# An Analysis of the Vocabulary Errors in the Written English of Kenya Secondary School Learners

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*Abstract*
*The significance of vocabulary knowledge to L₂ reading comprehension has long been established, that, having sufficient knowledge of L₂ words meanings and the ability to access that knowledge efficiently is recognized as essential factors in understanding written texts. However, the way Kenyan secondary school learners write, shows that they have inadequate vocabulary knowledge. This study, therefore, seeks to identify, categorize and find the meaning of the vocabulary erroneous answers obtained from reading comprehension assessment scripts of 73 form three learners from two Peri-urban girls' schools in Kajiado County, Kenya. The study employed a qualitative content analysis method. Reading comprehension erroneous answers that emerged from the present study were from word recognition lower-level sub-components processes. The study found that there were inadequate phonological vocabulary knowledge errors, collocational vocabulary knowledge errors, and semantic vocabulary knowledge errors. Based on the findings, the study recommends that teachers use different word contexts that show; various connotation meanings of words, demonstrate how words transform in different ways, and show relationships between words*

*Keywords:  phonological, collocation, semantic, vocabulary errors*

## Introduction

Teachers and researchers have long recognized the importance of vocabulary knowledge or lexical repertoire in learners' proficiency in English; however, not much has been done to find the meaning of the vocabulary erroneous answers obtained from the learners' written texts.

The knowledge of a word involves the combination of several different types of knowledge; what the word means, its relationship with other words, its connotations in different contexts, and its power of transformation in various forms (Stahl 1999).

Vocabulary knowledge is of primary importance to language teaching and learning because it plays an important role in molding the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Widaningsih, 2009). In the same vein, McCarthy (1990) emphasizes that one of the most important skills that teachers of English as a second language can impart to their learners is wide contextual word exposure.

Thornbury (2002, p.13) puts it briefly: if you spend most of your time learning grammar your English will not improve much. There is a lot of improvement if there is more learning of words and expressions. You can say very little with grammar, but you can say almost anything in words.

Most teachers normally ignore the vocabulary errors written by learners and focus on fluency and comprehension. Vocabulary knowledge learning is an unending task for any language learner and needs to be taken seriously (Changhong, 2010). For example, Stahl and Nagy (2006 p.173) state that a person's vocabulary knowledge 'opens or closes access to sources of information that will affect our future'. Mukoroli (2011) adds that vocabulary knowledge is an important and indispensable part of any language learning process.

### Background of the Study

Vocabulary knowledge is the ability to define words, word knowledge, and the skill to recognize situations appropriate for using words (Cervetti et al., 2012). Vocabulary knowledge incorporates a wide range of other linguistic features such as orthography (spelling), phonology (pronunciation), morphology, meaning, syntactic, collocation, register, frequency of the word and pragmatics (Moinzadeh & Moslehpour, 2012). Taking these features into consideration, Nation (2001) proposed that vocabulary knowledge comprises three dimensions: form (oral and written), meaning, and use.

In addition, Taylor (2004) proposed eight dimensions of vocabulary knowledge: (a) the written form of a word (b) the spoken form of a word (c) the association the word has with other words (d) the stylistic register constraints of the

word (e) the frequency of the word (f) the collocational nature of the word (g) the conceptual meaning of the word and (h) the grammatical nature of the word.

This study seeks to identify, categorize and find the meaning of the vocabulary erroneous answers obtained from reading comprehension assessment scripts.

Corder (1967) points out that errors are an important part of language and language learning. Errors tell how far towards the target language (TL) the learner has progressed and consequently what remains of him/her to learn. Errors provide a researcher with evidence of how language is learned and evidence of strategies or procedures the learners employ in discovering the language. Most importantly, according to Corder, errors provide a way for the learner to test his/her hypotheses about the nature of the language he/she is learning.

Language errors are a divergence from accepted rules of language made by a second language learner; it is a lack of knowledge of the correct rules of the target language (Al-oudat, 2017).
 Reading comprehension errors can be phonological, orthographical, morphological, syntactic, and lexical forms that deviate from the rules of the target language, contravening expectations of the literate adult native speaker generally realized in writing (Kaweera, 2013).

