# INFLUENCE OF SHENG LANGUAGE ON PROFICIENCY OF MASTERING ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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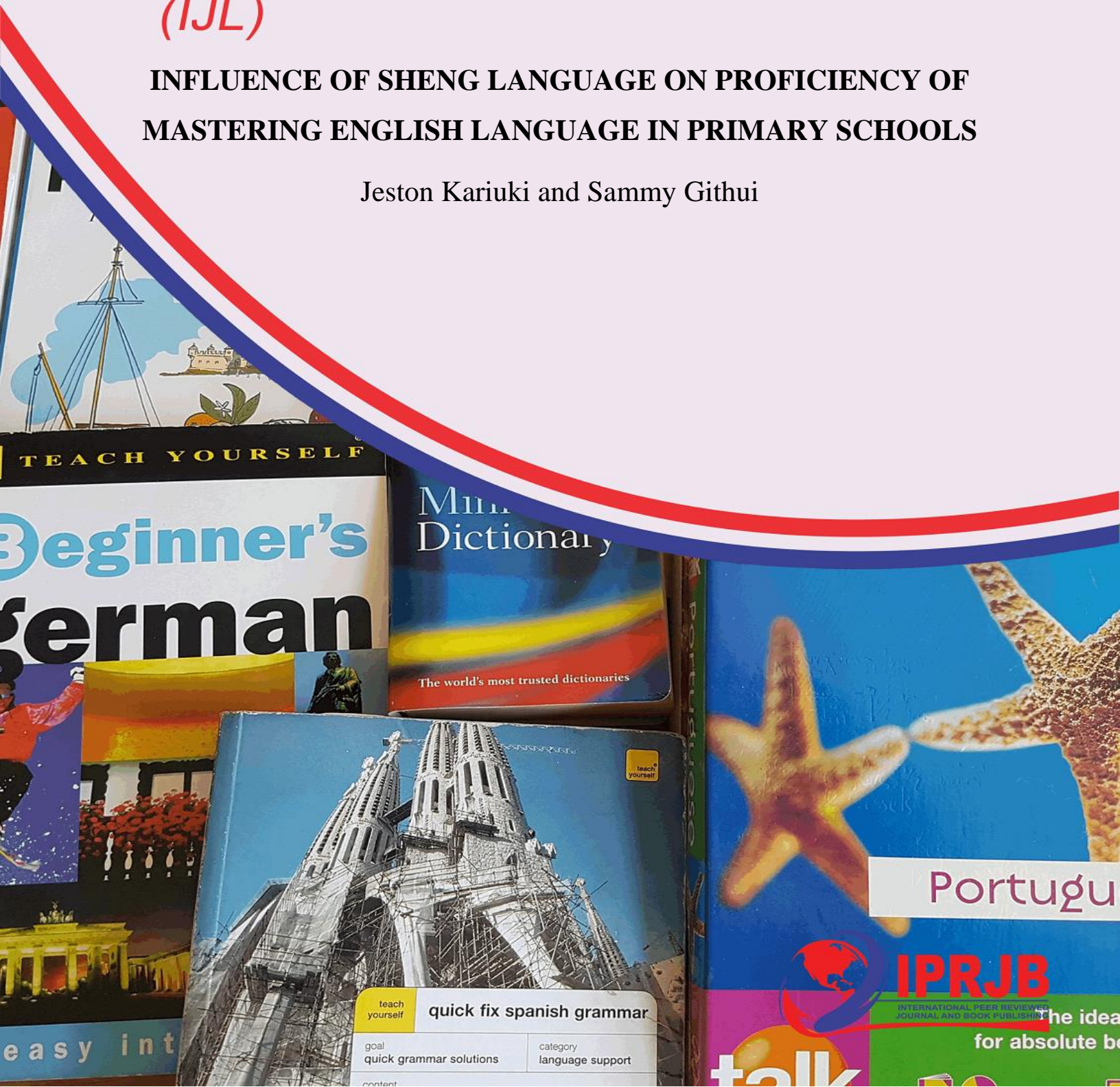
# INFLUENCE OF SHENG LANGUAGE ON PROFICIENCY OF MASTERING ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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### Abstract

*Purpose*: to evaluate the influence of sheng language on proficiency of mastering English language in primary schools.

