

A Comparison of Descriptive English Compositions of Visually Impaired and Sighted Students in Kenyan Secondary Schools

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ABSTRACT

Language is common to visually impaired and sighted students because they both use language to communicate ideas, feelings, and emotions and above all to describe their worlds. Descriptive writing brings alive the object of description, be it real or imagined. To do this effectively, it heavily exploits sensory details, sight being key among them. Descriptive essay writing is one of the topics tested in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Examination (henceforth KCSE) that is sat by both categories of students. However, there have been few attempts to comparatively study the descriptive characteristics of English compositions of visually impaired and those of sighted students. The information is crucial in determining whether the visually impaired learners are disadvantaged in any way. This is where this paper comes in. Purposive sampling was used to select Salvation Army (S.A) Thika High School for the Visually Challenged Persons and Broadway High School, both found within Thika Municipality in Thika District, Kiambu County in Kenya. The population of the study comprised the following categories of Form Three students; the totally visually impaired, the partially sighted from S.A Thika and sighted from Broadway. Form Three and Form Four teachers of English were also part of the sample. Data was collected from descriptive compositions written by the students and from questionnaires and interview schedules administered to the sampled teachers. Compositions written by visually impaired students were debrailled. Words and phrases were then extracted from the compositions according to the various senses. They were analysed in order to determine whether they were used in equal measure by both sighted and visually impaired students. Lexical density was then calculated, data presented in tables and results discussed. The findings in this paper revealed that visually impaired students used fewer descriptive terms in total and in all the senses than their sighted counterparts. The sighted students predominately exploited the sense of sight in their description while the visually impaired students mainly used the sense of hearing. The paper further established that even if all the sensory details used by the visually impaired students were combined, they would not match with the ones obtained from the sense of sight among the sighted students. The paper therefore concluded that there is a true correlation between sightedness and descriptive writing. The following recommendations were made: that the teachers deliberately present as many first-hand descriptive concepts in class as possible to the visually impaired students; schools for the visually impaired consider admitting sighted students to learn together with the visually impaired for more linguistic input; KNEC consider adapting descriptive composition topics to avoid disadvantaging the visually impaired students.

Key Words: Descriptive writing, visually impaired students, sighted students, sensory details, congenitally blind

INTRODUCTION

Descriptive writing, sometimes referred to as showing writing describes a particular person, place, object or event in great detail. It involves the use of elaborate sensory language, specific details, concrete words and figurative language in order to form pictures and images in the readers' minds. In a description, writers often use words to create a mental word picture of what they describe (Kinneavy & Warriner, 2002)). To achieve this, writers are expected to avoid vague and general words and instead use precise terms.

According to Reddy & Kusuma (2004), vision is crucial to normal language acquisition because it is responsible for a great deal of human communication. The absence of this sense can lead to significant changes in language patterns due to insufficient input and reinforcement from the visual feedback. This will consequently affect the nature of description since language acquisition depends on discovering and identifying objects and actions. This is difficult for children who cannot see such objects and actions. Visual impairment may therefore affect one's ability to give a good description since description entails vision as the dominant sensory input.

Visual impairment is an umbrella term that includes all levels of visual loss from total blindness to correctable visual limitations. Concepts used interchangeably to describe children whose vision is impaired include: visually handicapped, visually disabled, persons living with visual impairment, visually impaired, blind, sightless, partially sighted and low vision (Smith, Palton & Polloway, 2011). The paper adopted the term "visually impaired" to refer to blind children because it is one of the most polite terms of all the rest and this was indeed the group that was the focus in this paper. This group is considered legally visually impaired with a visual acuity of 3/60 according to the Snellen measures chart, a device that determines the visual acuity fraction measures of individuals. According to the American Foundation for the Blind (2018), visual impairment (distance and near vision) was defined as a binocular presenting visual acuity of less than 6/18 (20/63).

Sighted children on the other hand have an opportunity to explore and interact with the world, link words with objects and tie concepts and categories to the environments which they represent. They will subsequently give a description based on the amount of visual information they have. According to Cruinkshank (2008), visually impaired students differ from sighted students in the way they describe their environment. Both have different approaches in their descriptions. The language of space, colour and movements may have different associations for the visually impaired children.

