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# Comparison between students' academic performance and their abilities in written English language skills: A Tanzanian perspective

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## Abstract

This article is based on the study which sought to compare between the students' academic performance and their abilities in written English Language Skills. The study was conducted at the Sokoine University of Agriculture (SUA), Tanzania. The respondents were 358 finalists from six degree programmes selected randomly out of the 20 degree programmes at the university. The findings indicated that there was a statistically significant positive relationship between the students' abilities in the English Writing Skills Test (EWST) and their University GPAs ( $r=314$ ,  $p< 0.01$ ). However, the content analysis of the EWST essays showed that the students had serious problems in spelling, using appropriate forms of adjectives, punctuation marks, simple present tense, recognizing passive voice and using relative pronouns and prepositions.

**Keywords:** Students, Academic performance, Language skills

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## **1. Introduction**

Literature indicates that there is a link between academic achievements and proficiency in the language of instruction. For example, the poor performance of secondary school students in their national examinations in Tanzania has always been attributed to their low proficiency in the language of instruction, which is English (Malekela, 2003; Rubagumya, 1991; Mvungi, 1980). This implies that, one of the major factors which determine students' success in academic is proficiency in the language of instruction, which facilitates communication between teachers and students. In other words, if students do not have adequate communication skills, effective learning cannot take place (David and Ogsinji, 2009; Neke, 2003). This view is supported by Malekela (2003) who argued that if the learner is handicapped in the language of instruction, learning may not take place since both the instructor and learners will not be communicating.

Brooks and Adams (2009) are of the view that in any educational programme, students' academic performance is an outcome of a learning process which requires interaction and negotiation of meanings, as part of the process. At every point of the learning process, communication skills are fundamental, as Mohamed (2006), insists that they are necessary for the correct interpretation of lectures, texts, and assessment tasks. There is enough evidence from literature that for students studying in their second language, language proficiency is a greater impediment to their studies than other factors (Brooks and Adams, 2009). This view is supported by an example from Nigeria where the poor performance of students in English language at public examinations in recent times has been explained as a major cause of the decline in academic achievement and standard of education (David and Ogsinji, 2009). A similar observation is given by Neke (2003), who also pointed out that, among the many reasons that have been advanced to explain the declining trends in educational standards in Tanzania, poor proficiency in English has been a widely used argument. When these arguments are carefully evaluated, it is implied that there is a link between students' academic achievement and their proficiency in language skills, particularly in the language of instruction.

According to Prah (2003), language of instruction is the one in which basic skills and knowledge are imparted to the population, and the medium in which the production and reproduction of knowledge is taught. The skills and knowledge encompass problem-solving, information communication and technology, administration and management, science and technology, research, and languages. As pointed out earlier, after independence, the Tanzanian government through the Ministry of Education introduced a common media to be used in its institutions of education to include Kiswahili and English. In 1967, the government pronounced that Kiswahili would be the medium of instruction in primary schools and English in post-primary education in Tanzania (Roy-Campbell and Qorro, 1997; URT, 1995). The choice of Kiswahili as the medium of instruction in primary schools was based on the fact that it was a Tanzanian indigenous language which was acceptable to all sections of the population as it was spoken by 90% of the population (Malekela, 2003; Roy-Campbell and Qorro, 1997). It was also part of a larger educational reform effort, 'Education for Self-Reliance' (ESR) which was geared towards making education more relevant to the needs of the Tanzanian society (Roy-Campbell and Qorro, 1997).

Since then, there have been ongoing debates in Tanzania on whether English or Kiswahili should be the medium of instruction from secondary school to university level. However, the government's position on this matter has been clear as stipulated in the Education and Training Policy of 1995;

*“At primary school level, full development of language skills is vital for a fuller understanding and mastery of knowledge and skills implied in the primary school curriculum. Children at this level of education will continue to be taught in a language which is commonly used in Tanzania. Therefore, the medium of instruction in primary schools shall be Kiswahili, and English shall be a compulsory subject”* (URT, 1995: 39).

Therefore, by this policy statement, the government appreciates the use of Kiswahili as the medium of instruction at primary school level for enhancing understanding and mastery of knowledge and skills.

On the other hand, the government has this position on the medium of instruction at secondary education level as pointed out in the Education and Training Policy document of 1995;

*“Currently, English is the medium of instruction at secondary school level and most instructional media and pedagogical materials available at this level are also written in English. This situation is likely to remain so for a long time in the foreseeable future. In this policy document, it has been proposed that English should be taught as a subject from Standard I. It is, therefore, expected that at the end of seven years of primary education, pupils will have acquired and developed adequate mastery of this language, both spoken and written, to cope with the English language proficiency demands at secondary, post secondary levels and the world of work”* (URT, 1995: 44-45).

