

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN KISWAHILI READING COMPETENCE AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL LEARNERS: EVIDENCE FROM BARINGO CENTRAL SUB-COUNTY, KENYA

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Abstract

Kiswahili is a compulsory subject in the Kenyan secondary school curricula. However, it consistently records some of the lowest scores in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) examination. From 2017 to 2021, the mean Kiswahili score in Baringo Central Sub-County was not greater than a C- for five successive years. Does this pattern indicate that students are entering secondary school without the reading skills required by the subject? The issue of gender has often been in the spotlight of reading research. Boys and girls do not always respond in the same way when completing reading tasks. However, it is largely unknown whether this holds for Kiswahili. No published study has specifically examined this in Baringo Central Sub-County. This study aims to address this gap. Ninety Form Two learners were selected from four co-educational public secondary schools in the sub-county. Forty-five were male, and forty-five were female. The selection process employed purposive sampling and systematic sampling at various stages. The reading competence was assessed using the Gray Oral Reading Test, Fifth Edition. The assessment includes four dimensions: oral fluency, accuracy, reading rate, and comprehension. In this sample, the instrument was found to be reliable as reflected by a Cronbach's alpha of .775. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to determine whether there is a significant sex difference between the two groups. On average, female learners scored higher ($M = 49.91$) than male learners ($M = 47.74$) in the post-test. Nevertheless, this difference is not significant. The value of $t(88)$ was 0.901 ($p = .370$). The null hypothesis was kept. However, this does not mean that boys and girls read equally well. It suggests that both groups struggled at approximately the same level. The finding diverts attention from gender-specific factors to a systemic interpretation that is affecting all learners in the region, and may also be the reason why Kiswahili has consistently underperformed in national examinations.

Keywords: Kiswahili reading competence, gender differences, Gray Oral Reading Test (GORT-5)

Introduction

Every year, thousands of Kenyan students take the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) examination. The Kiswahili subject is included in all their timetables. Kiswahili has been a compulsory subject at both primary and secondary/high school levels for decades. Despite this, the subject has consistently recorded the lowest results in the KCSE national exams due to a lack of learning materials. The language policy issues that often get overtaken by English (Sika & Ochieng, 2023; Timammy & Oduor, 2016). The Kiswahili mean scores in the Baringo Central Sub-County have remained at grade C- for five years from 2017 to 2021. This was not a one-time event. An indication of the evidence we ought to investigate the pattern is: which? Assessing reading competence is important. The performance of almost every subject depends upon the ability to read accurately and understand content (Galang et al., 2023; Bessie & Rahayu, 2023; Suhaila et al., 2025). However, it is all the more true for Kiswahili. During the examination period, learners find it difficult to interact with assigned books, respond to comprehension questions, or follow instructions if they cannot read and comprehend the text at a reasonable speed (Wawire et al., 2022). Students' dislike of

Kiswahili may not be an issue. Many of them arrive in Form One without a good reading foundation that the subject demands (Ngorosho, 2017).

The level of reading competence is a frequently cited explanation in the literature (González-Betancor et al., 2022; Cuadrado-Vaca et al., 2024). Reading proficiency, the capacity to read, understand correctly, and follow instructions, is more important than reading as a broad concept. In Kiswahili, this is more important than learners realize. Reading comprehension is clearly tested in Kiswahili Paper 2. No matter how many revisions they have made, a student who struggles to understand written material will definitely perform poorly on the paper test. Data from the Kenya National Examination Council (KNEC) (2021) are clear in this regard. The Kiswahili Paper 2 mean scores decreased by approximately 12 points over five years, from 36.12 in 2017 to 24.36 in 2021. According to studies by Adeyemi (2014) and Wawire et al. (2023), learners who read and understand well usually perform better across other topics. In contrast, those with reading difficulties tend to struggle across a broader range. Without clear or direct instruction, reading difficulties rarely resolve once they are established (Domingue et al., 2021).

