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Effect of Inquiry-Based Learning on English Language Performance among Secondary School Students in Kilifi County, Kenya

***Grace Wanjiku Irungu**
ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0009-0007-6667-6563
Department of Educational Foundations, Kenyatta University, Kenya
E-mail: raceciku@gmail.com

Peter M. Gathara
ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7066-3980
Department of Educational Foundations, Kenyatta University, Kenya
E-mail: gathara.peter@ku.ac.ke

Njoroge Antony
ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8387-1922
Department of Educational Foundations, Kenyatta University, Kenya
E-mail: njoroge.johnson@ku.ac.ke

***Corresponding Author:** raceciku@gmail.com

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Abstract
This study investigated the effect of Inquiry-Based Learning in improving English language performance among secondary school students in Kilifi County, Kenya. Driven by the global shift toward 21st-century learner-centered approaches, the STUDY addressed the region's persistent low performance in English. The study utilized a quantitative research approach and a quasi-experimental non-equivalent control group pretest-posttest design. A sample of 216 Form Two students from six public schools was selected through stratified sampling. Simple random sampling was used to divide the participants into an experimental group (n=108) taught using IBL and a control group (n=108) taught using the lecture method. Descriptive and inferential statistics, including independent and paired samples t-tests, were used to analyze the data. The findings indicated no significant pre-test difference between groups, establishing a valid baseline. However, post-test results revealed a statistically significant difference in favor of the experimental group. The study concludes that Inquiry-Based Learning significantly enhances student achievement in English compared to traditional lecture methods. It is recommended that educators integrate Inquiry-Based Learning strategies into the curriculum to foster better learning outcomes.

Keywords: Inquiry-Based Learning; lecture method; performance; English language.

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Introduction
Language is a fundamental educational tool through which students acquire knowledge and develop essential skills. Particularly, English is an important international language and a link between countries and cultures (Twahirwa et al, 2022). Teaching the English language is, therefore, very fundamental in impacting learners with lifelong skills since they are equipped with literacy skills and practical knowledge that enable them to comprehend knowledge, think critically and communicate effectively. For teaching English to be effective in the 21st century, educators must embrace inquiry-based learning (IBL), a student-centered paradigm that prioritizes exploration and problem-solving over rote

instruction (Wildman, 2020). IBL recognizes the complexity of teaching English by positioning learners as active constructors of knowledge through investigative processes, rather than passive recipients of information. As Smegen et al. (2021) explained, inquiry-based learning encourages students to tackle issues independently, expanding their skills and understanding with minimal teacher intervention. This pedagogical shift is significant, as instructional strategies directly shape student outcomes, and persistent poor academic performance has frequently been associated with ineffective, teacher-centered approaches. Ruzaman and Rosli (2020) observed that some English instructors from Malaysia continue to rely heavily on traditional, teacher-led approaches, which limit opportunities for learners to engage critically and creatively. By contrast, IBL fosters deeper engagement, autonomy and adaptability, qualities essential for success in contemporary education.

Inquiry-based learning situates language at the heart of quality education for sustainable development by encouraging learners to actively question, investigate and construct meaning rather than passively absorb information (Antonio & Isabel, 2022). Through this approach, language becomes more than a medium of communication; it evolves into a dynamic tool for exploring interconnected skills, such as critical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving (Ruzaman & Rosli, 2020).

The Sustainable Development Goal on education envisions that by 2030, young people worldwide will attain functional reading proficiency levels in English that are internationally comparable to those achieved upon completion of basic education (Wale & Bogale, 2021). The emphasis on literacy reflects not only the measurable outcomes of language acquisition but also its transformative role in empowering learners to engage with real-world issues, challenge assumptions and contribute to sustainable social change. In this way, inquiry-based learning underscores language as both pathway to empowerment and catalyst for collective transformation.

