

Journal of Education

ISSN Online: 2616-8383



Stratford
Peer Reviewed Journals & books

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ISSN: 2616-8383

English Language Skills and Students' Academic Performance in Rwandan Public Secondary Schools: Case of Bugesera District

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How to cite this article: Hakorimana E., Oyebimpe A. & Andala H., O. (2020). English Language Skills and Students' Academic Performance in Rwandan Public Secondary Schools: Case of Bugesera District. Journal of Education. Vol 3(3) pp. 35-43.

Abstract

The aim of this research paper was to explore the effect of English language skills on students' academic performance in Rwandan public secondary schools. Descriptive survey and correlation research designs were adopted. The procedures that were used to collect data included closed-ended questionnaires for quantitative design and data was analyzed using SPSS software, for the qualitative design, the researcher used interviews, open-ended questionnaires and classroom observation to obtain the data. The researcher used simple random sampling to select the schools in Bugesera from which the information was gathered; hence seven schools were sampled. Stratified sampling was used to categorize the sampled schools according to their zones and size. Simple random sampling was also used to select students and teachers as it gave them equal chance to participate in the study. Hence, the target population was 414 including seven (7) head teachers, seven (7) deans of studies, fifty (50) teachers and three hundred and fifty (350) students. By using the formula of Yamane the sample size was 203. After the data had been collected findings were summarized and general conclusion was drawn whereby 92.08 % agreed that English is used as the language of instruction, 6.34 % disagreed and 1.58 % refused to provide information, 6.26 percent use English in their communication, 95.26 % can write an essay in English and 93.67 % can read and understand the written materials. The overall average of students' academic performance in national examination from 2014 to 2018 is 93.31 %. English language skills have great impact on the students' academic performance as it was revealed by 92 percent of respondents and correlation coefficient is 0.874 which means that there is high positive correlation between English language skills and students' academic performance. Based on the study's results, it was discussed that although there are other intervening variables that affect academic performance of students, LOI is the most factor. It is therefore recommended that all

stakeholders in education should make an effort to improve English language proficiency among students from nursery schools.

Keywords: *Language skills, Medium of instruction, Academic performance & Academic achievement*

1.1 Introduction

Academically, the first motivation of students and their teachers is students' success in academic activities, however this is hard to achieve when students do not have proficiency in LOI (Wilkinson & Silliman, 2008). In the countries where the medium of instruction is English, the students should understand and possess adequate skills for usage, so as to understand what they learn and experience good academic performance.

The concepts academic performance and language proficiency are wide. Academic performance is delimited to mean the result of activities related to education especially in a college or university undertaken by a student and is also defined as the ability to display through speaking or writing what one has learnt in the classroom (Komba, 2012). On the other hand, language proficiency is overall ability of an individual in language and this ability is measured in terms of listening, reading, writing and speaking skills. The relationship between English language and academic performance is expressed in terms of correlation coefficient.

The phenomenon of globalization has influenced many nations to adopt English as the language of instruction in schools (Tamtam, 2010) even in the countries where English is not native language for learners. With reference to African context, the research shows that many African learners are not proficient enough in English to be able to use it appropriately as the language of instruction (Alidou and Brock-utne 2011; Kyeyune 2010; Mwisheike 2002; Rubagumya, 1997; Rugemalira 2005; Vavrus 2002; and Webb 2002; 2004). Despite this, English is being used as the medium of instruction in most of the African countries including Rwanda. The language used in teaching and learning is of paramount importance to the acquisition of knowledge, understanding and the development of the skills among the students as well as the way they demonstrate the acquired knowledge in assignments and exams. If students do not have required skills in the language of instruction, they will not develop educationally (Brock Utne and Alidou 2011; Heugh 2000; Wolff 2011; Webb 2004). However, the choice of English is supported by political social and economic arguments (Choi & Tam, 2011).

Firstly, English language links Rwanda to other East African Countries such as Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania with which it carries out most of its trade. Therefore, Rwanda encourages its citizens to acquire the needed skills to use it (Rwanda, 2008). —Secondly, English is an international language used in most of the nations in the world and Rwanda has to collaborate with other countries (Kagire, 2008). Recent research has highlighted the mismatch between Rwandan student's English language abilities and the cognitive academic requirements (Anderson, Kagwesa & Rusanganwa, 2012). In fact, if language abilities do not match with the conceptual requirement, this would lead to frustration and a request to change the medium of instruction (Kagwesa, 2013). However English remains the preferred medium of instruction among the students because of the motivation associated with the use of English as an international language (Kagwesa 2012; and Freedman 2010). English was adopted in Rwandan education system as the only medium of instruction in 2009 (Sibomana, 2014).

