

## **Primary School Teachers' Practices in Developing Pupils with Writing Competency**

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### **Abstract**

The task of developing pupils in their early stages of schooling with good writing skills in early years tends to be accorded low priority by educators and researchers despite the fact writing is an essential skill useful both in school and in future socio-economic activities. Therefore this study is important to be undertaken to reveal specific strategies employed and challenges faced by teachers in developing pupils in standard One and Two with writing competency in public schools in the sampled areas. The data were collected from classroom teachers through semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires. The data analysis was done through grounded content analysis involving coding to establish outspoken issues of the study and it was revealed that pupils' acquisition of writing competency was highly dependent on the teacher's commitment and readiness. The study further revealed that the pupil's commitments to practicing writing, ability to handle and use pen/pencil, and proper holding of the writing materials were also essential in developing into good writers. Though handwriting skills were found by teachers in Meatu and Itilima Districts to be essential in everyday activities, the development of these skills were impaired by overcrowded classrooms, a lack of sufficient and developmentally appropriate chairs and desks, the inability of parents or caregivers to provide pupils with essential writing materials, and the teachers' low motivation to improvise ICT equipment. The study therefore concludes that the promotion of appropriate and supportive learning environments, overall teacher competency, and parental readiness to encourage pupils to attend schools will all be crucial in order to develop good writers.

**Keywords:** Writing, technology, literacy, competency, ICT.

## **Introduction**

Learning to read and write is critical to a child's success in schooling and in general life activities (Graham, Bollinger, Olson, D'Aoust, MacArthur, McCutchen, & Olinghouse, 2012). It is because of the significant contribution to the child's learning and life activities that reading and writing are embedded in school curriculums worldwide (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005). The inclusion of reading and writing skills concurrently in school curricula is purposeful, as these skills develop at the same time (Chediak, 2013). Writing, which is critical to general literacy skills as it specifically promotes reading attainment and successful learning in school, are, defined differently (Gerde, Bingham & Wasik, 2012; Fang & Wang, 2011). In early learning stages, Burke (2010) views writing as putting marks on paper (s) or any appealing surface. Graham (2010) adds that writing competency includes, apart from legible writings, the quantity and quality of such. It is further comprised of an act of self-clarification (Dockrell et al., 2015).

Writing competency is important to school pupils as school children spend up to 50% of their school day engaged in writing tasks (Mackenzie, Scull, & Munsie, 2013). Writing competency is conceived by Graham et al. (2012) as a fundamental part of engaging pupils in professional, social, community, and civic activities as nearly 70 percent of salaried employment require writing which is a critical component of being able to communicate effectively to a variety of audiences (Graham et al., 2012). This suggests that good writing competency in school is necessary not only for academic performance but also it transforms the child's mind.

Competency in writing is necessary to be developed early in school as the larger part of school activities are based on writing (McHale & Cermak, 1992). Writing is both explorative and practice-based play that develops child's fine motor (Burke, 2010), attracted some attention of education providers and the recipients as the world is text oriented (Cole & Feng, 2015), and it enables a child blending thoughts and knowledge together creating a unique meaning (Jones, Reutzler, & Fargo, 2010). Importantly, writing is identified by pupils as more difficult than listening and reading (Berman & Cheng, 2010) affecting most pupils' proficiency in acquiring a new language (Nesamalar, Saratha & Teh, 2001). At the centre of developing positive learning outcomes to early grade pupils is the ability of the teacher to facilitate pupils' writing development (EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2013). Also important for learning to become a competent writer is early handwriting instruction (Graham, 2010).

