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## Factors contributing to poor academic performance in English composition writing among grade12 learners in Kabwe District, Zambia

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### Abstract

There has been dissatisfaction with school leavers' English language skills, especially in composition writing and pupils' academic performance at the school certificate level is not as expected in most secondary schools. Therefore, this study aimed to assess factors contributing to poor academic performance in English Composition writing among Grade 12 learners in some selected secondary schools in Kabwe district of Central Province, Zambia. Eight (8) head teachers, (8) eight teachers, (4) four education standards officers, and eighty (80) learners from the eight secondary schools in Kabwe district were sampled for the study. Data was collected using questionnaires and in-depth interviews to allow the researchers a platform to ask open-response questions and to explore the respondents' perspectives about the factors contributing to poor academic performance in English Composition writing among Grade 12 learners. The data was analyzed by use of the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) computer package and Microsoft Word. The study revealed factors contributing to poor academic performance in English Composition writing among Grade 12 learners such as poor attitude, contact time, composition writing skills, poor teaching methods and techniques, and teachers lacking skills in various important areas of teaching composition in secondary schools at O' level. These areas include composition skills, teaching approach, and other factors revealed. Hence, the study recommended that head teachers should come up with programmes in schools through school-related activities to educate teachers on composition writing.

**Keywords:** English Composition; Factors; Official Language; Poor Academic Performance; Writing

### 1. Introduction

English is Zambia's national official language (MoE, 1996; Snelson, 1974). It is used as a means of communication and also as the language of particular activities such as education, commerce, and politics. The English language is also commonly used as a means of socialization. This position the English language enjoys demands that an average secondary school pupil should be competent with language skills. These are the receptive skills of listening and reading and the productive skills of speaking and writing. All learners need to have the skills in the use of English required for effective communication both while they are in school and once they leave secondary school. Learners need to go through the process of learning to acquire the skills needed for effective communication in composition writing. Muzumara (2011) defined learning as the acquisition of new knowledge, skills, and attitudes. As the learner acquires new knowledge, he/she develops the ability to display new behaviors and perform new tasks. The learner can know or do something that he/she was previously less able or unable to accomplish. In an organized and programmed type of learning, learners receive instructions in formal situations that are deliberately planned. In the programmed type of learning, the teacher inspires learners and guides their experiences from which they learn some fact, skill, or attitude

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(Farrant, 1980). This is what the study aimed to find out if learners are guided in their learning process. Some principles of learning may be considered to govern the learning process. Ibid (2011) outlined them as follows: readiness, effect, relaxation, association, involvement, and exercise. Generally, these can be applied to all learners at any level and in any subject area.

Children learn very well when they are ready. Stabb (1986) said readiness in the child is often shown by an eager response to the learning task with which he/she is presented. Children learn more easily when they have a desire to learn and this results in rapid progress once learning is begun. They learn best when they are physically, mentally, and emotionally ready. Lack of readiness may be due to either a lack of maturation or insufficient preparation of the child in the foundation of learning upon which the new learning will be built. Children learn with difficulty if they are not ready or interested in the topic or task. The result will be painfully slow progress or no progress at all (Ibid, 2011). This aspect of the principle of learning is very important to a child who is learning how to write composition. The child has to be ready, eager, and have the desire to do the task presented to him/her. With these, the child can do the task with less or no difficulties hence the focus of this study.

Ubahakwa (1991) says that another principle that governs the learning process is the effect. The principle of effect is based on the emotional reaction of the learner. Learning will usually be much more effective when a feeling of satisfaction, pleasantness, or reward is part of the process. The learners would strive to continue doing what provides a pleasant effect to continue learning. Positive reinforcement is more suitable to lead to success and motivate the learners. The teacher should recognize and commend improvement. Whatever the learning situation, it should contain elements that affect the learners positively and give them a feeling of satisfaction. Learning boosts someone's confidence and leads to a better quality of life (Muzumara, 2011). The effect is also important to learners learning to write a composition. They would come to know the importance of composition writing and the task would be enjoyable. Relaxation is also a principle that governs the learning process. Vygosky (1962) suggests that children learn best and remember longest when they are relaxed. Reduction of stress increases learning and retention. Relaxation would make a learner attain a state of increased calmness as he/she is doing the task. This makes a learner think freely and do the task as expected. Another principle that governs learning is association. Learning makes sense when the mind compares a new idea with something already known. Learning involves thinking. Knowledge is important to learning. Learning and knowledge are linked. So learners need knowledge and experiences already known to think with so that it is easier for them to learn new things (Barton, 2007).

Involvement is also a principle that governs the learning process. Pupils learn best when they take an active role in learning. Involvement has a direct influence on the development of the intellect. An involved learner will always have participatory behavior. This child is active, responsive, and engages in activities. The child becomes creative in thinking about who would come out with his/her ideas and relate what has been previously learned to the new context. The child can apply a learning strategy in a given learning situation. Involvement arouses enthusiasm and concentration (Ewell, 1997) hence the focus of this study. The principle of exercise states that those things most often repeated are best remembered. The more often an act is repeated, the more quickly and more permanently it will become a habit or an easily remembered piece of information (Ibid, 2011). The principle of exercise is the basis of drill and practice. It has been proven that learners learn better when they have meaningful practice and repetition. The key to this principle is that practice must be meaningful. It has also been proven that practice leads to improvement only when it is followed by positive feedback.