The study focused on the sense of sight because it is the most exploited in any description and the

largest percentage of human information comes from the visual channel. Vision also coordinates the rest of the senses. The study limited itself to the totally visually impaired category to establish if indeed their state would influence the kind of description they made. The sighted students were sampled for comparative purposes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Below we present an overview of descriptive writing before looking at the role of vision in description. Finally, we will look at visual impairment and description.

Descriptive Writing

Descriptive writing and sensory impressions cannot be separated because sensory details are the basic ingredients of all descriptions. Any good description should form pictures and images in the reader's mind regardless of the writers' purpose. The sensory data enables writers to create a scene for their audience through description by making the characters vivid. According to Kinneavy & Warriner 2003 the factual and realistic details create an exact image that cannot be misunderstood and can be tested or checked for accuracy by ones' readers.

Descriptive writing involves all the senses. This is because as noted by Reinking, Hart &Osten (2002) sensory impressions reflecting sights, sound, taste, smell and touch form the backbone of descriptive writing. He further says they often build toward one dominant impression that the writers want to evoke. Congenitally visually impaired children are restricted in this respect. The use of concrete and specific words is a writer's best assurance of writing not only vivid but also fully developed descriptions. This is not necessarily expressed explicitly in a direct statement but it is often revealed indirectly through the writer's choice of words and phrases according to Kirszner & Mandell (2001). In our study, sighted students may have had the advantage of using all the senses in their descriptions but congenitally visually impaired children were restricted in this respect.

Authors of a descriptive composition must carefully select details to support their dominant impression. The details should be consistent with the dominant impression. One of the ways of making the details specific is by using precise nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs according Kinneavy & Warriner 2003). All good descriptive writing whether objective or subjective, relies on specific details. The writer's aim is not simply to tell readers what something looks like but to show them. That is why descriptive writing is also called showing writing. Every person, place or thing has its special characteristics and writers should use their power of observation to detect them. Then the writers need to select the concrete words that will convey their dominant impression. The only focus should be quality and appropriateness to his purpose of writing. This study sought to investigate if the students both sighted and visually impaired, used specific details in their compositions.

The Role of Vision in Description

Sight is one of the most important senses in a precise description because description exploits the sense of vision. According to Reddy & Kusuma (2004), the centrality of vision in normal language acquisition cannot be overlooked as it is largely responsible for a great deal of human communication. Consequently, the absence of this sense can lead to significant changes in language patterns due to insufficient input and reinforcement from visual feedback. Language acquisition depends on discovering and identifying objects and actions, something that poses a serious challenge. Since descriptive writing employs the sense of sight as the dominant input, children who cannot see objects and actions may be disadvantaged.

According to Gargiulo (2011), vision is considered as the primary sense. This is because of all the senses it provides the most information to the brain. Vision collects and integrates both near and distant information in terms of shape, colour, form, size, texture, movement, spatial location and relationships. According to Bishop (2004) and Gargiulo (2011) it is only vision which is capable of perceiving a large number of bits of information and giving the brain a wide variety of it instantly and all at once. The information will further be used to provide a good description. Bishop (2004) further notes that even the combined senses of hearing, touch, taste and smell do not provide the rich variety of information that vision does. This implies that if the sense of sight is impaired or lost, it is difficult to compensate for the reduction in information through the other senses since we use eyes in every activity we perform as pointed out by Gargiulo (2011).

The sense of vision gives children the ability to explore, organize and make connections between different experiences. These connections help them make the most out of those experiences. According to Heward (1996) vision is thought to be a coordinating sense, and approximately 80% of information received by a sighted person comes from the visual channel. Visually impaired children must obtain a large amount of information by listening. It is a misconception that visually impaired individuals have a super sense of hearing or listen better than sighted peers. It is through proper instruction and experience that they will be able to use their hearing more efficiently (Harley, 2008).

