

Contextual understanding of the influence of English language on teacher-learners' classroom interactions in lower primary schools. *The experience of an endoglossic country, Rwanda*

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Abstract

The study aimed to investigate the influences of the English Medium of Instruction on teacher-learner classroom interactions in the lower primary in the Musanze district in the Northern Province of Rwanda. It was a qualitative research that followed a phenomenological research design. The informants were 60 persons. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 teachers and focus group discussions with 48 learners in P3. Collected data were analysed thematically. Results revealed that the English language used as MoI influences teacher-learners' classroom interactions in two ways. On one side, teacher-learners' classroom interactions through English help teachers and learners improve their communication skills and reduce stigma in English-speaking communities. However, low proficiency in the English language hinders effective teacher-learner classroom interactions and leads to poor learning performance. The study concluded that it is difficult to teach and learn English in lower primary schools and recommended constant in-service teachers' continuous professional development (CPD) in English in four communication skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening). In addition, sufficient preparation of learners to cope effectively with using the English language from the pre-primary stage of learning was suggested.

Keywords— Classroom Interactions, Endoglossic Country, Medium of Instruction.

I. INTRODUCTION

Background

The collaborative exchange of knowledge between teachers and learners or among learners themselves in the classroom was identified as one of key elements that improve social and academic achievement during the

teaching-learning process (Ghavifekr, 2020). Rezaie and Lashkarian (2015) affirmed that the teacher-learners' classroom interactions initiate and maintain relationships between teachers and learners. Various factors influence teacher-learners' classroom interactions in terms of knowledge, ideas, feelings, and wishes exchange. Mustapha, et al. (2010) grouped those

factors into four main categories, namely: cognitive, linguistic, pedagogical, and socio-cultural factors. This study emphasized linguistic and pedagogical factors. This is because, as Sardeshpande (2020) argued, language is not only a means of communication but also a backbone of the teaching-learning process, as it builds integral relationships among educational partners aiming at the intellectual development of learners.

In normal classroom interactions, verbal communication using words and grammatical systems (language) through reading, writing, listening, and speaking is mostly used (Baroona, 2019). For this purpose, Kackar (2019) noted that language is primarily a system of communication by which sounds, signs, actions, or ideas are transmitted. More specifically, the language of instruction known as the Medium of Instruction (MoI) is the vehicle through which education is delivered (Mwiseneza, 2015) and it plays a primordial role in the feasibility, tenability and successfulness of classroom interactions (da Costa, 2021). Moreover, Nzasabimfura and Andala (2022) noted that, most of the time, when the MoI is a foreign language, that is not well understood by learners, the classroom interactions tend to be teacher-centered rather than learner-centered. This has strong implications in the educational context in general and more precisely in classroom interactions among learners or between the teacher and learners. The situation becomes more complicated when teachers are also not familiar with the MoI, as the typical classroom interaction pattern tends to be an "Initiation-Response-Feedback/Evaluation (IRF/E) sequence (Zhang & Gao, 2020: p.22)". This means that the teacher asks questions, learners respond, and the teacher reacts to learners' responses without any other interventions. This classroom interaction pattern without deep and clear explanations and discussions is mentioned by the Rwanda Basic Education Board (REB) (2015) as one of the factors that can limit learners to achieve their full potential in terms of knowledge and competencies.

Problem Definition and Research Objective

The competence to communicate in English used as MoI in Rwanda is still low for many teachers and learners, despite investments made to improve it (Sibomana, 2014). In fact, almost 0% of total Rwandans use only English, 14% communicate in Kinyarwanda and English, while 54% use only Kinyarwanda when communicating (NISR, 2023). Based on these previous statistics, one may need to know how satisfactory teacher-learners' classroom interactions are, when English is used as MoI. Ndizeye (2022) highlighted the limitation in English

proficiency of education partakers as a major barrier to hearing and understanding in various academic activities including teacher-students interactions. More precisely, Asingwire, et al. (2015) argued that when lecturing in English only, the level of understanding for students in higher learning institutions in Rwanda was still low. In the same way, Niyomugabo (2012) highlighted "Kinyafanglais" as the newly created and used "language of Instruction" while interacting with students at higher learning institutions in Rwanda to enhance better understanding. Then, if such a situation happened in higher learning institutions, what is the situation at early primary levels of learning within this endoglossic country, where almost the entire population has one common language, Kinyarwanda, the mother tongue? Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the extent to which English used as MoI influences teacher-learners' classroom interactions in lower primary grades. It sought to answer the following question: 'To what extent English as MoI influences the teacher-learners' classroom interactions in lower primary grades'?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Empirical Review

