

Predominant Effect of Mother Tongue on Students' Writing Skills in Public Day Secondary Schools in Nyamira North Sub-County

By

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine the predominant effect of mother tongue on students writing skills in public Day secondary schools in Nyamira North Sub-County. The specific objective was to identify the predominant effects of mother tongue interference on writing skills. The study was grounded in Krashen's (1981) Second Language Acquisition Theory, which focuses on how individuals learn a second language, emphasizing cognitive and environmental factors that affect language proficiency. A convergent mixed methods research approach was used to combine both qualitative and quantitative data collection. The target population included 72 English teachers, 32 principals, and 1,381 Form III students from 32 public day secondary schools. A sample of 59 English teachers, 18 principals, and 302 students was selected using stratified and simple random sampling techniques, with automatic inclusion for school principals. Data collection instruments included questionnaires for teachers and students, and interview guides for principals. The instruments were validated and tested for reliability before use. Data analysis involved both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS to generate descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data from interviews was analyzed using thematic content analysis. The findings indicated that mother tongue interference significantly affects students' English writing skills. Common challenges include students' tendency to directly translate from their native languages, the use of Sheng or Kiswahili, and the mixing of native vocabulary in their writing. To address these issues, the study recommended the implementation of immersion-based English learning strategies, including increased speaking, listening, and exposure to engaging English reading materials. Ultimately, the study concluded that comprehensive language competency policies aimed at reducing mother tongue interference would improve students' writing skills, enhance academic performance, and promote better communication in English.

Key Words: Code-mixing, Exogenous Language, Mother Tongue, Second Language

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Background to the Problem

English today is used for many functions ranging from education, business, and politics to technology. The importance of speaking English at recent times cannot be underestimated or ignored as it is a language that is spoken in most parts of the world. (Putra 2020). It is pragmatic that as English becomes the world's lingua franca, countries all over the world have adopted English language as part of their education system. (Oktaviani & Fauzan 2017). Tolibovna (2022; Pp. 64) observes that learning English is unintentional to advance intellectually and personally since it is regarded as the language that is used most frequently. He articulates that 450 million people use English as their first language and an extra 600-650 million people communicate using English as a second language.

Research shows that learning English in schools relies heavily on formal and informal methods of language acquisition (De Wilde et al., 2020). For students in Kenya's linguistically diverse environment, the mother tongue may interfere with acquiring writing skills in English. Studies from other regions, such as Cameroon, Saudi Arabia, and Colombia, have demonstrated that the use of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction significantly affects students' performance in second language writing (Chuo & Walter, 2011; Al-Khreshah, 2015; Nueva & Ewan, 1998). Writing, one of the most challenging language skills, is often influenced by mother tongue interference, leading to frequent errors in grammar, sentence structure, and vocabulary (Watcharapunyawong & Usaha, 2013; Owu-Ewie & Williams, 2017).

In developed countries, the influence of a student's first language on English writing skills has been extensively studied, particularly among immigrant populations. In the United States, for instance, Spanish-speaking students often face challenges when writing in English due to the interference of their mother tongue. Research shows that Spanish speakers tend to transfer

grammatical structures such as sentence order and verb conjugation rules from Spanish into English compositions, resulting in errors in subject-verb agreement, verb tenses, and word choice (Menken, 2013). These errors are linked to linguistic interference, where the syntax and grammar of the mother tongue seep into the students' English writing, making it difficult for teachers to address these persistent issues without specific language intervention programs (Lugo-Neris et al., 2010).

Similarly, in the United Kingdom, the growing population of students from Eastern European countries has brought attention to the challenges of mother tongue interference in writing. Polish students, for example, often struggle with English grammar, especially articles and prepositions, which do not function similarly in Polish (D'Angelo, 2016). In English compositions, these students may omit articles entirely or use them incorrectly, reflecting the influence of Polish linguistic structures. This cross-linguistic interference is further complicated by the fact that most of these students speak Polish at home, limiting their exposure to English and reinforcing the patterns of mother tongue interference in their writing skills (May, 2018).