It is worth noting that when the Education and Training Policy came out in 1995, English was already the medium of instruction at secondary school level. Therefore, it was an emphasis of what was already in practice. In view of the above quotation, it seems that the decision by the government to use English as the medium of instruction at post primary school level was based on the assumption that students would have mastered the language before joining secondary education. However, this has proved to be impractical as studies indicate that by the time students join post primary levels of education, their English language proficiency seems to be very low (Rajani and Sumra, 2010; Komba, 2008; Mohamed, 2006; Criper and Dodd, 1984).

Since the medium of instruction at university level is English, all Tanzanian universities offer a course in Communication Skills (CS) to all first year undergraduate students as a remedy to the observed communication problems (Komba, 2008; Mohamed, 2006). The course is purposely taught in order to improve students' ability to learn efficiently and effectively through the medium of English (Mlacha and Rea, 1985; UDSM, 1983). For example, it is clearly stipulated in the *Introduction* of the workbook developed by the Communication Skills Unit (CSU) of the University of Dar es Salaam, that;

*“Whatever discipline a student works in, he/she needs a good grasp of English to be able to follow lectures and textbooks, and to write reports and essays. The language background of*

*students in higher education is varied, and those who have less advantageous background in English may find that this causes difficulties in their specialized work. The aim of this course is to bring student's level of English proficiency to a required standard for advanced academic study"* (University of Dar es Salaam, 1983: iii).

On the basis of the above quotation, it is clear that the students' inability to communicate in the academic settings using English medium necessitated the introduction of Communication Skills in English course in Tanzanian tertiary institutions.

This paper is based on the study which sought to compare the university students' overall academic performance with their English language abilities. The study had one specific objective which was *to compare the students' overall academic performance with their abilities in the written English language skills*. In addition, the study was guided by a research hypothesis; "there is no significant relationship between the students' overall academic performance and their abilities in the written English language skills".

## 2. Literature review

Literature on language policy indicates that after independence in 1961, Tanzania adopted a form of bilingual education in which Kiswahili would be used as the medium of instruction in the school career alongside English (Tibategeza, 2009; Neke, 2003). In 1967, Kiswahili was declared a national language and a language of instruction in primary schools while English was declared a co-official language and it was supposed to be taught as a compulsory subject in all primary schools (Mlama and Materu, 1978). In addition, English was also declared a language of instruction at post primary school levels, including the university. However, studies undertaken on the language-in-education (Tibategeza, 2009; Swila, 2009; Rugemalira, 2005; Rubagumya, 1991; Mlama and Materu, 1978) have advocated a switch to Kiswahili as a language of instruction at all levels of education insisting that the current system of bilingual education has negatively affected the provision of education. For example, a study by Mlama and Materu (1978), found out that students could not express themselves in English and most of them were unable to participate in an English lesson at all. Despite all the recommendations, the Tanzanian government has continued to insist that English should remain the language of instruction at all post primary school levels. According to Tibategeza (2009), the decision to maintain English as a medium of instruction at post primary school levels is attributed to the tremendous power and prestige of the English language in the global market. It is also because of the experience the post colonial elites have as they were successful in a foreign language-based-education system in which the colonial language (i.e. English) was the medium of instruction (Wolff, 2006).

It is worth noting that by 1969, there was already a move to make Kiswahili the medium of instruction from primary school to secondary education and eventually to university level. According to Brock-Utne (2002) the Ministry of Education sent a circular to all secondary school headmasters and headmistresses outlining the plan for the gradual introduction of Kiswahili as the medium of instruction which was suggested to take place as follows;

“.....that political science and civics should be taught in Kiswahili from the 1969/70 school year; domestic science from the 1970/71 school year; history, geography, agriculture, biology, and mathematics from the 1971/72 school-year” (Brock-Utne, 2002: 26).

Therefore, it was envisaged that by 1973, Kiswahili would become the medium of instruction in all subjects and it appeared that secondary school teachers favoured the use of Kiswahili as the medium of instruction (Bhaiji, 1976; cited in Rubagumya, 1986). The teaching of political science in Kiswahili started, but thereafter, the reforms stopped without explanation from the government.

