



## The need and relevance of shorthand knowledge for contemporary secretaries: Implications for training and assessment of shorthand

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### Abstract

This study aimed to establish the relevance and need for shorthand by Secretaries in modern offices. The study administered paper questionnaires and telephone interviews to office Executives, Secretaries and Shorthand instructors using convenience and snowball sampling. Findings indicate that Secretaries did not apply shorthand skills when carrying out their duties while few instructors did. Though shorthand was considered necessary, instructors disguised its irrelevancy for relevancy, probably to secure their jobs. The study recommended that Shorthand instructors should be recruited from among stenographic practitioners and not from the classroom. It further recommended training institutions to admit Secretarial Students from among those who have passed English language. More studies to investigate the causes of low application of shorthand skills by Secretaries in modern offices, and to assess if this low application is linked to the evolution of social media writing a style is advised.

**Keywords:** executives, *Penmanship, Secretary, Shorthand, Stenography*

### 1. Introduction

Shorthand which is also called Stenography, is any form of rapid writing using symbols in place letters of the alphabet, phrases or words <sup>[1]</sup>. Ager <sup>[2]</sup> referred to this system of writing as stenography (*narrow writing*), brachygraphic (*short writing*) or tachygraphy (*swift writing*). Sun <sup>[3]</sup> described it also as invisible communications. This article makes a brief and general presentation of the history of shorthand and how it was introduced in Uganda. Also, it will report on the findings of an investigation of the need and relevance of shorthand in Uganda based on analysed data from this survey.

The art of shorthand originated in about 350Bc in the ancient Egypt and Greek civilization <sup>[1]</sup>. The Greek historian, Xenophon used shorthand to write down the memoirs of Socrates <sup>[1]</sup>. In Great Britain, Shorthand evolved as a means of taking down confidential reports in coded forms, the system which over time developed and became a trade of an academic study <sup>[4]</sup>. The contributions of Isaac Pitman <sup>[5]</sup> and John Robert Gregg <sup>[6]</sup> particularly gave rise to writing of shorthand in English. Both Pitman and Gregg used a phonographic approach <sup>[7]</sup> and they wrote words according to how they (words) sounded instead of abbreviated spelling <sup>[8]</sup>. In Pitman system the position, length and thickness of the strokes are all crucial <sup>[7]</sup>. Pitman system became the predominant shorthand system in the English speaking <sup>[9, 10]</sup> with the exception of the USA which adopted the Gregg system right up to the present day <sup>[2, 11]</sup>.

Uganda and East Africa in general adopted the Pitman Shorthand system for training. The history extends way back to pre-colonialism. When Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) started operations in Uganda by 1959 under the instruction of Bishop Merlin, it trained the citizens on English, French, Luganda, and Swahili languages; in addition to shorthand, typing, bookkeeping; architectural design; public speaking, and Swimming skills <sup>[12]</sup>. One of the requirements for the job of Stenographers and Personal

Secretaries in the Uganda Protectorate was Shorthand and typewriting skills <sup>[13]</sup>. The use of shorthand is not only limited to stenographers, but has been and is still used by many Journalists, court clerks, clergies <sup>[14]</sup> and some individuals who have the knowledge and would want to keep their records secret <sup>[11]</sup>. Akomi and Ordu <sup>[15]</sup> defined a secretary as "an office-staff with a mastery of skills in typewriting, shorthand and routine office functions. Office secretaries should be able to take down dictations in shorthand and later transcribe it into longhand by either pens, typewrites or presently computers <sup>[15]</sup>. This skill enables them to produce professional, standard and authentic documents <sup>[16]</sup>. A traditional secretary actually acted as a memory aid to their bosses, in addition to answering telephone calls and processing mails.

Ugandan BTNET system still trains secretarial students on shorthand. Some secretarial roles such as taking dictations and recording minutes of meetings may not be easily replaced accurately by the advent of information technology. Aldrich <sup>[17]</sup> claimed that, in Nigeria, a number of organisations including banking industry have either re-designated the roles of professional secretaries or laid them off. The need for quick and accurate information for decision making has resulted in modern offices acquiring machines to ease the work of a secretary <sup>[18]</sup>.