Where gender fits into this is less clear. Boys and girls do not always perform the same in reading, and there is considerable research on this topic (Lehr, 2016; Troshenkov, 2022). However, the findings do not point in the same direction. Some studies have found that girls read better than boys (Scheerer-Neumann & Schnitzler, 2025; Manu et al., 2023). A study using PISA-2009 data found that girls who held more open attitudes toward gender performed better in reading than boys with similar attitudes (Taraszow et al., 2024). A South African study found a similar trend: girls outperformed boys in phonological processing and also reading accuracy. The researchers speculated that the occurrence might be due to inappropriate timing. Girls may acquire certain reading-related skills earlier in their development than boys (Wilsenach & Makaure, 2018). Therefore, in some cases, there are real differences.

Sur's (2022) meta-analysis found that, after controlling for socioeconomic status and parental education, gender had little effect on reading comprehension. Wu (2014) also examined online reading across many countries and found that boys and girls engaged with it in much the same way, with more developed countries providing more educational infrastructure and resources that may benefit girls (Chiu, 2018). Similarly, Miyamoto (2023) demonstrated that the connection between reading motivation and reading comprehension was approximately the same for both sexes. Therefore, the gender gap, where it exists, may have more to do with background conditions than with gender itself. However, classroom instruction also plays an important role in this regard. Hochweber and Vieluf (2018) demonstrated that a quality teaching technique, specifically teachers who focused on language skills and proper classroom management, was linked to smaller gaps between boys and girls in reading performance (Brokamp et al., 2019). Where teaching is strong, the gap is less apparent. Where it is weak, both groups tend to fall to roughly the same level for the same reasons.

In the Kenyan context, the evidence leans toward a null gender effect. For instance, Tella et al. (2010) found no meaningful difference between boys and girls in Kiswahili achievement at the KCSE level. Kheder and Rouabhia (2023) found that although some research suggests that gender has little bearing on language acquisition, girls are more similar to boys in language acquisition; both can succeed when given the right conditions and environments. Adeyemi (2014) also discovered gender disparities in secondary reading proficiency, but

Kiswahili was not the focus of the study. The participants were not isolated. Therefore, Kenyan research indicates that we cannot assume international findings will hold here.

However, a direct measurement of Kiswahili reading competence by gender at the secondary school level in Kenya has not been thoroughly examined, particularly in Baringo Central Sub-County, where the performance problem has remained unaddressed for years.

Drawing on Schema Theory, this study demonstrates the significance of past knowledge in comprehending texts, content, and linguistic schemata (Aninda et al., 2025). The idea is clear: reading comprehension is achieved by connecting new texts to prior knowledge. A person with little reading competence and experience has not accumulated this body of knowledge. They will struggle. According to this theory, boys and girls are equally subject to such limitations. This study investigated this hypothesis.

Objective of the Study

To determine the difference in reading competence by gender among Secondary School learners in public secondary schools in Baringo Central Sub-County.

Hypothesis of the Study

H₀₁: There is no statistically significant difference by gender in reading competence level among secondary school learners in Baringo Central Sub-County public secondary schools.

Methodology

This study adopted a cross-sectional causal-comparative design. This design seeks to identify the relationship between an independent variable (gender), a pre-existing characteristic that was not manipulated, and a dependent variable (reading competence). Comparing the mean reading scores of male and female learners to determine whether a significant difference exists is the defining feature of this type of design.

The entire Form Two learners in the 12 co-educational secondary schools located in Baringo Central Sub-County constituted the target population. In total, the population consisted of 540 learners, with each school having approximately 45 learners (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003). The sub-county of Baringo Central was chosen because no published study had investigated gender differences in Kiswahili reading competence in this sub-county, despite the subject consistently recording low KCSE mean scores in the sub-county for five consecutive years. The accessible population comprised of 180 Form Two learners from four co-educational schools within the sub-county, with each school contributing 45 learners, the maximum class size permitted by the Ministry of Education in Kenya (Asiamah et al., 2017).