In African countries, mother tongue influence is a common issue in students' academic performance, particularly in writing. In Nigeria, many students speak a local language such as Yoruba or Hausa as their first language, which often interferes with their English writing. According to Olaniyi (2019), students who primarily communicate in their mother tongue are more likely to transfer native linguistic rules into their English compositions. For example, Nigerian students often use subject-object-verb (SOV) sentence structures common in some local languages, which conflicts with the subject-verb-object (SVO) structure of English, leading to poorly structured sentences and reduced clarity in writing.

In South Africa, where several indigenous languages are spoken alongside English, students often face similar difficulties. Zulu-speaking students, for instance, tend to make errors in verb conjugation and word order when writing in English due to the different syntactic rules in Zulu (Nkosi, 2012). Research indicates that such students also struggle with writing tasks that require complex grammatical constructions, as their Zulu-based thought processes interfere with the linear, rule-bound structure of English (Setati, 2014). This linguistic interference is compounded

by limited access to English outside the classroom, leading to ongoing challenges in developing strong writing skills.

Beyond Nyamira County, students in other parts of Kenya experience similar issues related to mother tongue interference. In Western Kenya, Luo-speaking students encounter difficulties in writing coherent English sentences due to the significant differences between Luo and English syntax and grammar. According to Owuor (2017), Luo speakers often transfer linguistic elements such as tone, noun-adjective agreement, and sentence structure into their English writing, which distorts the clarity of their compositions. This problem is particularly pronounced in rural areas where exposure to English outside the classroom is limited, and students rely heavily on their mother tongue for daily communication.

In Kenya, in Nyamira North sub-county, students have significant challenges in writing due to the predominance of Kisii as their mother tongue. As observed by Onsongo (2019), students often transfer grammatical structures from Kisii into their English writing, resulting in awkward phrasing and syntactical errors. For example, Kisii-speaking students tend to construct sentences with the same word order as in their mother tongue, leading to misplaced subjects and objects in English sentences. This influence of Kisii also extends to vocabulary, where students may substitute Kisii words for English terms when they are unfamiliar with the correct English word, further complicating their writing (Ondimu, 2020).

Statement of the Problem

The use of Ekegusii, the mother tongue in Nyamira North Sub-County, has a significant impact on students' English writing skills. Despite the importance of English for academic success and future career opportunities, students in rural areas often transfer linguistic structures from their mother tongue into their writing, leading to errors and poor performance in English exams (Kamano, 2013; Mbithi, 2017). This linguistic interference is a major challenge as English is essential for accessing global communication and modern learning technologies (Hornby, 2014). The decline in English performance, particularly in public day secondary schools, reflects this struggle (Nyamira Education Board, 2021).

Although the Kenyan government emphasizes improving English proficiency, the dominant use of Ekegusii continues to hinder students' mastery of English, leading to poor KCSE results in Nyamira County. The daily use of the mother tongue both at home and in school affects students' writing abilities, worrying stakeholders about the long-term impact on academic achievement and future opportunities (Obungu, 2016; Ridha, 2014). Further research is needed to explore the specific effects of mother tongue use on writing skills in this region.

Research Question

What is the predominant effect of mother tongue on students writing skills in public Day secondary schools in Nyamira North Sub-County?

Theoretical Framework

Krashen's Second Language Acquisition Theory (1981) forms the foundation of this study on the effect of mother tongue on students' writing skills in Nyamira North Sub-County. This theory emphasizes that language acquisition is largely influenced by cognitive and environmental factors (Zambrano, 2022). Krashen's model distinguishes between the natural acquisition of a language and the conscious learning of its rules, suggesting that language proficiency can develop through meaningful interactions rather than intensive focus on grammar. This concept aligns with the issue in Nyamira, where students' use of Ekegusii, their mother tongue, transfers into their English writing, affecting their grammatical accuracy and writing standards (Kamano, 2013). The transfer of linguistic patterns from Ekegusii to English, particularly in students' writing, exemplifies this interference, which is a key focus of the study.