In 1980, Mwalimu Julius Kambarage Nyerere, the then President of Tanzania, appointed a Presidential Commission in Education to review the entire education system and Jackson Makweta was made the chairman of the commission (Brock-Utne, 2002; Rubagumya, 1991). The Makweta's Commission presented its report to the President in February 1982 with recommendations of fixing a date for the shift from English to Kiswahili as the medium of instruction. The recommendation to shift from English to Kiswahili was reached after realizing that the use of English language as a medium of instruction at post-primary education institutions hindered effective learning. According to the commission report, January 1985 was planned to be the first year of secondary school (Form I) to start using Kiswahili and in 1991 the university would start using Kiswahili as the medium of instruction (Brock-Utne, 2002). However, the recommendation did not appear in the official report which was published in 1984 (Rubagumya, 1991). It means that the government was not committed to make the shift from English to Kiswahili as the medium of instruction at post-primary school levels as suggested in the Makweta's commission report.

In 1984, the British government funded a study which was commissioned by the Tanzanian government to investigate on the teaching of English language and its use as medium of education in Tanzania. The study was done by a team of consultants comprising an Edinburgh University linguist, Dr. Criper, and an administrator, Mr. Dodd. The findings of this study indicated that “education standards were falling, and teachers' and students' knowledge of and proficiency in English was low” (Malekela, 2003: 104). The study confirmed earlier studies as it revealed that the level of English was too low in most schools for effective learning to take place. For example, it was found out that the number of students who were able to read easy unsimplified texts was less than 10% and nearly one third of all students were still at the level that they could not comprehend texts written in English after four years of secondary education (Criper & Dodd, 1984). In 1986, the British and the Tanzania governments agreed to launch a 10 year English Language Teaching Support Project (ELTSP) after the report by Criper and Dodd. According to Malekela (2003:104), the project was administered by the Overseas Development Administration through the British Council Office in Tanzania. The main components of the project included *reading programme* and *the in-service course for English teachers and school inspectors*. Although materials were produced and distributed to schools in order to assist language teachers implement the project, only a small stock was produced because of limited funding. An evaluation of the project by Rea-Dickins (1997) revealed that the implementation of the project did not produce the desired outcomes because of management problems, vastness of the country, and the rapid increase of secondary schools amidst scarce financial resources.

Rajani and Sumra (2010) conducted a study in which they found out that many children reached Standard 7 without any English skills at all. In the same vein, they also reported that by the time the students completed primary school, half of all children (49.1%) still could not read a Standard 2 level English story, and far fewer were likely to be able to read at Standard 7 level. In view of this, it is unrealistic to expect that such students would not face problems in communication as they join the higher levels of education where the medium of instruction is English language. Therefore, it seems that the students' communication deficiencies encountered at post primary school level, including the university, is a historical phenomenon which is rooted in language policy issues.

### **3. Methodology**

The research design chosen for this study was quantitative approach using the Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Coefficient and qualitative approach using content analysis. This design was chosen because the researcher sought to have an understanding of the relationship between the English Writing Skills Test (EWST) scores and the students' overall academic performance, expressed in terms of Grade Point Averages (GPAs), through correlation analysis. In addition, the content analysis of students' essays written in the English Writing Skills Test (EWST) was done in order to examine the students' strengths and weaknesses in English language.

This study was conducted at the Sokoine University of Agriculture (SUA) which is located in Morogoro Region, one of the regions of Tanzania mainland. The target population was all finalist degree programme students in 20 degree programmes at SUA in the 2010/2011 academic year. A simple random sampling technique was used to select the six degree programmes involved in this study. All students who were registered in each of the six selected degree programmes were involved in the study. Their total number was 358 students, including 251 males and 107 females.

The instruments used during the data collection process included Data Entry Sheet and the English Writing Skills Test (EWST), developed by the researchers. The data collection process involved two stages in which, stage one focused on the collection of information about the students' first year and second year GPAs. The data on students' university GPAs were entered in a Data Entry Sheet which was designed prior to the data collection process.

The English Writing Skills Test was administered to all students who participated in the study in order to examine the students' abilities in their English language writing skills. The test had two sections namely Section A and Section B. Section A of the EWST was designed to measure the following skills;

In Section B, the respondents were asked to write an essay of 350 words about the Tanzanian Higher Education Students' Loans Board. This topic was purposely chosen because it was a cross-cutting topic considering the heterogeneous nature of the target population which was made up of students from different degree programmes. All students at SUA are sponsored by the government of Tanzania through the Higher Education Students' Loans Board (HESLB) and therefore they were expected to be aware of a number of issues regarding the operations of the board. The essay was intended to measure the abilities as specified in

Table 2. The maximum score for this section of the EWST was 20 marks; hence the total of 50 marks for the whole test. After marking the test scripts, the scores were classified into grades on the basis of SUA score intervals and the grades were then assigned numerical points for data analysis purposes as follows: A = 5; B+ = 4.5; B = 4; C = 3; D = 2; and E = 1. The assigned numerical points were entered in the Data Entry Sheet alongside the GPAs of each respondent.