The adoption of English as the only MoI at all levels of formal education in Rwanda has been and continues to be a contentious issue and a subject of research (Habyarimana, 2015). Kral (2023) affirms serious and persistent challenges to the Rwandan education system caused by the decision to use the English language as MoI at all levels of schooling. Sibomana (2020) also showed that the transition from Kinyarwanda to English as MoI in upper grades of primary schools since 2010 was challenging for both teachers and learners due to their limitations in using English. This has been re-echoed by Niyibizi (2015), that the shift back from English to Kinyarwanda as MoI in 2011 left learners and teachers feeling more proficient in their mother tongue than in foreign languages. This signified that Rwanda adopted the right direction by shifting back to Kinyarwanda as MoI in lower primary schools. However, on the other hand, Rosendal and Ngabonziza (2023) argued that, the last decision to use English as MoI at all levels of schooling in Rwanda since the 2020-2021 academic year was the due decision. In fact, English is nowadays taken as the language of development, science and technology within many countries worldwide. It is also a language mostly used in international relations, and thus, Rwanda has no

other choice for being eligible, and competent in various English-speaking communities like the Common Wealth and East African Community (Maurice & Mukamazimpaka, 2021).

Theoretical review

The chosen theories to resonate and provide the road map of this study were the constructivism theory and symbolic interactionism theory. The constructivism theory, specifically in its social aspect, was chosen to help in a deep understanding of teacher-learners' classroom interactions through English in lower primary schools. This is because, as Vygotsky highlighted (Brown, et al., 2013), language is a powerful and very important tool created by humans to mediate their interactions with themselves and with their environment (Hawkes, 2012). For this study, the ways in which the English language influences the interactions between teachers and their learners in the lower primary have been emphasized. Additionally, constructivism theory puts more emphasis on initiatives and interactions during the teaching-learning process, whereby learners should focus on cooperative learning based on previous knowledge and experience by means of interactive actions (Jia, 2010). This means that learning is an interactive action that involves more than one person or individual. Then, the following basic assumptions of the constructivist view of learning underpinning this study: "All knowledge is socially constructed and social interaction plays a role in learning. Then, experience and prior understanding play a role in learning. But also, learning is situated in the context in which it occurs (Yilmaz, 2008: p. 167)".

Within the social aspect, the symbolic interactionism theory has been also opted to guide this research based on its emphasis on the way individuals shape and are shaped by society through communication (Drew, 2013). This theory highlights classroom interactions as social actions aiming at the acquisition of knowledge, competencies, and skills that enable learners to fit in their living society (Husin, et al., 2021). In this regard, Mousapour (2018) argued that facts are grounded and directed by symbols, including language within which

individuals negotiate and understand one another through interactions. Consequently, Carter and Fuller (2016) noted that the symbolic interactionism view analyses face-to-face interactions among individuals, specifically education partakers within the classroom, playgrounds, and other school venues. In this sense, teacher-learners' classroom interactions give learners the ability to tackle different cognitive, behavioral, and social practices that enable them to be skilled enough to think critically and then share results, actions, or views with peers or teachers (Adaba, 2017).

III. METHODOLOGY

Research design, Research population and Sampling

This qualitative study followed a phenomenological research design. The research population was 56,691 persons, comprising 56,125 learners in lower primary, 449 teachers, and 117 school head teachers in Musanze district, one of the five districts of the Northern Province of Rwanda. The period considered within the study was the school year 2023/2024. To select and determine the sample schools, a stratified random sampling technique was used. In fact, the 117 schools in the Musanze district were split into two strata based on their location either rural or urban areas. Then, based on the school status, these schools were grouped into three strata: public, government-aided, and private schools. Given that all teachers and learners in 117 primary schools legally registered in Musanze district could not be contacted within the period of data collection of this study; 6 schools have been selected purposively as sample schools for the study. Then, from these 6 sample schools, each stratum was represented as followings: GS Murora (rural public school), Kamisave (rural government-aided schools), SPES NOVA Junior Academy (rural private schools), GS Gashangiro II (urban public schools), GS Muhoza I (urban government-aided schools) and Ecole Regina Pacis (urban private school). The marriage of sample schools' location and their status is visualized in Table 1.

