

Quality Education and the Use of English Language as a Medium of Instruction in Rwandan Schools: An Interpretivist Study

Jean de Dieu Karasenga¹ Jean Baptiste Nzanana²

¹Protestant Institute of Arts and Social Sciences (PIASS), Rwanda. ²University of Rwanda, Rwanda

*Corresponding Author E-mail: karasengajd2014@gmail.com

Received 24 April 2022; Revised 10 May 2022; Accepted 01 June 2022

Abstract: The purpose of the study upon which this paper is based was to investigate the level at which school leaders and teachers use English as a medium of instruction to promote quality education in their schools. Data were collected using questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations at a Twelve-Year Basic Education school located in Muhanga District in the Southern Province of Rwanda. Participants consisted of two school leaders and 18 teachers from the school. Results suggest that teachers use the English language at minimal level during classroom activities. Pedagogical implications regarding what could be done to effectively use the English language in classrooms in order to foster quality education will be discussed.

Keywords: English language, English as a medium of instruction, educational quality, Rwanda

1. Introduction

The word ‘quality’ is often used without clarifying what quality is. The general concept of quality is difficult, and education quality is much more sophisticated. Quality is like ‘love’ everybody talks about it. In general, when things are better than others, it is said that they have more quality. Education quality is viewed based on the following angles: infrastructures, school buildings,

administration, teacher training, educational materials, teaching and students achievements (Nzabarirwa, 2016). Quality education provides the outcomes needed for individuals and communities to prosper. It allows schools to align and integrate fully with their communities and access a range of services to support educational services of their students. Education quality is ranked the sixth education for all (EFA) goal that puts a great emphasis on ameliorating all domains of quality of education and ensure individuals achieve all learning outcomes mainly in literacy, numeracy, and other life skills (Nzabarirwa, 2016).

Regarding the introduction of English in education in Rwanda, one can point to the process of both regional and global integration. On this, Rwanda joined the East African Community and the Commonwealth, both of which use English as the language of communication. To ensure that Rwandans fully benefit from this integration, the Government of Rwanda has established English as a medium of instruction from fourth grade of primary education to University. Since 2009, Rwanda's Education system has shifted from French to English as a medium of instruction. French is taught as subject and Kinyarwanda is used only for Kinyarwanda courses (Habyarimana, 2015). In 2011, there was another shift from English to Kinyarwanda for nursery up to primary 3. Since then, from that time English has been taught as subject and Kinyarwanda as medium of instruction in the first three years of primary schooling. This is in connection with UNESCO which recommended that children's education should be in their mother tongue (Habyarimana, 2015).

Rwanda is a multilingual society with four major languages, namely Kinyarwanda (native bantu language spoken by all Rwandans), French (official language from colonial period), English (brought in Rwanda after independence, and fully supported after 1994 repatriation of Rwandan people fled in English speaking countries, and Swahili (mainly spoken by Muslim communities and other Rwandan people from Tanzania, some regions from Uganda and Democratic Republic of Congo (Habyarimana, 2015).

So, after 1994 genocide, many returnees who came from English speaking countries motivated Rwanda to make English an official language and medium of instruction in schools (Uwambayinema, 2013).

Regarding education quality in Rwanda, the Economic Development and Poverty Reduction Strategy 2 (2013-2018) highlights that the quality of primary education hasn't been able to meet the pace of improvements in access (MINECOFIN, 2013). Concerning quality education there is still a need to reduce

class size, pupil-teacher ratios, and improve ways of promotion where automatic promotion of students in different grades should be taken into consideration critically (EFA, 2000-2015; Nzabarirwa, 2016)

Moreover, for enhancing education quality, teacher recruitment is based on their prospective teachers' areas of specializations and on the fact that they have done pedagogical and teaching practice. This facilitates to teach the course content in a more improved way. The Rwandan government pays teachers, school leaders, even though it is said that the primary school teachers' salary is still low. Students are also given lunch at schools countrywide mainly in nine year Basic education and twelve years Basic Education. This helps students to follow afternoon sessions in a wonderful way, because a hungry man is an angry man, that hunger can hamper the smooth transfer of knowledge (Nzabarirwa 2016).