#### 1.1 Research Problem

In Uganda today, many journalist and Secretaries carries along with them digital audio recorders to record whatever communications at their reach and later transcribe into news, reports and or minutes. A number of business educational institutions still train Secretarial student on Shorthand at Diploma and Certificate levels. All these levels were previously examined by Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB), but with the commencement of the Business Technical Vocational Education and Training Act of 2008, UNEB ceased to conduct technical

and vocational examinations in a phase manner and handed this specific function to Uganda Business and Technical Examinations Board (UBTEB), which commenced operation in the year 2011.

For a number of time, during public addresses to release end of course national examination results, the Executive Secretary of UBTEB have been mentioning lack of competences in Shorthand as one of the major factors that affect the completion rates of students who pursue Secretarial studies at both Certificate and Diploma levels. The audience would then mumber as the neighboring head of examination centers seated on a row turn to one another and ask the common question, “*But do we still need this shorthand?*”<sup>[19]</sup>.

The public remains at cross-roads, whether or not the country is applying and still need to train its citizens on Shorthand system of writing. This research therefore investigated if shorthand was still relevant and being used by the experts in modern offices. Four research questions guided this study; did office executives dictate notes to their Secretaries, did the Secretaries use shorthand to take down dictations, and did the Secretaries still needed shorthand skills to effectively perform their work. The study also set out to answer the question, were Shorthand instructor in TVET institutions themselves shorthand practitioners?

### 1.2 Objective of the study

To address the above questions in this study and to establish the relevance, need and application of shorthand skills by secretaries in Uganda offices, this research worked with the following specific objectives;

1. To find out if shorthand knowledge was still practiced by Ugandan Secretaries,
2. To establish if there was still need for training in Shorthand for modern offices,
3. To determine if Shorthand Instructors did practice Shorthand.

## 2. Materials and Methods

In order to achieve the above objectives, the present research employed a survey research design; since the respondents were people<sup>[20]</sup>.

### 2.1 Data Collection Methods

The researcher collected the data for this study in between June 2015 to December 2016. The study employed the questionnaire method of data collection and administered it in two different ways. The researcher chose this method to be able to address all category of targeted respondents in consideration of the cost, time and ease of administration as explained by<sup>[21]</sup>. The two ways of questionnaire data collection methods that the study employed were;

1. **Telephone interviews;** Administered to respondents who, by their nature and or sensitivity of their day to day duties, the researcher had perceived to have specific time to answer calls and, could not easily access E-mail, nor could they attend to face to face interviews. The researcher captured immediately the responses to the questionnaire during the phone interview, just as it would have been done by the respondent if they had responded to paper-based questionnaire. For follow up checks the researcher installed and enabled auto-record function of “Auto

Call Recorder, “version 5.26, an android app on my Mobile phone (Sony Xperia Z1,) used to make calls. This enabled the researcher to replay the calls and trace back any omissions made when filling the questionnaire.

2. The researcher also administered online questionnaires to targeted respondents who had easy access to E-mail facilities through “Google Form” and they sent back their responses through the same channel.

In all the data collection methods for the same target group, the researcher kept the content of the questionnaires the same and pre-tested both methods and harmonised them before actually administering it to collect real data.

### 2.2 The Study Population and Sample

This study targeted Office Executives, Secretaries and Shorthand Instructors from both public and private organisations / institutions in Uganda as its population. This automatically formed the “*Self-Selected Sample of the “Intact group”*”<sup>[22]</sup>.

### 2.3 Sample Size and Sampling Methods

From the targeted to sample a total of 150 respondents however, the researcher collected data from 134 respondents comprising of 48 Executives, 65 Secretaries and 21 Shorthand instructors. The study employed both *Convenience* and *Snowball* sampling methods. The respondents actually constituted theoretical samples<sup>[20]</sup>, as they purposively exhibited the desired features that were the focus of this study.

