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# **Influence of Local Language Use on Students' Academic Performance in Lower Primary Schools in Gatsibo District, Rwanda**

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## **Abstract**

This research assessed the influence of local language use on students' academic performance in lower primary schools in the Gatsibo district of Rwanda. Specifically, the research aimed to identify the factors influencing local language use in these schools, analyze the academic performance of students attributable to local language use, and assess the overall influence of local language use on academic performance. The study employed a descriptive and correlational design using a mixed-methods approach. The population consisted of 718 respondents, including 118 teachers and 600 parents. The sample size of 259 respondents was determined using the Yamane formula. Respondents were selected through purposive sampling, and data were collected using questionnaires and document research. A pilot study was also conducted. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 21, and interpretations were based on the results provided by the respondents. For the first objective, 91.2% of respondents agreed that class group discussions in the local language were beneficial, and the same percentage agreed with providing tests in the local language. Regarding the second objective, 90.0% agreed that there was a low level of speech development in English, 88.3% indicated a low level of English writing skills, and 81.9% reported low levels of reading skills. For the third objective, 93% agreed that government educational policies advocating class group discussions in local language led to low levels of language acquisition. Correlation values also indicated that teaching in local language positively influenced language acquisition levels. In conclusion, the study shows that factors such as class group discussions, teaching methods, explanations, and tests in the local language influence academic performance. The results indicate that low levels of language acquisition, speech development, and writing and reading skills are observed in national exams. All these factors significantly contribute to low performance in English, as indicated by p-values less than 0.05. The study recommends that educational stakeholders collaborate to improve English proficiency. The Ministry of Education should also provide instructional materials for the English language. Further studies should explore the importance of English proficiency at all educational levels and its effects on other factors affecting students' performance.

**Keywords:** *Local Language Use, Students' Academic Performance, Lower Primary Schools, Gatsibo District, Rwanda.*

## **1.0 Introduction**

English-medium instruction (EMI) has become a crucial component in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in this globalized era. English advanced significantly in the 20th century, becoming the language of world diplomacy, commerce, education, research, and technology. Therefore, English as an instructional language in the learning and teaching process has been a contentious issue in Europe and Asia (Chen & Tsai, 2013). Despite research showing the importance of a pupil's first language in language acquisition (Rawan, 2016), pupils and teaching staff members in Asia often communicate in Urdu in English-language classrooms. The dominance of French decreased due to linguistic reforms, leading to the exclusion of English as a language of instruction. Kinyarwanda, the native language, remains prevalent as only a small portion of people can communicate in basic French. However, Rwanda's government has now shifted the entire educational system to English and removed French from official activities (McGreal, 2018).

As schools rapidly transition to English for instruction, thousands of teachers have received rudimentary English training to produce a generation of English-speaking Rwandans. The move aims to boost Rwanda's trade links with English-speaking neighbors like Tanzania, Uganda, and Kenya (Chris McGreal, 2018). The Ministry of Education recommends a curriculum that teaches pupils in primary grades one to three exclusively in Kinyarwanda for all subjects (MINEDUC, 2019). The approach is effective for understanding concepts through relatable day-to-day examples. However, this might slow down the educational system and hinder the progress of English usage (REB, 2020). Teaching in a language that children understand enhances comprehension (REB, 2020). Yet, instructing pupils in Kinyarwanda could make learners too comfortable, potentially hindering them from learning other languages. In summary, the present research assessed the influence of local language use on students' academic performance in lower primary schools in the Gatsibo District, Rwanda.

### **1.1 Research objectives**

Specific Objectives that guided this research are:

- i. To determine factors influencing local language use in lower primary schools in Gatsibo District, Rwanda.
- ii. To analyse the students' academic performance in lower primary schools due to local language use.
- iii. To assess the influence of local language use on students' academic performance in lower primary schools in Gatsibo District, Rwanda.

