

## Gender Differences in the Acquisition of English Language Skills among Students in Secondary Schools in Kenya

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**Abstract:** This study is premised on the notion that boys and girls perform differently in communicative English with girls often outperforming the boys. Generally, pragmatic errors, in particular pragmabehavioral errors, are often cited as direct cause of misunderstanding leading to communication breakdown. Using a descriptive research design and a sample of ninety respondents, the researcher isolated errors in day-to-day communication of the respondents and documented the seriousness of these errors. The main objectives of the study were to identify and describe the types of pragmabehavioral communication and errors, and examine gender differences and individual variations of these pragmatic errors among the Kimeru L1 learners of L2 English. The study was guided by Murcia's [1] Model of Communicative Competence. The sample was drawn from three selected secondary schools in Central Imenti Sub-county, Meru County, Kenya. The main instruments of data collection were observation schedule and teacher interviews. Results indicate that there were gender differences in the way the female and the male used gestures and facial expressions, spatial distance, oculosics, body posture, artifacts and voice modulation. These results are hoped to raise awareness of gender differences in pragmabehavioral communication and the role pragmabehavioral communication plays in ensuring that a second language learners achieve communicative competence.

**Keywords:** Pragmabehavioral errors, Pragmatics, second language acquisition.

### INTRODUCTION

Pragmatics is an area of study in applied linguistics focusing on the appropriate use of language in contexts in which it is used, taking into consideration referring expressions known as taking turns in conversation, text information packaging, presupposition and implicature. According to Kasper [2], pragmatics is defined as the study of people's comprehension and production of linguistic action. Crystal [3] on the other hand sees it as the study of language from the point of view of the users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using of the language in social interaction, and the effects their use of language has on the other participant. Kasper [4] refers to pragmatic competence as knowledge of how to use language to achieve goals in language interactions in a social context. Pragmatics is about culture, communication and in the case of second languages; about intercultural communication. Pragmatic failure in this study is construed as "error".

As Blum-Kulka and Olhstain [5] point out pragmatic failure can have serious social implications. Pragmatic failure is a kind of error that occurs in cross-cultural communication when speakers make grammatically correct utterances, but untimely remark,

improper expression or inappropriate ways of speaking in different cultural context. Pragmatic failure occurs when speakers violate the interpersonal norms and social stipulations or do not conform to time and space perspective.

According to Bardovi-Harlig and others [6] language learners interacting with speakers of a target language must be exposed to language samples, which observe social, cultural and discourse conventions and which are pragmatically appropriate. The differences are thought to cause pragmatic failure and / or pragmatic errors. Learning a language therefore, involves learning a culture. For a second language learner to be able to interact with people from different cultures effectively, acquisition of cultural understanding and communication skills is an important consideration.

Communicative competence of second languages consists of both verbal and non-verbal and the latter cannot be underestimated, otherwise the non-native speaker may not be able to send and receive the message ambiguously [7]. This paper therefore, sought to examine how gender created the pragmabehavioral error variations of the kimeru L1 learners of L2 English.

Pragmabehavioral errors are because of inappropriate use of body language (such as gestures, facial expressions) and other non-verbal cues, or misinterpretation of time and space.

Kimeru L1 learners of L2 English in secondary schools have continually performed poorly in sections of national English examinations requiring adequate knowledge of communicative ability. Their day-to-day communication in English is largely wanting. Boys and girls have also been noted to perform differentially in communicative English with girls often outperforming the boys. One way of minimizing this problem is to identify and deal with cultural based pragmabehavioral errors as a precondition for successful communication in English. This paper seeks to examine gender differences and individual variations in pragmabehavioral communications and errors among Kimeru L1 learners of L2 English