According to the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) report on English language performance among 15-year-old students in developed countries, China scored 57%, Canada 53% and both the United States and Japan 51%, all slightly above the PISA average. This contrasts with the overall performance in African countries, where, on average, only 10% of students could read and interpret tasks in English. Higher proportions of students attaining minimum reading proficiency were observed in South Africa (44%), Nigeria (42%), Senegal (39%) and Zambia (34%). The report further noted that the use of learner-centered approaches, such as Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL), enhances learners' participation in the teaching–learning process, fosters deeper understanding of concepts and develops cognitive skills for generating, communicating and evaluating responses aligned with their interests (Program for International Student Assessment, 2018).

A Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) report showed that African countries performed slightly higher than in the PISA report. For example, South Africa scored 52% and Zambia 49%. In the East Africa Community, the level of literacy competence in English among Kenyan students was at 49%, slightly higher than their neighboring countries, Uganda (35%) and Tanzania (34%) (SACMEQ, 2018).

This indicates that the literacy level of secondary school students in African countries is still low compared to that in developed countries. The dismal performance calls for reflection about the teaching and pedagogical factors that may affect the learning of English in African countries. Despite the findings reported, limited attention has been given to strengthening English as the medium of instruction in secondary education across African contexts. In response, Africa Vision 2063 and other education bodies like the Center for Mathematics, Science and Technology Education in Africa (CEMASTEA) have advocated for IBL in teaching English in secondary schools (Ombuor, 2017). The East African Community recommends that curriculum implementation be learner-centered, enabling effective experiential learning and fostering 21st-century communication skills, including speaking, writing and listening (Giacomazzi, 2024). Teachers were advised to employ various interactive techniques that suit their learners' needs (Wahdan, 2020). The Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD, 2021) reformed the secondary school curriculum and recommended modernizing teacher training to incorporate innovative methods such as IBL, aimed at delivering quality education.

English as a subject has constantly been performed poorly in Kenya more especially in Rabai Sub County. Kenya National Examination Council (2022) report recorded a slight improvement in performance in English in all students with national average of 41% in 2022 compared to 37.86% in 2020. The report further indicates that a comparative analysis of overall performance in the subject from 2020 to 2022 still falls short of the average mean of 50%. In Rabai Sub-County, Kilifi County, the situation was more concerning, with students' average score of 35% in 2022. The report emphasized that students struggled with their writing and reading abilities. Factors that may have contributed to the poor performance included students' perceptions of English, ineffective teaching methods, limited educational resources, and insufficient syllabus coverage (Yanti et al., 2020). This study therefore sought to establish the effect of IBL method on improving students' English performance in Rabai, Kilifi County.

Literature Review

Teaching methods have evolved in response to curriculum reforms designed to address the learning needs of twenty-first-century students and the demands of the global marketplace (Wale & Bogale, 2021). One of the methodologies in teaching English that is widely used today is Inquiry-Based Learning. Kinyota (2020), defines IBL as a teaching approach, where students actively participate in the process of acquiring information or knowledge of a certain phenomenon with minimal guidance from their teacher. According to Wildman (2020), inquiry-based learning encourages students to be more curious and to ask questions, examine difficulties, investigate, generate ideas as they face challenges and construct new knowledge. They draw links between what they have learned in the past and what they are learning now. This fosters deep learning where students become engaged and involved in active learning, which facilitates retention since information is acquired via practical experiences and applied to real-world issues.

Ward (2020) asserted that inquiry-based learning (IBL) promotes deeper comprehension of subject matter and strengthens students' initiative in the learning process. Additionally, IBL enables students to connect new knowledge with what they have previously studied, take responsibility for their own learning, and acquire critical thinking and life skills needed for success in the twenty-first century. This view concurs with Kori's (2021) study in Singapore on the effect of inquiry-based learning in higher education, which found that learners' performance improved because IBL enhanced their critical thinking abilities. This suggests that IBL stimulates deeper understanding of content and motivates learners to integrate prior knowledge with newly acquired knowledge in order to solve problems.