Whitehurst & Lonigan (1998) narrate that learners do not learn complex tasks in a single lesson. They learn by applying what they have been taught and shown. Every time practice occurs, and learning continues. The teachers must repeat important items of subject matter at reasonable intervals, and provide opportunities for learners to practice while making sure that this process is directed towards a goal. The principle of exercise is also important to a learner learning to write a composition. A learner would perform better when he/she has meaningful practice and repetition with positive feedback. This leads to improvement in composition writing and hence the need to investigate. Since English is taught as a Second Language and, at the same time, used as the medium of instruction from upper primary to tertiary levels of education (MoE, 1996), pupils need to master the skills for communication. However, over the years, there has been dissatisfaction with school leavers' language skills, especially in writing. If pupils are taught how to write composition in class, how is it that their performance at the school certificate level is not as expected in most secondary schools (ECZ, 2015). The pupils' challenges in composition writing have been acknowledged with concern. The Chief Examiners' Reports on candidates' performance in the 2008 and 2014 Joint School Certificate of Education English Language Paper 1 noted that "Most candidates exhibited many challenges in Paper 1" (ECZ, 2008 and 2014). This indicates that Grade 12 school leavers complete their secondary education with very poor composition writing skills. It was not known why pupils' performance was poor despite having been taught in class. A study was therefore needed to identify the factors that contribute to Grade 12 pupils' poor performance in English composition writing.

### 1.1. Statement of the Problem

Writing is one of the ways a pupil can express him/herself on a given subject. The teaching of composition writing aims at equipping learners with skills in expressing themselves in writing effectively. A pupil should communicate effectively and accurately without or with fewer mistakes in writing (MoE, 1996). However, it has been observed that in many secondary schools in the Kabwe district, most Grade 12 pupils do not perform as expected in composition writing.

### 1.2. The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to evaluate factors contributing to poor academic performance in English composition writing among Grade 12 learners in Kabwe district, Zambia.

### 1.3. Research Objectives

The objectives of the study were to:

- Identify the errors pupils make in composition writing in class in some selected secondary schools in Kabwe district, Zambia.
- Assess the approaches/methods teachers use to teach composition writing in some selected secondary schools in Kabwe district, Zambia.
- Analyze factors contributing to poor academic performance in Grade 12 composition writing in some selected secondary schools in Kabwe district, Zambia.

### 1.4. Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by three theories-transmission theory by Thomas Aquinas, social-cultural theory by Lev Vygotsky, and cognitive theory by Jean Piaget in the 1930s, which guides teaching and learning in a manner that warrants improved learner performance by explaining human behavior and understanding the thought processes. The theories provided valuable information that gave insight into composition writing and brought out key factors concerning teaching that relate to improved learner performance.

### 1.5. Significance of the study

This study may benefit teachers of English in the use of appropriate approaches and the teaching of skills in composition writing. This, in turn, may improve the performance of pupils in composition writing. The study may contribute to the literature on factors contributing to poor academic performance in English composition writing in Grade 12 amongst learners. Further, the findings of this study may help policymakers and curriculum developers to set the curriculum in line with desirable objectives.

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## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Composition Writing

Composition writing is an act of writing or self-expression in writing in prose on a given subject. It is a continuous piece of writing that is formed by putting together the ideas the writer has on the subject. The writer tries to express his/her impressions, feelings, ideas, opinions, thoughts, and reflections, in the best way that he/she can. Writing makes the writer's thinking known to others. This is done in an organized way so that the reader can understand it (Rego, 2009). There are several purposes for writing a composition. It may be to inform, to persuade, to call the readers' attention to something, to express feelings, to entertain, or to give pleasure. The art of composition writing is learned through practice (Ibid, 2009). For learners to be able to express their feelings in writing, they need to learn with the guidance of a teacher in a classroom situation. It is for this reason that during composition writing lessons, learners learn the skills of continuous writing. Pupils learn how to plan and organize ideas logically. It is in a composition writing lesson where the teaching and learning of the skills of communication through writing is done (Luangala, 2004; Heffernan & Lincoln, 1994).

When writing a composition, a writer has to imagine that he/she is speaking to somebody as he/she is writing. One has to apply the golden rules of writing which say: Imagine the person you are writing to is with you. You write words as you would have spoken them (Sutton, 1972 in Sidambi, 2011). Writing a composition is a complex activity that includes the mechanics of writing, spelling, and the basics of language knowledge. This includes generating ideas, planning what to say and how to say it, and organizing the ideas into a coherent whole. It also includes recognizing the needs of the reader and how to meet these needs. It requires translating these plans into a written text, including the style of writing

and choosing words appropriate to the writing task (Myers, 1983). In this case, the writer has to remember all the necessary components that need to be included in producing the composition (Rego, 2009). Composition writing is much more than any other exercise. Unlike speaking, writing aims at compactness and precision in expression as well as grammatical, orthographic, and idiomatic accuracy. Writing in English entails coping with spelling, punctuation problems and fluency of expression, grammatical and lexical accuracy, and of the appropriateness of the style of writing (Tunncliffe, et al, 1986). Each particular piece of writing, therefore, should be written clearly and in a style that is suitable to its content.

## **2.2. Types of Composition**

### *2.2.1. Narrative Writing*

A narrative composition is a kind of writing where you talk about what happened to you or what you witnessed (Burton, 1982). It is telling a story. Some narratives are exciting, mystery while others are about ordinary life. Narrative writing involves a main idea or a lesson learned. To make the story interesting, pupils should think out the important ideas before they begin writing. They should plan the story carefully. The following must be considered in the writing of a narrative;

- Identifying the experience that you want to write about.
- Thinking about why the experience is important to you. Spend some time to remember what happened and write them down (Burton, 1982).

### *2.2.2. Descriptive Writing*

In descriptive writing, pupils are expected to describe processes, objects, places, atmospheres and scenes. For one to describe any of the above, one must have a clear picture of it in mind. One has to depict a picture in words as if he/she can see, hear, taste, and smell it. The writer should give detailed information about what is being described. One reason for writing a description is to have a reader identify what you have described once he/she sees it (Rego, 2009).

### *2.2.3. Argumentative Writing*

Argumentative writing is a kind of writing where the writer has to make the reader believe and support his/her idea or point of view. There are important steps to follow. These are;

- Identify your main ideas or point of view. Your purpose will be to make your reader accept the idea or point of view
- Identify your reader. To write a good argument, try to understand your reader's mind.
- Considering your readers, identify the strongest supporting points for your argument.
- Identify the most important opposing view. Explaining and strongly disagreeing with the opposing view will make your reader believe you more and give you support (Burton, 1982).