*Methodology*: This study further used a behavioral approach while researching and writing this article. A qualitative textual evaluation method was used in this research. Textual analysis consists of review and interpretation of scripts and articles and their inferential context in relations to the sheng language and proficiency of mastering English language.

*Findings*: Sheng influences word formation processes and patterns used in speaking and writing. Pupils used a lot of cutting-off of the final syllables of words and fixed coined syllables to complete the words by so doing, they altered the meaning of words. Pupils used words from other languages not acceptably borrowed by English language in speaking and writing affecting the choice and use of vocabulary in composition writing. Further, pupils also used vocabulary from sheng to explain a concept in English making grammatical errors. Teachers faced some challenges in curbing the use of Sheng in speaking and writing. These challenges were; lack of proper language policy in most schools, lack of proper guide books provided by KICD on teaching speaking and writing, lack of technical knowhow by teachers on tackling languages, large classes, inadequate time and the acceptance of sheng as a language to be used in the society.

*Unique contribution to theory, policy, and practice:* Schools should provide a language policy which should be strictly adhered to in order to minimize the negative influence of Sheng speaking and writing. Teachers should give pupils a lot of exercises to help in mastering of spellings and pronunciation in English. Some of the spelling strategies are filling in gaps, checking up words in the dictionary extensive reading and locating correct spelled words in a text.

## INTRODUCTION

In English language, the writing and speaking skill is very important, for one to communicate to an audience far from him or her. Not only is writing and speaking an important academic skill, but it is also an important skill that translates into any career field as nearly all professions require some form of writing on the job. The skill in English is facing a lot of challenges, therefore this study sought to look at one among the many problems which may be affecting English composition writing negatively and that is Sheng language.

Globally, educating a nation remains the most vital strategy for the development of the society throughout the developing world (Aikaman & Unterhalter, 2005). Many studies on human capital development concur that it is the human resources of a nation and not its capital or natural resources that ultimately determine the pace of its economic and social development. The principal institutional mechanism for developing human capital is the formal education system of primary, secondary, and tertiary training (Nsubuga, 2003).

Since education is an investment, there is a significant positive correlation between education and economic-social productivity. When people are educated, their standards of living are likely to improve, since they are empowered to access productive ventures, which will ultimately lead to an improvement in their livelihoods. The role of education therefore, is not just to impart knowledge and skills that enable the beneficiaries to function as economies and social change agents in society, but also to impart values, ideas, attitudes and aspirations important for national development. The straightforward linkage between education and development is through the improvement of labour skills, which in turn increases opportunities for well-paid productive employment. This then might enable the citizens of any nation to fully exploit their potential positively (Keith & Johnson, 2001).

Kenya has consistently developed its education system, since independence. Gross enrollment rates in primary schools have increased tremendously since the introduction of the policy of Free Primary Education (FPE). The goal of FPE is not only to increase equitable access, but also to improve quality and relevance of education being provided. Failure to expand access at primary education level will undermine the government efforts to sustain FPE, and the achievement of the education related Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Transition rates into the secondary level may fall unless access to quality primary schooling is expanded (World Bank Report, 1995). In addition, the competitiveness, especially in high value added and knowledge based sectors of the economy, depends on knowledge, skills and competences associated with abstract reasoning, analysis, language and communication skills and application of science and technology which are most efficiently acquired through schooling (Lewin, 2001). The official languages designated to be used in schools are English and Kiswahili however, mother tongue and a code made up of Kiswahili, English and mother tongue known as Sheng language tend to infiltrate into the school setting. Sheng language is cited as being one among the factors that affect proper acquisition and use of the official languages and thus their performance (Njoroge, 2012).

