

The Role of Mother tongue on the Development of English Early Literacy Skills among Pre-Primary Children in Gasabo District, Rwanda

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Abstract

The study aimed to investigate the role of Kinyarwanda as mother tongue on the development of English early literacy skills among pre-primary children in Gasabo district. The study used a descriptive research design where a census approach ensured that there is no sampling error since data was collected from the entire population. The population consisted of pre-primary children in Gasabo district. A total of 99 children were selected from 3 sampled schools, including Umuco Mwiza School, GS Kimironko and GS Gicaca 1. The schools were from Kimironko and Gikomero sectors. The two sectors were selected purposively to represent other sectors in Gasabo sector. Therefore, with the inclusion criteria of schools with teachers certified to teach in nurseries, we remained with only those 3 schools (2 schools from Kimironko sector and 1 school from Gikomero sector). The researcher used a questionnaire to collect data. Thus, a critical review was conducted to aid in identifying the appropriateness of the instrument to be used in this study. The questionnaire had three sections: Learners' Pronunciation Fluency, Learners' Grammar Proficiency and Learners' Literacy Performance. Each of the research question's data was analyzed using frequencies and percentages. In this case, the study used a test score to measure how well the pre-primary children answered the given test in each of the sections of the questionnaire in relation to English early literacy skills. The section of the questionnaire on grammar proficiency was marked out of 20 marks and the rest of the sections were marked out of 15 marks each. The scores had an interval of 5. Based on the findings of the study, the researcher concluded that Kinyarwanda as mother tongue plays a very positive role on the development of English pronunciation fluency among pre-primary children. The actual implementation of the English language policy in pre-primary helped the learners improve their pronunciation of English sounds based on their home background use of Kinyarwanda as mother tongue. The researcher further concluded that Kinyarwanda as mother tongue had a negative role on the development of English early literacy skills in terms of grammar proficiency because there is still direct transfer of rules from Kinyarwanda to English which leads to wrong English grammar proficiency. Lastly, Kinyarwanda's role as mother tongue led to relatively low performance in English literacy performance. A bigger percentage of learners that did the test got less marks compared to the overall

number of learners that sat for the test. In relation to the study findings, the study recommends the following: In reinforcing the positive role of Kinyarwanda as mother tongue on the development of English pronunciation fluency among pre-primary children, the use of Kinyarwanda in children's homes should be emphasized and incorporated into early education. This will shape young children's English pronunciation fluency. On the role of Kinyarwanda as mother tongue on the development of English grammar proficiency of pre-primary children, the negative role of direct transfer of rules from Kinyarwanda to English which leads to wrong English grammar proficiency should be corrected by educators prioritizing the introduction and teaching of irregular English forms, such as verb forms, prepositions, and plurals, at an early stage. Utilizing appropriate teaching methods like phonics and whole word approaches can help learners identify differences between Kinyarwanda and English. Lastly, on the role of Kinyarwanda as mother tongue on the development of English literacy performance of pre-primary children, the Ministry of Education should raise awareness among parents and guardians about the importance of providing sufficient reading materials and references in Kinyarwanda. This will help young children to establish a strong local language foundation, hence improving their English literacy performance at an early stage. Additionally, efforts should be made to document the orthographies of local languages in various districts and establish resources like reference materials and reading texts in Kinyarwanda.

Keywords— Kinyarwanda mother tongue, English early literacy, pronunciation fluency, grammar proficiency, pre-primary education.

I. INTRODUCTION

Language is one of natural factors that help the growth of education systems (Dodiya, 2018). Language is not only used in the education system of any given country, but it also serves other purposes including interaction as a way of expressing feelings and ideas. When a specific group speaks or uses its language, then that language is termed as the mother tongue (local language). However, Rwanda being a country with only one group of people (one culture), it has only one spoken local language, Kinyarwanda.

The reinforcement of English as the language of instruction in Rwandan schools begins as early as at the nursery level. Haman et al., (2017) indicates that the period spanning from birth to approximately age 10 constitutes the optimal window for introducing new languages to young children. This critical developmental stage is marked with heightened neuroplasticity and language acquisition abilities, making it an opportune time to lay the foundation for multilingual proficiency. By integrating English instruction from the earliest stages of education, Rwandan schools not only enable linguistic diversity, but it also capitalizes on the cognitive advantages associated with early language exposure. Therefore, emphasizing English language instruction from nursery level onwards aligns with both educational best practices and the developmental needs of young learners, fostering a solid linguistic framework for learners' future academic and professional endeavors (Ghasemi & Hashemi, 2011).