Table 1: Table of sample schools based on their location and status

School location	School status			Total Number of schools
	Public	Government -Aided	Private	
Rural	1	1	1	3
Urban	1	1	1	3
Total number of schools	2	2	2	6

To determine the size of research participants, various conditions have been considered especially those related to the research context, variability of school subjects in lower primary as well as the variability of the research population. Therefore, the purposive sampling technique has been used in choosing subjects to be considered. The condition was the subject taught in English. Then, among the four remaining core subjects excluding Kinyarwanda, namely Mathematics, Science and Elementary Technology (SET), Social and Religious Studies and English; SET subject was selected randomly, to be considered within this study. Additionally, after realizing that all sample schools have not equal classroom numbers in P1, P2, and P3, A classes of each grade were chosen. Research informants were 60 persons including twelve (12) SET teachers and forty-eight (48) learners in P3, in the proportion of eight (8) learners per school, 4 Girls and 4 Boys. The demographic features of participants are presented in Table 2 and table 3.

Table 2: Demographic features for 48 learners participated in focus group discussions

Variables	Categories	Frequencies	Percentages
Gender	Male	24	50%
	Female	24	50%
Ages	1 to 10	37	77.08%
	11 to 20	11	22.91%

Table 2 shows the demographic features of learners who participated in the study. They were 50% male and 50% female. Most of them (77.08%) were ten or below ten years old.

Table 3 presents the features of teachers who participated in semi-structured interviews.

Table 3: Demographic features of 12 informant teachers in semi-structured interview

Variables	Categories	Frequencies	Percentages
Gender	Male	2	16.66 %
	Female	10	83.33 %
Ages	20-29	3	25 %
	30-39	2	16.66 %
	40-49	5	41.66 %
	50-59	2	16.66 %
Working Experience	0-10	3	25 %
	11 to 20	2	16.66 %

	21-30	5	41.66 %
	31-40	1	8.33 %
	41-50	1	8.33 %
Qualification	NP/TTC/A ₀ in education	11	91.66 %
	Other Options	1	8.33 %

NP= 'Normal Primaire', TTC= Teacher Training Center, A₀= Bachelor's degree.

Table 3 shows that among 12 interviewed teachers 83.33% were female. This high number of female teachers reflects Carroll, et al. (2021)'s fact that in many countries including Rwanda, the majority of primary and pre-primary teachers are women. It is also clear that the majority of contacted teachers (91.6%) were qualified in education and experienced in teaching, as 41.6 % of them had between 21-30 years of experience in teaching.

Instruments for data collection and data analysis

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with 12 teachers in the proportion of two (2) teachers per school. Within 15 minutes for each, the interviewees were asked to react to three(3) questions related to how they characterize the teacher-learners' classroom interactions through English in lower primary, the influence of English language (the MoI) on teacher-learners' classroom interactions, and related recommendations or suggestions. To get multiple types of information and more detailed data, the focus group discussions with eight (8) learners, 4boys and 4 girls in P3A of each sampled school, were organized in Kinyarwanda within 20 minutes. It was a discussion related to how learners perceive teaching and learning using the English language as a MoI, the influence of the English language on the classroom interactions with their teachers as well as related suggestions and recommendations if any. Tools used to get and store information were interview/discussion guides, a notebook, and a smartphone.

To analyze data, a thematic data analysis technique has been used. All responses and suggestions were grouped into two categories based on the types of information they hold (psycho-pedagogical or curriculum implementation concerns), depending on school location, school status, and grades (levels). Then, the information gained was coded, integrated, explored, reflected, and interrogated. Within these exercises,

similar elements were grouped into themes and sub-themes, and their relationship like their contrasts and complementarities were examined and synthesized to come up with general information of the study.