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Mocho [8] examined the effects of the environment on the Kiidakho first language speakers' acquisition and use of Kiswahili as a second language. The study was descriptive by design and its target population was Form Two and Three high school students. Data was collected by means of questionnaire and written tasks. From the learners responses it was deduced that the home environment exposed the learner to more Kiidakho than Kiswahili. Study results indicated that the most preferred language of communication by students was Kiidakho. Outside class in high school, 33% of the students used Kiidakho and Kiswahili, 29% used Kiswahili only and 14% used English only. The study recommended that teachers of Kiswahili should be well versed with the theories of language learning and the effects of native languages on the target languages in the process of second language acquisition. This study is relevant to the current study as it looks into the interference of the native language, which includes its culture, in the acquisition of a second language. Mocho's study, however, only points out the environment as a source of learner errors in second language communicative competence. The current study thus sought to bridge this gap by discussing nonverbal communication in the acquisition of communicative competence in English as a second language

Mwaniki [9] studied the inter-language of Kikuyu learners of English as a second language targeting learners in standard seven and eight and those in Form One and Two in a formal classroom. He found out that learners overcame their target language handicap by creating new words and expressions, which were consistent with their L1. The process and strategies, which were linked to both intra-lingual and inter-lingual factors such as overgeneralization and

language transfer predominantly, shaped the characteristics at the interlanguage of L2 learners. His study deviates from the present study since his study was designed to investigate the L2 output of Kikuyu learners of English within the interlanguage framework while the current study looks into the L2 output of the Kimeru L1 learner of L2 English. The current paper revealed that some of the sources of pragmabehavioral errors were language and cultural transfer from L1 to L2 and overgeneralization of language and cultural rules.

The influence of mother-tongue maintenance on the acquisition of English language skills among students is one of the major sources of lack of communicative competence. Muriungi and Mbui [10] established that mother tongue among the students in Imenti South District was a hindrance to the acquisition of English language skills in day secondary schools. It was discovered that the teachers in the day schools in Imenti South District did very little in enforcing the use of English among the students' interaction in their day-to-day activities. This study recommended that the school administration and teachers should enforce rules to limit the use of vernacular in students' interaction. The study also recommended other programs like debates and class discussions be put in place to build confidence and proficiency in the students' use of English language.

Muriungi and Mbui's study puts this paper to perspective since it also based its study on day secondary schools and found out that a major source of pragmabehavioral errors was mother tongue and cultural influence. However, Muriungi and Mbui's study failed to point out the influence L1 culture had on nonverbal communication resulting to pragmabehavioral errors.

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Participants**

Participants were drawn from three public secondary schools in Central Imenti Sub-county, Meru County, Kenya. The schools were Katheri Girls' secondary School, Githongo Boys' Secondary School and Kianthumbi Mixed Secondary School. These schools were chosen because all the learners were from the same locality and were all Kimeru L1 speakers. A Mixed school was selected to assist the researcher observe how the girls and boys communicated when they were with the opposite gender, and the only boys' and girls' schools were used to observe how the two genders communicated when on their own. A random sample of ninety respondents from the three secondary schools was purposively selected. Respondents were drawn from Form One, Two and Three students. These classes were assumed to have been learning English for a number of years and therefore had the basics of

English language. Each student in each of the nine classes (there were three classes in each of the three chosen schools) randomly picked a number from a container. The students who had numbers one to ten in each class were included in the sample. This means that each class had ten respondents bringing to ninety respondents.

### **INSTRUMENTATION**

Recorded class debating instrument was used. This instrument involved a debate topic entitled "It is better to educate a girl than a boy." Each of the ninety participants was expected to participate in order to generate data on their spoken English. Since the respondents were drawn from Form One, Two and Three, the moderator picked the respondents at random alternating the three classes. Three debating sessions were arranged and recorded for observation by the researcher, one in each school. The debating session was an important instrument in capturing student's pragmabehavioral communication for example use of gestures, body posture during conversations. Observation was also used. The researcher in particular observed how the students talked with each other and the quality of their language especially nonverbal language as well as how they talked with the teachers. An interview with the teachers was carried out to find out how the teachers dealt with the gender differences in pragmabehavioral errors.