### *2.2.4. Expository Writing*

Expository writing is where you explain something with the correct information that you have and not what you think about it (Hedge, 2004). The function of expository writing is to explain or inform your reader with knowledge. By explaining a topic to the reader, you are demonstrating your knowledge. When writing an expository composition, words such as first, after, next, then, and last are used. This shows that one idea follows the other in an orderly manner. The second-person pronoun 'you' is also used. Pupils should be exposed to these types of compositions so that they can recognize and use them. With exposure, they will be able to write according to the requirements of each composition type in terms of format, grammar, and style. In short, pupils will be able to apply correctly the needed skills in a composition. One would wonder if pupils are taught all these types of compositions to apply the needed skills in composition writing.

## **2.3. Features of a Good Composition**

Many teachers admit to being uncomfortable when teaching composition writing. Secondary school learners easily grow frustrated as they are asked to write more and are assessed more thoroughly on their writing. This is because composing a piece of written communication demands an understanding of the content, knowledge of the audience and the context, ability to use appropriate conventions for that audience and context (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987). To come up with a good composition, the following features of a good composition are considered. These features are; focus organization, development, style, correctness, content, audience awareness, and creativity.

### 2.3.1. Focus

This is the main topic or subject which is established by the writer in response to the writing task. Focus is a feature of effective writing that answers the question “So what?” An effective piece of writing establishes a single focus and sustains that focus throughout the writing. A writer must think about what his/her topic should communicate. Focus, therefore, involves more than just knowing what your story is about, but understanding why you are writing it in the first place. Without a clear focus, learners’ compositions degenerate into lists of loosely related events or facts with no central idea to hold them together, leaving the reader to ask “So what?” By establishing a clear focus before they start to write, learners can craft their writing into a coherent and unified whole (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987). Finding a focus will help learners find the significance in their compositions, the message that they want to convey to their audience, and their reason for writing (Graves, 1994). It also helps readers, who are the teachers; understand the point of the piece of writing. If the readers are confused about the subject matter, the writer has not effectively established a focus. If the readers are engaged and not confused, the writer has been effective in establishing a focus. The time for the learners to think about focus, therefore, is before they begin to write, during the pre-writing stage of the writing process. Cox (2002) says that learners should critically establish a focus by knowing their audience. Who will read the piece of writing, and why? What will readers know or expect when they read? Are the learners applying this feature before and during the prewriting stage of the writing process?

### 2.3.2. Organization

Organization is the progression, relatedness, and completeness of ideas. A strong composition is well organized into paragraphs. Each paragraph focuses on a single idea and displays logical information. Each paragraph should be unified by intelligent use of transitions or keywords. Similarly, good writers use transition words to link paragraphs into a unified whole. This sequence should be logical and support the idea. An effective composition is organized with an introduction, main body, and conclusion. The introduction should begin in an interesting way that catches the readers’ attention. The main body should consist of several well-developed paragraphs. The conclusion should wrap it up by giving the reader a sense of closure (Ibid, 1994). Are learners’ compositions organized to display logical information?

### 2.3.3. Development

A composition is well organized when the idea in every paragraph is linked to the central idea. The writer provides a sufficient elaboration of the idea. Two important criteria used in determining whether details are supportive are the concept of relatedness and sufficiency. To be supportive of the subject matter, details must be related to the focus. Relatedness has to do with the directness of the relationship that the writer establishes between the information and the subject matter. Supporting details should be relevant and clear. The writer must present ideas with clarity to cause the support to be sufficient (Harris & Graham, 1992).

### 2.3.4. Style

Style is the control of language that is appropriate to the purpose, audience, and context of the writing task. The writer’s style is evident through word choice and sentence fluency. Skillful use of precise, purposeful vocabulary enhances the effectiveness of the composition through the use of appropriate words, phrases, and description that engages the audience (Graves, 1994).

### 2.3.5. Correctness

A composition should be written in a generally correct standard of English. It should display correct sentences, grammar, punctuation, sentence unity, agreement, syntax, and spelling. There should also be strong control over sentence structure and sentence form to have error-free composition writing.

### 2.3.6. Content

The content of the composition is the writer’s message. Good composition develops the writer’s main points through thorough discussion and the use of specific details. A good composition includes specific details to support the writer’s explanation (Harris & Graham, 1992).

### 2.3.7. Creativity

To be creative in writing is to go beyond the given information in a context and to work out what is new using the old information (Verghese, 1989).

These features of composition writing can help learners to become better writers. They help learners to focus on areas of strength as well as weakness. These features also help learners to become critical readers of their writing and those of others. The study aimed to find out if these features of composition were being incorporated into the teaching of composition lessons.

## **2.4. Composition writing skills**

There are special skills that learners are supposed to acquire to write a composition concisely and coherently. (Gathumbi & Masembe 2005) define a skill as a special ability acquired by training. A learner can demonstrate composition skills by the ability to perform a given writing task and this can only be done after some levels of training. These skills can make learners write their compositions well. Composition skills allow a learner to communicate the message with clarity and ease in writing. They enable learners to express thoughts, ideas, opinions, and viewpoints in an organized way (Hill, 1999). Teachers need to include the skills as they are planning for their composition lessons for them to set the limits for the content to be covered so that they remain focused during their lessons (Thungu et al, 2008). These skills are: thinking of ideas, organization of ideas, organization of composition, writing of composition, spelling, punctuation, vocabulary, and grammar.

