

Descriptive English Compositions of Visually Impaired Students in Kenyan Secondary Schools

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Abstract

Vision is crucial in normal language acquisition because it is responsible for a great deal of human communication. The absence of this can lead to significant changes in language patterns due to insufficient input and reinforcement from the visual channel. Descriptive writing, which is sometimes called showing writing, involves the use of elaborate sensory language, specific details and concrete words. The aim of any descriptive writing is to create a mental picture of what is being described to the reader. Visually impaired learners like their sighted counterparts, need to describe the world around them. Lack of vision as the primary channel of description may affect the kind of writing they do. Despite studies having been conducted on the visually impaired learners, there is little documented literature on descriptive compositions for this population. This paper therefore examined the written works for the visually impaired students with a view to determining the descriptive characteristics found in the students' written English compositions. Further, it sought to establish the descriptive characteristics that were likely to disadvantage the visually impaired students. The study was carried out in Salvation Army (hereafter S.A) Thika High school for the visually challenged persons. The school is found in Thika town, Kiambu County in Kenya. A descriptive research design was used. The population of the study comprised form three visually impaired students and their teachers of English. The students were asked to write a descriptive composition on a given topic. These compositions formed the linguistic data for this study. Additional data was collected from purposively sampled teachers using questionnaires to elicit data on the descriptive features in the students' compositions, and an interview schedule to obtain data on the descriptive characteristics that were likely to disadvantage the visually impaired students. The findings revealed that concepts denoting colour, shape, size, movement, texture and space were difficult to conceptualize hence difficult to describe. Most of the information a human being receives, comes from the vision channel. Consequently, in order for one to give a good description, the brain combines the visual details with other senses.

Keywords: Descriptive power, descriptive writing, legal blindness, visually impaired, vision.

Introduction

Visual impairment is an umbrella term that includes all levels of visual loss from total blindness to correctable visual limitations. A number of terms are used interchangeably to describe children whose vision is impaired. These terms include; visually handicapped, visually disabled, visually impaired, blind, sightless, partially sighted and low vision (Smith, Palton, Polloway & Dowdy, 2011). The study adopted the term 'visually impaired' because it is the most polite term of all.

Generally, there are two extremes of visual loss; blindness on one extreme and partial sightedness at the other extreme (Reddy & Kusuma, 2004). They further say that people from a legal stand point are considered blind if they have a visual acuity of 20/200 or less. Most of the visual handicaps can be identified through routine medical and community health screenings. Vision can also be ascertained by using the Snellen charts. A Snellen chart is a device that is used to determine the visual acuity fraction measures of individuals. An

individual considered legally visually impaired has a visual acuity of 3/60. The following is an interpretation of Snellen measures as noted by Reddy and Kusuma (2004).

Table 1: Interpretation of Snellen Measures

Snellen Measures (Visual acuity fraction)	Interpretation
6/6	Normal distance vision
6/9	Mild loss
6/12	Child needs to sit near a visual display
6/18	Lowest acuity for blackboard vivid.
6/36	Considered partially sighted and will require low vision aids and special texts
6/60	Very limited vision
3/60	Registered blind- sighted methods inappropriate

Source: Reddy and Kusuma (2004)

Thus in table one, learners with 6/6 acuity are considered sighted (normal distant vision) while those with 3/60 are considered blind. This study dealt with the legally visually impaired learners with a visual acuity of 3/60.

Description is fundamental to many writing situations. Before people make judgments about the world, before they compare, contrast or classify their experiences, they describe. Kirszner and Mandell (2001) note that people use description in many different kinds of assignments. Writers use description whenever they want to vividly tell the readers about the physical characteristics of a person, a place or an event or thing. To make this vivid description of ideas, sensory details are used in all descriptions to convey the sights, the sounds, the smells and the tastes of a person, thing, place or an event. Of all the senses, vision is capable of giving the brain a wide variety of information instantly and all at once. However, it could be a challenge for the visually impaired children to describe some things because they are inaccessible to touch and hearing. Facial expressions and gestures which can only be perceived visually may also pose challenges to the visually impaired children.