## Literature review

Learning to achieve writing competency in early grades (pre-primary and standard one and two classes) is an important component of literacy education foundational for a pupil to be able to document information from primary education across to higher educational levels (Datchuk, 2016). In a guide to effective instruction in writing from pre-primary education to standard three, the Ontario Ministry of Education (2005) identifies five key instructional approaches to writing as: modelled writing, shared writing, interactive writing, guided writing, and independent writing. Writing competency is learned through a variety of strategies. In developed countries, technology (word-processing and internet use) has worked well in improving writing competency among pupils (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005). Other means used to help pupils achieve writing competency is the provision of areas equipped with materials and with spaces for children to experiment with writing by scribbling (Burke, 2010). The Ontario Ministry of Education (2005) notes that writing areas should contain engaging materials such as magnetic letters and boards, chalkboards, alphabetic and picture books, a variety of type of papers (like scratch pads, envelopes, and construction paper), and a variety of writing materials in order to be most successful in encouraging pupils to write.

Practically, Burke (2010) identifies six stages involved in developing pupils' writing competency: scribbling, forming resembling letters, writing recognizable letters, grouping letters into sounds, and printing recognizable words and sentences with appropriate punctuation. In other countries, interventional programmes have helped to develop pupils with writing competency. For instance, Corbett and Stannard (2013) report on the use of the *Talk for Writing* (T4W) in teaching writing in primary schools. The T4W is a curriculum programme for raising standards of writing by motivating teachers and pupils to deepen their understanding of writing and to refine their skills (Beard, n.d). The T4W uses imitation of spoken words, attempting guided activities (innovation), and independent writing (invention) which make pupils understand structure and elements of written language (Dockrell et al., 2015). Another strategy is Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSDR) which has been used in the United States of America (USA) (Graham & Harris, 2005). All the approaches mentioned have found success in developing pupils with writing competency.

Writing skill is recognizing by Tanzania Education and Training Policies of both 1995 and that of 2014 in a way that some specific objectives were set as a target to be promoted. Though writing competency is important for academic achievement and employment functioning, there evidence indicating that standard One and Two pupils in Tanzania struggle with writing competency (Anney, Mmasa & Ndunguru, 2016; Brombacher, Nordstrum, Davidson, Batchelder, Cummiskey, & King, 2014). Specifically, Kalanje (2011) reports that 27% of the standard One engaged in a study could write with difficulty. Ngorosho and Lahtinen (2010) inform that 30% of standard Two children tested in writing did not write well. A research was important in determining teachers' engagement in developing standard One and Two pupils in Tanzania with writing competency. Therefore, this study specifically focused on;

- i. Exploring strategies teachers employ to develop standard One and Two pupils with writing competency, and
- ii. Challenges facing teachers in developing standard one and two pupils with competency in writing.

## **Methods and Instruments**

Qualitative phenomenological study design was employed for understanding and describing the classroom teachers' practices and strategies employed for developing standard one and two pupils with writing competency. Qualitative phenomenology was employed for bringing up the experiences and perceptions of individual teachers from their own perspectives in situations where learning takes place to uncover processes involved and relations existing between them and pupils (Starman, 2013). Practically, the researcher and research assistants visited the particular schools (natural settings) to collect the first-hand data. Teachers' availability in school was made through mobile phones as during the data collection, there was a national exercise meant for verifying workers in all public institutions including primary schools. To collect first-hand and in-depth data, semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires were employed.

## **Description of study participants**

The study participants were 12 purposively sampled teachers with academic certificates for teaching primary school. All teachers engaged in the study obtained their certificate in teacher education after attending the pre-service training enabled them to qualify as teachers with Grade IIIA. Meanwhile, 12 (66.7%) of the primary school teachers who were studied were female, with only six (33.3%) having five or more years work experience teaching in early grade classes.

### **Study Area**

The study was conducted in two districts (Itilima and Meatu), both located in Simiyu region. The two districts were selected for the study as they constitute the 17 most disadvantaged rural areas in Tanzania (Mosha et al., 2015). Authors describe the two districts as having poor educational outcomes as demonstrated by low pass rates in the primary school leaving examination results. The two districts had pupils struggling in word decoding with majority of them had limited literacy foundational skills (reading, writing and arithmetic) as was expected by the curriculum as only 6% had appropriate standard two level skills (Mosha et al., 2015).