Trainings in Competency-based Curriculum are still being carried out, organized by Rwanda Education Board (REB). During these trainings REB officials balance strengths and weaknesses of knowledge-based curriculum, then decide to adopt Competency-based Curriculum that leads to educational quality.

It is arguable that the above initiatives aimed at enhancing quality education in Rwanda would lead to good educational outcomes if the language used as a medium of instruction (i.e. English) is proficiently used by teachers and school leaders. The study upon which this paper is based investigated the level at which school leaders and teachers use English as a medium of instruction, thus contributing to the promotion of quality education.

Objectives of the study

1. To find out the level at which teachers use English as a medium of instruction.
2. To investigate the effect the use of English as a medium of instruction has on education quality.
3. To investigate the challenges faced by teachers while using English as a medium of instruction.
4. To investigate what can be done to promote English as a medium of instruction.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. At which level do teachers in the school selected use English as a medium of instruction?

2. What is the effect of using English as a medium of instruction on education quality promotion?
3. What are the challenges faced by teachers while using English as medium of instruction?
4. What can be done to promote English as a medium of instruction?

2. Research Methodology

a. Selection of participants

Participants were 24 teachers of different subjects taught in English and two school leaders working in Twelve year Basic Education School in Rwanda. The total number of participants was 26. When this research was carried out, the school had 1637 students. Of the 24 teachers who participated in the study, 12 taught at the secondary education level from senior one up to senior six while 12 taught from Primary 1 up to Primary 6. These participants were selected because they taught different subjects using English as a medium of instruction and therefore could provide constructive ideas related to promoting educational quality through English language use.

Seven teachers held Bachelor's degree as follows: 1 in Mathematics and Physics, 1 in Entrepreneurship, 1 in Chemistry, 1 in Mathematics, 1 in Literature English, 1 in Biology, and 1 in French and English. Four teachers held Diploma as follows: 3 Diploma in Mathematics and Physics, 1 Psychology. Thirteen teachers had an end of secondary education certificate having studied primary school education.

b. Data collection and analysis

In this study, a survey questionnaire was administered to 24 respondents. It was used by the researcher simply because a large amount of information could be obtained from many people and questionnaires are analysed scientifically and objectively compared to other forms of research methods. All 24 teachers were provided with questionnaires for completing and all questionnaires were returned back.

Documents including notices and communique written in English, permission slips completed in English, and minutes that were written in English by teachers were important sources for checking what was asked in questionnaires and interview.

For ethical considerations, participants were informed about the aims of research. They were assured voluntary participation and they could withdraw from the study any time. No name was used in collecting and transcribing survey data.

Grounded theory methods of data analysis, that are consistent with the principles of interpretivism and symbolic interactionism, were used in the study (O’Donoghue, 2007). The first stage of grounded theory analysis, opens coding, and was used to commence data analysis.

The following is an example of open coding for an excerpt from the transcript of an interview that took place on 8/12/2020 with School Head teacher in addressing guiding question 3: What are the challenges faced by teachers while using English as medium of instruction to promote educational quality?