### *2.4.1. Thinking of Ideas*

The skill of thinking of ideas comes about when a learner thinks of ideas for the writing activity. This is usually done during brainstorming or pre-writing. The teacher can present a situation or a question. Then he/she gives the learners reasonable time to freely think about ideas. It can be done through the learner talking to him/herself or with fellow learners producing ideas, or making comments on the topic given (Ibid, 2008). At this stage, pupils get a clear understanding of what their teacher expects from the writing activity. They figure out the best way to approach the activity. The learners feel free to explore their thoughts and opinions about a given activity and see where it leads. Brainstorming promotes creativity by encouraging learners in the generation of ideas through non-critical discussions. It also encourages enthusiasm and a competitive spirit among learners. A learner or learners can write down as many ideas as they can. Thinking of ideas is done before the actual writing activity (Raimes, 1983). This was what this study aimed to find out if teachers were using this skill when teaching composition writing.

### *2.4.2. Organization of Ideas*

From the ideas that were suggested during the brainstorming (thinking of ideas), learners should first select the relevant ideas for the given topic systematically and then put them into sequence. Learners must be trained to recognize what is logically connected to the given topic and put them in order. The re-arrangement may be in any order such as chronological order, logical order, from general to particular and spatial order (Tomlinson, 1980). It was not known if teachers were using this skill when teaching composition writing.

### *2.4.3. Organization of Composition*

A composition script is organized under three main parts namely; introduction, main body, and conclusion (Hill, 1999). The introduction reveals to the reader what the composition is about, why the writer is writing it, and how is going to approach the subject. This paragraph should set the tone for the composition. It should also arrest the reader's attention and it should make him/her want to read more. If the composition is an imaginary story, it is a good idea to begin it with a crisis. The main body of the composition should then interestingly develop the writer's theme, fulfilling the promise of the first paragraph, proving that the writer had a good reason for writing and showing that his approach was a reasonable one. Every sentence should be relevant to the theme expounded in the first paragraph of the composition. The conclusion should summarize what has gone before clearly and decisively, leaving the reader with the feeling that the composition has really been worth reading. One would wonder if teachers were using this skill when teaching composition writing.

### *2.4.4. Writing of Composition*

When writing, it is important that the learners should have a clear picture of whom they are addressing. They should always write for a specific person or group and continually think what this person or group is getting from what they are writing without forgetting to have a clear picture of what they are writing about. Before full composition work is begun, paragraph work can be practiced. The learners should write the first draft, the second or even the third draft before they write the final text. They should revise on grammar, usage and on suitability and arrangement of ideas. Learners should edit their compositions, identifying and correcting the errors. Having revised and edited their work, they then write the final version of the composition for submission to their teacher (Hill, 1999). This study aimed to find out if this skill was taught.

#### 2.4.5. Spelling

To spell is to write the letters of a word (Akombo et. Al, 2007). This is an action of forming words using letters. The essential identity of words is conveyed by the correct selection of graphemes, which are the spelling rules of the language. Spelling is an important element in English that learners must know because points may be denied for spelling mistakes. Learning and teaching of the skill of spelling can develop the pupils' minds to remember the accepted spelling. Correct spelling improves the overall presentation of the learners' work and will help with their confidence in writing. It was not known if learners were being reminded of this skill as they were engaged in writing of composition.

#### 2.4.6. Punctuation

Punctuation is a system of signs or symbols given to a reader to show how a sentence is constructed and how it should be read. Punctuation shows how the sentence should be read and makes the meaning clear. The punctuation system of a language has two functions. The first purpose is to enable stretches of written language to be read in a reasonable, connected way. The second purpose is to give an indication of the rhythm and colour of speech (Crystal, 1987).

The marks of punctuation are used between the words to show how the parts of a sentence relate to the whole sentence. Punctuation marks help the reader to understand more exactly what is written. The marks help the learners to put the thoughts and ideas of their written work in order (Akombo et. al, 2007). The punctuation marks include:

- The comma ( , ) - Is useful in a sentence when the writer wishes to pause before proceeding or adding a phrase that does not contain new subject. It can also be used to separate items on a list and also when using more than one adjective (a describing word). *Example: He lost his phone, reading glasses, wallet and passport.*
- The full stop ( . ) - Should always be used to end the sentence. The full stop indicates that a point has been made and that you are about to move on to further explanations or a related point. *Example: Our teacher has come.*
- The exclamation mark ( ! ) - Indicates strong feeling within a sentence, such as fear, anger or love. It is also used to accentuate feeling within the written spoken word. *Example: Help! Stop that thief!*
- The question mark ( ? ) - Simply indicates that a sentence is asking a question. It always comes at the end of the sentence. *Example: Are you coming tomorrow?*
- The semi-colon ( ; ) - Is perhaps the most difficult sign of punctuation to use accurately. It is used when joining two connected sentences and also to assemble detailed lists. *Example: The wind was strong; the sea was rough.*
- The colon ( : ) - Is commonly used when listing and within a heading or descriptive title. It is used to separate figures when used for hours and minutes and to separate titles and subtitles. The colon is also used in writing of bibliographies. *Example: She placed the following items into the trolley: beer, fruits, vegetables, toilet rolls, cereals and milk.*
- The apostrophe ( ' ) - Is sometimes called an inverted comma. It indicates possession or ownership. It is also used to indicate where a letter is omitted. *Example: This is Jane's jersey.*
- The quotation marks ( " " ) - Are used to mark out speech and when quoting someone else's speech. They are also used to set off the titles of short stories, poems, essays, magazines, articles, reports and song.
- *Example: Jumbo said, "Could I help you milk the cows?"*
- The hyphen ( - ) - Is used to link words together, especially the compound words. *Example: sub-part, week-end, non-verbal*
- The brackets ( ( ) ) - Always come in pairs and are used to make an aside, or a point which is not part of the main flow of a sentence. If you remove the words between the brackets, the sentence should still make sense. *Example: The strategy (or strategies) chosen to meet the objectives may need to change as the intervention continues.*
- The slash ( / ) - Is commonly used instead of 'or'. *Example: she/he*
- Capitalization - Capitalize the first word of every sentence, the direct quotation that is a sentence, proper nouns, names of persons, towns, counties, months, days and holidays (Akombo e'tal, 2007). Were teachers using this skill when teaching composition writing?