In spite of the political, social and economic pressure to use English as medium of instruction in Rwanda, there is a problem whereby many teachers and learners especially in rural areas use the English language only in classroom situation, where there are no television programs, no street signs, no newspapers, and no conversations in English outside the classroom

(Uwambayinema, 2013). This causes the problems of poor success of learners in academic activities due to inability to understand the materials in English. Now, educational researchers are still to find out whether the medium of instruction can affect students' academic performance but specifically here in Rwanda the discussed questions are: in spite of the trainings offered by the government of Rwanda as well as its stakeholders in education do teachers and students still have problems in English? Can this problem result to poor academic performance? How can this problem be fixed? This is the reason why the researcher embarked on this research about the effects of English language skills on the students' academic performance in Rwandan public secondary schools.

1.2 The Problem

Many of the students in Rwandan public secondary schools finish different levels with low scores in English, biology, economics, geography, history and other academic subject taught in English and this causes them to fail in national examinations like ordinary level leaving examinations, this is a common issue in 9 and 12 years basic education schools known as G.S schools. There is much discussion whether this may be due to the lack of English language skills and yet all the subjects' content are delivered in English, the students are required to study in English and sit for exams in English. As reported by some teachers in secondary schools English is not a native language and the students who fail in different levels are tolerated and promoted automatically without having required competences and finally when it comes national examinations like Ordinary level leaving examinations and Advanced level leaving examinations fail as well.

But this issues is gradually corrected as the years go on because when one compares the results of national exams in academic year 2014 and 2018 in selected schools can find the difference as the research showed that the more the students develop the language proficiency used as the medium of instruction the more they understand what they learn and improve their performance. This clearly explained by the analysis made from the comparison of the results of academic year 2014-2018 in selected schools. In 2014 school year, the total number of students who sat for National examination was 644 students. Consequently, 91.4% students passed National examination. Simply, 58.6% students failed. In 2015 school year, the total number of students who sat for National examination was also 644. The number of students who passed National examination was 90.5%. The students who failed were 9.5%. The school year 2016, the total number who sat for National examination was 549. The performances of students in National examination were as follows: students who passed 93.3% and the number of failures were 6.7%. This was an indicator of improvement.

In 2017 school year, the total number of students who sat for National examination was 534. Besides, the number of students who succeeded was 93.4%. The students who failed represented 6.6% students. In 2018 school year, the total number of students who sat for National examination was 472. The number of students who passed National examination 95.9%. The students who failed were 4.1%. From 2014 to 2018 school year, the overall average of percentages of students' performance in National examination is 93.31%. To conclude, this is an indicator that the students in sampled schools successfully performed in National examinations due to influence of English language skills.

Even though there is an improvement comparing to the past performance and current performance of students but still the competences are low compared to the expectation of the Ministry of Education. The problem of poor performance and quality of education and the real causes in Rwanda are still debatable.

In fact, the debates and discussions held on the causes of failure of students in Rwandan public secondary schools do not highlight lack of language proficiency as the cause of poor academic performance but as English is the medium of instruction where some teachers do not have enough skills to teach in English and prefer to mix English and Kinyarwanda whereas the students are required to study in English, this will prevent them from developing English skills which will lead to failure in academic subjects. This is the reason why this research paper was intended to examine the relationship between English language proficiency and academic performance in Rwandan public secondary schools.

1.3. Objective of the paper

Exploring the relationship between English language skills and students' academic performance in public secondary schools in Rwandan public secondary schools.

2.1 Literature review

Good students' academic achievement is a paramount important for individual as well as societal economic development (Job Wilson¹ & Sotco Claudius Komba¹, 2012). Unfortunately, low academic performance among Rwandan public secondary students especially those in 9 and 12 years basic education is commonly known issue and it has been discussed by different researchers for long time (Marie, 2013). This has caused parents who have a lot of money to send their children to private schools and some send their children abroad. Among the factors that are mentioned include language of instruction whereby students are said not to understand English as medium of instruction, this makes them fail to understand other subjects. The rampant failure of students in English as well as other academic subjects in the countries where English is not a native language made scholars to make research in this area since 1800s.