### **Pragmabehavioral communications and errors**

The present paper included the following in the analysis of non-verbal communication: gestures and facial expressions, body posture, oculusics, spatial distance, artifacts, voice modulation and haptics. When speakers are not aware of the differences in pragmabehavioral communication, their interlocutors may get a false impression or misunderstand the message, which causes pragmabehavioral failure.

### **Gestures and Facial Expressions**

Gestures and facial expressions are used to enhance communication but can also be a source of misunderstanding if the L1 gestures and facial expressions conflict in meaning or are unknown in the target language. In many instances interlocutors from two different cultures could share the same gestures and facial expressions but do not share the same meanings, which could cause misunderstandings and ultimately cause communication breakdown. For instance in the recorded debating session, a respondent was explaining about a girl becoming pregnant but instead of saying 'pregnant' the speaker rubbed his stomach in circular motions with the assumption that the listeners understand the gesture. The act of rubbing the stomach could be misunderstood by the listener thereby causing misunderstandings in that there would be many ways of interpreting the rubbing of the stomach in circular

motion, to mean stomach upset, pregnancy, discomfort etc. This shows that some of the gestures the speakers used were ambiguous. A more appropriate and accurate gesture for pregnancy would have been raising ones hands just above the stomach to indicate a bump.

Some gestures did not also communicate the intended meaning. During the debating session when one of the respondents was giving an apology for using offensive language, his facial expressions and other gestures contradicted his intention and words. The respondent contorted his face showing irritation towards the audience and loosely threw one hand in the air. This clearly indicated that the apology was not sincere and he did not seem to care about the feelings of the audience. Much as the respondent's words were apologetic, his gestures and facial expressions did not match up his words. He was supposed to show remorse for his actions through his facial expressions. Findings from the researcher's observations indicate that the respondents rarely smiled when conversing with the teachers. Most of the respondents had expressionless faces. The teachers too did not smile. They wore serious faces while giving instructions to the respondents.

### **Oculusics**

This is the study of eye behaviour and any other eye signals sent during communication. Gregersen [11] argues that eye behaviour has a higher probability of being noticed than other bodily movements. However, the author points out that when language learners are not familiar with the cultural code of eye behaviour in the western countries and use eye behaviour as dictated by their L1 culture, they may find themselves sending the wrong message. It was observed that the respondents did not maintain eye contact with their teachers. The respondents however maintained eye contact with their peers. Eye contact in the English language is a sign of honest conversation and active listening. Eye contact also shows that the listener is interested in what the speaker is saying. However, in the Kimeru culture eye contact with a person of higher social status is interpreted as a sign of lack of respect and arrogance. In this case, the respondents could not maintain eye contact with the teachers for fear of the teachers misunderstanding it as being rude and disrespectful. Therefore, the respondents held a conversation with the teachers while their eyes were focused on the ground as a show of respect to their teachers. This could easily cause misunderstanding if the speaker was a native speaker of English.

### **Body posture**

Body posture is the way we position our bodies when standing or sitting. It can communicate boredom, respect or disrespect towards a person, or interest in a particular person or subject. Body posture was observed through the way the respondents stood,

and sat. Some respondents had inappropriate body postures. Findings from the study indicated that the respondents who were not fluent in English language stood in a stoop as they presented their points. This already created an impression to the audience that they were not confident of themselves and that they were nervous. As the other respondents were listening, it was observed that a number of the listeners were slouched in their seats. Much as they were nodding to communicate that they were listening, their slouching in the seat could be misunderstood as lack of interest in what was being said and boredom.

Few students stood with their arms crossed on the chest for lack of what gestures and body movements to use. These students were not sure which gestures were appropriate and which ones were not. The students could be misunderstood for lacking interest in what they are saying.

### **Spatial distance**

This was seen in the distance the students maintained while talking to their teachers. Personal space depends on the social distance, familiarity between interlocutors and the cultural background. Axtell [12] points out that if a learner does not know how close he or she may come to an interlocutor, they may engage in the situation called conversational tango. This can create discomfort and misunderstandings.