## **2.0 Theoretical Literature**

### **2.1 Local Language Use in Lower Primary Schools**

This concept refers to the language deemed by public institutions as their official language. Local language implies general acceptance, both written and spoken, within the applicable active territory (Harkness, 2016). Evidence shows that around the world, many dialects exist and millions of people speak secondary and official languages (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010). Likewise, principal languages are experiencing diversity, expressed in the context of mother

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tongues and local dialects. Changes in language may occur due to various factors, including region, place, area, time, and duration (Aprianti & Parmawati, 2020). Plonski (2013) noted that UNESCO reported the relevance associated with the use of dialects and mother tongues in educational systems, especially in nursery and primary schools. Unfortunately, the predominance of English in the educational system has hindered educational practitioners from actively incorporating native languages in nursery and primary schools. In this regard, the full and active use of dialects and mother tongues in educational systems has not been possible. This suggests that the adoption of English in nursery and primary schools appears to be the greatest obstacle in the context of exploring new options. Therefore, students and children, in general, should be taught English from an early age to acquire skills and expand their vocabulary in the English language (Oliver, 2010).

## **2.2 Lower Primary Schools**

Lower primary schools are an essential part of a child's journey in formal education and come right after the preschool years, as pointed out by Adam Hayes in 2022. Often known as elementary schools, they cater to children between the ages of about five and eleven. During this stage, children are introduced to a wide range of subjects such as math, language arts, science, and social studies, creating a strong foundation for their educational future. Teachers use various methods to make learning enjoyable and relatable, employing techniques like interactive activities, storytelling, and real-world examples. Aside from academics, these years are also formative for the development of important life skills. Children learn how to work as a team, solve problems, and communicate effectively with both their peers and adults. The environment of lower primary schools also helps children form their first friendships and understand how to interact respectfully with people outside their immediate family. In essence, lower primary schools are critical for both academic and personal development, serving as a launchpad for future educational and life achievements (Adam Hayes, 2022).

## **2.3 Students' Academic Performance in Lower Primary Schools**

Student performance refers to learning outcomes, defined as the level at which pupils complete their studies and attain their goals by acquiring certificates representing academic achievement (Pandey, 2015). Orekan (2010) argues that the choice of language for instruction in Africa depends on a number of factors. Due to the experience of colonization, many African countries were colonized from the middle of the 19th century until the 1960s. According to Orekan (2010), the influence of colonial history on the educational system in Africa can be summarized as follows: Firstly, countries colonized by France primarily use French for instruction to align with the French educational system. Secondly, in countries colonized by the British, the use of local dialects was accepted during the early years of formal education, while English has been promoted at higher educational levels.

## **2.4. National Exams**

Examinations refer to a form of academic assessment employed to evaluate various aspects of a test-taker's abilities, including skills, competencies, proficiencies, as well as divisions and categories within a subject area. Exams may be administered in different formats, such as oral

presentations or written tests, to assess and demonstrate a range of skill sets. The nature of the qualifications required, the specific discipline being tested, and the methodologies used in exams can vary significantly (Pandey, 2015). Furthermore, the nature of test formats and the degree of complexity are commonly based on various factors. These may include teacher learning theories, the specific subject or topic being assessed, the size of the class, and other school-specific variables such as the curriculum and requirements for school accreditation (Pandey, 2015). Overall, the format and complexity of tests are generally decided upon and may even be permanently established based on a combination of these factors.

## **2.5. Class Group Work Discussion in Local Language**

**In lower primary schools, the use of discussions in small groups and whole-class settings** is a valuable educational approach. Such discussions can be conducted in the students' native language, allowing for a more comfortable and inclusive learning environment. This approach is not only beneficial for enhancing student engagement but also serves as a platform for developing various crucial skills. According to research by Pandey in 2015, group projects are another effective way to boost interaction among students, even when the teacher is not directly supervising them. These group activities encourage students to work collaboratively and foster the growth of essential competencies like critical thinking, effective communication, and interpersonal skills. By participating in discussions and group projects, children are exposed to different perspectives and learn to appreciate the value of teamwork. They also get the opportunity to apply theoretical concepts in real-world situations, further enriching their educational experience. Such methods, therefore, play a significant role in shaping well-rounded learners who are not only academically proficient but also skilled in navigating social interactions and problem-solving scenarios (Pandey, 2015).

## **2.6 Teaching in Local Language**

Teaching in the local language in lower primary schools has proven to be a highly effective strategy for enhancing student engagement and comprehension. According to Harkness in 2016, this approach involves various aspects, from the design of the curriculum to content selection, delivery, evaluation, and reflection—all carried out in the local language. The use of local language allows for a more tailored and relatable educational experience, as it bridges the gap between home and school environments. It makes students feel more at ease and allows them to better grasp complex skills, terms, and procedures. Additionally, teaching in the local language promotes better awareness and cognitive processing, as children are learning in a language that they understand well. When combined with other interactive methods such as group discussions and projects, as indicated by Pandey in 2015, and considering the foundational importance of lower primary schools in a child's educational journey, as stated by Adam Hayes in 2022, the use of local language in teaching creates a robust, inclusive, and effective learning environment. This holistic approach helps in nurturing not only academic intelligence but also crucial life skills like critical thinking and effective communication (Harkness, 2016).