The absence of vision, according to Bishop (2004), forces other sensory channels to provide initial sensory input data to the brain. This however, will never have the same motivational power as sight does. It has also been noted that children with normal vision without other disabilities learn constantly from their experiences and interaction with the environment. The sense of sight provides a variety of detailed information about the environment and relationships between things in that environment as they move about. This enables sighted children to produce enormous useful knowledge from everyday experiences. This would probably influence the kind of description they would produce. According to Bishop (2004) visual impairment however affects most of such incidental learning.

Visual impairment and Description

Visual problems create difficulties in exploring and interacting with the world, linking words with objects and tying concepts and categories to the environments which they represent (Dean, 1996).

According to Cruinkshank (2008), visually impaired students differ from sighted students in the way they describe their environment. Both have different approaches in their descriptions. The language of space, colour and movements may have different associations for the visually impaired children.

Heward (1996) Cruinkshank (2008), Harley (2008), Heward (1996) and Reddy & Kusuma (2004) observe that some things are inaccessible to touch such as distant views, colour and movement and making them difficult to describe. Harley (2008) also agrees that some items such as the sun, moon and stars are inaccessible. Some items are too large to be observed with understanding by touch; others are too small to touch. Some are too fragile, some move fast and others are difficult to touch because they are contained behind glasses such as liquids in thermometers. They further argue that it is not possible to teach space and time to congenitally visually handicapped children. Gulliford (1992) notes that, important ideas such as shape, number and size have to depend on tactile experiences. So the visually impaired individual's world is limited compared to that of a sighted one.

Heward (1996) says that many concepts that children with normal vision seem to acquire effortlessly may not be learned at all by visually impaired children. Alternatively, they may be learned incorrectly unless someone deliberately teaches them. It is necessary to plan and present a great many first-hand experiences to enable children with visual impairment to learn to do things independently. However, even when a concept is deliberately presented to visually impaired children, they may not learn it exactly the same way that children with normal vision would. This is because the other senses may not totally make up for loss of vision. The sensory input data to the brain by other sensory channels does not have the same motivational power as vision does as Bishop (2004) asserts.

Children who are visually impaired perform more poorly than sighted children on cognitive skills requiring comprehension or relating different items of information. Lack of vision makes it difficult for the visually impaired children to literally and cognitively see the connections between experiences in their environment. This will further affect the kind of description the visually impaired will make (Reddy & Kusuma, 2004).

Statement of Issue

The essence of descriptive writing is to vividly bring alive the object of description, whether real or imaginary. This kind of writing heavily relies on sensory details, the predominant one being sight. The fact descriptive writing is tested at the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Examination underscores its importance. Both sighted and visually impaired students tackle the same descriptive essay. As we have already seen, literature shows that vision is a coordinating sense, and close to 80% of information received by a sighted person comes from the visual channel. This suggests that students with visual impairment are at a distinct disadvantage. However, locally, there have been few attempts to comparatively study the descriptive characteristics of English compositions of visually impaired and those of sighted students. The information is crucial in determining the extent to which visually impaired learners may be disadvantaged in the writing of

the descriptive compositions, given that it carries twenty marks which is a third of the total for paper 3. Plugging this gap in knowledge was the motivation for this research from which this paper arose.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper employed a descriptive research design because the focus was on the data from the students' English compositions. Purposive sampling was used to select Salvation Army (S.A) Thika High School for the Visually Challenged Persons and Broadway High School, both found within Thika Town sub-county, Kiambu County in Kenya. S.A Thika High School was purposively sampled because, at the time of the study, it was the only fully established secondary school in Kenya that admitted students with visual impairments from form one to four. The other School, St. Lucy, only had Form One's and it was not yet fully established. Broadway High School was also purposively sampled because it was within the same sub-county as S.A Thika and it was also nearly at par with S.A Thika in terms of academic performance. The population of the study comprised the following categories of Form Three students; the totally visually impaired from S.A Thika and sighted from Broadway. Form Two teachers of English from both schools were also part of the sample: Three teachers from S.A Thika because there were three streams in Form Two and Two from Broadway. The teachers were purposively sampled because descriptive writing is taught in form two and they were the ones who handled the classes. Data was collected from descriptive compositions written by the students and from questionnaires and interview schedules administered to the sampled teachers.