The theory further identifies language transfer as a significant aspect of second language learning, which is crucial in understanding how students' mother tongue influences their writing in English (Amanda, 2020). Students often carry over vocabulary and grammatical structures from their first language into English, leading to errors that deviate from English norms. However, the theory also highlights that positive transfer of certain cognitive abilities can benefit students' second language acquisition. This framework is particularly relevant in Kenya, where students' bilingualism or

multilingualism could influence their language learning processes, including writing proficiency in English (Almaden, 2022). The study will explore these aspects within Nyamira North Sub-County, where students' everyday use of Ekegusii is believed to be a predominant factor in their struggle with English writing skills.

Review of Related Empirical Literature

The goal of Ghazwan's study from (2021), was to look at how the Arabic language affected the many facets of English in the writing of EFL students at the University of Bisha in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This study examined the detrimental effects of the mother language (Arabic) on several grammatical elements using 1200 sentences and 120 essays authored by 120 EFL students at the University of Bisha. SPSS version 22.0, a statistical software for social sciences, was used to handle and analyse this data. According to the study, Arabic has an impact on EFL learners' writing in general and their application of grammatical rules in particular, both positively and negatively. The study just looked at the negative effect in order to meet its primary goals. The results indicate that some students find writing an English essay to be a difficult undertaking due to the effect of their home tongue. Additionally, there are some unavoidable obstacles that students must overcome in order to enhance the learning environment and raise their general performance. Among the responders, articles, tenses, pronouns, prepositions, and negative and interrogative constructions are the traits most impacted by mother language. In order to help EFL learners and teachers develop writing skills and prevent negative mother tongue impacts on English writing in general and on the application of grammatical rules in particular, this study has provided a variety of pedagogical implications.

The study by Maiga (2020), looked at how students' academic performance at community secondary schools in the Bunda District was affected by the language of teaching. In order to collect data for the study, a mixed research design was used. Purposive and random sampling were used to select 105 teachers and students who were asked to answer semi-structured questions about language challenges they faced in secondary school, how their success or failure in school was influenced by the language of instruction, and potential solutions for raising students' proficiency in the language of instruction. The findings demonstrate that although while speaking, writing, and reading English was crucial for secondary school students to succeed academically, many of them

had difficulty speaking, writing, and reading during class debates and exams. Indeed, the language employed to educate learning was a significant obstacle to pupils' academic success. The study also discovered that both educators and learners have evolved a variety of coping strategies, including code-switching, to deal with linguistic barriers. Overall, this study suggests that teaching English as the major language of instruction from pre-primary through secondary school is necessary. To enhance English as the language of teaching in public schools, the government should also fund teacher language training and the use of multimedia in the classroom.

The effect of mother tongue on learning Kiswahili in public secondary schools in Kwanza Sub-County, Trans-Nzoia County, Kenya, was examined in the Simiyu and Wafula (2020) research. Weinreich's (1953) theory of first language acquisition and second language learning served as the study's foundation. This study examined the impact of interlanguage on Kiswahili language acquisition in public secondary schools in Kwanza Sub-County, Trans-Nzoia County, using a survey approach. Administration of questionnaires, scheduling of observations and interviews, and document analysis were all part of the data gathering process. Stratified sampling was employed in this study to choose the schools. Purposively, a sample of Kiswahili teachers and principals from the selected schools was taken. Several streaming schools were chosen using a straightforward random sampling approach. To make up the sample, the form three pupils were just chosen at random. The data analysis process made use of descriptive statistics. They contained frequencies and percentages. The study discovered that using interlanguage has a detrimental impact on learning Kiswahili. The survey also showed that instructors and students had a favourable attitude toward the Kiswahili language. Teachers ought to take advantage of this optimistic outlook in order to help pupils succeed in Kiswahili. The study also discovered that the skewed preference for English usage in school language policies had a detrimental impact on Kiswahili language proficiency. The survey also found that pupils had a certain amount of time to communicate in Kiswahili.