## **2.7 Instruction and Explanations in Local Language**

Teaching in lower primary schools often utilizes the local language for both instruction and explanation, offering multiple benefits for student engagement and comprehension. As highlighted by Harkness in 2016, instructions in the local language guide students clearly on what is expected of them, while explanations in the same language help break down complex concepts into understandable terms, often using local and cultural references. This approach aligns well with other effective educational strategies like group discussions and projects, cited by Pandey in 2015, to improve critical thinking and interpersonal skills. Given the foundational role that lower primary schools play in shaping a child's academic journey, as noted by Adam Hayes in 2022, the use of local language in teaching creates an inclusive and effective learning environment that nurtures both academic proficiency and essential life skills (Pandey, 2015).

## **2.8 Examination tests provided in Local Language**

Examinations conducted in the local language serve as formal assessments designed to evaluate a student's knowledge or skills in specific subjects, according to Pandey in 2015. These tests aim to certify a student's qualifications and provide a standardized measure of their academic performance. Administering exams in the local language makes them more accessible to students, reducing the cognitive load associated with language translation and allowing them to focus on demonstrating their understanding of the subject matter. In the context of lower primary schools, which play a crucial role in laying the educational foundation for children as pointed out by Adam Hayes in 2022, such examinations can be particularly effective. They not only assess academic knowledge but also serve as a tool for educators to gauge the effectiveness of teaching strategies, including those involving local language instruction and explanation, as noted by Harkness in 2016. Therefore, examinations in the local language contribute to a more inclusive and fair educational system, complementing other teaching methods and furthering the holistic development of students (Harkness, 2016)

## **3.0 Research Methodology**

The research used a descriptive and correlational study with a mixed approach to collect data on educational or social problems, as stated by Alvi (2016) and Babbie (2011). The target population for the study was 718 participants, including 118 teachers from three Groupe Scolaires and 600 parents. Due to the large population size, a sample design was employed using a mathematical formula by Taro Yamane, resulting in a sample size of 259 respondents, as shown in Table 1. Purposive sampling technique was used to choose participants based on specific qualities they possess. Data collection methods included questionnaires and documentation research techniques. These questionnaires, containing open questions relevant to the research objectives, were distributed among the sample participants to collect the required data effectively.

**Table 1: Sample Size**

Names of Schools	Target Population		Sample Size
	Teachers	Parents	
Groupe Scolaire Nyabikiri	45	200	87
Groupe Scolaire Ngarama	41	200	86
Groupe Scolaire Rwikiniro	32	200	86
<b>Total</b>	<b>718</b>		<b>259</b>

**Source: Gatsibo District (2023)**

#### **4.0 Research Findings**

The research findings are presented in sections.

##### **4.1 Determination of factors influencing local language use in lower primary schools of Gatsibo District**

The first objective of the study determined factors influencing local language use in lower primary schools of Gatsibo District. To achieve this objective, this study required participate to provide responses by filling the research tool. The researcher used a five Likert scape from strongly agree to strongly disagree and findings are presented in Table 2

**Table 2: Factors influencing local language use in lower primary schools of Gatsibo District**

Statements	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Mean	Std
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
Class group work discussion in local language	183	71.3	51	19.9	15	5.8	6	2.3	1	0.6	1.4	0.7
Teaching in local language	185	72.5	60	23.2	5	1.8	5	1.8	1	0.6	1.3	0.7
Instruction and explanations in local language	181	70.8	52	20.5	16	6.4	5	1.8	1	0.6	1.4	0.7
Examination tests provided in local language	174	68.4	49	19.3	25	9.9	5	1.8	1	0.6	1.4	0.7

**Source: Primary Data (2023)**

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Findings from Table 2 demonstrates responses provided on the factors that influencing local Language use. Therefore, 71.3% strongly agreed that in their school class group work discussion in local language is the factor that influences the use of language in lower primary schools of Gatsibo District at mean response of 1.3 with a standard deviation equal to 0.7, 72.5% of participants accepted that the use of local language is frequently in lower primary schools of Gatsibo District, 70.8% of respondents agreed that in their schools, instruction and explanations in local language are the factors that influence local language use in lower primary schools of Gatsibo District, Finally, 68.4% of respondents agreed that in their school Examination tests provided in local language is the factor that influences local language use in lower primary schools of Gatsibo District.

