

Gender as a Sociocultural Determinant of the Choice of Language Learning Strategies

¹Ben Nyongesa, ²Alfred Buregeya and ³Ayub Mukhwana

8.1 Abstract

The study examined gender as a sociocultural determinant of the choice of Language Learning Strategies among learners of English in the Tanzanian context. Under the guidance of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, the study hypothesized that gender is a significant factor in the choice of language learning strategies. To test this hypothesis, the study collected data from a total of 530 respondents drawn from both secondary schools and university using the SILL questionnaire. Using SPSS, descriptive mean scores and *t*-test was conducted to test to establish if there were any statistical significant differences in terms of the overall strategy, the six strategy categories and individual strategy items with gender. The results of the study indicated that: first, in terms of the overall strategy use, there was no significant difference with gender ($t=1.824, p<0.185$) at the significant level of $p\leq 0.05$ with a $df=508$ while gender. According to the results of six subcategories of language learning strategies respectively, significant differences did not exist in the use of memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, and affective strategies by gender ($t=.904, .926, .967, 1.315, p>.05$). However, significant differences existed in the use of metacognitive and social strategies ($t=3.469^*, 3.365^*, p<.05$). Consequently, male learners reported using metacognitive and social strategies more often than did female respondents. In terms of individual strategy items, metacognitive strategies appeared better predictors of the relationship between strategy choice and gender. Cognitive and Compensation strategy items did not show any significance at all. The study therefore recommends that the most preferred strategies (metacognitive and social) should form the core of strategy training. Second, the society in general and all stakeholders should strive to achieve gender balance inside and outside the classroom/lecture halls and in the teaching/learning resources.

Key Words: *Language Learning Strategies, Gender, Second Language Learning Context, Socio-culture*

8.2 Introduction

During the last couple of decades, there has been a growing concern with the cultural, social, political, economic and technological changes in the world. Language has been at centre stage in these changes and so language learning is one of the most important needs and it has become a necessity in people's lives. In order to keep up with these changes, people have had to meet the needs created by all these changes by trying to learn a second even a third language.

Effective language learning has become one of the areas of concern in the field of ESL/EFL learning which researchers and applied linguists have given much attention to. Because of this concern, the field of applied linguistics during the past decades witnessed a shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered approaches of language learning and teaching. Consequently, a shift of attention has taken place in second language acquisition research from the *products* of language learning to the *processes* through which learning takes place (Oxford, 1990). This means that the teacher as an educator is not only to impart knowledge to learners but also what is considered more important, to equip the learners with the abilities and skills to be able to learn in self-directed way. The

study and teaching of Language Learning Strategies is one of the ways of achieving learner.

The term “strategy” comes from the ancient Greek term “strategia”, which means “generalship or the art of war”. The warlike meaning of “strategia” has faded out but the ideas of control and goal-directedness remain in the current conceptualisation of the word. The meaning of strategy has been extended into learning. Learners employ strategies in the learning of different subjects. Those strategies employed in the learning of languages are thus referred to as Language Learning Strategies (LLS). However, there has been lack of consensus in the conceptualisation of LLS. O’Malley & Chamot, (1990) defines LLSs as “the special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information” (p.1). Oxford (1990a), on the other hand, defines LLSs as “specific actions, behaviours, steps, or techniques students use—often consciously—to improve their progress in apprehending, internalizing, and using the L2” (p.1). According to Cohen (1998) LLS are “learning processes which are consciously selected by the learners and which may result in action taken to enhance the learning of a second or foreign language, through the storage retention, recall, and application of information about that language is what constitutes LLSs” (p. 4). It is pointed out that the element of choice or conscious selection is important since this is what gives a strategy its special character.

Learning strategies can, therefore, be understood as the thoughts, behaviours, actions, operations, means, processes or procedures, tools or steps that the learners consciously employ. They are tools for active, self-directed involvement which is essential for developing communicative competence (Cohen 1998). In this study, a working definition of LLS from a sociocultural point of view, which is rather qualitative and starts with society and its culture rather than the individual, is that language learning strategies are the conscious learners’ socially mediated plans, techniques, steps, tactics, abilities or actions and learning behaviours whether observable or unobservable which directly or indirectly facilitate the comprehension, retention, retrieval and application of information for language learning and acquisition.