Research Design and Methodology

The study utilized a convergent parallel mixed-method design to examine the predominant effect of mother tongue on students' writing skills in public day secondary schools in Nyamira North Sub-County. This approach allowed for the simultaneous collection and analysis of both

quantitative and qualitative data, providing a comprehensive understanding of the research problem (Malau-Aduli & Alele, 2023).

The quantitative component employed a cross-sectional survey to assess how the use of the mother tongue, Ekegusii, affects students' English writing skills. This survey enabled the collection of specific performance data, revealing the direct impact of mother tongue interference on students' writing abilities. For the qualitative aspect, a phenomenological approach was used to explore students' and educators' lived experiences, offering deeper insights into how daily use of Ekegusii influenced English writing proficiency (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019). The convergent mixed-method design ensured a well-rounded examination of how mother tongue impacts English writing proficiency, incorporating both statistical evidence and personal experiences to enhance the study's findings.

Findings and Discussions

The first objective of the study examined predominant effect of mother tongue on students' mistakes in English writing tasks in public day secondary schools in Nyamira North Sub County. At first, the teachers were asked to indicate the frequency to which various mistakes were committed by students English writing tasks on a Likert scale of five; never (1), rarely (2), sometimes (3), often (4) and always (5). The results of analysis are given in Table 1.

Table 1
Interlingual Errors Committed by Students in English Writing Tasks

Grammatical Errors	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always	Mean	Std Dev
Wrong verb tense	4 (9.1%)	5 (11.4%)	24 (54.5%)	11 (25.0%)	3.9545	.8614
Prepositions: Omission, addition or wrong choice	5 (11.4%)	8 (18.2%)	25 (56.8%)	6 (13.6%)	3.7273	.8453
Translated word from Kisii	4 (9.1%)	21 (47.7%)	4 (9.1%)	15 (34.1%)	3.6818	1.0515
Pronouns: Omission, addition or wrong choice	4 (9.1%)	21 (47.7%)	15 (34.1%)	4 (9.1%)	3.4318	.7894
Capitalisation	13(29.5%)	10 (22.7%)	10 (22.7%)	11 (25.0%)	3.4318	1.1693
Adjective: Position	9 (20.5%)	15 (34.1%)	16 (36.4%)	4 (9.1%)	3.3409	.9136
Subject-verb agreement	4 (9.1%)	26 (59.1%)	10 (22.7%)	4 (9.1%)	3.3182	.7708
slips	8 (18.2%)	21 (47.7%)	15 (34.1%)		3.1591	.7134
Word order	5 (11.4%)	29 (65.9%)	10 (22.7%)		3.1136	.5793
Articles	15 (34.1%)	15 (34.1%)	14 (31.8%)		2.9773	.8209
Nouns	20 (45.5%)	10 (22.7%)	14 (31.8%)		2.8636	.8785
Composite					3.3636	0.8539

Source: *Field Data (2023)*

The study investigated how the Kisii mother tongue influences English writing errors among students in public day secondary schools in Nyamira North Sub County. Teachers assessed the frequency of various interlingual errors committed by students using a five-point Likert scale. The findings, summarized in Table 5, revealed that common errors included wrong verb tense (mean = 3.95), incorrect use of prepositions (mean = 3.72), and translating words from Kisii to English (mean = 3.68). Notably, the misuse of verb tenses, which included simple present, past, future, and past perfect, likely stemmed from the absence of equivalent verb tenses in the Kisii language. Other significant errors included issues with word order, articles, and nouns.

Teachers highlighted that these interlingual mistakes provide insights into students' language acquisition progress, suggesting that errors can serve as indicators of what students have learned and where they struggle. The results underscore persistent grammatical challenges for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, with poor grammatical understanding hindering their writing abilities. Understanding these language-related challenges enables writing instructors to tailor their teaching strategies to address specific obstacles, particularly those arising from students' native language interference, thus enhancing EFL learners' writing skills.

The second set of interlingual errors committed by students in English writing tasks is given in Table 2.