Scholars like Kyeyune (2010) and Webb (2004), argue that proficiency in the language of instruction is an essential factor in academic achievements and that lack of it would lead to low performance in school subjects. Due to different perspectives, it seems therefore, that English language skills influences the performance of students in public secondary schools. The more the students develop English language skills, the more they perform well.

In the beginning of implementing English as language of instruction policy in Rwanda some of the Rwandan teachers challenged it (Uwambayinema, 2013). But due to the relevant reasons which include social, economic, and political reasons the government of Rwanda had no other choice and helped the teachers to adapt to the changes by providing trainings to them (Sibomana E. , 2014). The current study wanted to find out the relevance between two variables such as English language skills and students academic performance.

3.1 Methodology

The study was conducted in Rwanda, Eastern province, Bugesera district from January 2019 to November 2019. Correlation and descriptive survey research designs were employed. The target population in this study included students, teachers and school administrators in Rwandan public secondary schools. The sum total of respondents was four hundred and fourteen (414), comprising of seven (7) Head Teachers, seven (7) Dean of studies, fifty (50) Teachers and three hundred and fifty (350) students. The schools from which the participants were chosen from are G.S Twimpala, G.S Ruhuha, G.S Kagasa, G.S Nyamata catholique, G.S Maranyundo, G.S Rilima catholique and G.S Rutonde. The number of respondents was sampled using the Taro Yamane formula (1970). This formula involves in calculating the sample size from target population. When the population size is 414, the required sample size

is 203. The researcher used three sampling techniques such as “purposive sampling, cluster random sampling, and simple random sampling”. The researcher used purposive sampling technique because not everyone can be able to respond accurately to the questions of research, the researcher selected from who and where to get information by considering the purpose of research for example, the researcher chose Bugesera public secondary schools because it is his working place, and the public schools are the most to experience poor academic performance due to the poor language skills comparing to private schools. In addition, not all the members of the selected schools participated in the study; the researcher chose few participants who seemed to have the information needed by the researcher and represent others.

The researcher also used simple random sampling because, with this technique, all individual had the same chance to be sampled. The researcher used the completely mixed pieces of papers marked “Yes” and “No” where each individual had to pick one randomly and if, he/she picks the one marked “Yes” were involved in the study. In this research quantitative approach was employed as part of the data was numerical in nature. Qualitative approach was also used because the researcher intended to gain in-depth understanding of the effects of English language skills on the students’ academic performance. Research instruments used included a semi-structured questionnaire to collect data from respondents who had enough time and can read, understand and write well using English language. This was helpful to gather data for the study. The critical point was that when “designing questionnaire, the researcher ensured that it is valid, reliable and unambiguous” (Richard & Schmidt, 2002). An interview was used to gather primary and qualitative data from target population (Burns, 1999).

Correlation and descriptive research design were used in this study. Correlation was used to assess the degree of relationship between English language skills and students’ academic achievement while descriptive was utilized to gather data about attitudes of participants, their opinions, their habits and social issues like education. In the progress of research, the researcher kept confidentiality on information from respondents as they were informed that the provided information should be kept confidentially and only used for the research purpose. After a successful data collection, SPSS was used to analyze, sum up and gather data and accessed with frequencies, tables and percentages to facilitate comparison and interpretation.

4.1 Findings

The total number of respondents in this study was 203 as indicated previously including 7 heads teachers, 7 deputy head teachers, 26 teachers, and 163 students. The researcher was able to access the data from all participants except one teacher who missed on the submission date due to sickness. Among the participants 51.24% were male while 48.76% were females.

After analyzing the data from all the questionnaires, interview as well as observations, the study found that even if there are other factors that influence students’ academic performance, English language skills also have great impact on the students’ academic performance in the public secondary schools as it is the language of instruction in Rwanda. This was revealed by all of the schools that were involved in the study and therefore, English language skills should be improved to ensure the improvement of students’ academic performance. Different strategies for improving English like debate, discussion and others should be used because even if there are English textbooks and other facilities for students to develop language skills, students do not use them effectively.