Table 1. Students' abilities measured by section A of the EWST

S/N	Ability measured
1	Ability to use simple present tense
2	Ability to relate subject with verb
3	Ability to use relative pronouns
4	Ability to use punctuation marks
5	Ability to use simple present tense and relate subject with verb
6	Ability to spell words
7	Ability to choose appropriate words
8	Ability to spell words
9	Ability to recognize passive voice
10	Ability to use appropriate forms of adjectives
11	Ability to use present perfect tense
12	Ability to use prepositions
13	Ability to relate subject with verb
14	Ability to choose appropriate words
15	Ability to use correct words and spelling

Source: Section of the EWST developed by the researchers

The collected data were analyzed using computer software, Statistical Package for Software System (SPSS), Version 18 using the Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation ( $r$ ) technique. The Pearson  $r$  was also used to determine the relationship between the students' overall academic performance (GPAs) and their abilities in the English Writing Skills Test. In the overall interpretation, the significance of the relationships was tested at

$p < 0.05$  level using a two tailed test. Moreover, to determine the degree to which the respondents had the specified abilities shown in Table 1, the researchers did an item analysis to determine the difficult index for each of the items. The results were expressed in terms of the percentages of the respondents who had the specified abilities. Finally, the qualitative aspects of the students' essays written in the writing skills test were analysed using content analysis and some direct quotations from the respondents' written essays have been reported in this article.

Table 2. Students' abilities measured by section B of the writing skills test

S/N	Ability measured
1	Ability to follow instructions
2	Ability to write an introduction to the essay
3	Ability to write complete sentences
4	Ability to relate subject with verb
5	Ability to write proper paragraphs
6	Ability to use details/examples to support or illustrate ideas
7	Ability to use appropriate tenses
8	Ability to use punctuation marks appropriately
9	Ability to choose appropriate words
10	Ability to spell words
11	Ability to conclude the essay

*Source: Section of the EWST developed by the researcher*

## 4. Results and discussions

### 4.1. Students' overall academic performance and their abilities in the English writing skills test

As pointed out in the introduction part of this article, the objective of this study was to compare students' overall academic performance with their abilities in the written English language. This was done because writing skills are of critical importance throughout education, and they are an essential element of college or university learning tool (Maaka and Ward, 2000; McKusick, 1999; Henderson et al., 1998). For example,



university students are expected to build their conceptual knowledge and critical thinking capacity through reading texts and to write papers in which they analyze and synthesize information from different written sources (McKusick, 1999). In view of this, an English Writing Skills Test was administered to all students who formed the sample for this study.

The results in the English Writing Skills Test (EWST) in relation to the overall academic performance were as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Overall students' performance in the English writing skills test (EWST) and the university GPAs

<b>Writing Skills Test</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>
	A	25	7.0	7.0
	B+	20	5.6	5.6
	B	56	15.6	15.6
	C	120	33.5	33.5
	D	137	38.3	38.3
	<b>Total</b>	<b>358</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>University GPAs</b>	<b>GPA Range</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>
	4.4-5.0 (First)	3	0.9	0.9
	3.5-4.3 (Upper)	171	47.5	47.5
	2.7-3.4 (Lower)	147	41.2	41.2
	2.0-2.6 (Pass)	37	10.4	10.4
	0-1.9 (Fail)	0	0	0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>358</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Field data (2011)

Table 3 indicates that 28.2% of students who sat for the English Writing Skills Test scored grade B and above. In addition, 33.5% obtained grade C, and 38.3% failed the EWST. With regard to the University GPAs, 100% of students had passed their courses which contributed to the University GPAs. This is despite the fact that 38.3% of them failed the English Writing Skills Test.

As pointed out in the methodology part of this article, the English writing skills test had two sections namely section A and section B. An item analysis was done for the items included in section A in order to determine the percentages of students having the stated abilities. The results were as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Students' abilities measured by section A of the writing skills test and percentages of students having the stated abilities (N=358)

S/N	Ability Measured	Difficult Index	Difficult Index Expressed as Percentage
1	Ability to spell words	.31	31%
2	Ability to use appropriate forms of adjectives	.32	32%
3	Ability to choose appropriate words	.34	34%
4	Ability to spell words	.36	36%
5	Ability to use punctuation marks	.37	37%
6	Ability to recognize passive voice	.42	42%
7	Ability to use simple present tense and relate subject with verb	.45	45%
8	Ability to use simple present	.46	46%
9	Ability to use relative pronouns	.47	47%
10	Ability to use prepositions	.49	49%
11	Ability to use present perfect tense	.51	51%
12	Ability to choose appropriate words	.51	51%
13	Ability to relate subject with verb	.52	52%
14	Ability to relate subject with verb	.56	56%
15	Ability to use correct words and spelling	.56	56%

Source: Field data (2011)

The results indicated in Table 4 are discussed in the subsequent sections.