Once children can easily speak in their own mother tongue, this can help them learn a second language

much easier (Rivera et al., 2023). They use the same skills acquired to learn the second language. In Rwanda, English is one of official languages and a language of instruction from nursery to postgraduate levels. The language is gaining popularity because of the benefits it offers internationally. English is used as a vehicle for science, research, mass media, international entertainment and literature. By the end of nursery education, children are expected to have mastered basic literacies in English. Therefore, literacy in English continue to be the most important determinant of children's future success in schools and at work (Faulkner-bond et al., 2012).

When children are offered opportunities to learn English in pre-primary schools, they are more likely to succeed in primary level of education (Raghuvanshi, 2020). UNESCO (2006) suggests that the transition to a language of instruction other than the child's L1 should not be required of learners before age 6 to 8 years. In addition, other reports on mother tongue-based programs concluded that children who learn in L1, age six to eight years of formal schooling have better academic performance and self-esteem than those who receive instruction exclusively in the official language or those who transition too early from the home language to the official language.

In relation to the above, (Save the Children, 2015) indicated that Rwanda has one of the highest primary school enrolment rates in Africa (97.6%) and yet ensuring that all students learn to read in the early grades remains a challenge because they lack basic early literacy skills, they should have acquired at their pre-

primary school level. In *Save the Children's* early literacy assessment carried out, it was found that half of primary grade one (P.1) learners were unable to read a single word of grade-level text. One reason for this alarming finding was that children did not enter P.1 (grade 1) with the necessary school readiness and English emergent reading skills from pre-primary.

The assessment carried out indicated that 99% of the P.1 children were not able to fluently (with accuracy) read any word in the short English story that was given. This was a manifestation of lack of early literacy skill. Kagabo (2008) explained that in Rwanda, there has been limited research on the role of mother tongue on the development of English Early Literacy Skills among pre-primary children. This gap needs to be addressed.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature review on the impact of mother tongues on the development of English literacy skills among pre-primary children delves into the significance of linguistic foundations in early childhood education. This review explores existing research and theoretical frameworks surrounding the role of mother tongues, particularly Kinyarwanda, and its influence on the acquisition and proficiency of English language skills. The review provides a comprehensive understanding of the intricate interplay between mother tongues and early literacy skills in English.

Transition from Kinyarwanda to English

Rwanda Ministry of Education (2019) directed that all primary schools should use English as a language of instruction from primary one to primary six. This was a shift from the use of Kinyarwanda as a language of instruction from primary one to primary three. Kinyarwanda remained a subject to be taught from lower to upper primary. The ministry restated the Rwanda's vision to enhance proficiency of all languages, focusing attention on using English as a language of instruction. In Rwanda, the transition from Kinyarwanda to English carries cognitive implications, punctuated by a complex web of controversies. In relation to the above, young children exposed to bilingual environments exhibit enhanced neutral activity, particularly in brain regions associated with memory, attention, and language.

A neutral activity refers to an action, task or behavior that does not inherently carry a positive or negative

connotation. It is devoid of bias, prejudice or favoritism toward any particular outcome, opinion or belief. In other words, a neutral activity is one that does not lean towards any specific perspective, ideology or stance, but rather maintains an objective and impartial stance. This phenomenon underscores the potential for cognitive enrichment when embracing linguistic diversity in early education. However, it is imperative to acknowledge the contrasting perspective articulated by Xu (2023) that introducing multiple languages at an early age could potentially confuse young minds, leading to development delays. This juxtaposition of cognitive advantages and concerns surrounding the medium of instruction highlights the intricate nature of language acquisition in early childhood education warranting a comprehensive exploration of its multifaceted effects (Cantoni, 2007).

Kinyarwanda as Mother Tongue and English Pronunciation Fluency

Pronunciation is the way in which words are spoken or articulated, encompassing specific sounds, stress patterns, intonation and rhythm used by speakers to convey meaning in a language. It is the correct way of pronouncing a word sound in each language (Chambers 21st century dictionary). Pronunciation of words differs from language to language. For example, Kinyarwanda and some other African languages have five distinct vowel sounds while some languages from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have seven, but English has more. Therefore, these differences in languages make the learning of English as second language a complex puzzle as learners may be tempted to transfer rules of the first language to the second language, leading to pronunciations like /puk/ instead of /buk/(Aziz et al., 2019).