 The process of error analysis involves the identification of errors, their description, explanation, and evaluation. This helps determine which features in the TL are problematic. This information can then aid in planning teaching, selecting and preparing materials, and designing syllabuses. Therefore, errors should be viewed positively.

 Vocabulary erroneous answers that emerged from the present study were from word recognition lower-level sub-components processes.

Word recognition belongs to the lower level of $L_2$ reading comprehension processes. It is a complicated skill, involving many sub-component processes, including visual analysis of the printed symbols, identification of letters, knowledge about grapheme-phoneme correspondence, the generation and application of phonological codes from the written word, and the connection of a word with its semantic representation (Kida, 2016). Skilled reading comprises all these processes, which through practice become fluent and cognizance.

Our mental lexicon contains at least three sets of knowledge about words; knowledge about visual forms (their orthography), their pronunciation (phonology), and their meaning (semantics) (Coltheart, 2006).

Rapid and automatic word recognition occurs when visual input from the word on the page activates lexical entries in the reader's lexicon that have well-represented information of all types: orthographic, phonological, semantic, and syntactic. In the situation of word recognition difficulty, the influence of contextual information plays a crucial role in word recognition (Carlisle, 2010).

Word recognition is viewed as a continuous process of evaluating, integrating, and matching the visual features of the word with the relevant model description in memory.

In order for fluent word recognition to occur, a reader must recognize the written word forms rapidly, activate links between the graphic form and phonological information, actuate appropriate semantic and syntactic resources, recognize morphological affixation in more complex word forms, and access her /his mental lexicon. In other words, recognition of words involves the interaction of activated orthographic, phonological, semantic, and syntactic processes (Andrews et al., 2020).

**Methodology**

The qualitative content analysis method generated the data for the present study. (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004.p.49) defined content analysis as a research method that provides a systematic and objective means to make valid inferences from verbal, visual, or written data in order to describe and quantify specific phenomena. This method involves condensing raw data into themes based on valid inference and interpretations. It is a process that uses inductive reasoning, by which themes emerge from the data through the researcher's careful examination and constant comparison (Mayring, Flick, 2014).

The texts of analysis for the present study were 20 vocabulary erroneous answers obtained from the

reading comprehension assessment scripts of 73 form three learners from two Peri-urban girls' schools in Kajiado County, Kenya. The meanings were then drawn into type, categories, sub-theme, and themes as shown in figure 1 below.

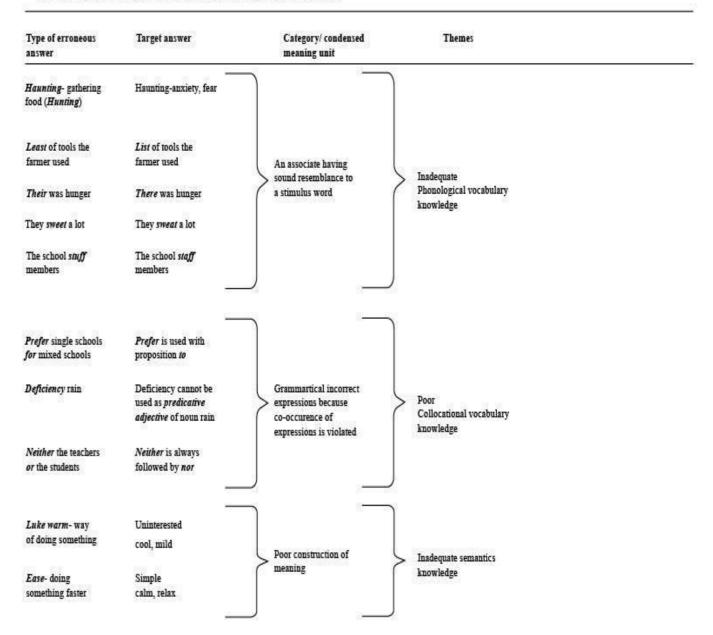## Vocabulary Knowledge Erroneous Answers, Categories and Themes