Table 2

Interlingual Grammatical, Lexical and Mechanic Writing Errors Committed by Students in English Writing Tasks

grammatical errors	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always	Mean	Std Dev
Spelling	4 (9.1%)	10 (22.7%)	19 (43.2%)	11 (25.0%)	3.8409	.9136
Wrong verb form	4 (9.1%)	21 (47.7%)	9 (20.5%)	10 (22.7%)	3.5682	.9499
Infinitive and Gerund	4 (9.1%)	26 (59.1%)	4 (9.1%)	4 (9.1%)	3.3182	.7708
Conjunctions	6 (13.6%)	23 (52.3%)	11 (25.0%)	4 (9.1%)	3.2955	.8235
Pronouns: Inappropriate use	4 (9.1%)	25 (56.8%)	15 (34.1%)		3.2500	.6147
Word choice	4 (9.1%)	25 (56.8%)	15 (34.1%)		3.2500	.6147
Sentence fragment	9 (20.5%)	20 (45.5%)	11 (25.0%)	4 (9.1%)	3.2273	.8856
Question mark	10 (22.7%)	14 (31.8%)	20 (45.5%)		3.2273	.8030
Collocation	9 (20.5%)	21 (47.7%)	10 (22.7%)	4 (9.1%)	3.2045	.8782
Confusion of sense relations	14 (31.8%)	15 (34.1%)	15 (34.1%)		3.0227	.8209
Adjective: Comparison	9 (20.5%)	31 (70.5%)	4 (9.1%)		2.8864	.5377
Composite					3.2810	0.7830

Source: Field Data (2023)

Table 2 outlines the interlingual errors committed by students in English writing tasks at public secondary schools in Nyamira North Sub County, focusing on grammatical, lexical, and mechanical writing errors. The analysis indicates that spelling errors are the most prevalent, with a mean score of 3.84, suggesting that students frequently struggle with spelling during writing assignments. Additionally, the incorrect use of verb forms is common, reflected by a mean score of 3.56, which highlights ongoing grammatical challenges faced by students.

Other notable errors include issues with conjunctions (mean = 3.30) and inappropriate pronoun usage (mean = 3.25). The least frequent errors involve collocations (mean = 3.20), confusion of sense relations (mean = 3.02), and comparative adjectives (mean = 2.89). Overall, the mean score for interlingual mistakes stands at 3.28, indicating a significant occurrence of these errors among students. The findings provide valuable insights into the specific writing challenges faced by students, suggesting the need for targeted interventions to improve their English writing proficiency and effectively address these recurring issues.

The students' questionnaire focused on free composition writing, where ten copies were distributed to each school. While a total of 35 compositions were marked, several questionnaires were not returned. Students were tasked with writing short essays of fewer than 500 words on topics such as “Hard work pays,” “My first day in secondary school,” and “Money does not buy happiness.” The analysis revealed various errors in English writing, many of which stemmed from the influence of the Ekegusii language. Common mistakes included misusing phrasal quantifiers and nouns (e.g., “two teas of cups” instead of “two cups of tea”), transitional words (e.g., “besides my younger brother hate it”), and noun phrase structures, which are less complex in Ekegusii.

Other noted errors involved misusing prepositional phrases and a limited vocabulary, as exemplified by awkward phrases like “mouth washing composed of two scrambled eggs.” Additionally, sentence structure lacked cohesion, leading to fragmented writing. Grammatical errors were prevalent, including issues with pronouns (e.g., incorrect gender usage) and subject-verb agreement. Vocabulary misuse and omissions, particularly of pronouns, were also significant. Students exhibited repetitive sentence structures that made their writing uninteresting. Overall, the

errors identified were predominantly influenced by the Ekegusii language, impacting tense usage, sentence cohesion, and overall clarity in their compositions.

To determine how mother tongue influenced their writing tasks, the response from students are provided in Figure 1.