Wach (2011) argues that deviations in performance of foreign language by speaker from native-speaker-like norms of pronunciation are due to the influence of differences between the phonetic patterns of foreign language and the speaker's own native language. Furthermore, findings in the field of sociolinguistics show that social groups may differ not simply in terms of their phonetic systems or which pronunciation they use but in how often they use certain pronunciations (Eckert & Labov, 2017). Eckert and Labov's argument seems to disagree with MINEDUC's assertion that the learner who learns in their local language first, learns English faster (Niyibizi, 2015).

Kinyarwanda as Mother Tongue and English Grammar Proficiency

The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary defines grammar as the study or science of rules for combination of words. Grammar may be roughly defined as the way a language manipulates and combines words (or bits of words) in order to form longer units of meaning (Sioco & De Vera, 2018). Furthermore, Mukrimaa et al. (2016) defines grammar as a system of rules which determines how words are put together to form grammatically well-formed phrases, how the phrases are put together to form grammatically well-formed clauses and how the clauses are put together to form grammatically well formed sentences. Therefore, according to these definitions, ill formed combinations of words, phrases and clauses, combinations that break the rules of grammar, are ungrammatical. Grammar determines which form of a word is used in speech and in writing (Nurhayati, 2019).

Zaabalawi (2021) explains that teaching grammar through translation has long been a contentious issue. This translation hinders the L2 learning process in as much as it promotes language transfer. Therefore, this creates in the mind of the L2 learners the wrong belief that structural and lexical items correspond to different languages.

Kinyarwanda Mother Tongue and English Literacy Performance

The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary defines literacy as 'the ability to read and write. Once children are literate in their own local language, they can learn a second language much easier because they can use the reading skills they acquired as a tool to learn the second language (Acosta, 2019). Additionally, MINEDUC (2008) affirms that children who spend their first years at school learning in their own language will be much better prepared for a second language.

It is important to clarify that both L1 and L2 acquisition by young children (up to around age 7) appear to differ significantly from language acquisition by older children (Rivera et al., 2023). Therefore, the distinctive nature of young children's L2 acquisition calls for a distinctive approach to supporting L2 acquisition in the early years. According to Rivera et al. (2023), the pace of learning an additional language and ability of children to learn an additional language depend upon whether the child has developed literacy in L1 or not. In other words, literacy entails the development of metalinguistic awareness, including the knowledge that the pronunciation of words is related to the written form (for most languages) and that there are 'right' and 'wrong' ways to say things (Rintaningrum, 2009).

Literature indicates that the development of literacy skills in L1 leads to better academic outcomes in L2, hence better outcomes in second language learning (Clark, 2022). Clark argues strongly that children should not be required to transition to instruction in L2 until they have achieved academic fluency and are fully literate in L1.

Indeed, fluency and literacy in the mother tongue lay a cognitive and linguistic foundation for learning additional languages. Therefore, if young children continue to have opportunities to develop their first language skills in lower classes, they emerge as bilingual (or multilingual) learners. If, however, children are forced to switch abruptly or transition too soon from learning in their mother tongue to schooling in a second language, their first language acquisition may be attenuated or even lost (Kagwesage, 2013).

More importantly, their self-confidence as learners and their interest in what they are learning may decline, leading to lack of motivation, school failure, and early school leaving (Woźniak et al., 2022).

Unlike the English language, Kinyarwanda language reading and writing is regular, that is, consonant followed by a vowel. On the other hand, English has more sounds than Kinyarwanda and this poses difficulty to Banyarwanda learners of English. Therefore, the acquisition of a second language in early childhood broadens the child's mind and enriches it more than it harms it.

Thus, children are not only able to speak languages despite being very young but also acquire knowledge about the different cultures and environments (Guzman & Vera, 2018).

Parents desire their children to learn English as early as possible, and some who are well off financially transfer their children to private nursery schools that communicate in English. This is aimed at enhancing their children's English skills from very beginning. Therefore, this thinking can find justification in the immersion theory (Wach, 2011). Thus, this study aimed at assessing the role of Kinyarwanda as mother tongue on the development of English Early Literacy Skills among Pre-Primary Children.

III. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study used descriptive statistics because of its many uses (Creswell, 2015). Descriptive research design is a powerful tool used by scientists and researchers to gather information about a particular group or phenomenon. This type of research provided a detailed and accurate picture of characteristics and behaviors of pre-primary schools in Gasabo District, City of Kigali.