One ward out of 22 out of 87 in Itilima District and one ward out of 29 in Meatu districts were involved in the study. In two of studied wards, a total of eight schools (four from each ward) constituted the sample enabling the researcher to access and study a total of 18 standard One and Two teachers. This research focused on teachers of standard One and Two only, since past studies have demonstrated that most children develop handwriting during standard One and that the quality of their writing reaches a plateau around standard Two, then becoming automatic from standard Three (Feder & Majnemer, 2007).

### **Data analysis**

The qualitative data gathered through face-face or one-on-one interviews conducted between the researcher and study informants in average of 40 minutes per session followed by deploying open-ended questionnaires to every teacher teaching standard One and Two for triangulating their responses. Data collected through questionnaires and interviews were transcribed from Kiswahili language that was used to interact with study informants into the English language before were analysed through inductive content analysis method. Data coding was done to enable the researcher establish the magnitude of teachers' responses as presented in Tables 1.0 and 1.1 of the study results.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness as a standard for evaluating the quality of qualitative studies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was observed by the researcher by implementing some procedures. One of the practical steps was training research assistants before they embarked on the fieldwork for data collection for collecting data accurately to address the study objectives appropriately. In addition, purposive selection of study participants was done for engaging study informants with rich experience in teaching

and learning on writing in standard One and Two. Moreover, the interview sessions were run in areas with minimal interferences in a way that respondents felt free and comfortable to respond.

## Results

The data analysis was conducted for the data collected through interview and questionnaire and the results as well as discussion of the findings are presented in two sub-sections as the study objectives: strategies to develop pupils with competency in writing; and challenges faced by teachers in developing pupils with competency in writing.

### Strategies for writing competency

The analysis of data on strategies employed by teachers in developing pupils with writing competency revealed several strategies as summarized in table 1.0.

**Table 1**  
*Teachers' Strategies for Writing Competency*

Strategies	Responses (N)	Percent of cases
Demonstration by the teacher	17	94.4%
Use of writing materials	8	44.4%
Practicing letter writing	11	61.2%
Use of project works	8	44.4%

As table 1.0 illustrates, the methods most commonly used include: demonstration (17 out of 18 respondents); pupils' practice of letter or number writing (11 out of 18 respondents), and the use of writing materials (8 out of 18 respondents). Use of project works was also employed by teachers (8 out of 18 respondents) to develop pupils with writing competency. It was learnt through the current study that technology was not employed by any respondents as a strategy for developing pupils with writing competency.

As noted in table 1.0, demonstration by teachers on chalk boards, sand, flipcharts, or other appealing surfaces as the most commonly used strategy for developing pupils with writing competency. The method was used for the pupils to observe and imitate the process of writing on various surfaces. Teachers also described showing their pupils cards with letters or numbers and requiring them demonstrate writing in the air with their fingers. Once pupils succeeded in writing letters or numerals in the air then, the teachers would instruct the pupils in the proper way of sitting and holding a pencil or pen for writing.

Practicing letter writing through scribbling and imitation is necessary to make pupils confident in their writing in the early stage of schooling and is essential practice for general writing skills and speed later on. Involving young pupils in scribbling various letters and numbers promotes their readiness for school and for becoming good readers as well.

Another strategy used by teachers was the provision of writing materials such as books, charts, letter cards, chalk, pencils, and slate. Teachers stated that specially designed exercise books for learning handwriting are helpful for pupils to develop writing competency, as they have with larger spaces than traditional exercise books. Also mentioned by teachers as crucial for early writing practice was the availability of developmentally appropriate desks for pupils to sit comfortably as they learn and practice writing. Finally, teachers mentioned the importance of having ample teaching and learning aids such as chalk of various colors and charts with letters and or numbers on them, all used for attracting young pupils' attentions.

Project work was identified as an essential strategy used by teachers to develop pupils with writing competency. Teachers in interviews explained that pupils can be given some tasks or assignments to form letters or numbers in various forms involving joining of letter-parts to form a whole letter or number. The teacher explained that the exercise of molding letters or numbers using mud or sculpture clay can help with learning the different 'stages' of writing letters. Furthermore, this activity can also be very useful for fine motor development which is necessary for holding writing materials during conventional writing practice.