The choice and use of Language Learning Strategies is not automatic. Research on LLSs (Oxford 1990a; Cohen 1987; and O’Malley and Chamot 1990 among others) has shown that there are a number of factors that influence their choice. These factors include proficiency level, motivation, gender, self-efficacy, ethnicity, cultural background and learning environment. In this study, gender as sociocultural determinants of the choice of LLS in the Tanzanian learning context was investigated. The choice of gender as a variable in this study was motivated by the observation that in language learning strategy research, many studies across different cultures show more frequent strategy use by females than males, especially the social-based strategies (Green & Oxford, 1995; Athina, 2011; Zeynali, 2012; Alhaisoni, 2012). However, some findings revealed that males employed more strategies than females (El.Dib, 2004; Jia-Jing, 2010), and some even suggested that there were no significant differences between males and females on their use of language learning strategies (Chou, 2002; Al-Otaibi, 2004; Ghazi and Samar, 2012)). These studies thus provided rich insights into interpreting the gender issues in the studies of LLS. However, since the results are inconclusive, the present study was

conducted in the Tanzanian setting in a bid to contribute to this debate. With regard to the assessment of gender as a sociocultural determinant of the choice of LLS, in the formal context, the study posed the question: since gender varies from one cultural background to another, how does it, in the Tanzanian cultural background, influence the choice of LLS?

According to Butler (1990), gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a 'natural' kind of being" (p.32). Gender is not something you acquire once and for all at an early stage of life, but an on-going accomplishment produced by your repeated actions (Cameron, 2004). As the authors indicate, one's *gender* is not equivalent to his/her sex; though, most of the time, building on the biological base that one has from birth, he/she constructs it through his/her life with the experiences which take place first in the family then in society. The social context and culture one lives in shapes ones gender identity accompanied with unique individual experiences. As a consequence, every society has a distinct gender identity and any individual living in them may or may not comply with the presumed gender identity. In this study, the term *gender* is used following this conceptualization of gender which is composed of culturally constructed male identity and female identity, not the biological differences between males and females.

The historical development of the gender concept in language studies reveals that the perspectives and the philosophies underlying the research have changed over time. Research on language and gender and theoretical shifts in this field result from real-world changes brought about by political movements and therefore represent not only differences in academic perspectives on gender and language, but also changes across time in how gender and language are perceived to work in the world (Cameron, 2004). According to Cameron (1995), "a crude historical-typological account of feminist linguistic approaches since 1973 would probably distinguish between three models of language and gender (p. 33)": the deficit model, the cultural difference model, the dominance model and cultural difference model. For the sake of this paper, I won't belabour discussing these models, however, here below is a brief discussion about how gender is de-essentialised from a post-structuralism model.

Like everything in life is influenced and changed by real life events like political instabilities and differing perspectives, there has been a move in language and gender away from a stable and conservative concept of gender to a more detailed and unstable one. All of these post-structuralism approaches to gender advocate the belief that "gender is a social phenomenon; it is about doing as opposed to having or being; it is the outcome of engagement, in particular, social practices as opposed to preceding and causing such engagement; and it is imminently unstable across different contexts (Block, 2002, p. 54)". Davis and Skilton-Sylvester (2004) too recite the claims of numerous scholars (e.g. Holmes, 1991; Freed, 1995) who believe that gender behaviours are neither predictable nor universal.

As a result of this understanding, studies began shifting from perceiving gender as an individual and generalizable concept to perceiving gender as a social construction within specific cultural and situational contexts (Davis & Skilton-Sylvester, 2004). Second language research, therefore, shifted from the positivistic conceptualization of gender as

an individual variable to a constructivist view of gender as social relations operating within complex systems has led to richer understandings of the relations between gender and language learning across societies, communities, and classrooms.