Population and Sampling

Gasabo District report (2018) affirms that the total number of pre-primary schools in the district is 113 (children in the ages 3-6). The highest number of schools is in Kimironko Sector (20 schools) and the lowest number of schools is in Gikomero Sector (3 schools). Due to this big difference of school population in the district, Kimironko and Gikomero sectors were selected purposively to represent other sectors. With the inclusion criteria of schools with teachers certified to teach in nurseries, the study remained with 3 schools (2 schools from Kimironko sector and 1 school from Gikomero sector). The total population from the 3 schools was 99 children, using the census method. The census method is typically used in research when the goal is to gather data from every member of the population being studied, rather than just a sample. This method is employed when the population size is relatively small or manageable, or when resources permit the collection of data from every individual. The census approach ensures that there is no sampling error since data is collected from the entire population.

Research Instruments

The researcher used a questionnaire to collect data. Thus, a critical review was conducted to aid in identifying the appropriateness of the instrument to be used in this study. The questionnaire had three sections: Learners' Pronunciation Fluency, Learners' Grammar Proficiency and Learners' Literacy Performance.

Validity and Reliability

The researcher ensured content validity with the help of experts who read through the responses from the administered questionnaire to make sure that those responses were answering the questions asked. What was found not to be adequately giving the required information as per the research questions, was modified or left out and replaced by accurate ones.

Statistical treatment of Data

Each of the research question's data was analyzed using frequencies and percentages. In this case, the study used a test score to measure how well the pre-primary children answered the given test in each of the sections

of the questionnaire (Learners' Pronunciation Fluency, Learners' Grammar Proficiency and Learners' Literacy Performance) in relation to English early literacy skills. The three sections of the questionnaire were marked out of 15 marks, 20 marks and 15 marks respectively. The scores had an interval of 5.

Ethical considerations

The researcher ensured that ethics were highly observed before and during the process of this research. The participants were assured that their responses would be strictly used with high confidentiality and be used only for the purposes of the study. Informed consent was an on-going feature of the research process, with scheduled review points built into the study and the right to withdraw was constantly respected.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study presents the findings of the study. The section is guided by research questions as follows:

Research Question 1: What is the role of Kinyarwanda as mother tongue in the development of English pronunciation fluency of pre-primary school children in the Gasabo District?

To answer this research question, the researchers administered a test to respondents to establish their English language pronunciation fluency. In this case, the respondents were supposed to tick the correct sounds and correct words based on the researchers' (English specialist) pronunciation of the specific sounds and words that were listed. This meant that children were supposed to be attentive and listen to sounds and words pronounced. Answers from the children were supposed to rhyme with what was on the marking guide. The whole section on pronunciation fluency consisted of 15 items and the class interval of the scores was 5.

Table 1 presents the findings from the three schools on the role of Kinyarwanda as mother tongue on the development of English pronunciation fluency.

The findings showed that 7 students (3 students from Umuco Mwiza School, 2 students from GS Kimironko and 2 students from GS Gicaca 1 scored in the range of 1 to 5 which is 7%. In the range of 6 to 10, 14 students (5 students from Umuco Mwiza School, none from Gs Kimironko and 9 students from GS Gicaca 1 had 14%. Moreover, 78 students (36 students from Umuco Mwiza School, 25 students from Gs Kimironko and 17 students from Gs Gicaca 1) got scores in the range of 11 to 15 equal to 79%. The questionnaire was marked out of 15 marks. The scores in the range of 11-15 reveal a very

good rate of pronunciation fluency compared to 7% and 14% of students who scored below the range of 11-15. Therefore, this performance signifies the role of Kinyarwanda as mother tongue on the development of English pronunciation fluency of pre-primary school

children. The performance showed how the learners could pronounce specific sounds and words that were listed due to linguistic transfer.

Table 1: Learners' Pronunciation Fluency.

Umuco Mwiza School GS Kimironko GS Gicaca1					
Class interval	Frequency	Frequency	Frequency	Total Frequency	Percentage
1-5	3	2	2	7	7
6-10	5	0	9	14	14
11-15	36	25	17	78	79
TOTAL	44	27	28	99	100

Research Question 2: What is the role of Kinyarwanda as mother tongue on the development of English grammar proficiency of pre-primary children in the Gasabo District?

To answer this research question, the researchers

administered a test to respondents to test their English grammar proficiency. In this section, a set of structural exercises and completion tasks in English were given to respondents in the three schools. The whole section on grammar proficiency consisted of 20 items and the class interval of the scores was 5.

Table 2: Learners' Grammar Proficiency.