The primary school curriculum is tailored to facilitate learning of knowledge, skills and attitudes through formal, non-formal or informal education. Formal education is composed of subjects outlined in the syllabus, majority of which are subjected to an end of course national examination. The subjects include: Mathematics, English, Kiswahili, Science and Social and Religious studies. Great importance has been placed on the development of the English language as it is a language of instruction and also a subject in itself. It has always been a compulsory subject in Kenya's system of education. In the class, it is allocated more lessons; five lessons alongside mathematics in lower primary and seven lessons in upper primary per week (KIE, 2002). The Kenya National Examination Council (KNEC) considers mastery of English crucial in the performance of any examination (KNEC, 2010). From the above statement; it is clear that

proficiency in English is the key to success in the other subjects in the school curriculum. The primary English syllabus states that writing skills acquired in primary school should enable learners to express themselves in written English using appropriate punctuation, spelling, grammar and vocabulary (Indagasi, 2008).

Sheng is a hybrid linguistic code that is believed to have evolved in Nairobi in the 1960s and 1970s. Its evolution and use has been attributed to a variety of factors ranging from language contact to inadequate knowledge of standard languages, (Swahili and English), identity (Samper, 2004), obfuscation of meaning (Mbugua, 2003) and cognitive efficiency among others. According to Mazrui, (1995), Sheng defies the classification categories such as pidgin, creole, slang (in spite of the acronym), or jargon. This is because although it exhibits features that characterize all these categories, none can be said to exhaustively capture its various peculiarities. It is unanimously believed that Sheng began in the poor residential areas of Nairobi's East lands, before gradually spreading to other poor residential areas of Nairobi and its environs. Today, it has become a characteristic linguistic phenomenon of Nairobi and other multiethnic urban areas in Kenya, though the degree of competence and participation differs from individual to individual and region to region among different categories of speakers (Wagikondi, 2004). Sheng as a language can therefore manifest itself in pupils' thoughts and how they express themselves in writing and speaking. This is the basis upon which this study is pursued in order to establish the relationship between Sheng and English and how the influence of Sheng on writing and speaking can be minimized.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Language transfer theory

This study was based on Language transfer theory as cited by Chang (2012). The language transfer theory proposes that the learner's mother tongue- MT will positively or negatively affect his learning of a foreign language in second language acquisition- SLA. He further observes that when there are differences between the learner's MT and Target Language- TL, the MT will negatively aid the TL learning. On the contrary, when the learner's MT and TL are similar, the native language will actively aid foreign language learning. Language transfer, also known as LI interference, linguistic interference or cross meaning, means that speakers or writers apply knowledge from their native language to the second language. It is most commonly discussed in the context of English language learning and teaching but can occur in any situation when someone does not have a native command of a language, as when translating into the second language.

Language interference is most often discussed as a source of errors known as negative transfer, it occurs when speakers and writers transfer items and structures that are not the same in both languages. In lexicology, words get their different ways of expression in different languages. Generally speaking, every language has their unique word formation, collocation and so on. As foreign language learners, especially beginners, they always first cope with the meanings. In some specific sense, they translate the words from negative language to target language equivalently. Thus all the results will lead to ambiguous or meaningless in the TL. The connotation associative meaning and effective meaning will be different as well. Words act as

basic units of communication among people and are loaded with different cultural meanings and implications. Gives us an example of the word "dog," that in western countries, dogs are treated as companions while to the Chinese, they are associated with negative meanings

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When the negatively transferred errors are discouraged in the learning classes, we are going to have the correct form of the English language being learned, and it not the errors transferred will affect the correct learning of English, thus a poorly done writings and language in terms of word order, spellings, vocabulary and poorly formed words.