Analytically, teachers in the studied schools provided minimal opportunity for pupils to develop their writing competency using enjoying opportunities like journal writing. This is to argue that writing competency that pupils are expected to develop at standard One and Two is mostly based on teacher directed activities. As a result, teacher-directed writing activities as indicated in Table 1.0 would limit pupils' creativity in writing and other learning related activities, hence poor learning achievements as well as lose schooling interests. Further, strategies used by teachers in developing pupils with writing competency signals lack of creativity in influencing positive child's development in writing competency. As a result, expected learning outcomes of the children and their future learning achievement would continue being impaired in the way that they would inefficiently and ineffectively communicate their ideas with teachers/educators on paper-pencils works.

Furthermore, it raises concerns that teachers' development (pre and in-service) holds greater chance to make teachers effective and innovative in developing child's potential into good writers. Teachers' professional development [PD] is important as the teaching and learning situations change (large group sizes against small class-sizes) and because teacher preparation (pre-service) is done in both public and private institutions. Without the PD teachers would implement the curriculum differently, hence with PD teachers develop common understanding of the core issues related to teacher education.

### Challenges in developing writing competency to pupils

The study also engaged teachers through and face-to-face interview to identify and describe challenges they face in developing pupils into good writers. The motive behind this exploration is that several studies within Tanzania and internationally have found that teachers tend to focus more on reading than on writing development, and therefore an analysis of the reasons for this seems crucial. The data analysis revealed several challenges but the most significant are presented in Table 1.1.

**Table 2**  
*Challenges Faced in Developing Writing Competency*

Challenges	Responses	Percent of Cases
High number of pupils in the class	18	100.0%
Insufficient supply of learning materials	16	88.8%
Effect of mother-tongue language	5	31.3%
Poverty	13	81.3%
Longer distance to school	4	25.0%

Table 1.1 illustrates that teachers are faced with various challenges in teaching writing, such as a high number of pupils in classrooms (100.0%), insufficient supply of learning materials (88.8%), poverty (81.3%), the effect of vernacular language (31.3%), and longer walking distance to school.

The high number of pupils compared to the available number of classrooms and teachers working to support pupils in standard One and Two affected teachers' initiatives in offering high quality instruction on writing practices. Most of the studied schools were found to have more than 70 pupils per classroom while the rooms they used for teaching and learning were meant to accommodate only 45 pupils each. It is commonly understood that the learning environment in general is impacted greatly by factors such as access to fresh air, and the amount of space available to accommodate pupils. With so many students in one small space, teaching



becomes significantly more difficult as teachers/educators would not be able to reach each pupil during learning and scaffold where need arise. Furthermore, successful teaching is nearly impossible with such a large number of students of different abilities in one classroom. This was described by one teacher during the one-on-one interview:

Pupils differ in their learning ability. As the teacher concentrates to assist the lower achiever, other pupils feel unoccupied and make noise. This is caused by longer time teachers take to pass through all pupils as they scaffold their learning in writing (Interview; Male teacher, 13th April, 2016)

In the view of the respondent, the teacher's role in the pupils' acquisition and mastery of writing practice is essential. Their role is made difficult, however, by the large number of students per classroom in the study areas and areas of similar learning environment. Another challenge faced by respondents is an acute shortage of teaching and learning materials. During the time of conducting this study, teachers identified there was shortage of desks, chairs, writing materials like flip charts, exercise books and pencils specifically designed for learning to write, as well as colored chalks and slates for pupils to practice with. While teachers do have some of these materials, most felt that the number provided does not adequately match with the number of enrolled pupils. Because of the lack of adequate chairs and desks, some pupils used to sit on the floor while few of the others used the few desks/chairs to sit on during instruction. In turn, teachers observe that such learning condition is incompatible with learning to write, as desks allow the pupil to sit and use the designed space for writing on his/her exercise books. Contrary to the expectations, the desks available in most of the visited schools were not developmentally appropriate and even the few available desks/chairs were found in poor conditions to favour pupils' learning; hence impact the teaching and learning process. It was further noted by the researcher from one teacher who elaborated that:

Imagine some pupils lie on the floor during the learning sessions. How could you develop all these pupils into good writers while learning situation is of this nature? Definitely even if there are ICT equipments, there will be differentials among pupils on learning outcomes (Interview; Female teacher, 12<sup>th</sup> April, 2016).