### 2.3 Data Analysis

This being a qualitative research, the researcher analysed the data descriptively, particularly using frequencies and Chi square analysis, in addition to graphical presentations of frequency data.

### 2.4 Data Editing and Coding

The researcher exported the responses from Google form to Excel application for data editing, coding and sorting and then analysed open ended questions thematically for the content and or themes before coding. During data editing, the researcher eliminated three questionnaires in which respondents had failed to complete significant (*more than 10 questions*) volume of the questions. Similarly, also eliminated from the study was one questionnaire in which the respondent ticked only the first responses irrespective of the question. After sorting the data the researcher then exported it to SPSS Version 20 for both high and low order data analysis.

### 2.5 Consent and Obligation to Notify the Respondents, Confidentiality and storage of Personal Data

The study used questionnaire with an introductory preamble in which it introduced the researcher, the research topic and purpose of the research to the target respondent. A phrase in the questionnaire requested the target respondent to give his / her consent to participate in the survey with a statement that, “information provided by the participants to this study would be treated with utmost confidentiality and no trace of the origin of data would be coded to reveal the person/ title/ or office of any participant”. The researcher passed on the

same statement verbally to the respondents who were interviewed through phone calls, but with additional information that “for purpose of data retrieval, the phone conversation would be recorded’ and later deleted after complete data retrieval. Whenever the respondent turned down the invitation to participate or did not send back the filled questionnaire or did not call me to pick it back, the researcher would thank him/ her for the time and apologised for the inconvenienced caused, either directly on phone or with a follow up note. A total of Sixteen targeted respondents turned down the invitation to participate in this research, In using both methods, this study did not capture the name or address of any respondent, save for the phone numbers and institutions of affiliations of those interviewed on phones, which remained confidential.

**3. Results**

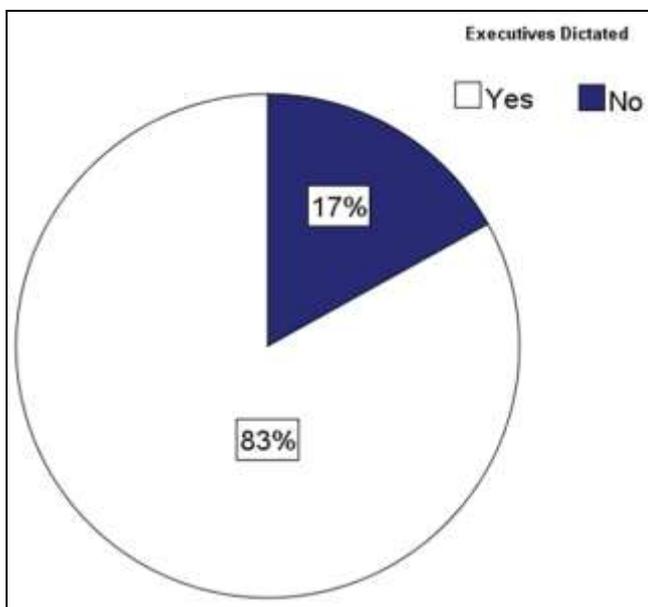
The researcher explored preliminary data (not included here) from the responses in Google Form response analysis tool to get a general impression per question prior to real analysis.

**3.1 Use of Shorthand by Office Secretaries**

The present study ran several analyses to establish if Shorthand was still used by contemporary Secretaries in Ugandan offices.

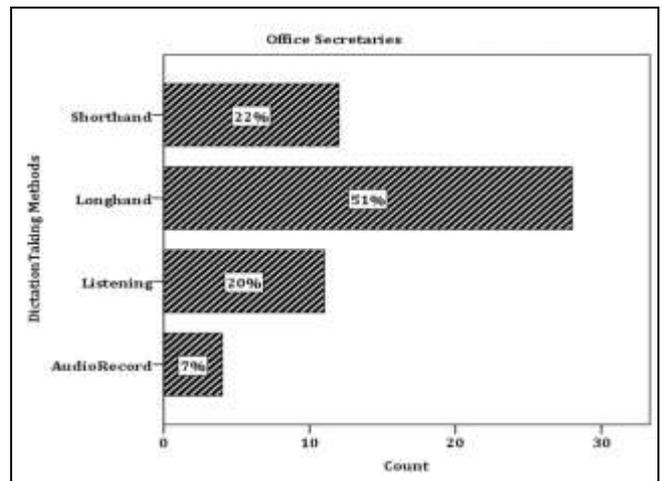
The researcher asked both the Secretaries and the Executives if Executives dictated memos to their Secretaries.