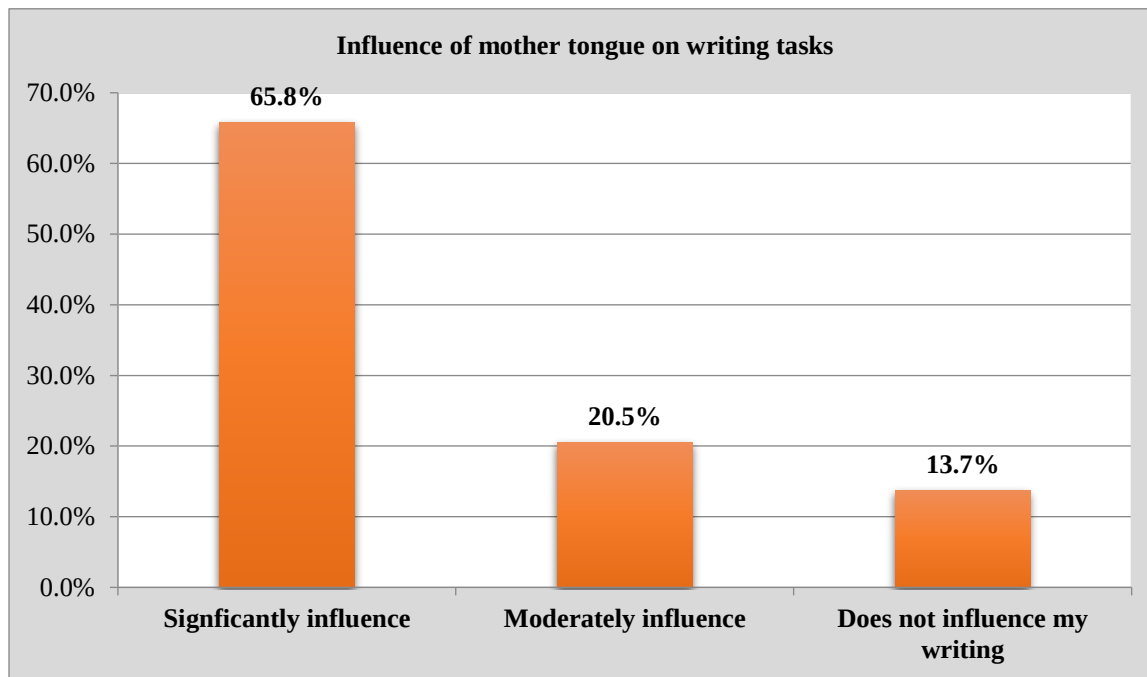


Figure 1: *Students Responses on Whether Mother Tongue Influence their English Writing Tasks*

The analysis of student responses regarding the influence of their mother tongue on English writing tasks revealed a significant correlation in Nyamira North Sub County. According to the data presented in Figure 4, approximately 65.8% of students agreed that their mother tongue, the Kisii language, notably impacted their writing proficiency in English. This suggests that many students feel that their mother tongue hinders their ability to write effectively in English. In contrast, around 20.5% acknowledged some influence from Kisii but did not view it as significantly detrimental. A smaller group, roughly 13.7%, believed that their mother tongue had little to no impact on their English writing abilities.

These findings indicate a clear relationship between the mother tongue and writing proficiency, emphasizing that students' skills in their native language can directly affect their English writing

capabilities. This influence manifests in various aspects such as syntax, vocabulary, sentence structure, and writing style. Understanding this dynamic can help educators tailor their teaching strategies to address the specific challenges posed by language acquisition, ultimately enhancing students' writing skills in English while also appreciating their linguistic backgrounds.

In similar vein, the teachers were asked on whether mother tongue influenced the way students wrote in English. Their responses are provided in Figure 2.