Umuco Mwiza School GS Kimironko GS Gicaca1					
Class interval	Frequency	Frequency	Frequency	Total Frequency	Percentage
1-5	5	1	4	10	10
6-10	23	13	16	52	53
11-15	15	13	8	36	36
16-20	1	0	0	1	1
TOTAL	44	27	28	99	100

Table 2 presents the findings from the three schools on the role of Kinyarwanda as mother tongue on the development of English grammar proficiency. The table show that 10 students (5 students from Umuco Mwiza School, 1 student from GS Kimironko and 4 students from GS Gicaca 1) scored in the range of 1 to 5 which is 10%. In the range of 6 to 10, 52 students (23 students from Umuco Mwiza school, 13 students from Gs Kimironko and 16 students from GS Gicaca 1) scored 53%. In addition, 36 students (15 students from Umuco Mwiza School, 13 students from GS Kimironko and 8 students from GS Gicaca 1) got scores in the range of 11 to 15 which is 36%. In the score range of 16 to 20, only 1 student from Umuco Mwiza School scored 1%. Therefore, the results showed a very low performance

rate of grammar proficiency since students who scored between 11 to 15 and 16 to 20 had only 36% and 1% respectively.

Research Question 3: Describe the role of Kinyarwanda as mother tongue on the development of English literacy performance of pre-primary children in Gasabo District.

This research question was answered using picture composition in the three schools to elicit learners' competence in English language reading and writing. The whole section on learners' literacy performance consisted of 15 items and the class interval of the scores was 5.

Table 3: Learners' Literacy Performance.

Umuco Mwiza School GS Kimironko GS Gicaca1					
Class interval	Frequency	Frequency	Frequency	Total Frequency	Percentage
1-5	3	12	7	22	22.2
6-10	16	0	13	29	29.3
11-15	25	15	8	48	48.5
TOTAL	44	27	28	99	100

Table 3 gives the findings from the three schools on the role of Kinyarwanda as mother tongue on the development of English literacy performance. The findings show that 22 students (3 students from Umuco Mwiza School, 12 students from GS Kimironko and 7 students from GS Gicaca 1) scored in the range of 1 to 5 which is 22.2%. In the range of 6 to 10, 29 students (16 students from Umuco Mwiza School, none from GS Kimironko and 13 students from GS Gicaca 1) got 29.3%. Additionally, 48 students (25 students from Umuco Mwiza School, 15 students from GS Kimironko and 8 students from GS Gicaca 1) in the range of 11 to 15 achieved 48.5%. This shows that in the literacy performance aspect, the performance was not good since majority of the students' scores were under the range score of 11 to 15.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The findings on the role of Kinyarwanda as mother tongue in the development of English pronunciation fluency of pre-primary school children in Gasabo district revealed that Kinyarwanda as mother tongue plays a very positive role on the development of English pronunciation fluency among pre-primary children. The findings showed that a substantial majority of students achieved scores indicative of good pronunciation skills, reflecting the positive influence of linguistic transfer from Kinyarwanda to English. This shows that the use of Kinyarwanda as a mother tongue in children's homes and incorporating it into early education can shape young children's English pronunciation fluency. Furthermore, the results on the role of Kinyarwanda as mother tongue on the development of English grammar proficiency of pre-primary children in the Gasabo district showed that the use of Kinyarwanda as mother

tongue had a negative role on the development of English early literacy skills in terms of grammar proficiency because there is still direct transfer of rules from Kinyarwanda to English which leads to wrong English grammar proficiency. Lastly, in finding out the role of Kinyarwanda as mother tongue on the development of English literacy performance of pre-primary children in Gasabo district, the findings revealed that to a larger extent Kinyarwanda as mother tongue impacts negatively on the development of English literacy performance of pre-primary children in Gasabo district. Kinyarwanda impacted the development of English literacy performance to a smaller extent.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

In reinforcing the positive role of Kinyarwanda as mother tongue on the development of English pronunciation fluency among pre-primary children, the use of Kinyarwanda in children's homes should be emphasized and incorporated into early education. This will shape young children's English pronunciation fluency. On the role of Kinyarwanda as mother tongue on the development of English grammar proficiency of pre-primary children, the negative role of direct transfer of rules from Kinyarwanda to English which leads to wrong English grammar proficiency should be corrected by educators prioritizing the introduction and teaching of irregular English forms, such as verb forms, prepositions, and plurals, at an early stage. Utilizing appropriate teaching methods like phonics and whole word approaches can help learners identify differences between Kinyarwanda and English. Lastly, on the role of Kinyarwanda as mother tongue on the development of English literacy performance of pre-primary children,

the Ministry of Education should raise awareness among parents and guardians about the importance of providing sufficient reading materials and references in Kinyarwanda. This will help young children to establish a strong local language foundation, hence improving their English literacy performance at an early stage. Additionally, efforts should be made to document the orthographies of local languages in various districts and establish resources like reference materials and reading texts in Kinyarwanda.

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