Indicators on the effects of English language skills were identified when researcher analyzed the academic performance of students from 2014 to 2018 in the table 3.1 where the findings show that the results improved according to the improvement rate of English. This is clearly means that, in order to ensure the maximum performance of students the teachers and school

administrators should help students to have four English language skills as the language of instructions. The findings showed that there was strongly positive correlation between English language skills and students' academic performance in public secondary schools as shown below:

Table 1. Correlation between English language skills and Students academic performance

		English language skills	Students' academic performance
English language skills	Pearson Correlation	1	.874**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	189	189
Students' academic performance	Pearson Correlation	.874**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	189	189

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

The findings in Table 1 the academic performance of the students and English language skills were correlative with the success of students' academic performance. The correlation coefficients shown in table 5.1 $r=0.874$ was accordingly and was produced with p-value of 000 of a 2-tailed. Findings in this study showed positive impact of English language skills on the students' academic performance in public secondary schools.

5.1 Discussion

In this study the researcher explored the impacts of English language skills on the students' academic performance. It was revealed that there is a strong relationship between English language skills and students' academic performance in Rwandan public secondary schools which is significant at 0.874. It is understandable in the study that English language plays a vital role in academic performance, and when Rwandan public secondary schools improve English language skills, the students' academic performance would be increased. Even if there are other factors that influence academic success of students, the language of instruction is the main as it is the key to learning. Moreover, among the studied individuals, the results proved that there is a strong relationship between language proficiency and success of the students in public secondary schools. Even if this cannot be common for all students but most of the students who experience good academic performance are those with English proficiency and on the other hand most of the students who experience poor academic performance are those without English proficiency. This means that once independent variable increases, dependent variable also increases. This means that if public secondary schools in Rwanda put efforts in improving language proficiency in four skills such as listening, speaking, and reading and writing, academic performance would also be improved.

The government of Rwanda through the ministry of education should devote required resources to English as language of instruction; otherwise the students would continue to fail in academic subjects. Furthermore, based on the results from this study, one can say that the failure of candidates who sit for national examinations resulted from poor English language skills and this contributes to the challenges facing the education system in Rwanda. This is because even most of the teachers do not have required English language proficiency to help their students (Nzitabakuze, 2012) and majority of them have the French background (Sibomana, 2014).

Even if the study revealed that there is high positive relationship between medium of instruction and academic performance, there are other factors which intervene so that once the problem of lack of English proficiency is solved without considering other factors the poor academic performance can remain there because even English as a subject requires different strategies to be mastered. It is therefore useful to note that even though the correlation coefficient is high, does not mean that the language of instruction should be changed from English to French as it was before, because it was obvious that English had to be adopted as the medium of instruction since 2009 (Tabaro, 2015).

Therefore, to deal with the problem of poor academic performance the government of Rwanda should first understand why public secondary students still have problem of English language? How can these students be helped to overcome this problem? What are other intervening variables that can affect learning and how can they be made good to students? And what are the appropriate methods of teaching and learning according to the subject and the level of students. But much emphasis should be put on improved or increased level of English proficiency because it is the first key to learning for example if the teachers talk to students and do not understand what he/she is saying, classroom learning stops there and even participatory methods and learner centered approach are not possible if students do not understand the language used (Komba, 2012).

Based on the witnesses given by some teachers, the language is the key to self-confidence for self-expression whereby the students with English proficiency participate in discussions in class while those without English proficiency prefer to keep quiet or say few in the discussion. This is mostly influenced by different factors such as poor background in nursery and primary schools, poor teaching and learning materials and fear of being judged once they make mistakes (Sibomana, 2014). After extensive discussion the research summarized the findings saying that even though the study showed that English proficiency as the medium of instruction has the significant impact on the academic performance of students in Rwandan public secondary schools, they are other factors which should not be neglected such as early stimulation, adequate and appropriate teaching and learning materials, involvement of parents, discipline of students, infrastructures, methods and approaches (Maniraguha, 1997).

6.1 Conclusion and recommendation

From the study findings, the researcher concluded that the English language skills affect the students' academic performance in Rwandan public secondary schools. When a student has these skills, it is very easy for him or her to read the written materials and understand, to make summary without mistakes, to listen from the teachers, to ask questions and discuss with others in the class and do well in exams. But it does not mean that other intervening variables as mentioned in discussions do not matter. Hence, without forgetting other intervening factors that can affect teaching and learning. It is recommended that Rwanda should adopt English as LOI from nursery schools, so that language proficiency is cultivated among the pupils from the initial stages of their education. In addition, due to the role of English language in globalization and development, it is wise for Rwanda to put much emphasis on English language skills as an additional criterion for students to be admitted into secondary schools and higher. It is also recommended that the government of Rwanda should invest more in improving students' ELP in the four skills: writing, reading, listening and speaking, in this way, a better performance would be achieved.

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