#### *4.1.1. Items One and Four: ability to spell words*

These items were included in the test in order to examine if the students were able to spell words correctly. The difficult index for item one was 0.31 which means that only 31% of students were able to spell the stated word correctly. On the other hand, it also means that more than two-third (69%) of the students were unable to spell words correctly. With regard to item four, the item analysis gave the difficult index of 0.36 which means that 36% of the students were able to spell the identified word correctly. On the other hand, 64% of students were unable to spell it appropriately. This is an indication that many of the students were unable to spell words correctly

#### *4.1.2. Item Two: ability to use appropriate forms of adjectives*

This item was included in the test in order to measure the students' ability to use appropriate forms of adjectives. The difficult index for this item was 0.32 which means that only 32% of the students were able to use appropriate forms of adjectives in their writing while majority of the students (68%) were unable to do the same.

#### *4.1.3. Items Three and Twelve: ability to choose appropriate words*

In writing skills, the choice of appropriate words which suit the topic and/or context is a very important aspect (Mohamed, 2006). In this regard, items three and twelve were included in the test in order to examine the students' ability to choose appropriate words as they develop their texts. The resulting difficult index for item three was 0.34 which means that only 34% of the students were able to choose appropriate words. It also means that approximately two-third (66%) of the students were unable to choose appropriate words in their writing. Regarding item twelve, a difficult index of 0.51 was obtained which means that 51% of the students were able to choose appropriate words while 49% of the students were unable to make appropriate choice of words in their writing. If an average is calculated using the findings in items three and twelve, it will be seen that only 43% of the students were able to choose appropriate words.

#### *4.1.4. Item Five: ability to use punctuation marks*

This item was included in the test in order to measure the students' ability to use punctuation marks. The item analysis gave the difficult index of 0.37 which means that 37% of the students were able to use punctuation marks correctly while (63%) of the students were unable to use punctuation marks appropriately.

#### *4.1.5. Item Six: ability to recognize passive voice*

This item was intended to measure the students' ability to recognize passive voice in writing. The item analysis for this item gave a difficult index of 0.42. This means that 42% of the students were able to recognize passive voice in their writing, while 58% of the students were unable to recognize the passive voice.

#### 4.1.6. Items Seven and Eight: ability to use simple present tense

In item seven, the students were examined on their ability to use the simple present tense in relation to subject-verb agreement. The difficult index for this item was 0.45 which means that less than half (45%) of the students were able to use the simple present tense in relation to subject-verb agreement while the majority of the students (55%) were unable. With regard to item eight, the difficulty index was 0.46 which means that 46% of the students were able to use the simple present tense appropriately. On the other hand, this difficult index suggested that more than half (54%) of the students were unable to use the specified tense. This is an indication that the majority of students had problems of using simple present tense.

#### 4.1.7. Item Nine: ability to use relative pronouns

This item was intended to measure the students' ability in using relative pronouns such as *which*, *who*, *whom* or *whose*. The difficult index for this item was 0.47. This means that 47% of the students were able to use relative pronouns appropriately. On the other hand, more than half (53%) of the students were unable to use relative pronouns.

#### 4.1.8. Item Ten: ability to use prepositions

In this item, the students were examined on their ability to use prepositions appropriately. The item analysis gave a difficult index of 0.49. This means that 49% of students were able to use prepositions appropriately while the other 51% were unable to use the prepositions in their writing

#### 4.1.9. Item Eleven: ability to use present perfect tense

This item was intended to measure the students' ability in using the present perfect tense. The item had a difficulty index of 0.51. It means that 51% of the students had the ability to use the present perfect tense appropriately. On the other hand, it means that 49% of the students were unable to use the present perfect tense correctly.

#### 4.1.10. Items Thirteen and Fourteen: ability to relate subject with verb

In these items, students were tested on their ability to relate subject with verb i.e. subject-verb agreement. The item analysis for item thirteen gave a difficult index of 0.52 which means that more than a half of the students (52%) were able to relate subject with verb in their writing. Although a high percentage of the students performed well in this item, there was yet a large proportion (48%) of the students who were unable to relate subject with verb in their writing. With regard to item fourteen, the resulting difficult index was 0.56 which means that 56% of the students were able relate the stated subject with verb appropriately. On the other hand, it also means that 44% of students were unable to relate subject with verb in their writing. The findings in item fourteen support the findings in item thirteen.