#### 2.4.7. Vocabulary

The words used in a language constitute its vocabulary. There are two classifications of words. These are function and content words. Function words are interrogatives, prepositions, auxiliaries and so on. Content words are those words of particular grammatical classes with meaning. The learners in secondary schools need to have vocabulary large enough for them to grasp the information which is given. They should also have the vocabulary to produce utterances and write on a variety of topics. Without structural competence the learners would never make themselves understood in writing as well as in speaking. Learners need to increase the number of lexical items which they can understand and use in writing (Tomlinson, 1980).

#### 2.4.8. Grammar

Grammar is a system consisting of phonology, morphology, semantics and syntax. The grammar of a language is essentially a logical, complete explanation of the way that language operates (Verghese, 1989). The grammar of any language acts as a guide in making sentences. A collection of words which conveys sense or meaning and is formed according to the logic of grammar constitutes a sentence. The meaning of the sentences should flow from one sentence to the next, carrying the argument or point of view forward in a clear and concise manner. If one does not use correct grammar, what one is trying to say will become unclear and the reader will be unable to follow the text because the flow of meaning is interrupted. Knowing the rules of grammar is important for communicating in a language (Ibid, 1989). Inconsistencies of grammar and mistakes in grammar blur the meaning of written work and can cause confusion in the mind of the reader. This slows the reader down and distracts him/her from getting the meaning of the sentence and the key messages contained. When preparing to write a composition, learners should plan, organize, arrange ideas in order and make the draft before writing the final one to be marked. All these aspects are to be taught in a composition lesson. This may justify the significance of this study to find out if these skills were being taught during composition lessons.

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### 3. Research methodology

#### 3.1. Research design

The study used a case study design. A case study design is useful in obtaining and describing data in depth of a particular case (Cain & Oakhill, 2007). The study was designed to be qualitative but it also used some quantitative techniques to analyze data of figures as well as attain the comprehensive results. On the other hand, quantitative method made the use of questionnaires, surveys and experiment to gather data that is revised and tabulated in numbers, which allows the data to be characterized by use of statistical analysis. Qualitative methods were appropriate to this investigation as it produced detailed data from a small group of participants, while exploring impressions, judgments and observation of English composition writing lessons as they appeared on the time table in the eight selected secondary schools, as well as the administration of tests in the same schools.

#### 3.2. Research site

The study was carried out in the eight selected secondary schools (Kabwe, Highridge, Central, Mine, Chimupati, Caritas, Bwacha and Stephen Luwisha ) in Kabwe district of Central Province from which respondents were also sampled.

#### 3.3. Population, Sample, and Sampling Procedure

The population for the study was purposefully drawn from the eight secondary schools. Purposive sampling procedure was used to select Head teachers (8) and Education Standards Officers (4) while the simple random sampling procedure was used to select the teachers (8) and pupils (80). The sample size comprised of 100 respondents. Also, the primary data was complimented by the secondary data which was derived from government policy documents, ministerial reports and relevant literature on the teaching and learning of initial literacy. In the sampling of institutions, the study adopted the stratified cluster random sampling technique. Sampling was done school status (rural or urban) and zone by zone. Schools were clustered by zones. Four zones were purposively selected based it being rural or urban. The sampling was done at three levels: Sampling zones and schools- level 1, Sampling teachers and learners-level 2, Sampling head teachers and Education standards officers -level 3.

#### 3.4. Data Analysis

In this research, the data was analyzed qualitatively as the semi structured interviews and observation schedules were used as data collection instruments. Thematic approach was used, where data analysis started with the categorization of themes from the semi structured interviews and observation schedules. Charts and graphs were used to analyze the data. The data gathered was analyzed according to the themes of the study, the order of the research objectives. Data generated from the interview guide was analyzed manually and also, a combination of software MS Access, SPSS and MS Excel was used to analyze data. Analysis was mainly descriptive, that is, mean, median, mode, range, and standard deviation. Related statistics were applied where possible. Statistical testing took the form of Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), correlation and regression both simple and multiple.

#### 3.5. Ethical Issues

The study avoided pressuring respondents to take part in the research. Alternatively, informed consent and assent were obtained from respondents involved in the research, and the research topic was strategically selected to ensure that there was no harm whatsoever to the research respondents. In this research, the study was fully conscious of the need



to abide by the ethical rule of respecting the privacy of individuals taking part in the research. In the same way, all the respondents of the research were to remain unidentified to the public as all their valuable views, opinions, and perceptions were only known by the researcher for use only in the research and participants' identities will forever remain hidden. The Researchers got permission from the head teachers to interview teachers and learners and from the District Education Board Secretary to interview Education Standards Officers and head teachers. The names of respondents would remain anonymous for the sake of confidentiality (Blum, 2013). However, the identity of respondents was concealed in the thesis but for identification in the thesis, the eighty learners were allocated numbers 1 to 80, the eight Head teachers were allocated ordinal numbers 1st to 8th the eight teachers were allocated letters A to H, while the four Education Standards Officers were allocated names of primary colours -Blue, Red, Green and Yellow.

## 4. Results and discussions

### 4.1. Errors Pupils made in Writing Composition

According to study results, all the errors pupils made in their written compositions from the eight schools were as follows: spellings at (18.34%), pronouns (10.94%), apostrophe/possessive (9.46%), run-on sentences (9.17%), expressions not grammatically clear (8.57%), wrong punctuation (8.28%), missing words (7.69), wrong expressions (5.91%), word order (5.17%), inaccurate word choice (4.58%), wrong preposition (4.43%), comma slices (4.14%), and lack of subject/verb agreement (3.25%) as illustrated in Table 1 below.