Simple random sampling was used to select compositions from Broadway. Purposive sampling was used with S.A Thika to select compositions for the study. The students were divided into three streams and taught by three different teachers of English. All of them were subjected to composition writing in order to create a natural situation. Then compositions from all the thirty eight congenitally visually impaired students were purposively sampled according to the school enrolment. Compositions of the remaining six students were not sampled because it was assumed that their data would affect the results of the study because the children acquired blindness after they had acquired language. Broadway had two streams in Form Three taught by different teachers of English. A descriptive composition (the same one as for S.A Thika) was administered to both streams so as to create a natural situation. Then thirty eight compositions were randomly sampled from a total of eighty four with each stream providing half of the number, for uniformity purposes. S.A Thika was the determining because it had thirty eight congenitally visually impaired students in all the streams, fewer than Broadway school. In total seventy six compositions were read and analysed. Compositions written by visually impaired students were debrailled. Descriptive words and phrases were then extracted from the compositions. They were analysed according to the various senses in order to determine whether they were used in equal measure by both sighted and visually impaired students. Then lexical density was calculated, data presented in tables and results discussed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Descriptive Lexical Items and phrases in the Students' Compositions

Thirty eight compositions on the topic “Describe a wedding ceremony you have attended” were read and analyzed for each category of students and the following was observed:

Table 1: Frequency Descriptive units in the compositions of the Visually Impaired Students

| Sensory input | Frequency | Percentage { % } |
|---------------|-----------|------------------|
| Hearing | 45 | 45.45 |
| Touch | 17 | 17.17 |
| Smell | 13 | 13.13 |
| Taste | 12 | 12.12 |
| Sight | 12 | 12.12 |
| Total | 99 | 100.00 |

As seen from the table, the total number of descriptive lexical items and phrases was 99. Descriptive words and phrases from the hearing sensory input dominated the essays with 45.45%. Those appealing to the sense of touch followed with 17.17%. The sensory input from the sense of smell was third with 13.13%. The senses of taste and sight gave the least number with 12.12% each. These scores imply that the visually impaired students use the sense of hearing as their primary input to get information from the environment. Subsequently, they use the same information in their descriptions.

Table 2: Frequency Descriptive lexical items and phrases in the compositions of the sighted students

| Sensory input | Frequency | Percentage { % } |
|---------------|-----------|------------------|
| Sight | 164 | 55.97 |
| Hearing | 61 | 20.82 |
| Touch | 28 | 9.56 |
| Smell | 21 | 7.17 |
| Taste | 19 | 6.48 |
| Total | 293 | 100.00 |

The above table indicates the distribution of descriptive terms in relation the various senses. These scores indicate that the sense of sight at 55.97% outstrips the other four senses combined since they only amount to 44.03%.

Table 3: Frequency Descriptive lexical items and phrases in the composition of both visually impaired and sighted students

| Category | Sensory input | | | | | Total |
|-------------------|---------------|---------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| | Sight | Hearing | Touch | Smell | Taste | |
| Visually impaired | 12 | 45 | 17 | 13 | 12 | 99 |
| Sighted | 164 | 61 | 28 | 21 | 19 | 293 |

The table above shows the distribution of descriptive lexical items and phrases for both visually impaired and sighted students. There were a total of 392 lexical items and phrases used in their descriptive compositions.

The visually impaired category provided 99 of these, forming 25.26% while their sighted counterparts gave the bulk at 293 which is 74.74%. The difference was a much higher proportion. It was apparent that the visually impaired students were disadvantaged in descriptive writing.

The Descriptive Characteristics of the Compositions of the Visually Impaired Students

(a) The sense of sight

Some descriptive words connected with colour, size, shape, movement, location and directions, which fall under this sensory input, were encountered. Words such as white, red, tall and short were used in the following contexts:

“.....all the people were in red garments which really.....”
“.....other was dressed in..... butiful [beautiful] tall dress.....”
“The bride was a short lady.....”