#### 4.1.11. Item Fifteen: ability to use correct words and spelling

This item was meant to examine the students' ability to use correct words and spelling in their writing. The computed difficult index was 0.56 which means that 56% of the students were able to use correct words and spelling in their writing while 44% of the students were unable to use correct words and spelling.

It is worth mentioning that the discrimination indices for all items ranged from 0.41 to 0.62 which means that all the items included in test discriminate positively. With regard to the analysis of response, the results indicated that each of the answer options attracted students and therefore a chance of guessing the correct answer was minimal.

#### 4.1.12. Conclusions on the item analysis of the EWST

Overall, the following conclusions can be drawn from the item analysis results. First, the majority of the students' performed poorly on the EWST. This can be justified by the fact that the level of difficult index for all items ranged from 0.31 to 0.56.

Secondly, it was revealed that the majority of students had serious problems in spelling (69%), using appropriate forms of adjectives (68%), using punctuation marks (63%), using simple present tense (59.5%), recognizing passive voice (58%), choosing appropriate words (57%), using relative pronouns (53%), and using prepositions (51%). The difficult indices for items which measured these abilities ranged from 0.31 to 0.49. This means that more than 50% of the students did not have the specified language abilities.

### 4.2. The qualitative analysis of the students' essay writing skills test

The qualitative analysis of the students' essays focused on the students' abilities such as ability to follow instructions, ability to introduce an essay, ability to write complete and meaningful sentences, ability to relate subject with verb, and ability to write proper paragraphs. Other areas of focus were ability to use details/examples to support or illustrate ideas, ability to use punctuation marks, ability to choose appropriate words, ability to spell words, and ability to conclude the essay. Results for the analysis were as shown in Table 5. Based on the data of this table, students' performance in the specified abilities are described in the following sections.

#### 4.2.1. Ability to follow instructions

In this ability, there were three things which were important for the students to observe in their essay writing. First, they were supposed to understand the kind of activity they were asked to do, which was to *write an essay*. Secondly, it was also expected that students would pay attention about the length of the activity, which for this case was clearly stipulated '*an essay of 350 words*'. Lastly, the students were expected to abide by the essay topic, which was the *Tanzanian Higher Education Students' Loans Board*. Table 5 indicates that 48% of students were unable to follow instructions as required. On the other hand, 32% of students were able to follow instructions while 20% wrote the essay without following all the given

instructions. For example, some students wrote essays of less than 100 words. One of them had only this to write;

*“Tanzania Higher Education students Loans Board is an organ which support high education learner by provide with them loan it provide meal and accommodation fees, stationery fee and faculty allowance which is provide according to student category either A, B, C, or D, etc and also according to the course the content is which student taken” (Field data, 2011).*

This was a complete essay of one of the students. The student had written only 56 words and could not even copy correctly some of the words from the instructions. For example, the word *Students’* in the instructions has an apostrophe while the student wrote it without the apostrophe. There were also many grammatical errors in the essay as underlined in the extract.

#### 4.2.2. Ability to introduce an essay

In this ability, the students were expected to use the writing skills learned in the CS course, including how to introduce an essay. As it can be seen from Table 6, 45.5% of the students introduced their essays but with a lot of grammatical errors. On the other hand, 37.2% of the students were unable to introduce their essays while those who were only 17.3%.

#### 4.2.3. Ability to write complete and meaningful sentences

It was expected that the students would write sentences which are complete and meaningful in order to convey the intended message. However, Table 5 indicates that 63.9% of the students were unable to write complete and meaningful sentences. On the other hand, 20.7% of the students wrote sentences which were inappropriate while the students who could write sentences which are complete and meaningful were only 15.3%. For example, one student had this to write;

*“As it is known most of Tanzanian people have erving low income due to the reasons that 80% persantage of Tanzanian people as practicing subsistence agricultural that mean they involves in small farming scale due to that reasons it can be difficult to use their produced production for sustaining themselves as well as seling those products for the expensenses (high expensence) to continue with higher learning without give loans” (Field data, 2011).*

As it can be seen from the extract, this student could not write complete and meaningful sentences in the essay.