Shah (2020) conducted a study in India and Australia and found that the IBL approach enhanced learners' affective and cognitive outcomes. The study further revealed that IBL had a positive impact on learners' competency-based tasks by promoting students' interest, creativity, excitement for learning and active engagement, rather than reliance on memorization. Similarly, Dyah et al. (2022), in a study conducted in Indonesia, reported that learners taught through IBL demonstrated significant improvement in reading and writing skills.

A case study conducted by Ibrahim et al. (2022) in Ghana showed that IBL developed secondary school students' ability to construct testable knowledge, formulate hypotheses and evaluate information critically. This was different from students taught through teacher-centered approaches, who remained passive recipients of information. Similarly, Gindya's (2022) study in Egypt revealed that students taught through IBL became more engaged learners and were able to generate original and imaginative ideas. In Rwanda, Twahirwa et al. (2022) found that IBL enhanced students' creativity and innovation in science learning. Likewise, Akolom et al. (2021) and Kunga et al. (2022) reported that the use of IBL as a teaching strategy improved students' English literacy in Kenya by strengthening their critical thinking and problem-solving abilities, thereby improving learning outcomes.

Although considerable research has been conducted on the inquiry-based learning (IBL) approach, most studies have been carried out outside Kenya. Moreover, studies conducted within Kenya have largely focused on the use of IBL strategies in science and mathematics subjects, with limited attention given to their application in the teaching of English in secondary schools. Consequently, there remains a contextual and subject-specific gap regarding the effectiveness of IBL in enhancing students' achievement in English. This study, therefore, sought to fill this gap by examining the impact of the inquiry-based learning approach on

students' achievement in English in secondary schools in Kilifi County.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by Jean Piaget's constructivist theory (1967), which emphasizes active learning and argues that learners construct knowledge through experience and interaction. The theory aligns with inquiry-based learning because it encourages exploration, questioning, investigation and problem-solving rather than passive learning. Piaget's concepts of schema and assimilation explain how learners integrate new language knowledge with prior understanding when encountering unfamiliar linguistic structures. The theory further supports designing inquiry activities according to students' cognitive levels to enhance language development (Kori, 2021). Poor performance in English is often linked to teacher-centered approaches that promote rote memorization without practical understanding (Yanti et al., 2020). Therefore, constructivist theory provides a strong foundation for using IBL in English language learning.

Methodology

This study utilized a quantitative research approach and a quasi-experimental design, specifically a non-equivalent control group pretest-posttest design. This design was selected to enhance the internal validity while controlling for pretesting sensitization effects. The study involved six intact classes from geographically separated secondary schools, a strategy employed to minimize cross-group interaction and prevent contamination of the intervention. Two instructional approaches were compared: the lecture-based method (control group) and Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) (experimental group). Data was analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics to objectively determine the statistical significance of differences in learning outcomes between the two groups.

Population and Sampling

The target population consisted of 1,070 Form Two students enrolled in 19 public secondary schools. A stratified sampling technique was employed to ensure representativeness, resulting in the selection of six schools. Stratification was appropriate given that the schools were heterogeneous (Gray et al., 2020). From the six schools, six intact classes were selected, resulting in a total sample size of 216 students. Simple random sampling was used to evenly divide the sample into two major treatments: the experimental group (n=108) and the control group (n=108), with each treatment comprising three classes.

The Intervention Procedure

The intervention was implemented over a two months period. The experimental group received instruction through Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL). The teacher acted as a facilitator, guiding students to explore English language concepts through investigation. Lessons began with a guiding question or problem. Students worked collaboratively in small groups to analyze texts, derive grammatical rules and practice oral skills through active discovery and discussion. This approach emphasized student engagement, critical thinking and the practical application of language concepts. The control group, on the other hand, was taught using the traditional lecture method. The teacher was the central figure, delivering content through direct instruction. Teachers explained concepts, wrote summaries on the board and provided examples while students listened and took notes. Learning was primarily passive, focusing on rote memorization and recall of facts without active investigation or group work.