**Language Policy in Kenyan Schools**

While barely a quarter of the Kenyan population can adequately use English, it remains the advantaged official language and the medium of instruction in the education system, unlike Kiswahili, the co-official language (Ogechi, 2005). However, while the leadership appears comfortable with this linguistic situation and would wish to have the status quo maintained, the linguistic situation among lay Kenyans demonstrates that not all is well on the ground. Historically, English came to Kenya through British colonialism, while Kiswahili initially spread throughout the country as a trade language from the coast. Although English is now considered to be a Kenyan language by some (Webb & Kembo-Sure, 2000), to a large extent it has to be learnt formally.

On the other hand, though Kiswahili is widely spoken and acquired on the basis of informal exposure to this language, Webb and Kembo-Sure (2000) argue that Kiswahili itself is as alien to most rural people as is English, and even among those who claim to speak it, only a small proportion are fluent enough to engage in serious discussions. The other Kenyan languages are only used in restricted areas largely for intra-ethnic interactions. Practically, therefore, Kenyan children do not have a single, uniform language that they all speak when they enroll in Grade 1. In addition, broadly speaking, there exist three linguistic zones in Kenya, namely; rural areas that are typically inhabited by ethnically homogenous communities and use local native languages, peri-urban areas, which, though rural, have ethnically diverse occupants and thus use Kiswahili as a language of wider communication, and urban areas that comprise large towns and cities with people from a multiplicity of ethnicities, in which Kiswahili and English are the languages of wider communication (Webb, & Kembo-Sure, K2000).

The official language policy in education prescribes the mother tongue as the medium of instruction in rural areas for the first three years of learning, whereas either Kiswahili or English

is used in the urban schools KIE, 2002). No clear policy exists for peri-urban schools, although they usually use Kiswahili to introduce education. However, from Grade 4 onwards, the teaching of and in mother tongue ceases. In Grade 4, Kiswahili continues as a subject whereas English becomes the medium of instruction as well as the language in which national examinations are written except (obviously) for examinations on Kiswahili. What this means is that the process of preparing the learners to sit for the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education starts in Grade 4, regardless of whether or not the learners are able to use English at that stage. At the end of the primary English course, all learners are expected to have a sufficient command of English in spoken and written forms to enable them to communicate fluently, follow subject courses and textbooks, and read for pleasure and information (Kenya Institute of Education, 2002).

## English speaking and writing

Vocabulary knowledge is important because it encompasses all the words we must know to access our background knowledge, express our ideas and communicate effectively, and learn about new concepts. "Vocabulary is the glue that holds stories, ideas and content together making comprehension accessible for children" (Rupley, Logan & Nichols, 1999). Students' word knowledge is linked strongly to academic success because students who have large vocabularies can understand new ideas and concepts more quickly than students with limited vocabularies. The high correlation in the research literature of word knowledge with writing composition indicates that if students do not adequately and steadily grow their vocabulary knowledge, writing composition will be affected (Chall & Jacobs, 2003).

Recent research shows that vocabulary growth is largely determined by parental practices, particularly before the age of 7 (Biemiller, 2003). Children mainly use words their parents and other adults use with them in conversation, and acquire larger vocabularies when their parents use more words Vocabulary is a strong indicator of writing success. It has been established that children's declining writing composition largely resulted from a lack of vocabulary knowledge and that this was primarily caused by a lack of learning opportunities, not a lack of natural ability (Biemiller, 2003).

## Sheng Language

Sheng has become the basic urban vernacular for the youth in Kenya today. Indications are that the young people in the rural areas now also commonly use it together with a sizeable portion of the adult population, who grew up with 'old school' Sheng - the Sheng in their days of youth. Sections of the electronic and print media regularly use Sheng and popular music features Sheng as a language of choice. With approximately 40 living languages in Kenya today, two of them, Swahili and English, arguably co-official (Skandera, 2000), one wonders where this new language came from and why it arose. Mazrui, (1995) has stated that the foundation of Sheng lies at the traditional code switching between Swahili and English (hence the term sh-eng) while others credit Sheng to the demand for a lingua franca in the colonial period during the beginnings of urbanization in the country.