Taking a post-structuralism stance to gender also means “understanding that gender cannot be studied in isolation from other traditional sociological variables such as ethnicity, religion, social class and nationality -variables that cluster together to form an individual's self-identity at a given point in time” (Block, 2002, p. 54), and that gendered activity is an outcome of “*communities of practice*”: during the course of our lives, people move into, out of, and through communities of practice continually transforming identities, understandings, and worldviews. Progressing through the life span brings ever-changing kinds of participation and nonparticipation, contexts for “belonging” and not belonging” in communities. A single individual participates in a variety of communities of practice at any given time, and over time: the family, a friendship ground, an athletic team, a church group. These groups may be all-female or all-male; they may be dominated by women or men; they may offer different forms of participation to men and women; they may be organized on the presumption that all members want (or will want) heterosexual love relations. Whatever the nature of one's participation into communities of practice, one's experience of gender emerges in participation as a gendered community member with others in a variety of communities of practice (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1995, p.469). Accepting that gender is a practiced attainment, gender should no more be studied as natural sex differences, yet it should be studied as contextualized social, psychological and linguistic behaviour. This is the point of view taken in this study.

8.3 Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Theory

Socio-Cultural Theory (SCT) provides a very important tenet of the roles of LLSs in facilitating second language acquisition. According to Vygotsky, an individual's cognitive system is a result of social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). Such interaction is vital for the development of language acquisition both in formal learning contexts and in natural settings. This theory views Second Language Acquisition as a social semiotic construct. It predicts that learning occurs as a result of mentorship and socio-cultural activity. The form-meaning associations that learners make are situational and cultural-based, and the resulting symbols, that is, the knowledge of the L2 mediate conscious thought relating to those situations and cultural phenomena (Lantolf, 1994). The prediction is that the meta-linguistic knowledge will vary in important ways depending on the context of learning and that learners' knowledge of various levels of linguistic representation (sociolinguistic, phonological, lexical and strategy knowledge) will vary widely from one learning context to another because each context is defined by a unique set of situations and culture (Lantolf and Appel, 1994). A similar argument that the choice of LLS is determined by socio-cultural factors is taken by the present study.

Internalisation, the zone of proximal development and mediation constitute the core concepts or tenets of SCT (Lantolf, 2000, p.1). Vygotsky maintained that higher psychological functions originate in interaction between individuals (inter-psychological level) before they are transferred within the individual (intra-psychological level). The central concept for SCT is the mediation of human behaviour with tools and signs systems. A tool could be as simple as a textbook or visual materials (Donato and McCormick, 1994), or symbolic language (Kozulin, 1990). Such tools allow us to

regulate our environment (Lantolf, 1994, p.418). External social speech is internalised through mediation (Vygotsky, 1978). In this way, SCT link society to the mind through mediation. Language as a tool of the mind bridges the individual understanding of us and particular contexts and situations within the world. Donato and McCormick (1994) also state “social processes and mental processes can be understood only if we understand the tools and signs that mediate them”.

Based on his theory of the *Zone of Proximal Development*, a learner will be able to perform at a level beyond the limit of his or her potential with the scaffolding of a teacher or a more capable peer (Vygotsky, 1978). With such scaffolding and assistance, the learner then gradually becomes more independent in his/her learning. As the learner becomes increasingly equipped with what it takes to be an independent and autonomous learner, the scaffolding should be gradually removed. The scaffolding provided by the teacher in the learning process encompasses all kinds of support to facilitate and enhance learning. LLSs are precisely a kind of scaffolding that teachers can provide. In other words, teachers can teach students new strategies and can help them sharpen their existing ones. Equipped with LLSs through instruction, learners will be able to employ them on their own to continue with their learning process even with the absence of the teacher’s support, after all, teachers will not be there for learners after they leave the learning environment.

8.4 Methodology

8.4.1 Participants

The targeted population of this research was secondary school learners and university learners of English in Tanzania. Language learners at secondary school and university levels were involved because, first, they have had formal instruction in English for a period of at least seven years. Second, because they are believed to be aware of their own learning strategies and they are also in a position to discuss these strategies. This was important since the study used questionnaires and interview techniques in data collection.

A total of two hundred university students randomly sampled from each year of study were involved. For the case of secondary schools, stratified and simple random sampling was employed at different stages to get a total of 310 participants who participated in this study. As a result, a total of five hundred and ten participants were involved in this research. Ethically, the names of the school and the participants’ personal data were kept anonymous in the current study.