Table 1. Interview and open coding

Interview transcript	Open coding
<p>I have realized that minimal exposure to English language as medium of Instruction is a challenge because teachers do not take initiative to use it as they have their Kinyarwanda language that is understood by everybody. I also see that the fact that some of us did not use English as MoI from primary education is a challenge that we face, really learning starts at an early age. I also realized that teachers do not want to move from lower primary up to upper primary to teach in English as a MoI, this is a serious challenge because they don’t want to learn more. I also see that as English language is not our mother tongue, we make a lot of mistakes; this is a challenge because we do not deliver our message effectively. I also</p>	<p>Minimal exposure to English language undermines its use.</p> <p>Some teachers did not study in English from Primary school.</p> <p>Teachers do not move from lower primary up to upper primary, this prevents them from learning more as far as using English as MoI is concerned.</p> <p>Teachers’ many mistakes in English.</p> <p>Using English as a medium of instruction compromised by</p>

<p>realized that not having enough trainings and shifting from French to English are challenges that we face that lead to not using English as MoI, simply because once we miss an English vocabulary we use Kinyarwanda language our mother tongue or French.</p>	<p>teachers' lack of enough English trainings and shifting from French to English</p>
--	---

After open coding, the analytic induction technique was used to analyse the open-coded data. The analytic induction technique brought to the formulation of general statements or propositions related to four research questions. Emphasis is now oriented to the presentation of findings.

3. Results and Discussion

a. At which level do teachers use English as a medium of instruction?

One of the respondents stated that English as a medium of instruction (MoI) is used at 25% during school meetings chaired by school leaders. This shows that at 75%, they use other languages other than English.

However, the level of exposure that individuals have to the second language reflects the level of proficiency within that language (Kozhevnikova, 2019). Indeed, one of the school leaders who participated in the study stated:” I rarely give instructions in the English language during morning meeting with students”. I did not find any teacher writing in English language asking for permission, meaning that teachers mainly use Kinyarwanda (i.e. their mother tongue) and sometimes French”. This concurs with Habyarimana (2015)’s view that when English is considered a foreign language, it is not compulsorily used as a medium of instruction and communication in organizational settings.

Moreover, one school leaders also reported that mostly permission slip formats brought to school by the Ministry of Education are written in Kinyarwanda and that very few formats are in English language. This reduces the level to which teachers are exposed to English language.

Regarding the use of English language as MoI once again, all teachers who participated in the study confirmed that they never write a letter in

English asking for permission. This is a negative finding as far as using English as MoI is concerned. The researcher realized that 90% of the teachers who participated in the study indicated that they use the Kinyarwanda language which is their mother tongue, while exchanging ideas in school meetings chaired by school administrators. This aligns with Habyarimana (2015)'s view that there are teachers who mix English as a language that should be used as MoI and Kinyarwanda at high level, which reduces much exposure to the English language as well. This can also affect quality, looking at Nzabarirwa (2016)'s view that quality goes with something's that are better than others. Attention is now turned to the presentation of the results for the second research question.

b. What is the effect of using English as a medium of instruction on education quality promotion?

Some participants stated that as Rwanda is a member of Commonwealth and East African Community, some secondary school leavers are not able to compete successfully in trade, business, even once they reach universities in those countries they are required much energy or effort.

Others highlighted that those students who reach those countries realize that their oral and verbal expression in English is poor. Participants continued reporting that students do not follow properly when the English language is used 100% as some do not get the content, others do not speak as they do not understand very well and lack the vocabulary to express themselves. In addition to this, practice makes perfect later they may be familiar with it.

Some participants confirmed that even in the Rwandan context, some students reach Rwandan universities without the ability to construct meaningful sentences. Others highlighted that much exposure to English in pre-university education settings could help respecting these four English language skills equitably, namely speaking-listening-reading-writing at 25% for each.

In addition to this, as we are in context where Kinyarwanda Language is spoken and understood throughout the country, English language use should be maximized at school level.

c. *What are the challenges faced by teachers while using English as medium of instruction?*

One of the school leaders who participated in the study said: “I studied in a francophone system; I studied English at the first time when I reached university level. I make a lot of mistakes especially in pronunciation which results into level of expression that is not appreciable”. This concurs with Shoemaker (2011)’s point that people cannot learn without mistakes. Making mistakes cannot be escaped in the process of learning.