#### 4.2.4. Ability to relate subject with verb

Students who were involved in this study were expected to be able to relate subjects with verbs in writing their essays. The analysis of the students’ scripts indicated that 57% of the students were unable to relate subjects with verbs in their writing (Table 5). On the other hand, 27% of the students could relate subjects

with verbs in some sentences while only 16% could relate subject with verb in all sentences. For example, one of the students who showed weakness in this aspect had this to write in the essay;

*“Tanzania Higher Education Loan Board are among the board for giving students loans. The board were found in Dsm and it start in 2005.*

*Many students is suppose to apply loans from this institution. Those who does not to do the application, they doesn't get loan for payment fees and other expensive.*

*The Board have many problems. These problems does not only affect students who is from rural area, but even in town” (Field data, 2011).*

#### 4.2.5. Ability to write proper paragraphs

In this aspect, the students were examined to find out whether they were able to write appropriate paragraphs in their essays. Results indicated that 76% of the students were unable to write paragraphs in the essays and 15.6% wrote paragraphs which contained several ideas that could have been put into separate paragraphs. Students who wrote proper paragraphs were only 8.4%.

#### 4.2.6. Ability to use details/examples to support or illustrate ideas

In this aspect, students were examined in their abilities to support or illustrate ideas written in their essays. Table 6 indicates that 85.1% of the students were unable to use details or examples to support ideas written in their essays. Those who used inappropriate details or examples in their essays were 14% while only 0.9% of the students were able to use appropriate details or examples to support their ideas.

#### 4.2.7. Ability to use appropriate tenses

The results indicated that 89.1% of the students were unable to use appropriate tenses in their writings. On the other hand, only 10.9% of the students wrote essays with appropriate tenses in some sentences and inappropriate tenses in other sentences. There were no (0%) students who used appropriate tenses throughout their essays. To show the extent of this problem is the following extract from one of the students' essay that reads as follows (note the single sentence paragraphs);

*“Tanzanian Higher Education Student loans Board (HESLB) is institution which sponser Tanzanian student by providing to them loans and this institution it was begin to be used in 2005 although the intention is to help Tanzanian to get loans in order to have good life but it was fail in various way.*

*HESLB delaying to finance student, student of university are complain because the HESLB is not fail in distributing loans in a time which student is expect to get their allowance and this lead student to fail their examination because of hardship of life.*

*Means testing, also it is a problem which affect student negatively because it make some student to pay all money which were needed to buy food.*

*School fees and other contributions, the HESLB is not financing of the contribution to university this lead hardship life to student so I can say that Tanzanian Higher Education Student loans Board was fail to improves student life.*

*HESLB don't considers poor people and disable, This lead hardship life to these student because their relative believe that" (Field data, 2011).*

The researcher was curious and retrieved this student's GPA. It was found that the student had the GPA of 3.3 which is equivalent to the *upper second class*. It means this student obtained high GPAs although his ability in written English language was low. Similar cases of students' weaknesses in tenses were observed, as already pointed out, in 89.1% of the essays.

#### *4.2.8. Ability to use punctuation marks appropriately*

Students' performance on this item indicated that 52.2% of the students were unable to use punctuation marks in their essays. It was also found out that 26.5% of the students could use punctuation marks in some sections of their essays while only 20.9% were able to use punctuation marks approximately throughout their essays. For example, one of the students had this to write:

*"Before the system of loans in university get it's started at first the university student were paid the amount of money which is coming for students for several uses such as an Accommodation amount Books and stationery amount meals amount so as the student can use for the whole Needed that he/she can found necessary to having in university but all this amount paid to university student freely" (Field data, 2011).*

As seen in this section of the essay, the writer was unable to use punctuation marks in the essay. There is no single punctuation mark in the entire writing, let alone the many grammatical errors.

#### *4.2.9. Ability to choose appropriate words*

After analysing the students' essays, it was found out that the majority (75.7%) of the students were unable to choose and use appropriate words in writing their essays. On the other hand, those who could use appropriate words in some sentences were 16.5% while only 7.8% of the students were able to choose appropriate words throughout their essays. Most of the students failed to choose relevant words to the topic they were writing about.

#### *4.2.10. Ability to spell words*

In this ability, results indicated that 50.5% of the students were able to spell most of the words in their essays. It was also found out that 45.5% of the students were unable to spell most of the words in their essays while only 3.9% were able to spell correctly all words in their essays. On the basis of these findings, it means that majority of students had problems in spelling English words in their writing.