8.4.2 Data Collection Procedure

The researcher contacted the principals of the desired schools to obtain their consent for conducting research in their schools. To better guarantee the support of the principals as well as the teachers of the student participants, the researcher offered to the principals a one- to three-hour workshop to the teachers who were interested in learning more about language learning strategies. This offer was not only a friendly gesture but was also intended to help the teachers better understand the focus of the study.

Then the researcher prepared and administered the questionnaires in person. This was done for the following reasons. One, it would avoid any influence in the filling in the questionnaires because of the teachers’ presence. Secondly, to clarify some issues to the

respondents whenever need arises. Before the respondents filled in the questionnaires, the researcher explained to them the purpose and the procedures of the questionnaire and also assured them that the intention was to understand how they learned English. The researcher explained to the students that (a) answers they put down would not affect their grades or their teachers' impressions; (b) questionnaire results would represent groups rather than individuals; (c) the researcher was not going to focus on individual students' questionnaire results; and (d) student participants would eventually be helping teachers improve their English teaching and helping all Tanzanian students learn English more effectively. Students were encouraged to ask questions at any time during the process. The whole process took about 30-50 minutes, including the researcher's explanation, the distributing and collecting of the questionnaire, and the actual time spent completing the questionnaire.

8.4.3 Data Analysis Procedures

After data collection, each questionnaire was examined individually and coded for statistical analysis using SPSS version 20. First, the researcher conducted descriptive statistics, including percentages, means and standard deviations of Means to summarise the learner's responses to strategy preference. Secondly, independent t-tests were conducted to test the hypothesis of equality. To determine the statistical significance throughout the study, significance levels of $p \leq .05$ was used.

8.5 Results

8.5.1 Results of the IBQ and SILL Questionnaires

In both questionnaires (IBQ and SILL) the researcher ensured a fair representation of the target population and the various variables which were investigated. The demographic information is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: The Gender Demographic information of the sample

		Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Valid	Male	233	45.7	45.7	45.7
	Female	277	54.3	54.3	100.0
	Total	510	100.0	100.0	

8.5.2 Overall Strategy Use and Gender

To establish whether gender is a factor in terms of the number and types of strategies chosen, an independent *t*-test was applied to the data set containing the overall use averages and gender of the students. As Table 2 below reflects, the mean overall for male students (Mean=3.411) was higher than the scores of female students (Mean=3.297). Based on the *t*-test analysis, no significant difference was found between male and female learners in overall strategy use ($t=1.824, p<0.185$).

Table 2: Mean Scores and Standard Deviations of Overall Strategy Use by Gender (N=510)

	Gender	N	Mean	Std.Dev.	t	p
Mean all	Male	233	3.411	.648		
	Female	277	3.297	.738	1.824	0.185

8.5.3 The Six Strategy Categories and Gender

Gender was examined to establish whether there were any statistical significant differences in the choice of the six strategy categories. According to Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances, the significance value was $p<0.07$, at the significance level $p<0.05$. It was assumed that the variances were equal; hence, a test of the hypothesis using the equal variances assumed row of the t-test was done.

Results of the t-test of equality of means performed to examine the relationships between gender differences and the use of the six categories of language learning strategies are reflected in Table 3. According to the results of six subcategories of language learning strategies respectively, significant differences did not exist in the use of memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, and affective strategies by gender($t=.904,.926,.9671.315,p>.05$). However, significant differences existed in the use of metacognitive strategies and social strategies ($t=3.469*,3.365*,p<.05$). The Means of frequency of male learners in using metacognitive strategies and social strategies were 3.991, and 3.722; the Means of frequency of female respondents in using metacognitive strategies and social strategies were 3.776, and 3.504 respectively. Consequently, male learners reported using metacognitive strategies and social strategies more often than did female respondents.

Table 3 Summary of Variation in Language Learning Strategy Category Use by Gender

Strategy Category	N	N	Mean	Mean	SD	SD	t	p
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female		
Memory	233	277	3.169	3.120	.555	.650	.904	.366
Cognitive	233	277	3.315	3.267	.529	.625	.926	.479
Compensation	233	277	2.948	2.875	.911	.795	.967	.076
Metacognitive	233	277	3.991	3.776	.602	.770	3.469*	.001
Affective	233	277	3.323	3.238	.653	.786	1.315	.189
Social	233	277	3.722	3.504	.636	.799	3.365*	.001