Ninety Form Two learners participated in the GORT-5 assessment: 45 males and 45 females, drawn from the four sampled schools. The accessible population of 180 Form Two learners in four schools was used to determine the sample size. Each of the four schools produced an intact class of about 45 learners. This was the maximum class size approved by Kenya's Ministry of Education ("Does Class Size Matter on Learning Output? A Case in Science and Mathematics Subjects in Public Secondary Schools in Siaya County, Kenya," 2022). To ensure direct comparability between males and females, equal gender representation was ensured at the sampling stage. Since school authorities do not permit the dismantling of class

settings, all members of the sampled class in each school participated, including learners from vulnerable groups.

Sampling was done in stages using Probabilistic and non-probabilistic methods, depending on the requirements of each step (Abutabenjeh & Jaradat, 2018). The initial stage selected purposive sampling to choose Baringo County as the study site because studies conducted there focused on other language skills beyond reading competence (The Influence of School Resources on the Instruction of Kiswahili Grammar in Baringo Central Sub-County, 2022). At stage two, convenience sampling was used to select Baringo Central Sub-County. This is due to its readily accessible road network, the proximity of schools to one another, and the stable security that enabled data collection during the study period.

The target population of Form Two learners for the 12 co-educational secondary schools in the sub-county is 1080. At the third stage of sampling, purposive sampling was used to select 4 schools from the 12 schools. This resulted in an accessible population of 180 Form Two learners. Students in Form Two were purposively selected, as most schools in the sub-county do not allow external research in examination classes in Forms Three and Four. For a school with more than one stream, systematic sampling would be used to select a single stream. In the end, all 45 learners in the intact class from each stream selected participated, making a total sample of 90 learners, 45 males and 45 females from the four schools. This stage ensures equal gender representation so that statistical comparison can be easily made between the two groups.

The GORT-5 was selected because it directly measures the four components of oral reading competence rate, accuracy, fluency, and comprehension, which are most relevant to Kiswahili performance at the secondary level. It is individually administered, ensuring that each learner's reading is assessed directly. It also produces a composite Oral Reading Index (ORI) that enables clear, direct cross-learner comparisons.

Before the study began, two Kiswahili language instructors at Egerton University reviewed the GORT-5 passages. The question posed to them was simple: do these texts, at this level of vocabulary and complexity, make sense to Form Two learners in a Kenyan classroom? Both reviewers agreed. This provided the instrument with content validity. Evidence for the construct and the criterion-related validity is detailed in the GORT-5 manual, which draws comparisons with other reading measures, including the Nelson-Denny Reading Test (Krabbe, 2017; Sudaryono et al., 2019). The manual does not have information on what to do and what happens as a result of testing. This is not a gap unique to this study; rather, it is a known limitation of this instrument.

Results and Discussion

Male and female participants completed the GORT-5. The results were then analyzed separately for each group to test H_{01} .

Table 1
Independent Samples t-test Results for Reading Competence by Gender.

Gender	n	Mean	SD	t	df	p
Female	45	49.91	10.82	0.901	88	.370 ^{ns}
Male	45	47.74	12.31			

Note. ^{ns} = not significant at $p < .05$ level (two-tailed). *SD*: Standard Deviation.

The t-test analysis in Table 1 demonstrates that there was no statistically significant gender difference in reading competence scores, $t(88) = 0.901$, $p = .370$. Female learners obtained a somewhat higher mean score ($M = 49.91$, $SD = 10.82$) than their male learners counterparts ($M = 47.74$, $SD = 12.31$). The mean difference of 2.17 points was not statistically significant at the .05 level. Therefore, the null hypothesis was retained.

The finding of the current study is very clear: no statistically significant gender difference in Kiswahili reading competence level was observed among Form Two learners in the Baringo Central Sub-County, Kenya. Girls averaged 49.91, and boys averaged 47.74, a difference of 2.17 points. However, these differences were not statistically significant, $t(88) = 0.901$, $p = .370$, and the null hypothesis was retained. The finding is not that boys' and girls' reading skills are similar, but both groups performed at similarly modest levels, which points to a shared literacy challenge rather than one rooted in gender. In other words, the problem runs deeper than gender differences in this sub-county.

