Cultural Factors Affecting English Performance in Rwandan Public Higher Learning Institutions: A Case Study of Third-Year Students at the University of Rwanda

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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that cultural factors may affect the learning of a second language. However, no such a study has been conducted in Rwanda to identify cultural factors that may affect the acquisition of English. The present research, therefore, was carried out to explore the effect that cultural factors exerted on the students' performance in the English language. The study was guided by Vygosky's socio-cultural theory according to which one's culture is among factors influencing performance in a second/foreign language. The target population was third-year students from the University of Rwanda. Using a case study design, the study hinged on qualitative approach to conduct one-on-one semi-structured interviews with 109 respondents recruited through random procedure from a population of 1257 students. For data analysis, the inductive approach was applied and emerging themes from students' responses were grouped into typologies. Findings revealed that most respondents believed cultural factors were detrimental to the development of proficiency in English while few attested that these factors affected their English positively. The findings also allowed the researchers to make recommendations to policy makers and teachers for promoting students' communication skills in English.

Keywords: *Cultural Factors, English Performance, Public Higher Learning Institutions, Rwanda*
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I. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, English has become a global language (Abbas et al., 2021). It has been promoted as an international language of business (Roshid et al., 2022) and the language of science and technology (Brock-Utne, 2016) in a number of countries in the world. Internationalisation has also led several countries across the globe to adopt English as the sole language of instruction (Sah & Karki, 2023) especially in their higher learning institutions. Some such countries are France, Germany, Spain, and the Netherlands in Europe (Vo, 2024), Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand in Asia (Sam, 2024), and Ethiopia, Tanzania, Mozambique and Rwanda in Africa (Plonski et al., 2013), to name but a few. Some of the countries that have shifted to English as a medium of instruction hold the belief that "to be educated means to know English" (Plonski et al., 2013, p. 3).

Students in countries where English was proclaimed as the language of instruction are compelled to develop proficiency in this language in order to cope with their academic tasks. However, students worldwide display limited proficiency in English, particularly in countries in which it is not the home language (Sam, 2024). In line with this, Aziz and Kashinathan (2021) state that students find it difficult to learn a foreign language since they fail to relate messages they convey in their own language with what they want to say in English or the other way around. This hindrance may be due to various factors, namely cultural factors which can influence the learning of this target language in one way or another (Serajuddin, 2023).

In fact, language and culture are mutually interdependent and constitute the most important components of any society that cannot be separated. Whereas a people's culture is a learnt system of values, beliefs and / or norms that shapes and symbolizes its language (Kuo & Lai, 2006), language is always cultural because it reflects, depicts and vehicles these values and beliefs (Bonvillain, 2019) One's culture thus plays a significant role in the acquisition of an

additional language. This influence can be either negative or positive. For example, in Bangladesh, language classrooms are teacher-oriented due to a tradition according to which obedience to teachers is a requirement and students have no room to raise their voice (Serajuddin, 2023). Education in this country is a one-way rather than a two-way process, which is detrimental to the students. As for Kim et al. (2022), they hold that there is a positive relationship between L1 and L2. In other words, skills acquired in L1 can help promote the learning of L2 (De la Fuente & Goldenberg, 2022).

In Rwanda, there are culture-related elements that hamper students' performance in English. For instance, the linguistic environment does not offer opportunities to students to practise English outside the classroom as almost all Rwandans speak Kinyarwanda, the mother tongue (Tabaro, 2019). The absence of a reading culture is another component hindering Rwandan students' proficiency in this medium of instruction (Manirakiza et al., 2024).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

In Rwanda, English was promoted as the sole medium of instruction from primary school onward in October 2008, and this policy was implemented in January 2009. Nowadays, English does not only enjoy the status of medium of instruction in the country, but it is also taught as a subject. At the University of Rwanda, first, second, and third-year students are respectively taught English for General Purposes (EGP), English for Specific Purposes and English (ESP) for Academic Purposes (EAP) throughout the academic year to enable them to attend mainstream modules without difficulty and prepare them for their future professions. However, until recently, some Rwandan university graduates have displayed limited communication skills (Mugirase & Ndimurugero, 2020). The students' failure to master English despite the language support they are provided with are probably due to a number of factors such as social, economic and cultural factors, to name but a few.

