Journal of Languages and Linguistics

[ISSN 2958-1028]
Volume: 04 Issue: 01 | October-2025

JLL

A Description of the Level of Proficiency in the Written English of First-Year University Students in Kenya

Authors

Anne Wachera Somba [1]; Felicia Arudo Yieke [2]; James Ogola Onyango [3]

Main Author's Email: waceracs@gmail.com

(1.) Kabarak University, Kenya; (2.3) Laikipia University, Kenya

Cite this article in APA

Somba, A. W., Yieke, F. A., & Ogola, J. O. (2025). A description of the level of proficiency in the written English of first-year university students in Kenya. *Journal of languages and linguistics*, *4*(1), 57-67. https://doi.org/10.51317/jll.v4i1.853

OPEN ACCESS

A publication of Editon Consortium Publishing (online)

Article history

Received: 2025-08-28
Accepted: 2025-09-29
Published: 2025-10-29

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Abstract

The study measures the level of proficiency in English of first-year university students admitted to universities by the Kenya Universities and Colleges Central Placement Service (KUCCPS) in 2021. This is a descriptive study with a sample of 405 students randomly selected from 15 public and private universities in Kenya. The study uses the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) to measure proficiency. Four areas of language proficiency were measured in this study: proficiency in grammar, proficiency in discourse organisation, proficiency in sociolinguistic aspects and proficiency in communication strategies. The study entailed a detailed content analysis, and scores were assigned on a scale of 1 to 6. The analysis revealed that proficiency in grammar and in discourse organisation both had an average score of 3.3, proficiency in sociolinguistic aspects had a score of 4.0, while proficiency in communication strategies had a score of 3.4. The overall average proficiency score for the study data was 3.4, which is at level B1. This level is characterised by language ability that enables one to use language independently for most purposes. It is, however, marked by numerous errors in grammar, structure, mechanics and vocabulary. This raises concern because proficiency in written English is indispensable for first-year university students in Kenya who use the language for academic writing. There is, therefore, a need to aim for level B2 of written proficiency at university entry because this level would enable students to express themselves fluently even on complex, abstract and technical topics.

Key terms: Language proficiency, proficiency in grammar, proficiency in discourse organisation, proficiency in sociolinguistic aspects, proficiency in strategic organisation.

INTRODUCTION

Language proficiency is known to influence academic success. Ghenghesh (2015) observes that success in academics increases with an increase in proficiency in the language of instruction at the point of a student's entry to university. In Kenya, this means that a student's proficiency in English can influence their academic performance in the course they have enrolled for. The current study is a description of proficiency in the written English of Kenyan first-year university students.

Cloud et al. (2000) observe that language proficiency encompasses the capacity to utilise language accurately and appropriately in both its oral and written manifestations across diverse contexts. This definition aligns with the Council of Europe (2020), which views proficiency as a language user's aptitude to comprehend, communicate, and interact within a language, encompassing the four language skills: speaking, listening, writing and reading. These definitions characterise proficiency as the practical application of language in authentic, real-world contexts.

Studies that have focused on the language proficiency of Kenyan students include Kithinji and OHirsi (2022), who studied the relationship between English language proficiency and academic performance among non-English speaking undergraduate students in Kenyan universities. They found that 76 per cent of undergraduate students from non-English speaking backgrounds lacked the expected language skills for a quality learning experience. Another study was by Athiemoolam and Kibui (2012), who analysed Kenyan grade 10 learners' proficiency in English, focusing on reading comprehension and vocabulary. They found that a large percentage of Kenyan learners encountered challenges with comprehension and vocabulary, which impacted their English language proficiency. This study reframes this focus to describe the level of proficiency in the written English of first-year university students in Kenya.