Five years of KCSE Kiswahili mean scores in Baringo Central sub-county reveal a continuous trend: schools in the sub-county maintained an average of C-, whereas the national mean was 6.4. This gap remains unaddressed. In conjunction with these figures, the absence of gender difference seems logical. Both groups collectively underperformed in this regard. Tella et al. (2010) observed a similar phenomenon at the national level, finding no significant difference in Kiswahili performance between boys and girls at the KCSE. The pattern persists. In the context of Kenyan secondary schools, gender does not appear to be a critical factor influencing Kiswahili performance, as indicated by certain overseas studies.

This contrasts with the findings in other contexts. For instance, Wilsenach and Makaure (2018) found significant gender differences in reading performance in South Africa. Sur (2022) also found a general female advantage in reading comprehension in multiple studies in Indonesia. This difference may reflect the instructional environment in Kenya. Similarly, Hochweber and Vieluf (2018) demonstrated that the gender gap in reading was minimal in classrooms with strong language emphasis and teacher support. If classrooms in Baringo Central Sub-County are characterized by low instructional quality, as the persistently poor KCSE results suggest, then both genders may be equally under-supported. The gender gap does not appear when neither group is effectively taught.

The KCSE data support this argument: over five years, no school in the sub-county exceeded a mean score of 5.5 in Kiswahili. The national average was 6.4. The gap between Baringo Central and the national mean is both persistent and substantial. If reading competence is strongly differentiated by gender, we would expect to see at least some variation in how boys and girls contribute to that performance. The absence of a significant gender difference suggests that systemic and shared reading weaknesses are the dominant factors.

Schema Theory, which anchors this study, offers one explanation (Xiao, 2024): reading comprehension depends on activating existing knowledge structures when processing new texts (Aninda et al., 2025; Zhang, 2025). Learners with limited exposure to extended reading (Wawire et al., 2023), in Kiswahili or any other subject, will have fewer active schemata to bring to reading tasks. This limitation did not discriminate between the sexes. If both male and female learners in the sub-county have had similarly restricted reading exposure before and during secondary school, the theory predicts exactly what the data show: average performance for both groups with no significant difference between them.

The metacognitive dimension is also important in this regard. Wu (2014) found that gender differences in online reading engagement and metacognitive strategy use were not significant in most countries. Miyamoto (2023) found that the relationship between reading motivation and comprehension was similar across genders. These studies reinforce our results. Where motivation, exposure, and strategy use are uniformly low, reading outcomes are uniformly modest, and gender becomes a secondary variable at best.

However, this null result should not be misinterpreted as a positive result. Both gender groups struggled in the same way. The absence of a significant gender difference ($p = .370$) is not evidence of egalitarian performance. This is evidence of a shared literacy challenge affecting all learners in the sub-county, regardless of sex. Addressing this challenge requires systemic interventions rather than gender-specific programs.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study set out to determine whether gender accounts for differences in Kiswahili reading competence among Form Two learners in Baringo Central Sub-County. The answer is that it does not. No statistically significant difference was found between male ($M = 47.74$) and female ($M = 49.91$) learners, $t(88) = 0.901$, $p = .370$. The null hypothesis was therefore retained.

That result should not be read as reassurance. Both groups performed at average levels on an instrument with a maximum score of 76, against the backdrop of five consecutive years of C-mean grades in KCSE Kiswahili. The problem is not gendered. Interventions in the Sub-County should not be selective; they should target all learners equally. Programmes designed based on gender differences misallocate available resources when no meaningful difference exists. After that, Kiswahili teachers need to prioritize structured oral reading strategies in Forms 1 and 2, where literacy is either built or lost. Third, schools need access to adequate Kiswahili reading materials. A learner who has no texts to practice with will not develop fluency regardless of instruction quality.

This study was limited to one sub-county and did not control for socioeconomic status or parental education, which may have contributed to equalizing scores across groups. Future research should extend this investigation to multiple counties and consider longitudinal designs that track the development of reading competence across secondary school.

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