**Table 1** Errors Pupils Made by Type

No	error type	Frequency	Percentage
1	Run-on sentences	62	09.17
2	Comma slices	28	04.14
3	Lack of subject/verb agreement	22	03.25
4	Pronoun	74	10.94
5	Apostrophe/possession	64	09.46
6	Inaccurate word choice	31	04.58
7	Spelling	124	18.34
8	Not grammatically clear	58	08.57
9	Missing words	52	07.69
10	Wrong preposition	30	04.43
11	Wrong expression	40	05.91
12	Word order	35	05.17
13	Wrong punctuation	56	08.28
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>676</b>	<b>100%</b>

The study revealed that some written sentences were not grammatically clear to get the intended thought as for one to communicate effectively either in written or spoken, there must be logic or sensible utterances. Once this is lost, the meaning of such utterances is distorted and communication cannot take place effectively. Lack of vocabulary could be the source of such errors. (Archer et. Al, 2012) says "it is through vocabulary that the learner acquires or learns to think, organize and focus of ideas." A learner with less vocabulary experience faces more problems in writing. Ibid (2012) notes that "it is through the increased number of lexical items learners understand that they use them in writing." (Shaughness, 1977) describes vocabulary as the collection of words in a given language used and understood in speaking, listening, reading and writing. Learners who cannot write logical or meaningful sentences will surely perform poorly in English composition writing. On punctuation, (Akombo, e'tal 2007) says that "punctuation marks help the reader to understand more what is written." Learners who do not use punctuation marks correctly perform poorly in composition writing. To perform well, a learner must have a language to use for what they wanted to talk about. (Cain

& Oakhill 2007) stipulates that “words are the building blocks of vocabulary.” So understanding and using words is the aim of language. (Ibid, 2007) further say that “vocabulary knowledge is a key component of reading and writing and it comes about as a result of oral language.” Hence, the richer the learners’ vocabulary in English language, the better they would be in expressing themselves in terms of composition writing.

#### 4.1.1. Skills Taught and Writing Strategies used During Composition Writing

According to study results, during Composition writing lessons, pupils were taught the skills of stating at 50%, editing 50%, research 37.5%, planning 25%, revising 25%, organization 25%, outlining 25% and the least taught skill is spelling and grammar at 12.5% as illustrated in Table 2 below.

**Table 2** Skills Taught and Skills Not Taught

S/n	Skills taught	Percentage of Skills taught	Percentage of Skills not Taught
1	Research	37.5	62.5
2	Planning	25	75
3	Editing	50	50
4	Revising	25	75
5	Spelling/grammar	12.5	87.5
6	Organization	25	75
7	Outlining	25	75
8	stating	50	50

The study revealed that poorly taught composition skills contribute to poor academic performance in examinations as learners are not able to express their feelings or ideas in writing. On the same, (Hill 1999) says that “skills of writing enable a learner to express his or her thoughts, ideas, opinions and viewpoints in an organized manner. During the learners’ schooling, they need to develop some writing skills such as: the ability to write complete and meaningful sentences, coherent, clear and well organized ideas, use communicative language, choose the suitable words and use the writing mechanics appropriately. When learners lack these skills, their writing may be unsatisfactory in many ways. These can be: poor grammar and syntax, poor organization of ideas, unclear organization of composition, weak reasoning and argument.

#### 4.2. Approaches used to Teach Composition Writing

From the results, it was revealed that teachers’ approach to teaching writing was mainly product-oriented, which is the traditional view to teaching writing and is a learner-centered approach. (Gathumbi and Masembe 2005) note that teachers who use Product-Oriented Approach concentrate on forms, which is syntax, grammar, mechanics and organization rather than content or meaning of the learners’ writing.” The teaching showed lack of importance put on the learners’ writing and creativity as a skill. The teachers seemed not to see the future benefits of developing their learners’ writing skills which are the most needed in writing effective compositions. Teachers took it for granted that the learners knew how to write and what they wrote was something that could be used as a test of the ability to write. The writing process should be an interactive nature of learning. Learners should be guided throughout until the final product. The other approaches are Process Oriented Approach in which learners communicate effectively in groups to think, to select and to organize ideas with the help of the teacher in the pre-writing stage. Process-Oriented Approach to writing has a positive effect on developing learners’ composition writing skills. The learners are able to make use of the pre-writing stage to explore, link and generate ideas (Ohio & Adeosun, 2003).

The traditional view to teaching composition writing is rightly referred to as the product-oriented approach because of three common features:

- A title is given by the teacher
- Learners are asked to write a composition of, for instance, 300 words to hand in at the end of the lesson

- Compositions are marked by the teacher and returned to the learners after sometime (Gathumbi and Masembe, 2005).

This approach is based on the assumption that the creative aspects of the writing process cannot be explained and understood, hence cannot be taught. The approach is deficient in a number of important aspects: first, the teacher views the learners' writing as a product. The teacher takes it for granted that the learners know how to write and what the learners produce is used as a test of the ability to write. The focus is always on the written product and not the process the learners have to go through in order to come up with the finished work (Meriwether, 1997). Williams (2003) said that the traditional or product approach is "Mindless, repetitive and anti-intellectual." Silva (1993) also added that the Product Oriented approach is an exercise in habit formation. All these assertions just show that the Product Oriented approach perceives language learning as the mastery of structures. The approach does not expose learners to the process of writing. It limits learners to the first and final production of written composition as opposed to the multiple re-writes of drafts allowed in process writing. Secondly, the teacher concentrates on forms, which is syntax, grammar, mechanics and organization rather than content. The teacher evaluates the written product/s and judges its form and content. The content is only considered as a vehicle for the correct expression of grammatical and organizational patterns on which the teacher is focusing. Thirdly, the learners are not given any directions on how to go about with the given task, as a result, most of them lose interest and writing becomes a burden. The teacher does not take time to find out if learners are familiar with the topic or not. Lastly, the feedback is sometimes delayed (Gathumbi & Masembe, 2005). The teacher may take time to mark the work for learners and to respond to their errors. In the classroom where the approach is used, the teacher acts as the judge of learners' writing rather than the facilitator. This was what the study aimed to find out which approach of teaching composition writing teachers use in the classroom.