Visually impaired learners like their sighted counterparts, need to describe the world around them. Lack of vision as the primary channel of description may affect the kind of writing they engage in. Studies have been conducted on the visually impaired learners from many perspectives. However, there is little documented literature on how they use language especially on descriptive writing. This paper therefore examined the visually impaired written compositions with a view to determining the descriptive characteristics found in the students' written English compositions. The specific objectives were: to examine the descriptive characteristics in the written compositions of visually impaired learners; and to explore the features which were likely to pose challenges to the visually impaired learners in their descriptive compositions. It is assumed that the visually impaired form three students are restricted in their range of descriptions in English language compositions and that there are some features that are likely to pose challenges to the form three visually impaired students when writing descriptive English compositions.

Visual Impairment, Description and Descriptive Writing

Sensory details are needed in all descriptions because they enable writers to create a scene for their audience by making the characters vivid. These factual and realistic details create an exact image that cannot be misunderstood and can be tested or checked for accuracy by one's readers as emphasized by Kinneavy and Warriner (2003). Sensory inputs enable children to form concepts of objects, colour, temperature, weight, shape, size, texture and direction.

Sight is one of the most important senses in a precise 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). The language of space, colour and movements may have different associations for the visually impaired children.

Cognition is very useful in the learning process and more so in descriptive writing. It is the ability to think and learn. It takes place when the brain interprets and integrates sensory inputs. Any sensory input has to be organized and processed from sensory organs through several stages in the brain (KISE, 2007). Sensory inputs enable children to form concepts of objects, colour, temperature, weight, shape, size, texture and direction. Since these sensory inputs are necessary in descriptive writing, the paper sought to determine whether they featured in the students' English composition.

According to Gargiulo (2011), vision is considered as the primary sense. This is due to the fact that 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. Bishop (2004) also notes that 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. He 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. We use eyes in every activity we perform (Gargiulo, 2011). Absent 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. In this study, data from the compositions was used to establish if data from the other senses matched the one obtained from vision.

Reddy and Kusuma (2004) point out that vision is crucial to normal language acquisition. This is 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 visual feedback. 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. It is the most exploited in any description as illustrated in the descriptive paragraph below.

A broad expanse of the river was turned to blood; in the middle distance the red hue brightened into gold, through which a solitary log came floating, black and conspicuous; in one place a long slanting mark lay sparkling upon the water: in another the surface was broken by boiling tumbling rings, that were as many- tinted as on opal; where the ruddy flush was faintest, was a smooth spot that was covered with graceful circles and radiating lines, ever so delicately traced; the shore on our left was densely wooded, and the somber shadow that fell from this forest was broken in one place by a long, ruffled trail that shone like silver; and high above the forest wall, a clean- stemmed dead tree waved a single leafy bough that glowed like aflame (Inman, 1979: 36).

According to Heward (1996), vision is thought to be a coordinating sense, and approximately 80 percent of information received by a normally 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 and thus listen better than sighted peers, which may not be the case. It is through

proper instruction and experience that they will be able to use their hearing more efficiently (Harley, 2008).

Heward (1996), Cruinkshank (2008) and Reddy and Kusuma (2004) further observe that some things such as distant views, space, time, colour, the sun, the moon and stars are inaccessible to either touch or hearing for the visually impaired children and these may therefore be difficult to describe. 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. As a result, this makes the visually impaired child's world limited. 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.

Bishop (2004) and Gargiulo (2011) observe that vision is capable of giving the brain a variety of information instantly and all at once. This is not possible for visually impaired children. 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. This paper sought to establish if visually impaired learners had difficulty in describing such phenomena as the sun, moon, colour and space in their descriptive essays.

Descriptive writing is sometimes called showing writing because it 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. Writers often use words to create a mental word picture of what they describe (Kinneavy & Warriner, 2003). No matter what the writer's intention is, all good description forms pictures and images in the reader's mind. To achieve this, writers are expected to avoid vague and general words. Instead, they are expected to choose precise nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs.

Descriptive writing involves all the senses. This is because as noted by Reinking, Hart and Osten (2002), sensory impressions reflecting sights, sound, taste, smell and touch form the backbone of descriptive writing. They further say they often build towards one dominant impression that the writers want to evoke. Congenitally visually impaired children are restricted in this respect. 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 (Kirsznner & Mandell, 2001).

One of the ways of making the details specific is by using precise nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs (Kinneavy & Warriner, 2003). All good descriptive writing, whether objective or subjective, relies on specific details. The writers' aim is not simply to tell readers what something looks like but to show them. Every person, place or thing has its special characteristics and writers should use their powers 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 on quality and appropriateness to their purpose of writing. This study sought to investigate if the students used specific details in their compositions.