From figure 1 below, out of 118 respondents, 83% confirmed that Office Executives dictated memos and letters to their Secretaries. This presented great chance to their secretaries to use shorthand.



**Fig 1:** Proportion of Respondent Executives who Dictates Memos to Secretaries.

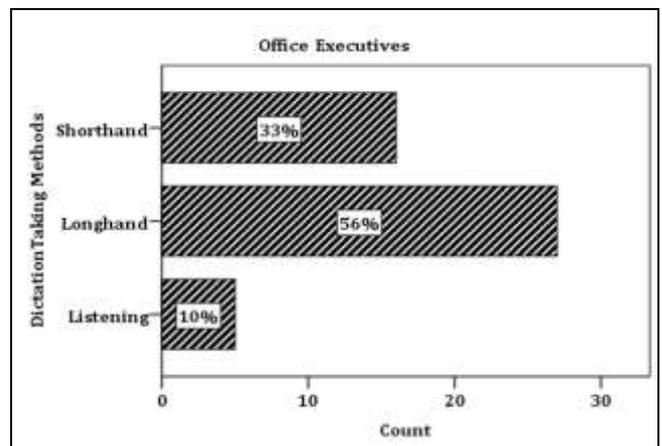
The study further investigated the use of Shorthand by secretaries by comparing the various methods used by Secretaries to take down dictations from their Executives (Figures 2a and 2b).



**Fig 2a:** Methods Used by Secretaries to Take Dictations.

In figure 2a above, out of the 55 Secretaries who responded, 51% revealed that they commonly took down dictations in Longhand, followed by 22% who took in Shorthand while 20% of the Secretaries just listened to their bosses during dictations.

A small percentage (7%) of Secretaries did audio recording of dictations and later transcribed into letters/ memos. Similarly, in figure 2b below, the Office Executives confirmed that their Secretaries took down dictations in Longhand (56%), followed by Shorthand (33%) and 10% did just listened.

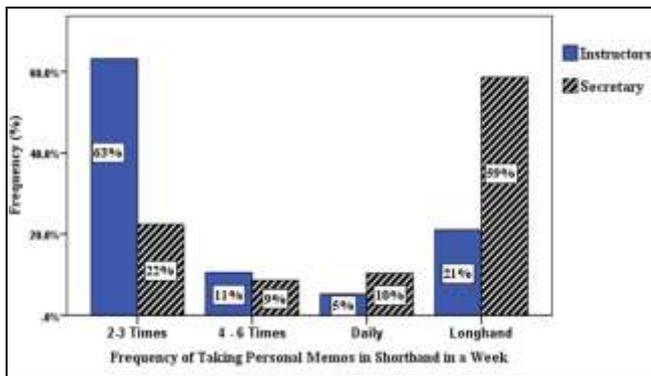


**Fig 2b:** Methods Used by Secretaries to Take Dictations as Reported by Office Executives.

In addition, the researcher also confirmed that, most Secretaries did not practiced shorthand skills as they did their job when he personally interacted with those Secretaries whom he interviewed on phone. In fact after the researcher introduced the study topic to respondents whom he interviewed on phone, many of them at first thought that the researcher would put them into real practical Shorthand test.

**3.2 Personal Use of Shorthand by Secretaries and Shorthand Instructors**

One part of the questionnaire asked both the Instructors and Secretaries how frequent they took their personal notes or memos in Shorthand in a week.