Results from the observation data indicate that the respondents were not able to keep an appropriate distance between themselves and the teachers. Most of the male respondents maintained a too far distance with the female teachers out of a culturally expected norm of behaviour but impractical in a school setup. The girls similarly maintained a too far distance with the male teachers. The Meru culture affected the teacher- student relationship.

This far distance to the English native speaker would be misunderstood as being cold and aloof. However, Kimeru culture dictates a young man, who has undergone circumcision should maintain a far distance when talking to older women, who are the age of their mothers, as a sign of respect. The boys therefore maintained a far distance with their female teachers as a sign of respect but also affected the learning experience especially in the learning of English. The same too far distance was also observed between the girls and the male teachers. One would easily misinterpret them for strangers.

It was also observed that the girls and boys respondents in the mixed schools did not interact with each other freely. They maintained a far distance in class which affected group discussions, role play and other class activities that required boys and girls to

work together to improve on their pragmatic competence.

### **Haptics (touch)**

According to Negi [13] haptics concerns the role of touch in communications. This includes a handshake, bodily contact, patting, and gentle touch of others. It was observed that there was very little touch or body contact between interlocutors. As noted when discussing spatial distance, there was a too far distance between the teachers and students during communication. This distance also discouraged any type of physical contact. The teachers initiated the handshakes with the respondents. This communicates the teachers' dominance over the students who are in a lower social status. The handshakes between the teachers and the students were few and because of the physical distance, the two interlocutors had to overstretch their hands for a handshake while the students bowed their heads as a sign of respect to the teachers. Kimeru culture has definite rules on how younger people should show respect to older people and gender plays a big role. However, this creates an unsuitable environment for language learning.

### **Voice modulation**

This includes vocal tone, volume and speed. During the debating sessions, it was observed that some respondents talked too slowly. The pace was too slow which caused restlessness among the listeners. The English native speakers could misunderstand this as lack of content and boredom. However, it has been noted that among the Meru natives, when one is explaining what they feel is an important point or telling an important story, they use a slow pace; which the respondents also used. A number of respondents used very low volume that a native English speaker could easily misunderstand as shyness or timidity especially when talking to the teachers. The teachers looked comfortable with the volume and the tone. The Kimeru culture discourages young people from speaking too loudly to the older people or those in higher social status. Thus, a student speaking loudly to a teacher or even near a teacher would be interpreted as disrespecting the teacher.

### **Gender differences and variations of pragmabehavioral communications and errors**

This paper sought to find out the gender variations of pragmabehavioral errors in the Kimeru L1 learners of L2 English. Gender is embedded so thoroughly in our institutions, our actions, our beliefs and it appears to be natural. This paper revealed that pragmabehavioral varied between male and female gender. One of the reasons why there was communication variations based on gender is because of cultural practices and expectations in the society.



This research revealed that there were pragmabehavioral gender differences in the Kimeru L1 learners of L2 English respondents. This paper highlights these nonverbal differences as follows:

#### **Gender differences in the use of gestures and facial expressions**

The female students showed emotions more than the male students when making an apology. It was observed that the females in mixed gender schools showed remorse and used more facial expressions than the male students use. It was also noted that the boys in the mixed schools used fewer facial expressions and in most cases, their faces were expressionless and non-communicative. They were also somewhat stiff, aloof and used fewer gestures than the girls. Their body language did not communicate much. An English native as lack of interest and boredom could interpret this. Celce-Murcia [14] points out that it is easier for the second language learner to be linguistically competent, but very difficult for an L2 learner to learn and practice the culture of the target language yet this is the most important in language use. In Kimeru culture men do not show emotions to women especially for fear of being misunderstood as being weak in character. The fact that male students were aloof and stiff denied them opportunities to practice correct language use especially when using role play as a tool of learning.

#### **Gender differences in oculistics**

It was observed that when the male students were talking to the female teachers, they did not maintain eye contact. None raised their head, all through the conversation the male students were somewhat stiff and with eyes fixated on the ground. This same case applied to the female students. While eye contact is essential in communication, the Kimeru culture dictates that when a young person is talking with an older person, the younger person should not look at the older person in the eye as this is interpreted as a sign of disrespect.