Research Methodology

The study employed a descriptive research design. This was because the focus was on data from the students' English compositions. Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) point out that descriptive design is concerned with providing descriptions of phenomena that occur naturally, without the intervention of an experiment or manipulation of any form. In this study, data was gathered to learn more about the visually impaired and sighted students' English compositions to establish their descriptive characteristics.

The study was carried out in Salvation Army (S.A) Thika High School for the Visually Challenged Persons. The school is within Thika Municipality in Thika District,

Kiambu County in Kenya. Thika municipality is approximately forty kilometres from the city of Nairobi, Kenya. The school is a public secondary school. The study population dealt with Form Three teachers of English and Form Three students from S.A Thika for the Visually Impaired; both partially sighted and totally unsighted.

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, had only Form One students and it was not yet fully established. Teachers were purposively sampled because they handled the Form Three classes. According to Kombo and Tromp (2006), purposive sampling enables studies to use their judgment to select cases that will best enable them to answer their research questions and meet their research objectives. Purposive selection is useful when studies wish to select such cases. Visually impaired students belong to a specialized group, which is not easy to get especially in a secondary school setting. So purposive sampling was useful in selecting such a population which had the required characteristics.

English compositions written by Form Three students in a classroom setting in the school formed the data for this study. The topic was 'A Wedding Ceremony I attended'. 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. In each of the streams, both partially sighted and totally visually impaired students learnt in the same class. So, all of them were subjected to composition writing in order to create a natural situation. Compositions from all the thirty eight congenitally visually impaired students were thereafter 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. As a result, they would have used the visual images they had learnt and correlated what they heard or touched with it.

Three teachers from S.A Thika were purposively sampled to answer a questionnaire because there were three streams taught by three different teachers of English. The three teachers who taught English in the Form Three class for the visually impaired students were further purposively sampled for an interview schedule. The data for the study was in the form of English compositions. The focus was on the lexical and syntactic units in the visually impaired students' written essays. One open-ended descriptive composition was given. The choice to use a free composition to elicit data from the students was because it was less restricting and it enabled students to use a variety of descriptive words and figures of speech. From the composition given, linguistic items (words) described were isolated. The teachers of English in each class assisted in administering the compositions in a normal classroom setting. This was purposeful because it triggered the students' spontaneous responses in writing which a stranger like a researcher would probably not have achieved.

Information obtained from a questionnaire given to the teachers of English in the classes investigated augmented information on whether the visually impaired students were disadvantaged in descriptive writing. The teachers of English of the visually impaired students were further subjected to an interview schedule to elicit further data on the challenges their learners encountered in writing descriptive compositions. Information on why the students describe the way they do was also obtained in the schedule.

Compositions written by visually impaired students were debrailled (transcribed into a form that could be read by sighted people). The compositions were read in order to establish the general trends. Lexical items relating to one or more of the five senses were then picked and written on a sheet of paper in order to determine whether they were used in equal measure by the visually impaired students. Also the usage of specific words that pertained to descriptive writing was extracted. The data was sorted out according to the objectives. The

study then examined the categories that emerged in all the compositions. The lexical density in terms of percentage was calculated and presented in tables. A discussion of emerging patterns was then made.

Results and Discussions

Thirty eight compositions on the topic ‘Describe a wedding ceremony you have attended’ were read and analysed. A total of 99 descriptive words were identified as shown in Table two below.

Table 2: Descriptive Words 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, descriptive words from the hearing sensory input dominated the essays with 45.45 percent. Those appealing to the sense of touch followed with 17.17 percent. The sensory input from the sense of smell was third with 13.13 percent. The senses of taste and sight gave the least number with 12.12 percent 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. The following is a detailed analysis of each sensory input:

The Sense of Sight

Some descriptive words connected with colour, size, shape, movement, location and directions, which fall under the sense of sight, were encountered. This comprised a frequency of 12.12 percent. Words such as **white, red, tall and short** were used in the following contexts:

- 1 ‘.....all the people were in **red** garments which really.....’
- 2 ‘.....other was dressed in..... *butiful* [*beautiful*] **tall** dress.....’