**Fig 3:** Frequency of Using Shorthand for Personal Work by Secretaries and Shorthand Instructors in a Week

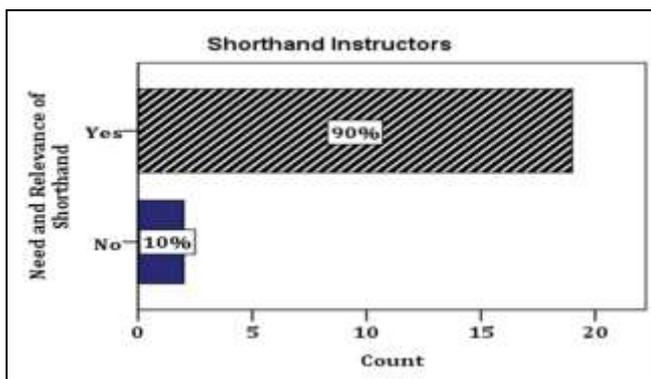
**3.3 Instructors or Secretaries with Experience in Both Professions**

To establish whether there existed Shorthand Instructors who first practiced or were practicing stenography and also if there were office Secretaries who worked as trainers, the study analysed responses from 69 respondents (excluding Executives). From the 21 respondent shorthand instructors, seven (33.3%) worked as Office Secretaries and only 5 (10.4%) out of 65 Secretaries had ever worked as Shorthand Instructors. This finding leaves a lot to be desired when it comes to training delivery of shorthand in Institutions.

In figure 3 above findings show that, most Secretaries (59%) used longhand for personal records, while 63.2% of the Instructors used Shorthand two to three times a week. It appeared the use of Shorthand was associated to some particular category of respondents. Generally, more Instructors practiced Shorthand than the Secretaries

**3.4 Relevance and Need for Shorthand Knowledge by Secretaries**

The present study explored the three categories of respondents to establish if Shorthand knowledge was still required and relevant for effective working of contemporary Secretaries.

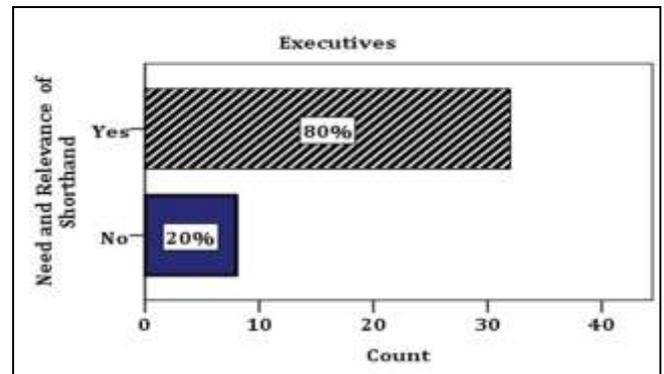


**Fig 4a:** The Opinion of Shorthand Instructors on the Need and Relevance of Shorthand Modern Office Secretaries

The justification for the relevance and need of Shorthand to office Secretaries was nearly inclined to the category of respondents. From figure 4a - 4c below, findings show that majority of the Instructors (90%) and Executives (80%) agreed that Shorthand was still relevant and needed for an effective & efficient Secretary in modern offices, however only about the average number (67%) of the Secretaries

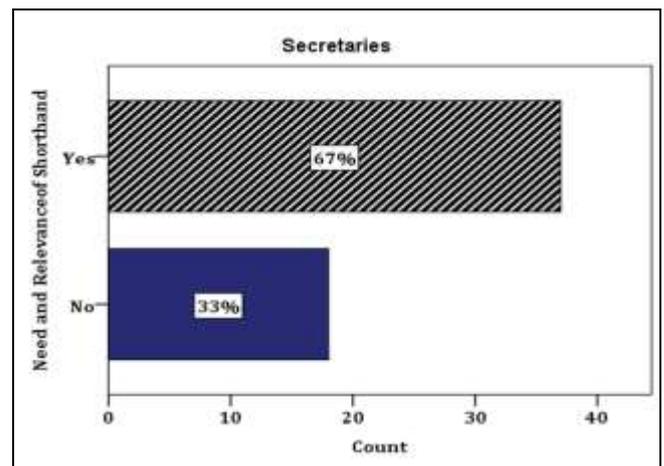
shared this belief.