The modern approach to the teaching of composition writing is a direct opposite of the traditional or product-oriented approach and it is referred to as the Process-Oriented Approach to teaching writing (Ibid, 2005). This approach combines communicative and process approaches to writing. According to Clay (1991), this is based on the understanding that people write to communicate with readers to accomplish a specific purpose and also that writing is a complex process. In this approach, there is understanding that writing is a process. Hence, writing is considered and perceived as a communicative act. Learners are encouraged to think of their audience (reader) and the purpose for writing. The process writing encourages learners to experience the writing and composing of their own texts in the process of writing. The approach also empowers the learners by enabling them to make decisions about the direction of their writing through group discussion, drafting and feedback from the teacher. Doing so, learners become responsible for making improvements themselves. The modern approach stresses the meaning rather than the form and it treats writing as a process which can be divided into three stages. These stages are pre-writing, composing and revision.

At the pre-writing or brainstorming stage, when the teacher presents the question or situation, learners are given the freedom to think and create ideas on the given topic, experiences or situation without much interference and restrictions from the teacher. This is an active stage where learners are encouraged to freely exchange ideas and opinions in pairs and groups concerning the information structure, the language, supporting arguments and the best way to perform the task given. This stage promotes creativity by encouraging generation of ideas. At this stage, learners are responsible for improving their own work themselves. Learners are given time to think about ideas and to discuss them (Ibid, 1986). When conducting the pre-writing activity, the teacher should encourage the learners who seem to be lost to begin the activity. The teacher may suggest a few ideas and then look for ways to prompt learners to participate. Pre-writing stage prevents learners from experiencing hopelessness due to lack of adequate possibilities or solutions to a given situation. It helps learners to develop and improve their communication skills. It also encourages enthusiasm and a competitive spirit among learners (Thungu e'tal, 2008). This is what the study aimed to find out if learners are engaged in the pre-writing activity during composition writing lesson.

The next stage is the writing stage and it is known as the composing stage. Learners are encouraged to work together and to consult one another. They are given time to draft what they want to say. At this stage, learners are again allowed to discuss and then write a more detailed account. This gives room to learners to explore the topic fully. As the learners are exploring through drafting, they are also getting guidance from the teacher and their fellow learners. The stage allows them to make drafts and more drafts, read over their work and think about it. This moves them to new ideas. While learners are writing, they are thinking and discussing in groups. It makes them create more ideas and at the same time eliminating errors (Meriwether, 1997). The teacher's role at this stage is to facilitate and provide guidance wherever it is needed. Are learners going through this stage before writing? The final stage is the revision stage. At this stage, learners edit as well as proof read what they have written (Myers, 2006). All these processes should go along with appropriate feedback from the teacher as a facilitator. With proper guidance, learners will be enabled to discover new ideas and new words as they write drafts, edit or proof read until the final production. The Process-Oriented or Modern

Approach is a learner centered way of teaching composition writing. One would wonder whether teachers are carrying out these stages of writing as they are teaching composition writing in schools, and hence the need to investigate. At each of these stages (the pre-writing, composing and revision), the learners are fully involved in the writing processes. A process of good writing entails stages (Raimes, 1983). These are;

#### 4.3. Pre-writing stage

- I. The writer needs to have a reason for writing.
- II. The writer needs to identify his/her audience.
- III. There must be consideration of the choice of appropriate vocabulary.
- IV. Gathering of ideas through observing, brainstorming, making notes and talking to others.

#### Composing stage

- V. Planning in groups how to go about the task and organizing ideas that have been gathered during the pre-writing stage.
- VI. Drafting and then reading the drafts critically. Revision stage
- VII. Making revision of the draft.
- VIII. Preparation of more drafts and then the final copy.
- IX. Editing for possible grammatical, syntactic, spelling and punctuation mistakes (Raimes, 1983).

Learners need to go through all the necessary stages before handing in their work to the teacher for marking. It was not known if teachers were using all the stages when teaching composition writing or they simply write a topic and ask learners to write a composition. This may justify the significance of this study to find out which approach teachers were using to teach composition writing in secondary schools.

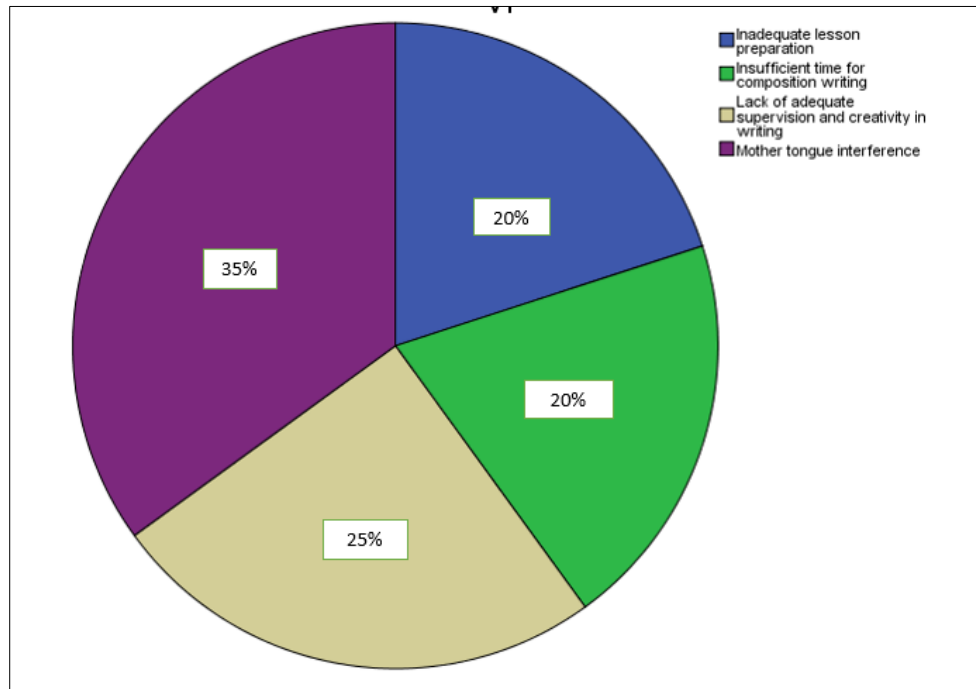
#### 4.4. Factors Contributing to Poor Academic Performance in Composition Writing