Data Collection Techniques

The study was structured around two groups: an experimental group and a control group. Prior to the intervention, a pre-assessment was administered to all the groups to establish a baseline of the students' existing competency. This baseline served as a covariate for measuring the impact of the instructional interventions. During the two-month intervention period, the 108 students in the experimental group were instructed using the Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) approach while the 108 students in the control group received instruction via the traditional lecture method. At the conclusion of the intervention, a post-test was administered to all participants to evaluate changes in performance. The summative assessment comprised three tasks—a written assignment, a cloze test and an oral skills evaluation, with a total of 60 marks. These tasks were designed to assess a range of cognitive abilities, including recall, comprehension, application, analysis, evaluation and creativity. A grading rubric was developed and refined to ensure validity and consistency. The researchers, assisted by English teachers, administered, supervised, graded and recorded the assessments. Scores were aggregated and averaged for each group to facilitate comparison.

Data Analysis

Data from the pretest and posttest was coded and analyzed using the SPSS Version 29. Descriptive statistics, specifically mean scores and standard deviations, were computed to summarize the data. To test the hypothesis and determine the statistical significance of the difference in learning outcomes between the two instructional methods, an independent samples t-test was utilized. Additionally, a paired samples t-test was used to compare the pre-test and post-test averages within each group to measure individual student growth over time.

Ethical Considerations

The researchers obtained a certificate of authorization from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) to conduct the study and forwarded it to the Kilifi County Ministry of Education. Consent was also sought from school principals and subject teachers on behalf of the students who participated in the study. Participation was voluntary, and respondents' responses were used solely for the purposes of this research. Confidentiality was maintained by omitting respondents' names from the standardized tests.

Findings and Discussions

This section presents the findings of the study, guided by specific research questions.

Research Question 1: What is the difference in the Pretest English performance of students in the control and experimental groups?

To determine the equivalence of the two groups prior to the intervention, an independent samples t-test was conducted on the pre-test scores to test the null hypothesis: H0: There is no significant difference in pre-test performance in English between students in the control and experimental groups.

Table 1: Students' Pre-Test Scores of the Control and the Experimental Groups

Group	*N*	*Mean*	*Std. Deviation*	*Std. Error Mean*
Control group	108	40.78	6.24	0.60
Experimental group	108	42.42	9.42	0.91

Table 2: Comparison of T-Test Analysis on the Pre-Test of the Control and the Experimental Groups

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.223	.661	1.503	214	.135	1.64	1.09	25.27	31.01
Equal variances not assumed			1.503	192.44	.135	1.64	1.09	21.92	31.42

Table 3: Students' Post-Test Scores of the Control and the Experimental Groups

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Control group	108	46.32	2.79	0.27
Experimental group	108	52.52	2.75	0.26

The independent samples t-test results, shown in Table 2, indicate that the difference between the groups was not statistically significant, t (214) = 1.50, p=.135. Levene's Test for Equality of Variances was non-significant, confirming the assumption of equal variances. Since the p-value is greater than the 0.05 alpha level, the null hypothesis is retained. This suggests no statistically significant difference in the English proficiency of the two groups before the study began, establishing a valid baseline for comparison.

Research Question 2: Is there a significant difference in the Posttest English performance of students in the control and experimental groups?

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the post-test scores of the two groups testing the null hypothesis: Ho; there is no significant difference in posttest performance in English between students in the control and experimental groups.

Table 3 shows the Experimental Group (M=52.52, SD=2.75) had a higher mean score compared to the Control Group (M=46.32, SD=2.79).

Levene's Test was significant (p=.002), indicating unequal variance assumed; therefore, the "Equal variances not assumed" row was interpreted. The results show a statistically significant difference between the groups, t (212.98) =16.53, p<.005. The Mean Difference of -6.20 indicates that the Experimental Group outperformed the Control Group. Since the p-value is less than the 0.05 alpha level, the null hypothesis is rejected. This suggests that the Inquiry-Based Learning intervention had a significant positive impact on the English performance of the students in the Experimental Group compared to those taught via the lecture method.