The current study measures proficiency using the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Rather than measuring abstract grammatical knowledge, CEFR focuses on what a language user is actually able to do with a language in real-world situations. CEFR; therefore, provides various scales to measure different abilities in the four language skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. Since this study measured proficiency in written English, the scales CEFR provides to evaluate the production of written texts were used. These are scales that measure proficiency in grammar, discourse organisation, sociolinguistic aspects and those that measure the ability to use communication strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language proficiency is necessary not only for facilitating effective real-life communication but also for cultivating confidence among proficient communicators. Darasawang and Reinders (2021) established that a weak to moderate correlation exists between the willingness to communicate and language proficiency. Their study posited that enhanced proficiency fosters confidence, which subsequently contributes to an increased willingness to engage in communication. Similarly, Yu et al. (2025) determined that international students in U.S. universities possessing high language proficiency experienced greater social engagement and enhanced well-being. This led these scholars to conclude that language proficiency serves as a predictor of the psycho-social well-being of international students in the United States. Furthermore, Saptiany and Putriningsih (2023), who investigated the role of English proficiency in promoting tourism in Indonesia, found that mastery of the English language significantly influenced communication, thereby enhancing tourist satisfaction and yielding greater economic profitability within the tourism sector.

One of the pivotal functions of proficiency resides in the realm of education. Leung (2022) notes that language proficiency serves as the foundation for a myriad of language curriculum designs and pedagogical approaches. This perspective is further substantiated by Zhu et al. (2023), who observe that proficiency scales are employed by policymakers as a guiding framework in language education, by educators to delineate the linguistic profiles of students, by learners for the purpose of goal-setting and navigating their language acquisition journey, by curriculum designers to craft, align, or refine educational curricula, and by researchers to formulate rubrics, frameworks, and assessment models. Harsch

and Malone (2020) contend that as students acquire a second language, they traverse a continuum of discernible stages. Consequently, it becomes feasible to ascertain a student's level of linguistic proficiency. The present study utilises a proficiency scale—the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages—to measure written language proficiency levels of study subjects.

CEFR was initially conceived in Europe in 2001 with the primary objective of establishing a robust foundation for the mutual acknowledgement of language qualifications, thereby facilitating enhanced social mobility throughout Europe and supporting teacher education and curriculum development (Council of Europe, 2020). Its impact has since transcended European borders and has been integrated into the educational systems of Taiwan, Japan, China, New Zealand, and Australia (Nagai & O'Dwyer, 2011). It has, therefore, positioned itself as an international language proficiency scale.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) recognises six levels of proficiency: the breakthrough level - the lowest stage of generative language use - allows the language user to interact simply: asking and answering basic questions instead of relying on finite, rehearsed, situation-specific phrases. The second level of proficiency in this method is called waystage, representing a speaker who can fulfil social functions, such as using polite forms of address or greeting, asking and answering questions about work or their free time, and doing simple transactions like banking, travelling, or using public transport. The third level of proficiency is called threshold; at this stage, a speaker shows some language flexibility to express much of what they want to say, although they may pause for grammatical and lexical planning, and repair is quite evident. The fourth level of proficiency is called vantage, where the speaker can advance arguments, persuade others, and demonstrate discourse competence through the use of cohesive devices and connectors to organise text. The fifth level is known as effective operational proficiency, which describes a speaker who commands a broad range of language, using it fluently and spontaneously. They possess a wide lexical repertoire and can easily overcome gaps with circumlocution, showing little obvious searching for expressions or avoidance. The sixth and highest level of proficiency in this framework is termed mastery; this level corresponds to a language user who, while not at the level of a native speaker or near-native competence, can understand almost everything heard or read with ease, is fluent, and can recognise and convey nuances of meaning as well as effectively utilise a broad range of modifications. They command a wide array of idiomatic expressions and can backtrack and reformulate in ways that are not noticeable.

In Kenya, proficiency is measured only through the national exams that award grades from A to E, and it would be interesting to find out the level of written language proficiency in English among Kenyan first-year university students using an international scale such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

METHODOLOGY

The current study used the descriptive research design. According to Takona (2024), studies that describe the characteristics of an individual or a group fall under descriptive research. Since the current study describes the levels of grammatical competence exhibited in the English of first-year university students, it is descriptive research.