#### 4.2 Analysis of the students' Academic Performance in national exams

Participants filed questionnaire; the researcher also analyzed different documents about secondary school performance in English in lower primary schools. Respondent's opinions are rated using strongly disagree to strongly agree.

**Table 3: Students' Performance in National Exams that is due to Local Language Use**

Statements	Storngly Agree		Agree		Not Sure		Disagee		Strongly Disagree		Mean	Std
	N	%	N	%	N%	N	%	N	%			
English language acquisition	174	67.8	61	24.0	11	4.7	10	3.5	0	0.0	1.4	0.7
The use of English speech	165	64.6	66	25.1	18	7.0	7	2.9	0	0.0	1.4	0.7
Writing English language	169	66.1	57	22.2	19	7.6	7	2.9	4	1.2	1.5	0.8
English reading skills acquisition	155	60.8	75	29.2	18	7.0	5	1.8	4	1.2	1.5	0.7

#### Source: Primary Data (2023)

Results presented in the Table 3 through the questionnaire, the researcher the students' performance in national exams that is due to local language use, information is given in Table 2 which demonstrated that 67.8 of participants accepted the existence of low level of English language acquisition is the factor that analyses the students' performance in national exams, 64.6% show a strongly agreement, low level of English language speech development was the

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factor that analyses the students' performance in national exams. Moreover, 66.1% accepted the schools, low level of writing English language is the factor that analyses the students' performance in national exams, 60.0% of schools, and low level of English reading skulls acquisition is the factor that analyses the students' performance in national exams.

#### 4.3 Influence of Local Language Use in Lower Primary Schools on Students' Academic Performance

The study established the effect of local language use in lower primary schools on students' performance in national examinations in Rwanda.

**Table 4: Influence of local language use on students' Academic Performance**

Statements	Strongly Agree		Agree		Not Sure		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Mean	Std
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
Government educational policies assess the influence of local language use in lower primary schools on students' performance in national examinations	159	62.0	76	29.8	14	5.8	7	2.3	0	0.0	1.4	0.7
Involvement of parents is the factor that assess the influence of local language use in lower primary schools on students' performance	171	66.7	56	22.2	18	7.0	9	3.5	2	0.6	1.5	0.8
School facilities are the factors that assess the influence of local language use in lower primary schools on students' performance	153	59.6	82	32.2	14	5.8	7	2.3	0	0.0	1.4	0.8
School policies are the factors that assess the influence of local language use in lower primary schools on students' performance	180	70.2	53	21.1	16	6.4	7	2.3	0	0.0	1.5	0.7

**Source: Primary Data (2023)**

Results presented in Table 4 demonstrated that 62.0 % agreed that Government educational policies assess the influence of local language use in lower primary schools on students' performance in national examinations in Rwanda; 66.7% of respondents agreed that involvement of parents is the factor that assess the influence of using local language in lower schools on students' performance in national examinations in Rwanda; 59.6% respondents agreed that school facilities are the factors that assess the influence of local language in lower primary schools on students' performance in national examinations in Rwanda, 91.8% show an agreement on policies as a factors that assess the influence of using local language in primary schools on students' performance in national examinations in Rwanda, 70.2 of respondents agreed that School policies are the factors that assess the influence of using local language in lower primary schools on students' performance in national examinations in Rwanda, 70.2% of respondents agreed that that Age of learners are the factors that assess the influence of local language use in lower primary schools on students' performance in national examinations in Rwanda.

#### 4.4 Correlation Analysis

Table 5 presents the results of the correlation analysis

**Table 5: Correlation Analysis**

		Language acquisition	Speech development	Writing English language	Reading acquisition
Class group	Pearson Correlation	.473**	.448**	.369**	.455**
work discussion	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000
in local language	N	256	256	256	256
Teaching in local	Pearson Correlation	.435**	.474**	.402**	.472**
language	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	256	256	256	256
Instruction and	Pearson Correlation	.430**	.426**	.396**	.474**
explanations in	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000
local language	N	256	256	318	256
Examination	Pearson Correlation	.413**	.396**	.358**	.480**
tests provided in	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000
local language	N	256	256	256	256