The words 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 preference. However, a section of the crowd could be dressed in uniform or observe a certain dress code. Other students did not specify who exactly 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 and role models 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; read out some samples of descriptive compositions and explain some of the descriptive concepts encountered; and present descriptive concepts such as colour, spatial location, movement, size and shape in class deliberately. However, according to Bishop (2004) as stated in the literature review, 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.

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:

3 ‘... *the bride was very beautiful.....*’

4 ‘*This was a quite interesting day.....*’

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 Langan (2008), specific details lend vividness and precision to any description.

The use of degree adverbs in the examples above contradicts what literature says to the effect that visually impaired students do not use them in their work (Harley, 2008). 65.79 percent of the students used ‘very’, 2.63 percent used ‘quite’ and 31.58 percent did not use them. However, other degree adverbs such as ‘rather’, ‘so’, ‘most’ and ‘too’ were not encountered. So, ‘very’ was the most prevalent degree adverb among the students’.

According to Kinneavy and Warriner (2003) and Hall (1994), action verbs are more descriptive than other verbs. Leech and Svartvik (2000) and Crystal (2000) define action verbs as those that describe something which happens in a limited time and have a definite beginning and end. Action verbs are used to describe movement in this study. 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.

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:

6 ‘...*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.

From the foregoing, it is obvious that the visually impaired students were disadvantaged in descriptive lexical items related to colour, size, shape, movement, and location. It was not possible for them to describe such abstract concepts because they were unable to conceptualize them.

The Sense of Hearing

Descriptive words connected with sounds fall under this sensory channel. These words comprised 45.45 percent of the descriptive lexical units, forming the highest number as compared to other senses. 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 some examples:

7 ‘... *...all people were excited they were screaming*’

8 ‘...*people were mercilessly cheering with joy....*’

However, the lexical density scored is far below the expected input because the sense of hearing is regarded as the primary sense of the visually impaired according to Landau and Gleitman (2009), and Heward (1996). 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 percent 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 the sense of hearing cannot fully compensate for the loss of information through vision for the visually impaired students. This is because as stated by Bishop (2004), the sense of hearing does not have the same motivational power as the sense of sight.

The Sense of Touch

This sensory input had 17.17 percent of the descriptive words. It was also the second most frequent. Words 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:

- 9 *'... they were glad to be in **shade** because it is **so hot**'*
- 10 *'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.....'*

Some of the terms were however 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. 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.

The Sense of Smell

This had a lexical density of 13.13 percent and was the third highest in frequency. Descriptive words such as **aroma, delicious, and sweet smelling** were used in their compositions. The words described the smells in the wedding scene.

- 11 *'.....some **beautiful smelling** flowers.....'*
- 12 *'.....were given **delicious** 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 example, seeing a carcass and imaging a foul smell even before one perceives it.

The Sense of Taste

A lexical density of 12.12 percent was obtained and provided the least number of descriptive terms together with that of sight. Descriptive words appealing to the sense of taste such as **tasted sweet, fried, tasted like honey, flavour** and **delicious** were noted as in:

13 '....we were given cakes which **tasted like honey**'

14 '...we were given **delicious** food'

A possible explanation as to why students had a low density in this sense is that there are only 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. Furthermore, some of them had sentences that were not meaningful because they left out vital details. Majority of the visually impaired learners opted to shift from a descriptive essay to a narrative one due to lack of descriptive words. Their teachers too reported that this was common practice among them. Even though narrative essays have some descriptive features, the focus in these essays is to tell about events in the order that they occurred.

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 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 and try to acquire as much descriptive features about them as possible. Again, events and objects are incidental and indefinite and their descriptive features are varied.

Conclusion

From the study findings, it was evident that the visually impaired students had limited descriptive terms in all the sensory channels. Concepts such as colour, movement, direction, space, shape and size were difficult to conceptualize hence difficult to describe. Thus, the assumption that the visually impaired students are restricted in their range of descriptions is hereby justified. Sensory impressions reflecting sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste are the backbone of any description. For this reason, the study concluded that the visually impaired students are disadvantaged in descriptive writing. This is because, for one to write a good description the brain combines the visual images with the input from the other senses. Consequently, given their disability, the majority of visually impaired shifted to writing a narrative essay instead of a descriptive one. The study therefore concluded that there is a true correlation between sightedness and descriptive writing.

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