Karanja, (2010) in her paper, Homeless At Home, informs us on how Sheng is formulated and its use among the Kenyan urban youth. She tells us that Sheng was started in an attempt to bridge the ethnic divide and that between the perceived traditional values and the urban modernized values.

She also tells us how Sheng words are formed by word borrowing, coining and truncation. The research informs the current one especially on Sheng word formation and on what the language is used for. However, it does not tell us its effects on English language.

## METHODOLOGY

This study further used a behavioral approach while researching and writing this article, which involved evaluating the meaning embedded in a silence by considering the environment and the situation at hand in that very moment. The drawing and interpretation of research findings and sense which is not a quantitative impact evaluation, was important in this context, which implies that qualitative and thematic analysis was most suitable in this study. A qualitative textual evaluation method was used in this research. Textual analysis consists of review and interpretation of scripts and articles and their inferential context in relations to the sheng language on proficiency of mastering English language. Cutting (2008), nevertheless, reaffirmed its reliability and adequacy, in particular when the researcher pays attention to text itself. In this regard, there should be more interpretation of the texts and their targeted discussion environment in view of the time and situation in which they were written.

## FINDINGS AND RESULTS

The study findings showed that sheng had influenced sentence construction in speaking and writing in English and therefore students are not able to construct their sentences well at the same time there is clear distortion of the meaning of the sentences making the composition not to be clearly understood. According to Indagasi, (2008) presentation of sentence patterns in upper primary is done both orally and in written form. Sentence structure must first be identified and then presented in a context which brings out the meanings. On the contrary, it was found out that sentence construction in composition writing has been influenced by Sheng to an extent that they are presented in context which do not bring out their meanings clearly. On one hand Bosire, (2006), points out that structure formation in structure of Sheng may influence linguistics as pointed out in this research. Further, Bosire (2009) found out that Lexical manipulation is a tool that distorts and re-engineers the structure and meaning of words in a way that uniquely identifies them as Sheng. Distortion may be structural or semantic. There are two main structural distortions; syllable methathesis and truncation.

The study findings indicated that Sheng had an influence on word spelling in English. This was found to concur with Mutiga (2013), who argued that speakers of Sheng substitute 'foreign' sounds found in English with the closest sounds found either in Kiswahili or any other indigenous languages making it difficult for learners to distinguish the different English vowel sounds and their qualities thus leading to inaccurate pronunciation and spelling of English words. Further Njuguna (2013) reported that Kenya National Examinations Council had revealed that some candidates who sat 2012 Standard Eight exams failed flat in writing compositions. A post-mortem report showed that some of the candidates could hardly write simple words correctly, mainly because of strong mother-tongue and 'sheng' influence. According to the report, some candidates hardly communicated because any attempt to do so was hampered by multiple errors in spelling and sentence structure. This clearly shows that Sheng has influenced the use of correct spelling in composition writing in public primary schools. On her part Mutiga (2013)

pointed that teachers of English specifically complained that speakers of Sheng' substituted 'foreign' sounds found in English with the closest sounds found either in Kiswahili or any other indigenous languages.

It emerged from the study findings that sheng influenced word formation processes and patterns used in composition writing in public primary schools in Eldoret Municipality. This was found to support the findings of Bosire (2009) who noted that sheng causes semantic manipulations in English. These manipulations are seen in processes employed to extend, invert or radically change the meaning of lexemes appropriated from Swahili, English or any of the source languages that Sheng takes vocabulary from. The study further showed that there is language interference as pupils apply knowledge from Sheng language to the 2nd language influencing word formation processes and patterns in English. It was further established that Sheng has been shown to be responsible for linguistic change (Aitchison, 2001) since word formation has been achieved through either borrowing, arbitrary coinage or re-lexicalization (Ogechi, 2005). Most of the words used by pupils are formed in the Sheng structure, showing a lot of coinage and reduplication as found in Sheng language.