Table 4: Post-Test Results Comparing Students' Means between the Control and the Experimental Groups

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances			**t-test for Equality of Means**						
	F	**Sig.**	**t**	**df**	**Si(2-tailed)**	**Mean Difference**	**Std. Error Mean**	**95% Confidence Interval of the Difference**	
								Lower	**Upper**
Equal variances assumed	9.422	.002	16.525	214	.000	-6.20	0.38	41.46	49.25
Equal variances not assumed			16.525	212.98	.000	-6.20	0.38	49.83	53.86

Table 5: Students' Pretest and Post-Test Scores of the Experimental Group

Group	**N**	**Mean**	**Std. Deviation**	**Std. Error Mean**
Pretest	108	42.42	9.42	0.91
Posttest	108	52.52	2.75	0.26

Table 6: Paired T-Test Results Comparing Students' Pretest and Posttest Means in the Experimental Groups.

	Mean Difference	Std. Dev. Mean	**Std. Error Mean**	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		**t**	**df**	**Sig.(2-tailed)**
				Lower	**Upper**			
Post-test score - pretest score	10	8.20	0.79	8.53	11.67	**12.78**	**107**	**0.028**

The findings suggest that the IBL approach enabled students to develop knowledge, comprehension and application skills and thus enhanced good performance. This finding aligns with Gindya (2022), who argued that students taught using IBL develop into engaged learners capable of original, imaginative thought, leading to improved performance. Likewise, Akolom et al. (2021) and Kunga et al. (2022) reported that the use of IBL as a teaching strategy improved students' English literacy by strengthening their critical thinking and problem-solving abilities, thereby improving learning outcomes.

The results are also in line with Jean Piaget's constructivist theory (1967), which emphasizes active learning and argues that learners construct knowledge through experience and interaction (Kohnstamm, 2021). Inquiry-based learning encourages students to exploration, questioning, investigation and problem-solving rather than passive learning. According to Shah (2020), that IBL had a positive impact on learners' competency-based tasks by promoting students' interest, creativity, excitement for learning and active engagement, rather than reliance on memorization. The results, therefore, suggests that teachers should employ IBL approach in teaching English subject for maximized students' achievement.

Research Question 3: Is there a significant difference in the Pretest and Posttest English performance of students in the experimental groups?

The following null hypothesis was tested. Ho: There is no significant difference in pretest and Posttest performance in English between students in the experimental group.

Table 6 presents the results of the paired samples t-test. There was a statistically significant increase in scores from the Pretest to the Post-test, t (107) =12.78, p<.005. The mean difference was 10.10, with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 8.53 to

11.67. Given that the p-value is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected. This finding confirms a significant improvement in English performance within the experimental group following the intervention. The findings match with Ibrahim's et al. (2022), which found a significant difference in students' English pretest and posttest achievement scores. Similarly, the study of Dyah et al. (2022) reported that learners taught through IBL demonstrated significant improvement in reading and writing skills. Teachers of English should therefore embrace IBL approach in teaching to improve on their learners' performance.

Conclusions

The study concludes that the use of the Inquiry-Based Learning led to significantly higher academic achievement in the experimental group compared to the control group taught though the conventional approach. The findings confirm that the instructional method employed in the experimental group has tangible effects on learning outcomes. Therefore, the Inquiry-Based Learning approach is ideal in maximizing learners' academic achievements. It is a superior pedagogical approach for enhancing English language performance in secondary schools, as it fosters deeper engagement, critical thinking and better retention of content compared to passive lecture-based instruction.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions, the study recommends that the Ministry of Education and school administrators advocate for the application of the Inquiry-Based Learning approach in the secondary school English curriculum for maximized results. Teacher training colleges should incorporate the Inquiry-Based learning approaches into their teacher education programs to equip future educators with the necessary facilitation skills. Additionally, in-service teachers should be encouraged to attend professional development workshops focused on shifting from teacher-centered to learner-centered methodologies. Schools should also provide the necessary resources and learning environments that support group work and investigation, which are essential components of IBL.

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