Trustworthiness of data

To ensure the credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability of data, the interview and focus group discussion sessions were carried out at schools twice: during the first and second terms of academic year 2023-2024, specifically in December 2023 and early January 2024. The teachers were asked the same questions in semi-structured interviews and learners taken randomly were subjected to the same exercise as in the first session. The second session was organized to complete and confirm the acquired data from the first sessions.

Ethical consideration

Participation in this study was voluntary. Before data collection, all respondents were informed of the aim of the research, their role in the good accomplishment of the research, and guaranteed the confidentiality of the information provided. But also, before being interviewed teachers signed the consent and provided information was anonymous. For the focus group discussion with learners, the consents were signed by parents of selected learners. Teachers and parents were guaranteed that the United Nations Convention on Rights of Child (UNCRC) specifically learners protection and care might be respected during the focus group discussions.

Results and discussions

This research intended to investigate the extent to which the English language (used as MoI) influences the teacher-learners' classroom interactions in Rwandan lower primary education. The findings revealed that the influences of English MoI on teacher-learners' classroom interactions could be viewed in various dimensions:

Teacher –learners' classroom interactions through English vis-à-vis class grades and school status

Comparing grades in lower primary, five (5) teachers who taught in P1, P2, and P3 mentioned that in P3 of the public and government-aided schools, both in rural and urban areas, Kinyarwanda and English could be used simultaneously, and learners get some key knowledge. However, for P2 and P1 classes, the understanding of content of planned lessons through English is still a serious problem to learners. In fact, 10(83.3%) among contacted teachers, asserted that,

during SET classes through English, learners struggle with two elements: First of all, language (understanding) and then after, the reality behind the science to be learned. Consequently, they affirmed that this might discourage learners in their learning. Therefore, they are mostly used to teach in Kinyarwanda to facilitate quick understanding by learners and avoid possible loss of interest in their lessons. This comment is quite similar to that of Benavides, et al. (2010)' that, the tough mind exercise of self-representation of what is happening may lead to the acquiring of insufficient knowledge and competencies to learners, compared to those they are supposed to get in normal conditions.

For Private schools, the situation is different: Four (4) contacted teachers from private schools (mostly located in urban and centers of some rural areas) affirmed that learners in lower primary grades, learn SET through English only. However, they mentioned that their performance is not at the same level, regarding grades and school location, because of learners' background and experience of using the English language as well as the environmental context of the school differ. Then, for this case, two (2) teachers from rural private schools affirm that they spent much time and effort to learners in P1 and other newcomers in P2 and P3 at the beginning of the school year, to help them to get the required level of English skills that allow them to follow school subjects in English only. They said that they are used to mixing Kinyarwanda and English at the beginning, and then, organizing catch-up sessions for learners with difficulties. This mentioned challenge in rural private schools is quite the same as Ndizeye (2022) assertion that the monolingual environment in Rwanda, handicaps many Rwandans from using foreign languages in their interactions. Meanwhile, other two (2) teachers in urban private schools, whose learners are well prepared to use the English language from nursery schools, testified that teacher-learners' classroom interactions are conducted through English only at all grades. They added that the possibility of these interactions through English only is grounded in the high level of proficiency in English for teachers and schools' instructions that do not allow the use of any other language except English. One teacher noted:

" No one here either teachers or learners is allowed to communicate through Kinyarwanda, unless during the lesson of Kinyarwanda".

In addition, Teachers highlighted the strong collaboration between them and learners' family members that helps and allows learners to learn in

easier and faster ways. Within this collaboration, teachers prepare more additional exercises to be done as homework, during evening, morning, and weekend coaching sessions. Therefore, learners with difficulties, especially those in P1 are helped. This is understandable because learners in P1 and P2 are still at low levels of literacy and numeracy. They are still studying vowels and consonants. To confirm the information gained from SET teachers, 16 contacted learners from private schools affirmed that they have no problem of interacting with their teachers in English.