| Type of erroneous answer | Target answer | Category/ condensed meaning unit | Themes |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Haunting*- gathering food (*Hunting*) | Haunting-anxiety, fear | An associate having sound resemblance to a stimulus word | Inadequate Phonological vocabulary knowledge |
| *Least* of tools the farmer used | *List* of tools the farmer used | | |
| *Their* was hunger | *There* was hunger | | |
| They *sweet* a lot | They *sweat* a lot | | |
| The school *stuff* members | The school *staff* members | | |
| *Prefer* single schools *for* mixed schools | *Prefer* is used with proposition *to* | Grammartical incorrect expressions because co-occurence of expressions is violated | Poor Collocational vocabulary knowledge |
| *Deficiency* rain | Deficiency cannot be used as *predicative adjective* of noun rain | | |
| *Neither* the teachers *or* the students | *Neither* is always followed by *nor* | | |
| *Luke warm*- way of doing something | Uninterested cool, mild | Poor construction of meaning | Inadequate semantics knowledge |
| *Ease*- doing something faster | Simple calm, relax | | |

*Figure 1: Content Analysis vocabulary knowledge erroneous answers and themes*

The themes that emerged from the data were; phonological vocabulary knowledge errors, collocational vocabulary knowledge errors, and semantic vocabulary knowledge errors.

## Discussion of the Findings

From phonological vocabulary knowledge the following errors can be seen : *haut vs hunt, stuff vs staff, list vs least, there vs their.*

These errors mean that this study's learners experience a number of phonological processing interrelated inabilities including the inability to recognize and use the sound constituents of oral language, the inability to convert the visual print into its corresponding spoken form, inability to locate and retrieve word meaning in the mental lexicon  and the use of sound codes for temporary memory storage.

According to (Teng, 2016) phonological processing calls for a number of interrelated abilities, including a) ability to recognize and use the sound constituents of oral language b) phonological decoding (the ability to convert the visual print into its corresponding spoken form) c) phonological recoding (locating and retrieving word meaning in the mental lexicon through the use of phonological information) and d) phonological memory (the use of sound codes for temporary memory storage).

The learners of this study lacked the ability to locate and retrieve word meaning in their mental lexicon through the use of word phonological information**.** Learners who manifest deficits in phonological awareness have been found to experience persistent difficulties in word decoding (Blachman,1991). The awareness that words can be divided into single phonemes is necessary to comprehend the alphabetic principle underlying the written language system (Bryne,1998).

Erroneous answers from the poor collocation of vocabulary knowledge can be seen in: ***prefer*** single schools ***for*** mixed schools. Here, the verb *prefer* does not *collocate* with the preposition *for*. The other is, ***neither*** the teachers ***or*** students, where error occurs because the conjunction ***neither*** is not paired with conjunction ***or***. Finally, there is *deficiency* rain. Rain cannot be described as being deficient. The collocational nature of the word is a dimension of vocabulary knowledge that originates from a widespread view that language learners struggle with formulaic language in general and particularly in collocations.

Collocations are viewed as a problem even for advanced learners of the English language (Kemp, 2009).

Semantic Vocabulary Knowledge Errors from poor semantic meanings in include ***lukewarm*** which was defined as a ***way of doing something*** and *ease* defined as ***doing something faster.*** The lexical quality hypothesis proposes the specificity and completeness of the orthographic, phonological, grammatical, and semantic constituents of lexical representations and correlations between different constituents of lexical representations. Strong connections allow printed word forms to trigger synchronous, coherent activation of all components of the word's identity required for comprehension (Perfetti, 2007). This study has established that the learners had poor and less developed lexical representations of words.

The knowledge of a word involves the combination of several different types of knowledge. In his clear and concise volume, (Stahl, 2008) suggested that knowing a word means not only knowing its literal definition but also knowing its relationship to other words, its connotations in different contexts, and its power of transformation in various forms. In support of this Zhang and Anual, 2008 described a strong correlation between learners' volume of reading comprehension and their vocabulary knowledge.

There is a need for early assessment and intervention to identify learners' inadequacy in lower-level word recognition processes of phonological cognizance referred to as phonological awareness; orthographic knowledge and vocabulary knowledge. This assessment would be prior to the higher-level reader-based knowledge sources of text integration processes, concerned with assimilation of text-based information and reader's schemata for the purpose of general comprehension and mental representation of the text.

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