The study was carried out in universities in Kenya that are recognised by the Commission for University Education. These are 67 public and private universities that admitted students through the Kenya Universities and Colleges Central Placement Service (KUCCPS) in 2021. Students admitted through KUCCPS ensure regional balance in the sample. The sample for this study comprised 405 first-year university students. This sample size was determined based on Gill et al (2010 table of sample sizes as cited in Ahmed (2024), which assigns a sample size of 370 and above for a population of more than 10,000 with a 5% margin of error. These subjects were sampled from 15 Kenyan universities, selected purposively to ensure they had programmes in the three career pathways followed at the tertiary level of education, which are the STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) pathway, the social sciences pathway and the sports and performing arts pathway. Selecting students from these three pathways was to ascertain that the whole spectrum of language ability is captured in the

selected sample. From the 15 selected universities, 3 programmes were randomly selected from each of the three career pathways. From each selected programme, 9 participants were randomly selected. Thus, 27 students were selected from each of the 15 universities, giving rise to a sample of 405. From each of the 405 students sampled in this study, two texts—one formal and the other informal—were collected. In total, 810 texts were analysed.

To ensure anonymity, each university that was selected for this study was randomly assigned a letter of the alphabet from 'A' to 'O' (15 letters of the alphabet for the 15 universities selected for the study). Additionally, each participant was, in turn, assigned the letter representing their university, and a randomly assigned numeral from numeral 1 to 27 for the 27 participants drawn from each selected university. For example, for the university assigned letter B, the participants were randomly coded as B1, B2, B3, B4, B5, B6 B7, B8, B9, B10, B11, B12, B13, B14, B15, B16, B17, B18, B19, B20, B21, B22, B23, B24, B25, B26, and B27. Further, the lower case letter 'f' coded data as formal, while the lower case 'i' coded data as informal.

Thus, data coded as A1f refers to formal data collected from the university, coded as A, for the student coded as 1.

Instrumentation

The current study uses tests to collect data. Two written tests were administered: one that would elicit informal data and another that would elicit formal data. The formal test required study subjects to write a formal speech that they would deliver to high school students on "The Effects of Cheating in Exams", while the informal test required study subjects to write a letter to a friend studying abroad recounting a funny incident that happened during a lecture. Tests were considered adequate instruments for data collection in this study because the answers they would elicit would constitute authentic, spontaneous, formal, and informal language necessary for measuring the study subjects' level of grammatical competence.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section is divided into four sub-sections: analysis of proficiency in grammar, discourse organisation, sociolinguistic aspects and communication strategies. The average level of proficiency in grammar was found to be 3.2 for the formal texts and 3.4 for the informal texts. The average score for proficiency in discourse organisation was 3.5 for the formal text and 3.0 for the informal text. The average score for proficiency in sociolinguistic aspects was 4.0 for both the formal and the informal texts. The average score for proficiency in communication strategies was 3.0 for both the formal and informal texts. The overall average level of proficiency in the written formal data was 3.4, while the informal data had an average of 3.3. Thus, both formal and informal written language of the study sample was at level B1, referred to as the threshold level. This is the level where the user is able to follow a discussion, provided the language is clearly articulated in the standard dialect, the user displays sufficient simple language flexibility to express much of what they want to, and the user may hesitate for lexical and grammatical planning, thus it is characterised by backtracking and repair (Council of Europe, 2001). A detailed analysis of the levels of proficiency follows in the sections below.

Proficiency in the Grammar of the Written English of First-Year University Students in Kenya

In the CEFR, proficiency in grammar is assessed using the following descriptors: general linguistic range (morpho-syntax), vocabulary range, grammatical accuracy, vocabulary control, and orthographic control. Each of these descriptors is explained below.