Table 5: Qualitative analysis of the students' essay writing skills test

S/N	Abilities	N= 358		
		Were Able	Somewhat*	Were Unable
1.	Ability to follow instructions e.g. write an essay of 350 words about HESLB etc.	111 (32%)	72 (20%)	175 (48%)
2.	Ability to introduce an essay e.g. defining key words, giving a thesis statement etc.	62 (17.3%)	163 (45.5%)	133 (37.2%)
3.	Ability to write complete and meaningful sentences	55 (15.4%)	74 (20.7%)	229 (63.9%)
4.	Ability to relate subject with verb i.e. subject-verb agreement	56 (16%)	97 (27%)	205 (57%)
5.	Ability to write proper paragraphs	30 (8.4%)	56 (15.6%)	272 (76%)
6.	Ability to use details/examples to support or illustrate ideas	3 (0.9%)	50 (14%)	305 (85.1%)
7.	Ability to use appropriate tenses.	0 (0%)	39 (10.9%)	319 (89.1%)
8.	Ability to use punctuation marks appropriately such as full stops, commas etc.	75 (20.9%)	95 (26.5%)	188 (52.5%)
9.	Ability to choose appropriate words	28 (7.8%)	59 (16.5%)	271 (75.7%)
10.	Ability to spell words	14 (3.9%)	181 (50.6%)	163 (45.5%)
11.	Ability to conclude essays	10 (2.8%)	31 (8.7%)	317 (88.6%)

\* Students performed in the specified ability to some degree

Source: Field data (2011)

#### 4.2.11. Ability to conclude essays

The analysis of students' essays indicated that 88.6% of the students were unable to conclude their essays while those who could conclude their essays with grammatical and semantic errors were 8.7. The students who were able to write good conclusions for their essays were only 2.8%.

#### 4.3. The correlation between the English writing skills test grades and the university GPAs

The results of the correlation between the English Writing Skills Test (EWST) grades and university GPAs for all students in the sample were as shown in Table 6.

Table 6. The pearson's product moment correlation coefficient (r) between the English writing skills test and the university GPAs

		<b>Writing Test</b>	<b>GPAs</b>
<b>Writing Test</b>	Pearson Correlation	1	0.314**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	358	358
<b>GPAs</b>	Pearson Correlation	0.314**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
	N	358	358
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).			

Source: Field data (2011)

Table 6 indicates that the correlation coefficient between the English Writing Skills Test grades and the University GPAs was  $r=0.314$ ,  $p<0.01$  in a two-tailed test. Notwithstanding the students' weaknesses, there was a positive relationship between the English Writing Skills Test grades and the University GPAs for the sampled students.

The observed value was compared with the critical value to determine whether the relationship was statistically significant. Given that  $df=356$  and  $p<0.05$ , it was found out that the critical value of 0.113 was less than the observed value of 0.314. On the basis of these findings, it was concluded that there was a

statistically significant relationship between students' abilities in the written English language abilities and their University GPAs,  $r = 0.314$ ,  $p < 0.01$ .

The findings that the students' performance in the EWST correlated positively with the University Grade Point Averages at SUA agree with those of other studies conducted elsewhere. For example, Black (1991) correlated students' grades received in the English as Second Language (ESL) courses with the overall academic averages and found out a positive correlation between the performance in the written English and the overall academic achievement. Similarly, Buttler and Castellon-Wellington (2000) as cited in Fakeye and Ogunsinji (2009) compared the students' performance in the content areas of their subjects of specialization to concurrent performance in a language proficiency test. The results indicated that the language proficiency test performance correlated positively with performance in content areas of their subjects of specialization. Other studies carried out elsewhere have also given similar findings that there is a link between students' academic achievement and their proficiency in language skills (Maleki, 2010; Brooks and Adams, 2009; Maleki and Zangani, 2007; Doney, 2006; Geene, 2006; Ho and Spinks, 2004).

However, an interesting observation in this study is the low correlation between the students' abilities in English language as revealed by the EWST and their University GPAs,  $r=0.416$ ,  $p< 0.01$ . This could mean that the University Grade Point Averages could be influenced by other factors other than the English language skills (García-Vázquez et al., 1997).

## 5. Conclusion

The findings in this study have revealed that there was a statistically significant relationship between the students' overall academic performance and their abilities in the written English language skills. Notwithstanding the significant relationship between the two variables, majority of students had serious problems in spelling, using appropriate forms of adjectives, punctuation marks, simple present tense, recognizing passive voice, choosing appropriate words, and using relative pronouns.

On the basis of these findings, it is recommended that the Sokoine University of Agriculture should review its course assessment procedures for students taking different courses at the university. To this effect, one of the options could be introducing oral examinations in which students' competencies in both academic content and language skills could be examined. Since this was a single site study, it is recommended that a similar study which could be carried out to involve more than one university should be conducted in order to compare the students' abilities in English language skills across the universities.

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