Teacher-learners' classroom interactions through English in the lower primary in terms of the Psycho-Pedagogical dimension

The use of the English language as MoI in the teaching and learning process presented positive influences for some, as well as handicaps or barriers for other teachers and learners during the teaching and learning process, depending on class grade, school location, and school status. Six (6) teachers (50% of informant teachers) asserted that teacher-learners' classroom interactions through English allow teaching-learning partakers to acquire many English vocabulary, which helps them to improve their way of teaching and learning through English. One young teacher in the rural primary said:

"During the lesson plan, I am used to searching on the internet and in books like the dictionary for the meaning of keywords in the lesson, and this is at the same time the occasion to acquire many vocabularies that may even help in other angles of life".

More specifically, fifty-three (53) (88.3%) among 60 informants, qualify the teacher-learners classroom interactions through English as the best tool that could help learners and teachers to increase and improve their knowledge and skills in English language as well as sciences and technology. This is closely related to Vu & Burns (2014) mention that English is a key tool for communication, science, and technology, within this era of globalization and internationalization. In fact, Nzasabimfura and Andala (2022) asserted that English is no longer a just language, but a way and a tool by which the world communicates. Within this concern, five (5) teachers (41.6% of contacted teachers) in young generations with less than 20 years of experience appreciated the use of the English language while teaching and learning, as a means to help teachers and learners to improve their skills in English. They confirmed that interacting with learners through English inculcates in them, the mind and ability to speak

English with confidence and allows them to avoid stigma.

On the other hand, a non-negligible number of participant teachers in this study attested barriers caused by the English language and thus handicapped in one way or another the teacher-learners' classroom interactions. In fact, eight (8) of 12 teachers interviewed argued that most of the time learners become shy, stay quiet, and loose interest in SET lessons because they don't understand what is said or taught. This is the contrast of Jerome et al. (2009) assertion that, apart from learning how to read, calculate, and write (subject contents), at the beginning of schooling, learners learn also how to think critically and share ideas with peers and their teacher, and then, make friends. In addition, seven (7) teachers from public and government-aided schools revealed that some learners refuse to answer, to avoid being ashamed based on their incapacity of speaking and reading properly in English. This has been confirmed by 14 (29.1%) learners from those schools, who revealed that learning in English was very difficult to them because they tried to listen to what the teacher and other learners said, but they were incapable of responding by speaking or writing through English. They utilized Kinyarwanda language, signs language, or quip quiet. This challenge is not specific to learners only, because three (3) of the contacted teachers confirmed that some teachers decided to take an early retreat rather than struggle by teaching through English. These cases relate to Crawford (2021) note, that the loss of interest in teaching and learning can be the root cause of school dropout for some learners.

Teaching and Learning process in lower primary

Regarding the teaching and learning process, 9 SET teachers (75% of contacted teachers), in P1 and P2 in public and government-aided schools in rural and urban areas, affirm that it is difficult to interact in English during the first period of SET lessons. The following are statements provided by one of them:

"For the first session of the lesson, I explain the whole lesson in Kinyarwanda and ask questions to learners in Kinyarwanda, for the second session, I read each sentence in English and explain it in Kinyarwanda. The question-responses sequences are done in Kinyarwanda. For the third and fourth periods, I help learners memorize some keywords and sentences from the lesson, in the English language".

This teacher's statement of starting the lesson by explaining in Kinyarwanda to allow learners to

understand materials to be learned reflects the Niyibizi, et al. (2021) note, that even though Rwanda is multilingual, it is also an endoglossic country, whereby daily communication for almost all Rwandans is done through Kinyarwanda, their mother tongue. Specifically, teachers in P1 public and government-aided from rural and urban areas, argued that it is quite impossible for learners, who are at the beginning phase of studying, to learn in a foreign language, and understand the taught content in the first sessions of the lesson. In addition to teachers' responses, 32(66.6%), learners in P3 from public and government-aided schools, notified that they know and can understand some words in English but cannot use it when interacting with their teachers or classmates. This underpins Odinko and Williams (2006)'s assertion that it takes a long time to reach the level of language proficiency for those who are required to learn a non-native language, to use it as MoI.