The study findings noted that there was lack of language policy in public primary schools and this has been a major challenge in curbing the use of Sheng in composition writing in public primary schools. The study findings concurs with that of Momanyi (2009) who pointed out that the emergence of 'Sheng' may have to do with the lack of clarity in Kenya's language policy especially by providing speakers with a code that makes good use of all the major languages spoken in the country. To some extent this may be true because while Kenya boasts of having English as its official language, there are no deliberate efforts to make this a reality through policy formulation. Furthermore, the study reflected what Kagure (2010) noted on challenges associated with implementing English language policy in multilingual learning in ethnically homogenous schools where national languages are not the main languages spoken at home.

The emergence of Sheng in the poor residential areas of Nairobi and its adoption as the youth's secret code accounts for the stigma associated with its speakers. It has since spread its tentacles out of the inner city to various parts of the country in addition to becoming increasingly popular in the media and popular culture (Samper, 2002) Sheng's pervasiveness in the daily discourse of the Nairobi people is demonstrated by the irony exhibited by many people who use it unconsciously while denying its knowledge or use. Outright condemnation, therefore, would not only amount to selfcondemnation, but would also be ignoring the reality regarding the function the code serves in Kenya's linguistic market, especially amongst the youth in their identity project and some criminals who use it as a secret code (Githiora, 2002)

 In spite of these functions, its negative effect on school performance in English language in both primary and secondary school levels has been a thorn in the flesh for the parents and language pedagogist's (Samper, 2002). Driven by need to prevent the corruption of languages and to endeavor to teach 'proper' languages that enhance the learners' career opportunities, such stakeholders are usually harsh in their evaluation of Sheng and its speakers. Among the speakers, on the other hand, effects of Sheng fluctuates depending on whether they are peripheral or core speakers, and their motivations for using Sheng. 'Sheng' is based primarily on Kiswahili structure.

It uses Kiswahili grammar with lexicon drawn from Kiswahili, English and the various ethnic languages mostly spoken in big towns. Initially, this mixed code was unstable, random and fluid, but it gradually developed more systematic patterns of usage at the phonological, morphological and syntactic levels. For example, the word 'father' started as 'fadhee', later it changed to 'buda or budaa' and now it is 'mbuyu'. According to Githiora, (2002), the word 'buda' has its origin in Gujarati and Hindi which means an old man. But in the new coinage 'mbuyu' there seems to be no explanation as to its origin. The code dominates the discourse of primary and secondary school children outside their formal classroom setting, and is widely spoken also by street hawkers, street children, public service vehicle drivers and conductors and small scale business communities in market places.

## CONCLUSION

Sheng influences the use of correct spelling and pronunciation by distorting the structure of words in English making it difficult for learners to distinguish between English vowel sounds and their qualities thus leading to inaccurate pronunciation and spelling of English words. Sheng influences word formation processes and patterns used in speaking and writing. Pupils used a lot of cutting-off of the final syllables of words and fixed coined syllables to complete the words by so doing, they altered the meaning of words. Pupils used words from other languages not acceptably borrowed by English language in speaking and writing affecting the choice and use of vocabulary in composition writing. Further, pupils also used vocabulary from sheng to explain a concept in English making grammatical errors.

Teachers faced some challenges in curbing the use of Sheng in speaking and writing. These challenges were; lack of proper language policy in most schools, lack of proper guide books provided by KICD on teaching speaking and writing, lack of technical knowhow by teachers on tackling languages, large classes, inadequate time and the acceptance of sheng as a language to be used in the society.

## Recommendations

Schools should provide a language policy which should be strictly adhered to in order to minimize the negative influence of Sheng speaking and writing. Teachers should give pupils a lot of exercises to help in mastering of spellings and pronunciation in English. Some of the spelling strategies are filling in gaps, checking up words in the dictionary extensive reading and locating correct spelled words in a text. There should be censorship on the language used in the media to curb the spread of Sheng language.

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