It was also noted in the mixed schools that in the mixed schools, during the debating sessions, the girls were timid, shy, and avoided eye contact with the audience. The boys on the other hand were more bold and maintained eye contact with the audience. This difference emanates from the fact that women in the Kimeru culture are supposed to be submissive towards the men. This timid and shy behaviour of the girls denies them also opportunities to practice language use effectively.

#### **Gender differences in body posture**

While addressing the audience during the debating session, majority of the male students' posture was erect and seemed to dominate the arguments more with facts than quality of language. They were keener to

show the audience their knowledge of the subject of discussion. They ignored the standard language and instead used slang. The female students on the other hand stood in a slumped posture and were not loud enough. They were keener on being perfect in their language skills. Their posture would be misinterpreted for lack of knowledge of content. However, the Kimeru culture discourages women from engaging in arguments with men. The women have to watch what they tell the men and ensure that they are respectful.

#### **Gender differences on spatial distance**

As discussed in body posture, men tend to occupy more space than women when sitting or even standing. This gives them a sense of power over the women. Kimeru culture accords the men more power over the women and for this reason, the women on the other hand occupy less space in the way they sit and stand. Women are expected to be submissive to the men.

It was also noted that during discussion groups the female students were very close to each other and huddled together while the male students seemed more conscious of their personal space and tended to keep more distance from each other and from their teachers. The men in the Kimeru culture do not show emotions or feeling and so by being too close with their peers makes them uncomfortable. This, however, is not good for discussion groups, role-play and dramatization, which are methods used language learning.

#### **Gender differences in artifacts**

Artifacts in this paper are the use of dressing, perfume, jewellery to enhance appearance and communication. It was noted that in the mixed schools, during the debating sessions, the girls constantly kept adjusting their skirts and blouses. The girls also fidgeted and did not maintain eye contact with the audience. This could be misunderstood by the audience as nervousness and lack of sufficient content on the topic that they were presenting. However, the girls in the Kimeru culture are taught to be conscious of how they are dressed i.e. the length of skirt and how much it exposes the thighs; the size of blouse and how much it exposes their chests, while in the company of men. The men on the other hand were not conscious about their dressing. Some had untucked and unbuttoned shirts. They were somewhat rough. This is because culturally no one is keen on the men's dressing.

#### **Voice modulation**

It was observed that the girls spoke in a lower tone than the boys did. The boys also used a more authoritative tone of voice than the girls did. This is seen in the Kimeru culture where men, especially in the homes, have authority over the women. In Kimeru culture it is the role of the wife to take care of the

family, feed and ensure the home is well taken care of. The men do not cook but they make most of the decisions in the home. Women are not allowed to argue with men, or shout to their husbands as this is seen as a sign of disrespect. This culture seems to have been transferred to the mixed schools where the girls shy away from any meaningful argument with the boys. This practice affects the learning of English especially in debating sessions.

The male respondents also used a slower pace when explaining a point to indicate that they were sure of themselves as compared to the female respondents who used a faster pace so as to complete their point and get seated.

### CONCLUSION

This paper reveals that there were gender differences in pragmabehavioral communication and errors among the Kimeru L1 learners of L2 English. The male respondents were different from female respondents in their use of gestures and facial expressions, body posture, spatial distance, voice modulation and oculesics. The use of pragmabehavioral communication in the second language was influenced by the respondents L1 cultural background, which resulted to pragmabehavioral errors. The cultural based gender differences of pragmabehavioral errors do not accord language learners opportunities to practice correct use of language and etiquette. Since their cultural background stands in the way, the learners do not exploit opportunities to learn language in use. Consequently when asked to perform communicative tasks both groups of gender do not do well. This paper recommends that awareness of the importance of pragmabehavioral communication and errors be raised and the role it plays in communicative competence to ensure that the second language learner is conscious of the errors. Teachers should be encouraged to focus on teaching language use to highlight and deal with the gender differences in pragmabehavioral communication.

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