The words and phrases were used to describe the people and objects as well as locate specific places at the wedding. However, some of the descriptive words in this sensory channel were wrongly used. For instance in the colour class, some students decided to dress everybody at the wedding in red garments. This is not realistic and practical in real life situations. People come dressed in different colours depending on an individual's culture, taste and role at the wedding. Moreover, a section of the crowd could be dressed in uniform or observe a certain dress code. Other students did not specify who exactly was dressed in what colour or what colour of flowers and ribbons decorated what.

The students were able to use such words in their description because of their teachers' input, feedback in class. When teachers were interviewed on how they prepare their students to handle descriptive topics, they said they: hold class discussions on descriptions of people, objects and events. They also read out some samples of descriptive compositions and explain some of the descriptive concepts encountered. Further, they present descriptive concepts such as colour, spatial location, movement, size and shape in class deliberately.

However, according to Bishop (2004), even if a concept is deliberately presented in class, the visually impaired students may learn it wrongly miss it completely, or understand it differently from the way sighted children do. This could explain why some students dressed everyone in one colour. In order to give a good description, writers should use precise and specific details. However, in most of the descriptions, students used vague and general adjectives of opinion such as beautiful, nice, smart, and wonderful. According to Tichy (1988) such adjectives convey little meaning when used loosely. The visually impaired students made an effort to revivify such adjectives by adding the degree adverbs “very” and “quite” as in:

“.... the bride was very beautiful.....”
“This was a quite interesting day.....”

“...clothes which were very smart...”

However, in the absence of concrete details such overworked intensifiers not only lost their impact but also weakened the compositions. A specific word has fewer meanings but says more than a general and vague term. According to Tichy (1988) specific details lend vividness and precision to any description. Surprisingly, 65.79% of the students used the degree adverb ‘very’, 2.63% used ‘quite’ and 31.58% did not use them. This contradicts Harley’s (2008) observation that the unsighted individuals do not use intensifiers.

According to Leech & Svartvik (2000), Crystal (2000), Kinneavy (2002) and Hall (1994), action verbs are more descriptive than other verbs. Verbs such as marching, peeping, kissing, waving and smiling denoting actions likely to take place at a wedding were not present in the students’ compositions. People have to see such actions, the gestures or non-verbal cues in order for them to label them correctly. Obviously, the visually impaired students were disadvantaged in this respect.

Another observation is that the students lacked variety in location and direction words. Words such as behind, ahead, inside, near and towards were not encountered. Some students used “in front” to indicate every position or direction without a reference point. The following sentence illustrates:

“...the couple were made to seat in front beautiful and shiny as gold”.

This was not surprising given the fact that locating one place or direction relative to another requires the sense of sight.

(b) The sense of hearing

Words such as cheering, hooting, shouts, echoes, thunder, silent voice, screaming and melodies were all observed in the students’ compositions. These words were used to describe the sounds made by people and objects during the wedding ceremony. Here are examples:

“... all people were excited they were screaming”

“.....people were mercilessly cheering with joy....”

“.... a choir of singers were singing their sweet melodies”

“I heard a hooting of a car.....”

The sense of hearing is regarded as the primary sense of the visually impaired according to Landau and Gleitman (2009 and Heward (1996). However, the lexical density scored is far below the expected input because it is assumed that when the sense of sight is impaired, that of hearing takes over the slot reserved for vision in the brain. As stated earlier in the literature review, vision provides approximately 80% of the information to the brain (Heward, 1996). Accordingly, the sense of hearing should have had a higher incidence than what was observed.

A possible explanation for the above phenomenon is that, in some cases, one needs to see the

objects or people in order to associate them with certain sounds. It was impossible for the visually impaired to do so because of their visual status, which restricts their experience of the visual environment. From this study, it is clear that for the visually impaired students, the sense of hearing cannot fully compensate for the loss of visual information. This is because as stated by Bishop (2004), the sense of hearing does not have the same motivational power as the sense of sight does.

(c) The Sense of touch

Words and expressions such as bright, nylon, fried by the sun, hot, cold, shade, mud and thick carpet were present in the compositions. The words were used to describe the weather, temperature and texture of people or objects as illustrated in the following examples:

"... they were glad to be in shade because it is so hot.