The lack of developmentally appropriate chairs and desks in sufficient quantity in many schools is partially caused by the government's poor mobilization of resource, however community members' low income level also is a major contributor. Teachers stated that parents do not tend to contribute to the construction of classrooms or desks, as they claim that it is the government's responsibility. Low incomes also affect education in other ways, as for example some parents engage their children in income generating activities and farming activities rather than sending their children to school every day, which leads to truancy and eventual school drop-out.

Some parents and caregivers are also found to have paid little attention to developing their children with the language used for instruction in primary schools, which is Kiswahili. As a result, many children start primary school with poor communication skills in the required language. This impacts the pupil in writing words correctly. One teacher provided several examples in which the use of local languages has impacted students' early writing skills in Kiswahili, such as when students write rafiki (friend) as *lafiki*, Mungu (God) as *nungu*, and nchi (country) as *inchi*.

A significant lesson learnt by the researcher on the challenges facing teachers in teaching standard one and two pupils to develop writing competency is that, some of the challenges are within the school management and teacher's capacity in addressing them. For instance; a collaboration between the school and parents/community in line with informed village/street leaders could help in mobilizing and raising resources for building classes furnished with materials like desks/chairs and writing materials to accommodate the increasing number of enrolled pupils for improved teacher-pupils interaction during instructions due to the reduced group learning sizes in classrooms. Therefore, partnership between the school/teacher and parents/community could positively reduce some challenges impacting positive teaching and learning. The partnership mainly through parents' meeting would provide teachers with opportunities to educate parents on their roles inter-alia, interacting with their children through Kiswahili as a language used in school for instruction. Educating parents on their duties on positive child development and learning would reduce the impact of mother-tongue in teacher-pupil interaction. Therefore, teachers' creativity in addressing the said challenges is crucial and it should be promoted in schools.

## **Discussion**

### **Strategies**

The use of appropriate strategies for teaching and learning to write is crucial. In this study, it was found that demonstration and project works were among the strategies used most commonly by teachers. The use of these strategies is supported by experts, including the Ontario Ministry of Education (2005), T4W, and the SRSD, all of which suggest approaches which involve guided instruction directed by the teacher. The provision of instructions to pupils is of great importance as without it, pupils would have no clear direction to take in their learning. Furthermore, invention/independent writing (as advocated in T4W and the SRSD) was also emphasized by the teachers in Meatu and Itilima districts. Independent writing makes pupils improve their skills in holding pen or pencil when writing in their exercise books, while simultaneously developing higher-order skills like spelling and story composition. The PLP-R/W Committee (2010) shares that the independent writing makes pupils work individually while applying and practicing the taught language structures in their writing. The approach encourages pupils to write on their own with the teacher interacting to further support their writing development.

Scribbling and imitation as discussed by teachers in this study is also supported by experts such as Feder and Majnemer (2007) and the Ontario Ministry of Education (2005), who suggest that these activities help to develop pupils in the full range of skills needed for proper writing. Furthermore, scribbling and imitation are essential learning strategies as they make pupils enjoy the act of writing. Demonstration as identified by teachers in the studied schools to be principle strategy, the PLP-R/W Committee (2010) regards it as a crucial strategy in that teachers demonstrate or act as exemplars providing children models for doing and using writing explicitly in the classroom. While there experiences through the T4W project that talking or stories help children make meaning of the written language, talking in the current study was minimally considered by teachers as a strategy to develop pupils with several issues including stages involved in writing.

Contrary to the study findings on the strategies used to develop pupils with writing competency, the PLP-R/W Committee (2010) informs that teachers use different teaching strategies to help pupils develop and practise their writing skills such as shared writing that involves the whole class and the teacher composing the text collaboratively.

