing.

As has been revealed in section 3, a large number of writing problems are pedagogical in nature. The failure of many students to use standard Kiswahili norms in writing implies a failure of the school and the education system at large. I would argue that it is the role of the school to develop and extend the skills of the students' academic writing. Likewise, it is the responsibility of the curriculum developers, in conjunction with the Ministry of Education and Culture, to carry out regular evaluations of the Kiswahili syllabus and teaching methodology to check whether they reflect the stated language objectives.

In conclusion, this study has revealed some of the crucial writing problems found amongst students at Kigurunyembe and Morogoro secondary schools. It appears that out of the six writing problems, three are very crucial, including: the misuse of capital letters, inadequate use of punctuation marks and inexplicitness or fuzziness. Their impact is more serious than the other problems because the intended meaning is often misconceived. Even more important is that these crucial problems arise from pedagogical reasons, but this does not mean that teachers alone can solve these problems. Nor does it mean that these problems can be solved outside the school system. However, the study advocates that writing

problems can be reduced to a greater extent if the students are taught writing skills by professional language (Kiswahili) teachers and not otherwise.

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