General linguistic range is concerned with the ability to use morphologically and syntactically correct structures. The highest level of proficiency (level C2) in this aspect requires the flexible and accurate use of sentence structures, word forms, word choice, and affixation. The average level of general linguistic range in the study data is B1 (in this study, assigned a value of 3). According to the Council of Europe (2001), this is a level of proficiency where the language user has a sufficient range of language to express themselves even on issues they have not planned for prior to the communication. The user at this point is also able to express main ideas with reasonable precision, though the development of the ideas may not be sufficient. They are also able to express abstract and cultural topics, but may hesitate for lexical and grammatical planning, use circumlocutions and repetitions to make

up for limitations in vocabulary. They may also have difficulties with structural formulations.

All these features are demonstrated in the study data, as demonstrated in the example below:

Example 1:

EFFECTS OF CHEATING IN EXAMS

Cheating in exams or exams malpractice as some will call it, as far as I know only have negative consequences some of which can be very dire. These effects can be long term or even short term. Whether one cheats and walks away scotfree without being pinpointed, or one is caught in the manipulation of exam materials to get better results, both are said to have used a shot cut. And as we all know, no short cut is any place worth going.

Firstly, cheating in exams will ruin one's reputation. When one is paraded or even broadcast in our news that knows how to go viral in a blink of an eye. The reputation of the culprit is damage over a wider area than he/she could imagine. This may later have repercussions icase one wanted to search for a job. The employees will never fail to bare a benefit of doubt as far as the integrity of their client was concerned.

In addition to that, cheating in exams can lead to discontinuation of one from learning. Worse about this is that at the university level once one is discontinued from University A, under no circumstance is University B or C allowed to accept or even readmit such a culprit. This means that one's education ceases untimely and unfruitfully.

Nevertheless, cheating in exams is against the laws of Kenya's act on examination irregularity. For national examinations one is brought into custody and fined in a court of law very highly. Fines amounting up to 5 or 3 million can compel one's family to sell anything available to take a bond for their child. This can happen parallel to one being arrested and jailed over a number of years thus wasting one's valuable time.

Finally, cheating in exams leads to failed performance at the place of work. Where one has high qualification in papers but on the ground thing are different. This is too sensitive and it endangers life of mankind at large. (B14f)

In example 1 above, the structures communicate, but with some difficulties. There are sentence fragments such as '*Where one has a high qualification in papers, but on the ground thing are different'*. This group of words does not have a subject and a verb; thus, it does not qualify to be punctuated as a sentence, as is the case in this data. It is therefore a sentence fragment. There is, however, a logical flow of ideas marked by logical connectors such as *Firstly…., In addition to …., Nevertheless…., and Finally…* at the beginning of each paragraph, but *'Nevertheless'*, in paragraph four, is incorrectly used as it signals contrast, yet what follows is additional information: that cheating in exams is against the laws of Kenya. A connector signalling addition, such as moreover, would have been more appropriate. There are fair attempts to develop the topic sentence in each paragraph, and some errors appear to be typographical, which the writer could have self-corrected. For example, *icase* for *incase* and *damage* instead of *damaged*. There are circumlocutions too, for example, *The reputation of the culprit is damaged over a wider area than he/she could imagine*. The underlined part can be replaced by the word *extensively*, thus it can be considered a circumlocution. This is a typical text in the study data that would have a proficiency level of B1 because it is able to communicate using simple language and with a few difficulties in grammar and constructions.

Example 2 below further illustrates study subjects who could express main ideas well, though they are insufficiently developed.

Example 2

Cheating in exams undermines the standard of education. Students who cheat in exam become poor decision makers in their careers students have resorted to cheating in order to qualify for there exams and the discussed below are the effects.