These findings however, are contradictory to those in sections 3.1 which revealed that most Secretaries neither practiced Shorthand in offices nor did them and the Instructors used Shorthand in their personal records.



**Fig 4b:** The Opinion of the Executives on the Need and Relevance of Shorthand for Modern Office Secretaries

This is not a surprise, since just about average number (67%) of Secretaries agreed that shorthand knowledge was still needed and relevant for Secretaries in modern offices.



**Fig 4c:** The Opinion of the Office Secretaries on the Need and Relevance of Shorthand for Modern Office Secretaries

**4. Discussion of Results**

The present findings in sections three above are interesting and very contradictory. In this section therefore the researcher makes arguments from informed and researched opinion to interpret the above findings while, corroborating with similar findings and arguments from other studies to reach informative and original conclusions.

**4.1 Use of Shorthand by Office Secretaries**

From the phone call interviews with the Secretaries, the researcher was informed clearly stated that secretaries used Shorthand only while they were still students as they revised to pass their examinations. In sections 3.1 of the present study, findings corroborated that most Secretaries did not practiced shorthand to record memos and dictations. This finding is in support to that of [23] who found that some students or employed secretaries with inaccurate shorthand writing skills did not use shorthand in their daily work. Not

every person trained in shorthand make a good shorthand typist. Ill trained Secretaries discourage their bosses from dictating notes <sup>[24]</sup>. Oguntimehin and Oludele <sup>[25]</sup> also confirmed that office automation has resulted in many managers getting involved in doing their own work. This means the daily use of shorthand by Secretaries in modern offices is greatly reduced.

In a study done by Lyon <sup>[23]</sup>, some employers confirmed that shorthand was much more difficult than audio typing and they preferred to select shorthand typist with hope that they would be more capable even in other tasks. This could suggest that the mastery of shorthand requires higher level of intelligence which may not be exhibited by most students who pursue the course. English language is a major weakness of most typists and shorthand students <sup>[26]</sup>. Wilkins <sup>[27]</sup> found a positive correlation between attainment in junior high school English and shorthand. This means that proficiency in English is a reliable predictor of one's results and accuracy in shorthand. It is also likely that introductory shorthand teachers do not emphasise the importance of penmanship which affects the speed of one's handwriting <sup>[28]</sup>. This suggests that more emphasis should be put on the technique of shorthand rather than on its art and substance during training delivery <sup>[29]</sup>. Righter <sup>[28]</sup> and Gaffga <sup>[30]</sup> emphasised the importance of penmanship in mastery of the art of shorthand. Slow penmanship and poor spelling ability is one weakness among most shorthand typist <sup>[26]</sup>. Why then do modern Secretaries fail to practice shorthand, yet it is always one of the job requirements for office Secretaries? Could it be that the evolving social media writing styles such as those used on Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram or short message service (SMS) is gradually replacing the traditional Gregg or Pitman shorthand? Thurlow <sup>[31]</sup> considered these social media writing styles as shorthand, while Karlgren <sup>[32]</sup> and Tonne <sup>[33]</sup> described them as "abbreviated" longhand and. Gaffga <sup>[30]</sup> emphasised that shorthand teachers must get concerned with penmanship if they are to improve the skills of speedy writing in their learners. It could therefore be true that slow penmanship, poor English commands, and low intelligence for aspiring students as well as evolution of social media languages are some of the factors contributing to low application of shorthand by Secretaries in modern offices.