In addition, results suggest that linguistic environment, that 25% of teachers don’t have ownership and accountability, that little and poor vocabulary in English, less speaking of it in society, that students’ shyness to present ideas to their colleagues, that British and American English both written in some Rwandan school books, that students cannot follow when a teacher often uses English, that 25% of the teachers who participated in study are unable to provide explanations in English while teaching their courses, that teachers did not get enough trainings in English, and that 25% of the teachers who participated in the study don’t have self-confidence. These are challenges faced by teachers while using English as MoI. Each of these challenges had a negative impact on using English as MoI. For example, all teachers lack an environment in which they can implement English as MoI, unless when they are at school. Kinyarwanda which is the mother tongue for all Rwandan people is understood by everyone, all respondents and Rwandan people at large don’t take the initiative of using English, yet a language is mastered when it is used.

d. *What can be done to promote English as a medium of instruction?*

School leaders highlighted that teachers should teach but having in mind that today one might be teaching in the lower primary school, tomorrow in the upper primary school or secondary level. Meaning that every participant in the study should develop his or her ability to speak and write English. This aligns with Krashen’s (2013)’s observation that when there is an input that is added to the previous knowledge in that case, learning has taken place.

Other strategies shared by school leaders in the study are reducing grammar translation since it is a classical method of teaching English. This

goes with teaching a foreign language that is English, using mother tongue translations that are Kinyarwanda. It was suggested that teaching materials should be increased rather than putting a great emphasis on mother tongue translations; this could lead to much exposure of English as MoI. This concurs with Youssif (2019)'s belief that it is surprising to see grammar translation method that is still being used in some classrooms.

Moreover, school leaders and teachers who participated in the study reported that increasing the number of formal professional development opportunities aimed at in developing English language proficiency should be organized, that English as MoI should be maximized at school level because once participants in the study leave school and go to their respective families, they don't get a person to talk to since all local people speak the Kinyarwanda language, that debates among students should be reinforced, that teachers and school leaders should be confident while using English as MoI. Furthermore all school leaders and teachers who participated in the study confirmed that using English as MoI should start at an early age, from Nursery school up to university level.

e. Implications of the study for practice

Using English as a MoI is very crucial as far as teaching and students achievements is concerned. School leaders should maximize the use of English while chairing school meetings; this will increase much exposure to English as MoI which in turn promotes language proficiency. This will also help Rwandans to compete successfully at national and international levels, hence leads to teachers, students' achievements once they get a job that would improve their welfare. This concurs with Nzabarirwa (2016)'s view that teaching and students are component of educational quality. In addition to this, Kozhevnikova (2019) asserts that the level of exposure that a speaker has to the second language is automatically related to language proficiency in that language.

Moreover, school leaders and teachers in Rwanda should use English as a second language (ESL) not as a foreign language (EFL), where they have to use it as official language that is highly con sired as MoI, instead of using it because there is somebody who does not understand Kinyarwanda language, or that they are in the class. Once opted as a second language, it will increase the total amount of time in which an

individual has contact with English supposed to be used as MoI. This aligns with Habyarimana (2015)'s view that in Africa, English is used as a second language (ESL), and it is also used as a foreign language (EFL).

Another implication of the study is that school leaders and teachers should bear in mind that learning is endless, using English as MoI should enhance getting new inputs among themselves. Indeed, Ministry of Education trainers in Rwanda should avail permission request formats not only in Kinyarwanda but also in English as well.

4. Conclusion

It will be recalled that the aim of the study was to investigate the level at which teachers in the school studied use English as MoI. It was found that English as MoI is used at minimal level (25%) in school meetings organized by school leaders. According to Kozhevnikova (2019) the level of exposure that individuals have to second language reflects the level of proficiency within that language.

The study's findings confirmed that all teachers who participated in the study never write in English asking for permission, this is due to the fact that permission request formats are mainly written in Kinyarwanda language.