8.5.4 Individual Strategy Items and Gender

Individual strategy items were also believed to be significantly different with gender. Table 4 below shows the individual strategy items that were significantly different with

gender. From Table 5 below, it can be seen that a total of twelve strategy items showed statistical significant differences with gender. The leading strategy category was the Metacognitive category with five strategy items. In a descending order, the items were “I think about my progress in learning English” (No 38 Av. Mean=4.115, $t=2.347$, $p<.0003$); “I have clear goals for improving my English skills” (No 37 Av. Mean=4.05, $t=3.281$, $p<.0000$); “I look for people I can talk to in English” (No 35 Av. Mean=3.575, $t=3.207$, $p<.0000$); “I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English” (No 30 Av. Mean 3.93, $t=2.083$, $p<.0007$) and “I notice my English mistakes” (No 31 Av. Mean=3.6, $t=2.875$, $p<.0000$). All the five strategy items registered a high frequency on average for both male and female respondents.

Memory and Social categories followed with each having three strategy items showing statistical significance with gender. Memory items, in a descending order, included “I think of relationships between what I already know and new word in English” (No 1 Av. Mean= (t=2.520, $p<.0001$); “I remember new English words or phrase by remembering their location” (No 9 Av. Mean 3.1, $t=1.938$, $p<.0010$) and “I use rhymes to remember new English words” (No 5 Av. Mean 2.865, $t=-3.015$, $p<.0000$). Social strategy items included “I ask my friends to edit my English writings” (No 48 Av. Mean=3.695, $t=3.014$, $p<.0000$); “I ask questions in English” (No 49 Av. Mean=3.445, $t=2.403$, $p<.0003$) and “I try to learn about the culture of English speakers”(No 50 Av. Mean=3.195, $t=2.439$, $p<.0003$). There was only 1 Affective strategy item, “I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English” (No 41 ($t=3.077$, $p<.0000$). It is evident, therefore, that metacognitive strategies showed the relationship between strategy choice and gender. Cognitive and Compensation strategy items did not show any significance at all. This is presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4 Summary of Statistically Significant Strategy Items with Gender

Item No	Strategy item & strategy category	Sex	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error Mean	t	p
1	I think of relationships between what I already know and new word in English (MEMORY)	Male	233	3.46	1.008	.066	2.520*	.0001
		Female	277	3.23	1.062	.064		
5	I use rhymes to remember new English words (MEMORY)	Male	233	2.70	1.240	.081	3.015*	.0000
		Female	277	3.03	1.218	.073		
9	I remember new English words or phrase by remembering their location (MEMORY)	Male	233	3.21	1.258	.082	1.938*	.0010
		Female	277	2.99	1.350	.081		
30	I try to find as many ways as I can to use my (METACOGNITIVE)	Male	233	4.03	.949	.062	2.083*	.0007
		Female	277	3.83	1.209	.073		
31	I notice my English mistakes (METACOGNITIVE)	Male	233	3.76	1.226	.080	2.875*	.0000
		Female	277	3.44	1.269	.076		

35	I look for people I can talk to in English (METACOGNITIVE)	Male	233	3.75	1.118	.073	3.207*	.0000
		Female	277	3.40	1.289	.077		
37	I have clear goals for improving my English skills (METACOGNITIVE)	Male	233	4.14	.852	.056	3.281*	.0000
		Female	277	3.86	1.077	.065		
38	I think about my progress in learning English (METACOGNITIVE)	Male	233	4.22	.925	.061	2.347*	.0003
		Female	277	4.01	1.060	.064		
41	I give myself a reward or treat when I do well (AFFECTIVE)	Male	233	3.56	1.213	.079	3.077*	.0000
		Female	277	3.21	1.374	.083		
48	I ask my friends to edit my English writings (SOCIAL)	Male	233	3.85	1.054	.069	3.014*	.0000
		Female	277	3.54	1.226	.074		
49	I ask questions in English (SOCIAL)	Male	233	3.57	1.036	.068	2.403*	.0003
		Female	277	3.32	1.234	.074		
50	I try to learn about the culture of English speakers. (SOCIAL)	Male	233	3.33	1.210	.079	2.439*	.0003
		Female	277	3.06	1.302	.078		