As far as teachers' proficiency and using English when teaching, nine (9) (75 %) teachers aged 30 years old and above, revealed that some teachers in public and government-aided schools in rural and urban areas, especially those trained in French medium, have serious problem of mastering and speaking English language. They affirm that proficiency in the English language for some teachers is still low so it is difficult for them to teach through English only without mentors. They argued that most of the time, those teachers are used to read only what is written in books, without any deep explanations to learners who are required on their side, to repeat and memorize some words or sentences in English. This confirmed Sibomana (2020) findings that, because of limitation in English proficiency, some teachers prefer to simplify the subject content into simple and small sentences that can be memorized by learners. In contrast, this problem is not found in private schools. Four (4) interviewed teachers revealed that proficiency in English is one of the conditions to be recruited in private schools. Therefore, competitive and well-skilled teachers in terms of teaching qualification and language skills are hired. In private schools, teachers are required to explain lessons deeply and organize class discussions or engage debate with learners. The purpose is deep clarifications of the issue under discussion, to favor a good understanding of the content to be learned.

Teacher-learners' classroom interactions through English and Rwanda curriculum implementation

Regarding the implementation of curricula under use in Rwanda, nine (9) contacted teachers affirmed having difficulties to use some teaching aids, because of

unfamiliarity with using the English language. This is very closely related to Maniraho's (2013) argument that there is a net difference between learning English and using it for teaching. On the other hand, four (4) teachers in private schools mentioned the issue of unavailability of teaching materials including books. Additionally, the nature of the program or lesson to be taught is not forgotten: eight (8) teachers testify that for SET subjects, some lessons require deep scientific and technological skills, which require the teacher to explain in the language more understood by learners, to enhance their comprehension. This underpins Makondo (2018) affirmation that the best MoI for teaching and learning process for a beginner learner is its mother tongue. Through the mother tongue, the learner understands better and expresses him/herself freely. In addition, five (5) (44.6%) of interviewed teachers mentioned the issue of incompatibility between the planned method of teaching for some SET lessons or programs and the level of schooling, knowledge, and skills, that learners are supposed to have. In this line, one (1) teacher in rural public school answered by asking "How learners in P1 who are still learning vowels and consonants can read or write sentences asked in the written exam of SET prepared at the District or National levels?"

IV. CONCLUSION

Findings from this study reveal that it is not easy for teachers and learners in lower primary, from public and government-aided schools, to interact in English medium only. Comparing schools based on their locations, teacher-learners' classroom interactions are mostly carried out through Kinyarwanda medium in both rural and urban areas in both public and government-aided schools. Meanwhile, learners must pass schools, district and national examinations through English medium. This was highlighted to be one among key causes of poor performance in examinations set in English for many learners in those schools, compared to their fellows in private schools, where teacher-learners' classroom interactions are strictly done through English medium from nursery schools. Regarding school grades, teacher-learners' classroom interactions through English is more handicapped by the issue of language barriers for learners in P1 compared to learners in other grades where this challenges are reduced as learners move.

V. RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Most of the researches conducted in the domain of the English language as MoI in Rwanda have put more emphasis on the use of English in higher learning as well as secondary levels of education, the quality of education provided, the teacher-students' proficiency in English, etc. However, the deep contextualization of how teachers and learners communicate at the beginning of schooling, at the same time at the beginning of learning by using a foreign language, was missing. The current study might bring new contributions to the existing literature and help to get a clear understanding of the influence of the English language on teacher-learners' classroom interactions at early ages of schooling (lower primary). This is because, the beginning of schooling is taken as the backbone of the learning process, that may contribute more to the quality of further acquisition of knowledge and skills by learners. Therefore, the study recommended the following (1) REB should consider, measure, compare, and balance possible positive and negative implications of planned change or reform in the educational sector before its implementation, based on teachers' and learners' backgrounds as well as schools' working conditions. (2) REB is required to continue and improve the in-service training of teachers including teachers in private schools. This must go hand in hand with the provision of sufficient and adequate teaching aids that help teachers to moderate classroom interactions through English in an adequate way. (3) Local authorities in education have to reinforce preschools including nursery programs and sensitize all parents to enroll their children in nursery and other preschool studies so that each Rwandan child starts lower primary with minimum required skills in the English language, that allow him/her to interact with teachers or peers through English medium. (4) Teachers in lower primary, especially those in public and government-aided schools must strive to improve their level of English language proficiency, which may help them to lead effective classroom interactions with their learners in English.

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