Cheating can lead to class failure as different colleges have different ways of imposing academic penalties on the students who cheat in exams or their assignments. Cheating causes embarrasment as the way people around you treat and view you once you are caught cheating causes stress they disregard you and loose trust in you. (K17f)

In example 2, the effects of cheating in exams, such as class failure and embarrassment, have been communicated. This is despite the presence of errors in the areas of sentence structure, vocabulary and even spelling. For instance, the last paragraph is a

sentence run-on comprised of two sentences that have been punctuated as one sentence. They can be revised thus,
Cheating causes embarrasment as the way people around you treat and view you once you are caught cheating causes stress they disregard you and loose trust in you.

Furthermore, the word *embarrassment* has been misspelt, and the word *loose* has been used wrongly in place of *lose*, a word with which it is commonly confused. It can also be observed that the body paragraphs in this speech are comprised of only one sentence that expresses the main idea, and no attempt has been made to develop these main ideas. All these characteristics place the proficiency at level B1.

Another indicator of proficiency in grammar is vocabulary range. According to the Council of Europe (2020), vocabulary range concerns the breadth and variety of expressions used. This is gained through reading widely. The highest level of proficiency in this aspect (level C2) requires the language user to have a good command of a very broad lexical repertoire, including idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms. The user at this level should also show awareness of connotative levels of meaning.

In the study data, the vocabulary range as a measure of proficiency in grammar is at level B1. This is the level that requires the language user to have a good range of vocabulary related to familiar topics and everyday situations. The vocabulary is sufficient for one to express themselves with some circumlocutions (Council of Europe, 2020). Example 1 above demonstrates this as the writer has sufficient vocabulary to express themselves simply, and there is use of circumlocutions. For instance, the study subject in example 1 is able to express themselves on the topic of "cheating in exams". They use vocabulary such as *dire consequences, manipulation of exam material,* and also idioms such as *scotfree* and *pinpointed.* However, the expression *no shortcut is any place worth going* could be erroneous and could be revised to *no shortcut leads to any place worth going.* This, therefore, puts the vocabulary range of this text at B1 (threshold), the level where the user has simple vocabulary, simple idiom, uses circumlocution due to insufficient vocabulary and sometimes errors in vocabulary and idiom.

Example 2 also demonstrates the use of simple vocabulary to communicate the familiar topic of cheating in exams, and some vocabulary, such as *loose* has been wrongly used; nevertheless, meaning is negotiated with some degree of success.

Council of Europe (2001) identifies grammatical accuracy as another indicator of proficiency in grammar. It is described as the aspect concerned with grammatical correctness. It has been observed that inaccuracy increases at level B1 of proficiency (Council of Europe, 2020). This is because at Level B1, the learner starts to use language more independently and creatively. The highest level of proficiency in this aspect (level C2) describes a user who maintains consistent grammatical control of complex language, even while attention is otherwise engaged (Council of Europe, 2020).

In the study data, grammatical accuracy has an average proficiency level of B1. This is the level of a language user who communicates with reasonable accuracy in familiar contexts. The user generally has good control of grammar, but there is noticeable mother-tongue influence. Errors occur, but what is intended is clear. In example 1, among other inaccuracies, there is no subject-verb agreement in some sentences. For example, in the sentence, *Cheating in exams or exams malpractice as some will call it, as far as I know only have negative consequences some of which can be very dire.* In this sentence, the subject is *cheating in exams.* This is a singular subject that should go with a singular verb, but in this case, the verb is plural, *have.* However, this lack of subject-verb agreement does not hinder meaning. Similarly, in example 2, the intended meaning is clear despite errors with regard to sentence structure, spelling and vocabulary.

Vocabulary control is yet another indicator of proficiency in grammar (Council of Europe, 2001). It has been described as the aspect concerned with the learner's ability to choose appropriate expressions from their repertoire. Level C2 of proficiency in this aspect requires one to have the ability to consistently and correctly use appropriate, less common

vocabulary idiomatically. In the study data, the average proficiency level in vocabulary control is B2 (assigned a value of 4 in this study). This level is characterised by lexical accuracy with few confusions and a few incorrect instances of word choice, which do not hinder meaning. Consider example 3 below, drawn from the study data.