8.6 Discussion

In the present study, based on the t-test analysis, no significant difference was found between male and female learners in overall strategy use ($t=1.824$, $p<0.185$) at the significance level of .05. Male learners reported using more strategies in general than did female learners. The findings of this study are consistent with a few of the previous ESL and EFL studies which investigated gender and the strategy use of learners. These studies have shown that males are better strategy users than their female counterparts (Wharton, 2000; Peng, 2001; Tercanlioglu, 2004; Ghazi and Samar, 2012). For instance, Mohammad and Saeed's (2010) investigation compared the strategy use of male and female bilingual students in Iran. After running the independent t-test, the results showed that the difference between male and female bilinguals' strategy use was statistically significant in favour of male bilinguals. They attribute this to a number of factors. First, some negative cultural and social attitudes toward female language learners. For instance, the opinion of the society toward female's language learning is more negative in religious and traditional Eastern countries like Iran and it is generally assumed that women need a foreign language less than men. Consequently, these factors decrease women's intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for learning a foreign language. Second, males have more opportunities for interpersonal relationships than females in Iranian EFL context both in the classroom and outside the classroom. These explanations cannot be ruled out with regard to the sample in the present study.

The results of the six categories of language learning strategies showed that significant differences existed in the use of metacognitive strategies ($t=3.469^*$, $p<.001$) and social strategies ($t=3.365^*$, $p<.001$). However, no significant differences were seen in the use of memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, and affective strategies by gender ($t=.904$, $p<.366$; $t=.926$, $p<.479$; $t=.967$, $p<.075$; $t=1.315$, $p<.189$) respectively. Contrary to the widely acclaimed notion that female students are better at social strategy use than the male students as they excel in establishing strong relationships and building vast social networks (Zeynali, 2012; Hong-Nam and Leavell, 2006; Sheorey,

1999; Oxford, 1990), it was the male participants who reported using more social strategies in this study. This could be attributed to the sociocultural influence. According to Block (2002), "gender cannot be studied in isolation from other traditional sociological variables such as ethnicity, religion, social class and nationality-variables that cluster together to form an individual's self-identity at a given point in time" (p.54), and gendered activity is an outcome of "communities of practice". Like in many other African traditional societies, the Tanzanian culture is patriarchal in nature. This is partly the influence from the Arabic culture which is conservative hence inhibits female members from freely socialising and establishing relationships inside and outside their immediate circles. Another possible explanation could be the belief that English is as difficult as sciences are and so it is a reserve of male students.

8.7 Pedagogical Implications

Since language learning is a social activity, sociocultural factors play a key role in determining the what and the how of language learning. The difference in strategy use between female and male students implies that gender inequality is still an issue to grapple with. The socialisation that male and female learners get in the socio-cultural context determines their approach, effort and even the strategies they employ in learning language. For instance, a culture that does not allow free interaction of both male and female learners denies them the opportunity to develop social strategies. The society in general and all stakeholders should strive to achieve gender balance inside and outside the classroom/lecture halls. This should also be checked in the teaching and learning materials which also propagate gender stereotypes to a large extent.

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¹Dr. Ben Nyongesa, ²Alfred Buregeya and ³Ayub Mukhwana

¹Kibabii University

Department of English, Literature, Journalism and Mass Communication
P.O. Box 1699-50200 Bungoma - Kenya

²University of Nairobi

Department of Linguistics and Languages
P.O. Box 30197- 00100 Nairobi GPO

³University of Nairobi

Department of Linguistics and Languages
P.O. Box 30197- 00100 Nairobi GPO

CORRESPONDING AUTHORS

- Julius K. Maiyo, Director (PC&QA), Kibabii University
- Rispah Wepukhulu, Dean, Faculty of Education and Social Sciences (FESS), Kibabii University
- Ochieng Ahaya, Department of Social Science Education, Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology
- Obondo Gaudence, PhD student, Department of Curriculum Instruction and Educational Media, Moi University
- Titus S. Munene, Masters student, Department of Curriculum and Instructional Technology, Kibabii University
- Naliaka Edith, PhD student, School of Education, Moi University
- Echaune Manasi, Department of Education and Vocational Training, County Government of Busia, Kenya
- Ben Nyongesa, Department of English, Literature, Journalism and Mass Communication, Kibabii University