Nevertheless, although various elements can impact on the learning of a language, the focus of the current research is exploring cultural factors that may affect Rwandan students' performance in English especially as this topic has never been dealt with. Hence, it is within this framework that this study aims at investigating the extent to which cultural factors may influence students' English language performance at higher learning institutions, and specifically at the University of Rwanda where the researchers are employed as lecturers.

1.2 Research Objectives
The research specific objectives were to explore:
i.   The effects of the Rwandan linguistic environment on students' performance in English;
ii. The influence that the mother tongue, Kinyarwanda, may have on students' English language learning; and
iii. The effects that reading culture can exert on students' performance in English.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

The present study was underpinned by Vygosky's socio-cultural theory also known as cultural-historical activity theory (Ohta, 2024) that plays a prominent role in educational research, especially among socially-situated investigators of educational development and transformation. According to Ohta (2024), sociocultural theory emphasises the influence of factors like pre-existing language repertoires, cultures, and contexts on second language learning. Kushki and Nassaji (2024) also highlight the effect of external factors such social interactions and cultural aspects on cognitive processes. As for Lantolf (2024), he purports that second language learning and development are mainly situated in the social world which gradually varies and affects learners' developmental processes accordingly. Cherry (2024) also argues that cultural beliefs and attitudes influence ways in which individuals' language acquisition occurs.

2.2 Empirical Review

Research has shown that second language learners' culture may negatively or positively affect the acquisition of English, a second/foreign language. For example, Serajuddin's (2023) study findings indicated that cultural attitudes had an adverse effect on Bangladesh students' performance in English. In his research conducted in primary and secondary schools in Kenya, Kisaka (2015) noted that there were cultural practices that impeded students' performance in English. Some such practices were peaking Kiswahili or mother tongue at home and the belief that using a foreign language at home reflected pride and disrespect. On the other hand, Siegelman's et al. (2024) study on rethinking First Language-Second Language similarities and differences in English Proficiency: Insights from the English Reading Online (ENRO) project revealed that there is significant positive correlation between reading skills in the home language and English reading proficiency. As for Kumar et al. (2021), they explored the effectiveness of

regulated code-switching in language classrooms in India and noted that this strategy also enhanced students' English language skills.

2.2.1 Linguistic Environment and Influence on Second Language Learning

Research has demonstrated that the learning landscape plays a significant role in second language acquisition (Azhimia & Parnawati, 2023). Karlik (2023) provides examples of people who travel to countries where the target language is used and affirm that they are likely to develop proficiency in this language. According to Andrew et al. (2022), learners will probably learn the second language if their families or communities speak it and are supportive.

Sibomana (2014) is also of the view that immersion in an environment where students can naturally and spontaneously interact in the second language will enhance proficiency in this language. He therefore explicates that, in a monolingual country like Rwanda, where 99% of the population speak Kinyarwanda, the mother tongue, it is challenging for students to develop proficiency in English, the medium of instruction and one of the official languages in the country. Sibomana argues that exposure to English is very limited in Rwanda and students use it only when they are in the classroom, teachers being "almost the only model and source of input for learners" (p.22). In a similar vein, Tabaro (2019) asserts that living in a country (Rwanda) where one common language (Kinyarwanda) is used makes it too demanding for teachers and students compelled to use English in the classroom.

2.2.2 Influence of the Mother Tongue on Students' Performance in English

Language Interdependence

According to Jiamin (2024), mother tongue or home language transfer is a widespread cross-linguistic impact on second language acquisition as its learners are influenced by the similarities between their home language and the target language. Zhu et al. (2024) stipulate that Cummins' theory of linguistic interdependence and the linguistic threshold theories explicitly explain this phenomenon. They explored the interplay of attitudes particularly the transfer of self-efficacy and emotions between L1 Chinese and L2 English integrated writing contexts and found out that self-efficacy, that is, "one's perception of one's abilities" or one's sense of writing competence, could transfer from L1 to L2. In other words, L2 writing competence depends on L1 writing competence. Their findings also revealed that self-efficacy in L1 was predictor to enjoyment and anxiety in L1 and L2, that is, there is a correlation between L1 and L2 writing attitudes.

In contrast, Hashim et al. (2024) study on the influence of L1 on the academic writing skills of undergraduate students of English revealed a negative transfer from L1 to L2. Their findings showed that students made numerous spelling, vocabulary and grammatical mistakes in English due to the dissimilarities between their L1 and English, the target language. In Japan, a study by Haristiani and Christinawati (2024) also revealed that intermediate learners of second language made several errors in speech due to a lack of familiarity with sentence structure conventions and appropriate use of language, incomplete application of rules, false hypothesis, overgeneralisation and language transfer.