Example 3

We had just entered the class on time and our lecturer arrived very early just right on time to resume the lesson. My friend chose to sit in the middle of the class where it is very warm. He fell asleep and had a short dream in which he shouted, "Mummy, mummy help! help!" We all started laughing because he was literally shouting at the top of his voice that was deep. (K9i)

The word *resume* is incorrectly used since the meaning intended, based on the context (the students had just entered class), is *start.* This wrong choice of vocabulary is not a very common feature in the study data, thus the average level of vocabulary control is B2. Likewise, examples 1 and 2 have largely accurate word choice, albeit mostly simple common vocabulary. Few errors and confusions with regard to word choice can be observed, for instance the choice of the word *loose* instead of *lose* in example 2.

Orthographic Control is another indicator of proficiency in grammar. It is concerned with the ability to spell and use language, layout, and punctuation (Council of Europe, 2020). Level C2 of proficiency in this aspect is marked by orthography that is error free. In the study data, the average level of proficiency in this aspect is B1. The language user at this level can produce continuous writing which is generally intelligible throughout. Spelling, punctuation and layout are accurate enough to be followed most of the time. Consider example 4 below, which is drawn from the study data.

Example 4

Generally and in conclution, cheating in exams is a very dangerous and stressfull practice, when a student ends up finding himself a culprit of exam malpractices, he ruins his reputation and can even lead to him being discontinued. (N5f)

Two words: *conclusion* and *stressful* have been misspelt in example 3 above. The whole structure is a sentence run-on because two sentences have been punctuated as one. The revised version would read,

Generally and in conclusion, cheating in exams is a very dangerous and stressful practice. When a student ends up finding himself a culprit of exam malpractices, he ruins his reputation and this can even lead to him being discontinued.

Despite the orthographic errors highlighted above, meaning is not hindered; therefore, level B1 in orthographic control is appropriate. Similarly, examples 1, 2 and 3 demonstrate this same level of orthographic control where despite spelling and punctuation errors, the texts are still meaningful.

Level of Proficiency in Discourse Organisation in the Written English of First-Year University Students in Kenya

In CEFR, proficiency in discourse organisation concerns how a text is organised, structured and arranged. For written texts, discourse competence is marked by thematic development as well as coherence and cohesion. Thematic development concerns the logical presentation of a text, whereby ideas in a text are expanded and developed using supporting details.

In the study data, thematic development is at the proficiency level of B1. The language user at this level can clearly signal chronological sequence, can develop an argument well enough to be followed without difficulty, and is aware of the conventional structure of the text type concerned. The study data demonstrates this level of proficiency because study subjects have mostly displayed awareness of the conventional structure of a speech and an informal letter, which are the texts they were required to write. Consider example 5 below, drawn from the study data coded as F3i.

Example 5:

P.O. Box 133,
Xxxxx.

21st NOVEMBER 2022
Dear xxxx,

How are you doing? I am sorry it took me longer than expected to write to you. How have you been doing during this holiday? On my part, I have been travelling and making new friends and good memories.

Oh my goodness I have this story that I have been dying to tell you and I swear it is so funny. This incident happened in my class in the period of practical presentation where we made the class so restless and due to this our lecturer gave lectures like we should behave properly and should know the seriousness of rotting at university.

He was using his project and we were in a class of approximately two hundred students. We would be able to see and follow through. He was busy looking at a folder that has a collection related to the lesson to show us and help us navigate through the commonly challenging unit.

His efforts to locate the drive seemed not to yield fruits. He closed the presentation and opened a different drive and we all saw a folder named "xx had press" everybody was shocked to see such a folder in a professor's device. An awkward silence followed and then the class started hawling and shouting at the top of their lungs, "open it, open it". He looked astonished and not ready to open it but he did not close it either. It just kept flushing there for some time until he opened it and the folder was empty. We spent the whole lecture giggling and whispering to one another.