### **Challenges faced by teachers**

With regard to the challenges faced by teachers, the study findings are consistent with Feder and Majnemer (2007) and Burke (2010) who describe the importance of a quality writing area when learning to write properly. It seems clear from the study findings that the height of the chairs/desks, sitting positions, and the type of writing materials used by the pupil impact teachers' ability to develop good writers. Therefore, developmentally appropriate materials and appealing learning environments will be necessary during the implementation of any improved curriculum which aims to raise standards or learning quality. As it is claimed by teachers in this study that overcrowded classes has impacted their efforts to access and scaffold individual pupil, One head teacher noted that one of the crucial barriers to progress in developing writing to pupils is because of the curriculum being too prescriptive (too many text types and not enough time spent on each text genre) and little time allocated in the time table for pupils to spend in extended writing (Ings, 2009). Ings concludes that widely, head teachers claimed that most writing opportunities remained 'prescriptive' and linked to planned work, with few opportunities to explore style and approach more freely.

Just as teachers highly ranked poverty as a crucial challenge impacting teaching pupils to develop into writing competency, researchers (Gunnar, Frenn, Wewerka, & Van Ryzin, 2009; Miller, Seifer, Stroud, Sheinkopf, & Dickstein, 2006) inform that children raised in poverty are much less likely to have crucial needs met than their more affluent peers are and, as a result, are subject to some grave consequences. Because of inability to meet children's needs, such deficits inhibit the production of new brain cells, alter the path of maturation, and rework the healthy neural circuitry in children's brains, thereby undermining emotional and social development and predisposing them to emotional dysfunction. The situation results into several developmental and learning challenges mainly emotional and social; acute and chronic stressors; cognitive lags; and health and safety issues (Jensen, 2009). Looking at understanding of teachers in Itilima and Meatu districts on poverty and its impact in learning and development, they were limited into parents' inability to afford building and furnishing classrooms with limited understanding on the impacts poverty on child's brain.

### **Study Limitations and Further Research**

This study was faced with a major limitation that teachers in the visited schools indicated reluctance in participating in this study in the view that it would waste their time allocated to cover the prescribed learning contents. It was also difficult to find all teachers teaching standard One and Two as they were participating in an activity for the verification of government workers. The verification exercise was conducted by the district executives and was required by the President's Office. This activity made the data collection process more difficult as it forced the researcher to visit schools several times to meet with the teachers.

Another limitation is that the study findings could not be easily generalized to other areas in Tanzania. The study selected districts with poor educational outcomes limiting generalization as it is not known to the other districts with good educational outcomes whether results would match with the current study findings. Therefore, another study for comparison purpose could be conducted using districts with poor educational outcomes as well as districts with good examination outcomes, in order to determine if there are variations in teaching and learning practices, strategies, and technology for developing pupils as good writers in these two types of districts.

### **Conclusions**

Based on the findings of this study, it could be concluded that developing pupils with competency in writing requires the use of various strategies and materials. It implies that classrooms should be equipped with writing materials and spaces for positive interaction between pupils with writing spaces. Secondly, the integration of ICT in education, particularly in early grade classes, is limited by local economic factors as well as readiness factors. It should be noted that integration of technology has been emphasized in various policy documents in Tanzania for improving the quality of education; however, implementation at the national level has been slow. Furthermore, while it would be helpful to integrate ICT into the curriculum in order to develop early grade pupils with writing competency, any changes should also take note of the interest and level of intellectual development of the children so that the changes do not go beyond their developmental capacity. The final conclusion this study makes is that serious commitments and investment by the government will be required to improve educational infrastructure in Tanzania, especially the construction of enough classes to reduce class sizes sufficiently. It will be crucial to have enough classrooms to accommodate the increasing number of pupils enrolled in standard One and Two in upcoming years, so that there is increased space for

practicing writing freely and so that there can be increased teacher-pupil interaction throughout the school day. In line with construction of enough classes to accommodate enrolled pupils and in ensuring that the expected demands of classrooms are met, teachers professional development in aspects of teaching and learning particularly on innovating materials and the learning sessions is important.

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