The study observed that both the teachers and the learners were constrained by time in which to do the teaching and the writing. Teachers need adequate time to make learners understand the topic fully while learners need time to think about the topic given, time to think about the ideas in groups, time to organize the ideas in groups, time to write and re-write until the learners write final drafts to present to the teacher (Nyoni, 2012). While it can be appreciated that learners need time to themselves, but process writing goes with difficulties of thinking about ideas, organizing ideas, writing and re-writing. Also, learners needed the teachers' attention and supervision in order to develop the writing skills needed (Sovik 2003) as the teachers' role at all the stages of writing is to facilitate and provide guidance whenever it is needed. Lack of school libraries has a direct impact on the poor literacy levels. Improving literacy is the main reason for having school libraries. Reading has a positive impact on reading comprehension, vocabulary, spelling ability, grammar usage and writing style. Learners, who read widely, typically have higher literacy development.

For learners to be effective writers, creativity is important. It helps them to develop skills in structuring sentences, paragraph development, classifying related ideas, identifying main ideas and logical sequencing of ideas (Myers 2006). A learner who is creative consciously controls the language and it fosters improvement in writing. This moves a learner towards being a critical thinker, reader and writer. Creativity in learners should be developed for them to improve their skills and develop their communicative competences. Creativity also enhances learners' critical thinking ability. Learners with this problem will have difficulties such as: getting started on writing composition, inconsistency legibility in writing, organizational problems, poor narration sequencing, lack of transitions, generating ideas or elaborating on them, developing and organizing ideas, with writing tasks that require creativity/creative thinking, write only short passages, write exceptionally slowly and with great effort in order to produce their thoughts in writing.

Furthermore, it was observed that most learners were limited in their use of vocabulary and some even substituted words with those from the first language (L1) in some cases. Mother tongue interference is a serious challenge with some learners. They did not have the ability to exploit the creativity of the English language effectively. These learners consciously struggled to write and in the end, many errors were made. Mother tongue interference impacts negatively on the acquisition of English Language skills among secondary school learners. This is in line with Obemeata (1995) who adds that learners with this problem lack communicative command required in English Language. They lack proper motivation to be able to learn English and usually such learners are not willing to participate in the class activities as in most cases, teachers' pay attention to learners who perform well. Lastly, there were inadequate lesson preparations as the lesson plans and the schemes of work did not indicate the skills that were to be taught in the composition lesson plans. A lesson plan indicates specific objectives which learners are supposed to achieve by the end of the lesson. These specific objectives include knowledge, skills and attitudes to be taught by the end of the lesson. Since the composition

skills were left out on the lesson plans this just indicated that teachers were not preparing adequately for composition writing lessons to enable the learners acquire the necessary needed skills for effective communication. (Thungu, e'tal 2008) suggest that inclusion of knowledge, skills and attitudes on the lesson plan and also stating objectives while the teacher is preparing sets the limit for content to be covered so that the teacher remains focused during the lesson. Inadequate lesson preparation is a factor which may interfere with the successful implementation of a lesson plan and this can lead to poor performance in composition writing.



**Figure 1** Factors Contributing to Poor Academic Performance in Composition Writing

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study revealed that learners with insufficient English Language vocabulary exhibited many errors in their compositions. They did not have the language to express themselves with. The study also revealed that composition skills were poorly taught in secondary schools visited to enable learners express their feelings. When learners lack skills, their writing may be unsatisfactory in various ways. Another factor was the use of inappropriate approach/method to the teaching of composition writing. The teachers' approach was mainly the traditional or Product-Oriented Approach which focused on the evaluation of the learners' finished products and not the Process-Oriented approach which evaluates aspects of the various stages of writing. Involving learners in the cycle of the process writing enhances their composition writing abilities.

The study revealed that time allocated for teaching and learning English composition writing was not adequate for learners to go through the process of writing. Teachers need time to make learners understand the topic fully. Learners also need time to think about the topic given, think about ideas, organize ideas, write and re-write until the final copy. The study also concluded that teachers were not providing the needed guidance or supervision to the learners in the process of writing. Learning is facilitated when the teacher demonstrates what is to be learned rather than telling them what is to be learned. Another factor was that schools which were not utilizing the library facilities were not exposing learners to extensive reading which enhances their vocabulary or develops the power of self-expression in their writing. Reading helps learners learn text structures and the language that they can use in their own composition writing. The study also revealed that learners were lacking creativity in their writing to make them critical thinkers, readers and writers. Learners with this problem will have difficulties in writing. Learners' limited use of vocabulary in the English Language was another factor. This made some to substitute or used first language (L1) expressions due to mother tongue interference hence, many errors were made. Learners with this problem lack communicative command required in English Language. Inadequate lesson preparation was another factor that interfered with successful implementation of the lesson plan leading to poor performance in composition writing.

### *Recommendations*

The following are actions that should be taken based on the findings of this study:

- Schools should enhance Continuous Professional Development (CPD) in composition teaching. This will make the teachers share ideas on the teaching approaches/methods and any other difficulties they encounter.
- Schools should have literacy clubs where learners continue practicing the language. After all, the important aim of literacy is to develop learners' abilities to communicate effectively.
- Schools should provide equipped libraries. Reading helps learners to learn text structures and language.
- Schools should initiate remedial teaching for learners with severe cases of deficiency in writing
- Schools should encourage learners to be using English language in and outside classrooms to increase their English language proficiency.
- Teachers should encourage learners to read widely in order to improve their language skills.
- Teachers should engage learners in group activities that help to generate information before writing.
- Teachers should provide guidance or assist learners in information gap activities. This gives an opportunity for extended speaking practice and it motivates the learners.

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### **Compliance with ethical standards**

#### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

#### *Statement of informed consent*

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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