"The sun was bright so there was a need of a big sheet of nylon to be spread above to protect the people from the sun....."

"There was a thick carpet on the floor..."

However, some of the terms were inappropriately used. For instance, 'nylon' was used to mean 'polythene' and 'bright' to mean 'hot' when describing the heat from the sun.

Visually impaired people mainly depend on hearing and touch to describe their environment. Some textures need not be touched in order to be described. For example, one can distinguish between a rough and smooth surface merely by the sense of sight. Further on, vision can motivate individuals to see what to hear or touch. Indeed, it is not practical for individuals to go round touching every object or entity they encounter in order to describe its texture. Moreover, some things are inaccessible to touch because they are either small or fragile. So, because of their state, the visually impaired students could not augment the sense of touch with the sense of sight.

(d) The sense of smell

Descriptive words such as aroma, delicious, and sweet smelling were used in their compositions. The words described the smells at the wedding scene as seen in the following examples:

".....some beautiful smelling flowers....."

"were given delicious food"

"Sweet smelling food....."

A possible explanation for the low lexical density is that lack of sight limited their movement in an unfamiliar environment, thus reducing the opportunities to smell a variety of things and people in different places at the wedding. The sense of sight also reinforces this sense. For instance, on seeing a carcass, one can imagine a foul smell even before one perceiving it.

(e) The sense of taste

Descriptive words appealing to the sense of taste such as tasted sweet, fried, tasted like honey, flavor and delicious were noted in the examples below:

"...we were given cakes which tasted like honey.

"...we were given delicious food."

".....thing become sweeter towards the sweetness of honey."

The students scored low here because possibly because there are only a few things that can be perceived by taste. Again, probably the sense of sight can reinforce the sense of taste. It is possible to see something and say "it looks delicious".

From the foregoing analysis, it is evident that visually impaired students used very few descriptive terms - actually some had none. The students had important events in their compositions summarized in one paragraph. Again, some of them had sentences that were not meaningful because they left out vital details as in example 7 above. Although both narrative and descriptive compositions appear in the KCSE English examination, the sighted students have an advantage because they can easily choose either. However, the majority of the visually impaired them opt for a narrative composition one due to lack of descriptive words. Their teachers reported that this is common practice. Even though narrative compositions have some descriptive features, the focus in these essays is to tell about events in the order in which they occurred (Kinneavy, 2001: Langan, 2008: Norton, 2003 and Kirschner, 2008).

Due to their restricted experience of the world, the visually impaired find it difficult to conceptualize and hence describe certain concepts such as colour, movement, space, size and shape. These concepts cannot be heard, smelt or touched. The teachers interviewed confirmed that conceptualization of abstract things is the key challenge to the students. This explains why, according to the teachers, they prefer narrative essays to descriptive ones and perform better in them. It was also revealed that they try as much as possible to avoid descriptive topics whenever they encounter them. The teachers also said that the students prefer describing people to events and objects. The reason could be that they are always in contact with people and so they are motivated to describe them. The order of senses in terms of frequency in the study data corresponded to what the teachers' said they had observed: hearing, touch, smell, taste and sight.

Descriptive Characteristics of the English Compositions of Sighted Students

(a) The sense of sight

The study revealed that the students used descriptive words and phrases relating to colour, size, shape, location and movement. Examples of such included red, white, glittering, strolled, gorgeous, tall, diamond, behind and peeped as in

".....red and white balloons decorated the church."

"...and then we saw their shining and glittering clothes."

*"Her diamond necklace shone in a bewitching manner."
"The bridegroom was tall, slender of about thirty five years".*

Most descriptive words came from adjectives and actions verbs such as marching, waving, smiling, and kissing. The words were used to describe the people and objects at the wedding as seen in the examples below:

*The crowd was waving at the bride and bridegroom as they were marching towards...
The couple kissed each other before the audience*

The sighted students were able to use many sight descriptive words and phrases because of their ability to see. Wortman (1992) points out that vision is the richest of the human senses and because of this, peoples' eyes receive light from the surrounding objects and translate it into nerve impulses. He further says that when they reach their destinations people experience the vast array of shapes, colour, textures and movements that make their visual world.