Yours faithful,
Xxxx

Example 5 above has some structural and grammatical errors, but they do not hinder meaning. The conventional structure of an informal letter is followed, where the addresses and date are laid out correctly. The complimentary close is far too formal and incorrect (should be *faithfully, not faithful*), but this study subject demonstrates the ability to use the correct layout for a friendly letter. The letter also gives a chronological account of an incident that happened in a lecture and uses signals of chronological order, such as *an awkward silence followed.* The word *followed* signals that events are flowing chronologically.

Example 2 is a demonstration of study subjects who did not demonstrate the ability to develop paragraphs well. Consider the paragraphs below copied from example 2.

Cheating can lead to class failure as different colleges have different ways of imposing academic penalties on the students who cheat in exams or their assignments.

Cheating causes embarrasment as the way people around you treat and view you once you are caught cheating causes stress they disregard you and loose trust in you.

These are one-sentence paragraphs that have introduced ideas but have not continued to sufficiently develop them. They are, therefore, lacking in thematic development.

Coherence and cohesion also help measure proficiency in discourse organisation. They refer to how separate elements in a text are linked into a logical whole through the use of lexical and grammatical devices such as reference, ellipsis, substitution, conjunction, synonyms, repetition of the same word, and collocation. In the study data, this aspect of discourse competence has a proficiency level of B2. At this level, the language user can efficiently utilise a variety of linking expressions to clearly indicate the relationships between ideas. There may be some "jumpiness," but texts are generally well-organised and coherent with logical paragraphs (Council of Europe, 2020).

Example 5 above demonstrates coherence and cohesion in that a number of cohesive devices have been used to cause it to hang together as a whole. For example, pronoun reference has been used several times: the phrase *the lecturer* is used in paragraph 2, and the text that follows this mention uses the pronouns *he* and *his* to refer to the lecturer. Collocation as a cohesive device has also been utilised in example 5. An example is the use of the words

folder, drive, and device, all used in separate sentences in relation to the lecturer's computer. They, therefore, join the concerned sentences cohesively. Some texts in the study data do not demonstrate appropriate links between sentences or even paragraphs. Example 6 below lacks links between sentences.

Example 6:
FUNNIEST INCIDENT DURING A LECTURE

1. Students sleeping during lecture.
2. Students passing notes to each other during lectures.
3. During a test, one student received the test paper and shouted out loud and stormed out of the lecture room.
4. During my first online lecture with the students, some did not mute their audios and distructed the class the whole lecture with funny background noises.
5. My first freshman class, when I entered the class they all stood up.

In this example, each sentence stands on its own, and there are no connectors to show how the sentences are connected. Such texts have lowered the average proficiency score for cohesion and coherence to level B1.

Level of Proficiency in Sociolinguistic Aspects in the Written English of First Year University Students in Kenya

Proficiency in the sociolinguistic aspects of language involves the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate the social dimensions of language use. It encompasses the use of polite forms, appropriate registers, and proper idioms and expressions. In the study data, sociolinguistic appropriateness has an average proficiency level of B2. A language user at this proficiency level can maintain relationships without embarrassment and awkwardness; they can adjust their expressions to distinguish between formal and informal registers, though they do not always do so appropriately. They can also express themselves confidently, clearly, and politely.

In the study data, it is clear that the study subjects are aware of when to use formal and when to use informal language. Consider example 7 below that has excerpts from data coded as L7f.

Example 7:
The students after passing exams with false marks may do tough courses in higher education institutions which they drop out in the process. This reduces the number of students graduating from prestigious courses that are meant to bring proffesionals in the countryreducing the number of qualified proffesionals.

In conclusion, the education system has been gravely affected by this behaviour, which has made many parents and other professionals not trust the education system. The hard work put in place by the stakeholders is carried in vain by those who cheat in examinations.

Though the text above has many errors, it is clearly written in a formal register. It also demonstrates an awareness of the formal context in which the speech would be delivered. It would, therefore, not be awkward. The excerpt below is from the same study subject, but for the informal text.