The researcher observed that when English is fully used as MoI from primary school level up to university level, students would finish their studies with an improved knowledge that would facilitate them to compete; hence education quality promotion observed as they would have gotten achievements that would improve their welfare.

It was also found that future teachers are not taught in English all the time and that Kinyarwanda and English are mixed depending on their levels of proficiency, for example beginners, intermediate, and advanced levels.

It follows that the challenges faced by teachers while using English as MoI was linguistic environment, lacking self confidence, teachers didn't get enough professional training regarding using English as MoI, as some grew up in francophone system.

To conclude, it was also found that the use of English as MoI should be increased at school level, because once teachers/students reach their respective families, it is not easy to get a person to talk to using English as MoI, as an overwhelming majority of people only speak Kinyarwanda language that is understood throughout the country.

5. References

- Choi Fung Tam, A. (2012). Language and Education. Does the switch of medium of instruction facilitate the language learning of students? The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin.
- Devine, T. (2000). English for autonomy, autonomy in English: students' and teachers' beliefs about autonomy in language learning. Proceedings of the 13th Annual EA Education conference, 67-77.
- Habyarimana, H. (2015). Investigation of attitudes and classroom practices of educators and learners in relation to English as the medium of instruction at four primary schools. PhD thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.
- Jana, M. (n.d). Overgeneralisation in learning to read. University of Illinois.
- Khaled, K. (n.d). First language (L1) influence on second language (L2) reading: the role of transfer. Department of Curriculum and Instruction. Faculty of Education. University of Victoria, B.C.
- Khasbani, I. (2019). English as a medium of Instruction in Indonesian primary and secondary Education: Theory and reality. *Englisia Journal* 6(2), 146. <https://doi.org/10.22373/ej.v6i2.4506>.
- Kozhevnikova, E. (2019). Impact of language exposure and artificial linguistic environment on students vocabulary acquisition. Institute of foreign languages, peoples' friendship University of Russia. Doi: <http://doi.org/10.20319/pijss.2019.51.430439>
- Krashen, S. (1987). Principles and practice in second language acquisition. Prentice-Hall International.
- Krashen, S. (1988). Second language acquisition and language learning. Prentice-Hall International.
- Krashen, S. (2013). Second language acquisition: Theory, applications, and some conjectures. Cambridge University Press.
- Marsh, D. (2006) English as medium of instruction in the new global linguistics order :Global characteristics, local consequences. UNICOM, continuing Education, Centre, University of Jyväskylä.
- Maslow, A. (1996). Critique of self-actualisation theory: In E. Hoffman(ed.). Future visions: The unpublished papers of Abraham Maslow. Thousand Oaks, CA: sage. pp.26-32.
- Nzabarirwa, W. (2016). Education quality in Rwanda: factors of success, challenges and future prospects. Catholic Education in Rwanda

- O'Dwyer, S. (2006). The English teacher as facilitator and authority. David English House, Hiroshima prefecture, Japan School of philosophy, University of New South Wales. Volume 9, number 4.
- Popham, J. (2006). Educational leadership magazine. Los Angeles.
- Schoemaker, P. (2011). Brilliant mistakes: Finding success on the far side of failure. Philadelphia: Wharton digital place.
- Sivasubramaniam Sivakumar, (2009). Issues and Insights for promoting Agency, Voice and Subjecthood in Reading and Assessment. The Petroleum Institute, Abu Dhabi.
- Uwambayinema ,E.(2013). Science Teachers' challenges implementing Rwanda 's English as a medium of instruction policy .Masters thesis. College of Arts and Humanities, California State University, Fresno.
- White, L. (1989). Universal Grammar and second language acquisition. Volume 1. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Youssif Zaghvani, O. (2019). Influence of Grammar Translation method(GTM) on Libyan students' English performance in communicative situations. Department of English, Faculty of Arts, University of Benghazi. International Journal of Social Sciences. Vol5 no 2. Doi:<https://doi.org/10.20319/pijss.2019.52.511530>.