(b) The sense of hearing

This was the second in ranking from the study corpora which comprised descriptive words such as cheering, hooting, screaming, ululations, thunderously, bang and murmuring. They were used to describe the sounds made by people and objects at the wedding. Probably because the sighted students have learnt to associate what they see with certain sounds, they were able to use the following lexical items in their essays:

*...murmurs rented the air..
.....the vehicles hooting melodiously
.....ululations were sang by old woman.*

The sense of sight can be said to reinforce the perception of bang, cheering and even murmuring since one can see the attendant action.

(c) The sense of touch

It recorded descriptive words relating to temperature and textures of people, objects and situations at the wedding. Descriptive words such as hot, cool, leather, chilly, smooth, breezy and cotton were noted. See the examples below:

*I took a cold shower that left me.....
The bride wore a crisp cotton dress.
The morning was chilly.....*

Example 31 was probably aided by the sense of sight.

(d) The sense of smell

Descriptive words in this sensory input included details connected with the smells of food, the air, the drinks and the environment as a whole. Words such as scent, delicious, aroma, fresh, pungent and odour were all evident in the students' compositions. Here are extracts from the compositions:

*I could smell the scent of perfumes they had applied.
I took a cold shower that left me as fresh as daisy.
.....sweet aroma that come from the food.....*

The channel scored low possibly they are a few things that can be perceived by smell. Example 34 is closely associated with sight since one has to see the source of the fresh smell- in this case a daisy. It is even possible that upon seeing food at a distance, one can begin imagining a sweet smell, something that the visually impaired cannot do. Again, since the sighted are not limited in their movement, they are more likely to move around and perceive different smells such as aroma of food (example 35).

(e) The sense of taste

This was the lowest ranked in the sensory word bank of descriptive lexical units. The words included sweet, mouth-watering, tasty, pungent, delicious and flavor as seen in the examples below:

*The food tasted delicious
.... also the flavor of food which was already packed in hot dishes.
.....the food that was tasty*

An interesting observation is that the sense of taste is the least used by both categories of students. A possible explanation is that there are only a few things that can be tasted. Responses from the teachers confirmed what was observed in this study -that sensory impressions occur in the following order: sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste.

From their compositions, it was clear that sighted students generally exhibited the ability to explore and interact with the people, objects and actions at the wedding. This enabled them to link descriptive words with their referents correctly. They were also able to easily conceptualize of concepts of colour, weight, shape, size, space and movement because they are sighted.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings in this paper revealed that the visually impaired students have a narrower choice when it comes to selecting a composition topic. This is because they tend to settle for a narrative rather than a descriptive topic. Those who go for the descriptive composition are further disadvantaged since they have fewer descriptive terms in all the sensory channels than their sighted

counterparts. Concepts such as colour, movement, direction, space, shape and size are difficult to conceptualize hence difficult to describe given that they are largely dependent on the sense of sight. Thus the claim that the visually impaired students are restricted in their range of descriptions is justified. On the contrary, sighted students used a range of descriptive words in their compositions. We have argued that even the other senses are sometimes fed by sight so that for example, one imagines that the food tastes or smells as good as it looks. For this reason, the study concluded that the visually impaired students are disadvantaged in descriptive writing because, for one to write a good description the brain combines the visual images with the input from the other senses.

The paper therefore made the following recommendations:

Kenya National Examination Council to consider the needs of visually impaired learners as it sets an English examination that requires descriptive details. It should offer a wide range of topics for the students to choose from.

The teachers of English to offer a variety of first-hand experiences to the visually impaired students. Furthermore, they (teachers) should deliberately present as many descriptive concepts in class as possible. This will enable the students have a variety of descriptive concepts so that they will use the same in descriptive.

The school to consider admitting sighted students to learn together with the visually impaired for more linguistic input. The visually impaired may learn more descriptive units from there sighted counterparts in non-formal and informal settings because communication here is natural and spontaneous.

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