McBride et al. (2022) holds that L1 transfer is an important factor in L2 prosody learning whereas McClellan (2024) argues that both L2 students and teachers are likely to mispronounce prosodic features in L2 and to deviate from L1 speech. It was also found out that, due to lack of voiced consonants and close syllable in their home language, Kabarasi speakers mispronounced English words during oral presentations whereby they voiced voiceless sounds and devoiced voiced sounds as well as inserted some vowels in the target language and made closed English syllables open (Chenenje, 2024). It was also noted that students substituted English sounds with Kabras sounds. Their mother tongue, therefore, negatively affected second language acquisition more than it facilitated the teaching and learning process.

Obviously, prior language experiences play a key role in second language acquisition. However, Pica (1989) holds that differences between L1 and L2 do not necessarily imply learning difficulties and that similarities between both languages do not guarantee ease of learning. In fact, he conducted a study on how language learning can respond to classroom concerns and discovered that Japanese students whose negation system was far different from the English negation mastered the latter faster than their Spanish, Russian and Italian counterparts whose negation structures were similar to those in English.

Code Switching

Code switching refers to the use of two languages in a phrase or utterance (Muysken, 2020). Research has highlighted that this practice may help enhance second language learning. For instance, Khafaga et al. (2024) explain that the main goal for the use of two codes is to facilitate understanding of the learnt material. Tran (2024) adds that L1 plays a number of functions in second language learning like offering support structures, facilitating negotiation of meaning, enhancing L2 comprehension, boosting uptake of L2 vocabulary, and developing learning strategies. Code-

switching is also believed to relieve students from anxiety, amplify socialisation, foster word power, help them understand complex grammatical structures and ideas, and allowed teachers to actively engage students in classroom language activities (Cejudo et al., 2024).

Furthermore, Sibomana and Uwambayinema (2016) purport that codeswitching in classroom situations has a positive effect on students' performance in English. The researchers in the current study are also of the view that resort to codeswitching is unavoidable in multilingual classrooms as it creates a room for learners' voice, but that its use should be limited in the Rwandan context where school appears to be the unique arena for them to practise English. In a similar vein, Cejudo et al. (2024) contend that code-switching overuse can prevent students from acquiring the second language.

2.2.3 Lack of Reading Culture

Reading has proven to promote students' skills in a given language (Ramolula & Nkoane, 2023). For example, reading helps enhance students' knowledge, understanding and use of vocabulary (Pellicer-Sánchez, 2020). Moreover, reading positively affects students' reading achievement (Hassan et al., 2021), their writing performance (Nguyen, 2022) and their critical thinking skills. For Kang'a and Gichuru (2016), reading enables students to acquire accurate pronunciation and to develop phonological awareness and fluency.

However, research has shown that Rwandan students display poor reading culture in general (Manirakiza et al., 2024). The authors explain that the love of reading is a habit that is transmitted from generation to generation, which is not the case in Rwanda due to the long-standing predominance of oral communication that has characterised the country for years (Ruterana, 2012). Harerimana et al. (2024) contend that lack of reading culture results in Rwandan students' poor performance in English and in teachers' failure to achieve their objectives.

III. METHODOLOGY

This section deals with the research design, the study location, the target population, sampling procedures and techniques, the sample size, research instruments, data collection procedures, and data analysis.

3.1 Research Design

Qualitative case study research design was used to collect the data as the study intended to explore students' experiences, behaviours and beliefs regarding cultural factors and their influence on their performance in English. According to Dehalwar and Sharma (2024), this kind of research allows in-depth exploration of research subjects' "experiences, behaviors and social phenomena through non-numerical data" (p.10). Qualitative methods also enable researchers to investigate research participants' inner humanistic issues (Muzari et al., 2022). In the current study, qualitative research design helped to gain understanding of respondents' perspectives of cultural factors affecting their performance in English.

3.2 Study Location

The current research was carried out in the six campuses of the University of Rwanda. These are Huye, Nyarugenge, Remera, Busogo, Nyagatare and Rukara Campuses. Huye Campus is situated in the Southern Province of Rwanda, Nyarugenge and Remera Campuses in the capital city Kigali, Busogo Campus in the Northern Province, and Nyagatare and Rukara Campuses in the Eastern Province of Rwanda.