#### 4.2 Instructors or Secretaries with Experience in Both Professions

The finding in section 3.3 which showed that only 33% of the Instructors out of twenty-one (21) had worked as Office Secretaries and only 10% of the Secretaries had ever worked as Shorthand Instructors leaves a lot to be desired when it comes to training delivery of shorthand in Institutions. It is common knowledge that teachers who practice or are active practitioners of their professions are "good" at knowledge and skills transfer to the learners <sup>[34]</sup>. Shorthand teacher education is not complete unless one have had practical experience in the use of the art <sup>[35]</sup>. Such a teacher should certainly be able to do what he/she expects his/her students to do. The old proverb, "Don't do as I do, but do as I say" has become innocuous, and Sayers must become Doers. An experienced shorthand teacher must have been into the office and have shared the responsibility actually to get the spirit of business flowing through his/her veins. This will

enable him / her to cultivate the power of organisations that is characteristic of the business world so that he/she can bring it to the class and make it part of the instruction. Williamson <sup>[36]</sup> further emphasised that the teacher "on the top of the mountain of practice sees infinitely more than the teacher in the valley of theory." It is therefore not surprising to discover that very few shorthand instructors practiced stenography; a factor which could have led to poor mastery of shorthand skills by modern Secretaries. This is even made worse with very few shorthand teachers having teaching qualifications above Diploma level <sup>[19]</sup>.

#### 4.3 Relevance and Need for Shorthand Knowledge to Contemporary Secretaries

On the question as to whether Shorthand was still relevant and needed for effective Secretarial duties, majority of all the three categories of respondents; Instructors (90%), Executives (80%) and Secretaries (67%) responded in affirmative. This finding also contradicts those in sections 3.1 above, which revealed that most Secretaries did not practice Shorthand in offices nor did them or Instructors use it for their personal records.

The finding is however supported by a number of researchers who did similar studies. A respondent in a newspaper interview was reported to have stressed that everyone still needed shorthand skills in their offices <sup>[19]</sup>. Further, Lyon <sup>[23]</sup> in her survey study of local demands for girls trained in shorthand in Scotland, discovered that there was still a substantial demand for girls trained in shorthand and that the demand was likely to continue at a fairly high rate. Aldrich <sup>[17]</sup> in his study of continued relevance of the secretarial practitioners in the age of office technology stated that shorthand was accurate and is still relevant in office management, especially in document preparations and executive assistance. Aldrich <sup>[17]</sup> further recommended that traditional secretaries who are competent in typewriting and shorthand should rapidly adapt to the new ICT age in order for them to remain relevant to modern offices. Oguntimehin and Oludele <sup>[25]</sup> studied the relevance of shorthand and typewriting to office management and found that the emergence of voice recording technology does not remove the relevance of shorthand in taking down oral telephone call information. The present finding therefore confirmed that, shorthand was still very useful in the modern offices, but that the secretaries required additional ICT skills to enhance their productivity in technology laden offices.

The affirmative responses of the instructors to relevance of shorthand in this study may also be interpreted from different points of view. The finding may suggest that Instructors overwhelmingly supported the relevance of Shorthand from their job security perspectives. The fact that Secretaries ranked lowest in support for the relevance of shorthand, was a confirmation that they did not miss the skill in the execution of their duties. It is likely that the abbreviated longhand preferred by most Secretaries to take dictations was actually the emergent social media "shorthand", a subject for yet another research and discussion.

#### 5. Conclusion

This research has shown that contemporary Secretaries did not use Shorthand when they did their jobs. There is likely a challenge with the delivery and grasping of the art and

substance of Shorthand right from training institutions. The researcher considers poor quality of instructors and admitted students as candidate factors to explore, as well as evolution of social media languages. Generally, Shorthand instructors in classes have not practiced stenography. Skills acquisition is not an easy practice in any profession and the same is true for shorthand. This could further explain why Secretaries are not practicing shorthand. It is high time for Sayers of “*Don't do as I do, but do as I say*” to be put to task to themselves do. Shorthand instructors must come from office environments and not direct from the last examination rooms or otherwise, the continued disguise of irrelevance for relevance of the shorthand in the training curricular and world of work. Shorthand is still very relevant and a useful tool to hide secrets and write fast.

The present study therefore recommends that recruitment of Shorthand instructors should be made from the pool of practicing stenographers. It also recommends training institutions to admit students who intend to pursue Secretarial (Shorthand) studies from among those who have passed English language to improve the mastery of Shorthand skills. This paper further recommends for more studies to investigate the causes of low application of shorthand skills by Secretaries in modern offices and if there exists any association with the evolution of social media languages and writing styles.

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