**Source: Primary Data (2023)**

\*(Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The results presented in Table 5 show a correlation between the use of local language in various classroom activities and low levels of English language acquisition skills. Specifically, class group work discussions conducted in the local language correlated with low levels of English acquisition (0.473), speech development (0.448), writing skills (0.369), and reading skills (0.455). Similarly, teaching in the local language was associated with low levels in English

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acquisition (0.434), speech development (0.474), writing skills (0.404), and reading skills (0.472). Furthermore, using local language for instruction and explanations was linked to low levels of English acquisition (0.430), speech development (0.426), writing skills (0.396), and reading skills (0.474). Examination tests given in the local language also correlated with low levels of English acquisition (0.413), speech development (0.396), writing skills (0.358), and reading skills (0.485). These findings suggest a relationship between the use of local language in primary schools and poor performance in English language skills. This observation is consistent with research conducted in Tanzania by Dodd in 2016. Dodd found that only an estimated 10% of Form Four students are at a beginner's level in using English for their courses. Moreover, 75% of Form One courses are taught in Kiswahili, and a mere 20% of students tested on reading skills were found to have very low levels.

#### **4.5 Discussion of Findings**

Results on the factors influencing local language use in lower primary schools in Gatsibo District indicate that 71.3% of respondents strongly agreed that class group work discussions in the local language influence local language use in lower primary schools. Similarly, 72.5% agreed that teaching in the local language is a factor, and 70.8% agreed that instructions and explanations in the local language also influence its use. Additionally, 68.4% agreed that providing examination tests in the local language is another influencing factor. The study supports Mugaru's (2018) findings, which revealed that treatment groups in quasi-experimental classes were instructed in Kiswahili while control groups were instructed in English. Regarding the second objective, which analyzes students' performance in national exams due to local language use, 68.8% accepted that language acquisition is a factor, 64.6% confirmed that a low level of English language speech development is a factor, and 66.1% agreed that a low level of writing in English is a factor. These results align with the necessity for improved teaching, as suggested by Dodd (2016). Criper and Dodd conducted a study in Egypt, indicating that the British government was committed to funding projects on the condition of using English in the educational sector. As for the third objective related to the influence of local language use on students' performance in national examinations in Rwanda, 62.0% of participants accepted that government educational policies assess this influence, 66.7% agreed that parental involvement is a factor, and 91.8% agreed that school policies are factors. Finally, 70.2% agreed that the age of learners influences this as well. The findings reveal that teaching in the local language was associated with low levels of English acquisition, speech development, writing, and reading skills. This research assessed the level of English performance in the Tanzanian education system, supported by British findings (Dodd, 2016). It provided three results: (i) an expected percentage of Form Four pupils at the beginner level in English language teaching and learning; (ii) an estimate that 95% of teaching in Form One is done in Kiswahili; and (iii) fewer than 20% of university students who are examined on their reading level are found to be extremely low.

## 5.0 Conclusion

The study concludes that the factors influencing local language use in lower primary schools in Gatsibo District are class group work discussions in local language, teaching in local language, instruction and explanations in local language, and examination tests provided in local language. In addition, the study concludes that low levels of English language acquisition, speech development, writing, and reading skills were the results obtained by students in national exams. Besides, the study establishes a relationship between factors for using local language and student performance in using English in lower primary schools located in Gatsibo District. Therefore, a correlation matrix between independent variables (class group work discussion in local language, teaching in local language, instruction and explanations in local language, and examination tests provided in local language) and dependent variables (low level of English language acquisition, low level of English language speech development, low level of writing in English, and low level of English reading skills acquisition) shows positive significance since the p-values were less than 0.05.

## 6.0 Recommendations

Based on the results obtained, the researcher recommends that partners in educational activities in the district under study should collaborate with the community to improve the level of speaking, reading, writing, and listening in English as a language of instruction. The Ministry of Education should provide more instructional materials for the English language with the aim of enhancing English language proficiency. They should also offer sufficient training to boost teachers' ability to teach using English, thereby preparing future manpower capable of providing students with English language skills that will enable them to compete worldwide in the labor market. The study recommends future research to explore the following subjects: the effect of creating awareness about the importance of the English language among students at all levels of education; the influence of the English language on Rwandan economic development; the effect of English as a language of instruction on Rwandan pupils' learning outcomes; and other factors that affect pupils' performance in the English language.

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