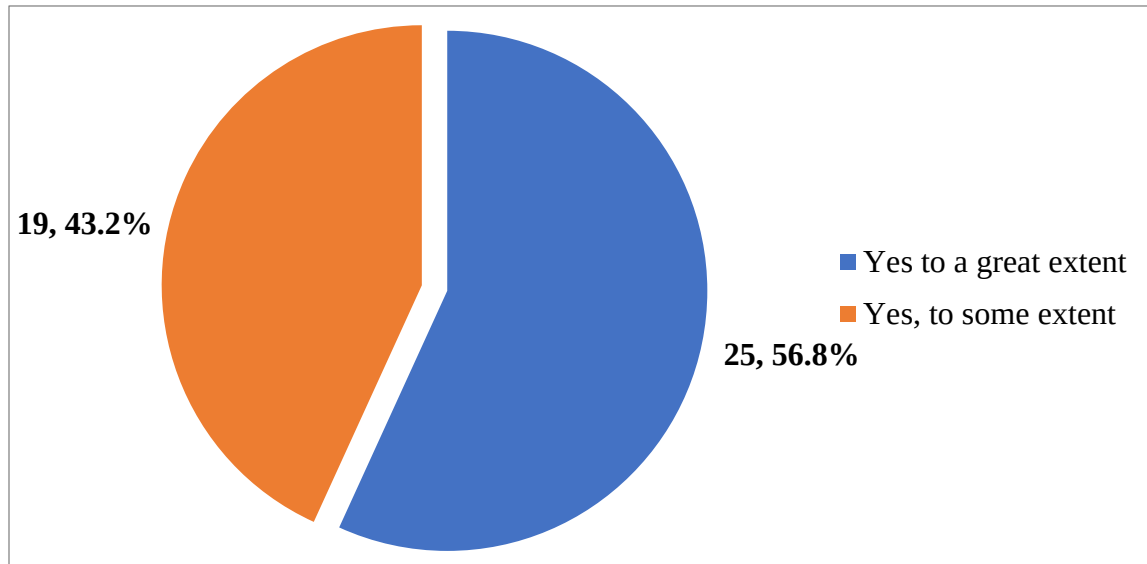


Figure 5: *Teachers Responses on Whether Mother Tongue Influences the way Students Write in English*

Teachers' responses regarding the influence of mother tongue on students' English writing abilities in Nyamira North Sub County reveal significant insights. According to Figure 5, about 56.8% of teachers believe that students' writing in English is greatly affected by their mother tongue, indicating a strong correlation between proficiency in Kisii and English writing skills. Conversely, around 43.2% acknowledged a lesser degree of influence, suggesting that while they recognize the impact of the local language, they do not view it as overwhelmingly significant. Overall, these findings suggest a consensus among educators on the substantial role of mother tongue in shaping students' English writing proficiency.

Interviews with principals further affirmed this perspective, highlighting that students often translate directly from Kisii to English without adapting to English grammatical structures, leading to common writing errors. This issue is exacerbated when teachers model incorrect pronunciation

influenced by their own mother tongue, making it challenging for students to develop accurate English language skills. The results align with Issason's (2023) observations about the persistent effects of mother tongue on English, particularly in mispronunciation. Such mispronunciations can stem from ignorance of proper forms, guesswork, or general linguistic challenges. The findings emphasize the need for educators to address language transfer issues and consider bilingual teaching strategies that leverage students' linguistic backgrounds to improve their English writing skills.

Summary of Findings

The study revealed that a significant majority of students (65.8%) acknowledged that their mother tongue, Kisii, greatly influences their ability to write in English. Teachers corroborated this finding, with 56.8% agreeing that students' writing skills in English are substantially affected by their mother tongue. Common writing errors included misuse of grammar, vocabulary, and syntax due to direct translation from Kisii to English, indicating a clear connection between mother tongue proficiency and English writing skills.

Conclusion

The research concludes that the mother tongue significantly impacts students' writing skills in English within public day secondary schools in Nyamira North Sub County. The direct translation from Kisii to English and the influence of teachers' pronunciations contribute to persistent writing difficulties. This underlines the importance of addressing language transfer issues in the classroom to enhance English writing proficiency among students.

Recommendations

To mitigate the negative effects of mother tongue on writing skills, the study recommends that educators incorporate strategies that acknowledge and leverage students' linguistic backgrounds. This could include targeted instruction on grammar and syntax differences between Kisii and English, professional development for teachers on proper pronunciation, and the integration of bilingual teaching methods. These approaches aim to create a more supportive environment for improving English writing skills while respecting students' mother tongues.

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