Example 8:
Dear Mary,
How are you doing? It has been a while since I checked up on you. How are your studies at Stanford University?How are your lecturers teaching there? Are they interactive as ours? I hope you are doing fine and healthy. (L7i)

This second excerpt adopts an informal register utilising casual style, such as the phrase *checked up on you.* Sociolinguistic appropriateness is also displayed in the use of polite forms such as greetings, *How are you doing?* At times, errors may occur, for example in example 5 which is an informal letter, yet it ends with a formal complimentary close, *Yours faithful* (should be *Yours faithfully*). The study sample, thus, demonstrated a fair ability to produce texts that are socially appropriate. This could be due to the fact that learners of a second language can utilise sociolinguistic rules of their L1 to other languages they learn.

The Level of Proficiency in Communication Strategies in the Written English of First-Year University Students in Kenya

In CEFR, producing a text requires three types of communication strategies, namely planning strategies, compensating strategies and monitoring and repair

strategies (Council of Europe, 2001). Skills in these three constitute proficiency in communication strategies. Planning involves mental preparation before producing language. Since the texts analysed in this study had already been produced, planning strategies were not studied here. Compensating is a strategy language users utilise to maintain communication when they cannot think of the appropriate expression, thus they have to compensate. The compensation can be in terms of the use of gestures to support language, or deliberately using the wrong word and qualifying it, for example, *the black and white horse that lives in the wild*, while referring to a zebra. One deliberately calls it a *horse*, though they know it is not, but qualifies the horse to communicate its characteristics that would aid in its identification. One can also compensate by defining the missing concept or by the use of a paraphrase (circumlocution). The study data has instances of compensation, and it is at level B1. This is because instances of compensation are few, and it is possible that the study subjects avoid communicating what they have problems with, rather than using compensation. Consider example 9 below, drawn from the study data coded as D17f.

Example 9:
Learning tends to build on itself, you learn basics first so that you can use those basics in more complicated problems.

The underlined part above is an example of circumlocution. It can be replaced by the word *cumulative.* Thus, the sentence would read, *Learning is cumulative.*

Other examples of compensating using circumlocution in the written data are examples 10 and 11 below.

Example 10:
… lecturers request the sending away of the student. (H11f)
This is a periphrastic (long) way of saying that the lecturers recommended *expulsion*.

Example 11:
Another effect is actually going to affect your upper class studies. (L13f)
The phrase *upper class* as used in this sentence refers to *tertiary* education. It is, therefore, an instance of circumlocution.

The CEFR scale for compensation categorises language that uses gestures to make up for insufficient vocabulary at levels A1 and A2. At the upper end of level B1, the language user can use communication strategies such as defining a concept or qualifying words, such as *a truck for carrying people,* when referring to a bus. This is the kind of compensation that is used in examples 10 and 11 above.

Example 9 above is a smoother way of compensating for a deficiency in vocabulary that CEFR would place at level B2. However, since instances of compensation are few, and some, like examples 10 and 11, do not fit into the texts seamlessly, the ability to use compensation strategies in the study data is placed at level B1. Monitoring and repair as an indicator of strategic competence is not observed in the written texts. It is a feature of spoken texts.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: The overall average score for proficiency in the written English of first-year university students in Kenya is 3.4. This translates to level B1 of proficiency based on CEFR. Though this level allows one to communicate simply on any subject, it is marked by numerous lexical, grammatical, mechanical and structural errors as demonstrated in the foregoing discussion. This means that at university entry, Kenyan students' writing is marked by errors that would compromise the efficacy of their communication. The International English Test (2024) recommends that students joining a university should have a minimum of B2 level of language proficiency. This level is marked by spontaneous, clear, well-structured language that demonstrates good command of vocabulary (Council of Europe, 2020). The current study supports this recommendation; thus, there is a need for the English secondary school curriculum in Kenya to align itself with the descriptors of level B2 of language proficiency.

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