3.3 Target Population

Population is a group of elements such as people, objects or events sharing the same characteristics and in which researchers are interested (Nanjundeswaraswamy & Divakar, 2021. In the present study, the researchers purposively considered year three students because the latter were all supposed to have completed the prescribed modules of English for General Purposes (EGP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) respectively taught in the first and second years and to be taking English for Academic Purposes delivered in the third year. It was assumed that these students were at an advanced level of competence in the English language.

3.4 Sampling Procedures and Techniques

Sample procedures and techniques are generally used to estimate the sample size (Nanjundeswaraswamy & Divakar, 2021). Therefore, a random procedure was used and 5 cases were chosen from each cluster or class of students. The researchers carefully identified the overarching themes before recruiting the next round of cases, and they carried out the data collection work until the data saturation was reached.

3.5 Sample Size

Subsequent to the random sampling, a subset or part, representative of the research population was chosen (Nanjundeswaraswamy & Divakar, 2021). Indeed, the research population consisted of 1257 students - from whom a sample population of 109 respondents were selected.

3.6 Research Instruments

Research instruments have been defined as tools used to show whether the phenomena under study align with the research problem or refute it (Sukmawati, 2023), and whether they are related to the chosen research methodology. They are tools 'used to collect… data related to a research interest…and [are] usually determined by the researcher' (Wonu & Igwe, 2023, p. 165). These instruments in qualitative research vary considerably depending on the purpose of the research being conducted (Mensah, 2020).

In the present qualitative study, the researchers conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews using a predetermined interview guide (a list of topics to be covered and questions related to these topics) to facilitate the data collection process. During interviews, the researchers also made use of smart phones and/or laptops to record the information provided to them. This can be referred to as naturalistic observation as it implicitly studied the research subjects' spontaneous behaviour in their respective campuses. It goes without saying that the researchers themselves served as research instruments throughout the research process as, according to Sukmawati (2023, p. 119), they 'determine research focus, select informants as data sources, collect data, assess data quality, analyze data, interpret data and make conclusions on all stimuli from the environment that must be estimated to be meaningful or not for research'.

3.7 Data Collection Procedures

Before actual interviews were conducted, a predetermined interview guide was piloted with third year students in the faculty of Medicine at Huye Campus. This enabled the researchers to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the guiding questions and to adjust them. During the real data collection phase, one-on-one interviews were also conducted with third year students in the remaining faculties across the University of Rwanda at different times. The posed questions consisting of a yes/no and an open-ended sub-question each allowed the researchers to determine cultural factors the students claimed to affect their performance in English. The yes/no questions enabled the researchers to identify the number of students whose performance in English was positively or negatively affected by cultural factors. Open-ended questions provided explanations on ways in which cultural factors influenced their proficiency in English. Moreover, students' answers to these open-ended questions helped the researchers to ask probing questions and obtain richer insights on the researched issue. In concomitance with interviews, the researchers wrote in notebooks any relevant reaction and /or fact supporting or contrasting the research subjects' claims they could note.

3.8 Data analysis

As the present research was qualitative in nature, data analysis was done inductively. Such an approach to data analysis consists of reading the gathered data through over and over again, identifying and reflecting on the most recurring themes and condensing them into typologies. According to (Bingham, 2023, p.2), inductive analysis requires researchers to peruse through the collected data, identifying 'codes, categories, patterns, and themes as they emerge.' In the present study, the gathered data were carefully scrutinised, themes emerging from the respondents' views and perceptions identified and reflected on before they were grouped into typologies in accordance with their similarities and differences. Indeed, inductive research puts data into patterns according to their relationships, be they similarities or differences for a deeper understanding of the researched topic (Kumar & Ujire, 2024).

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Findings emerging from the collected data showed that only 9 out of 109 respondents believed that culture had a positive effect on their English language proficiency, 90 claimed that it affected them negatively, and 10 provided irrelevant answers. The positive effects mentioned were language interdependence or positive transfer and use of context-situated teaching and learning materials. The highlighted negative effects were non-conducive linguistic background, negative transfer from the home language to the target language, code switching, and lack of reading habits.

4.1 Positive Effects of Culture on Students' Performance in English
4.1.1 Positive Transfer

Of the 9 respondents who attested that culture impacted positively on their performance in English, 7 contended that languages were interdependent. They explained that the skills acquired in Kinyarwanda (their mother tongue) could facilitate the learning of this foreign language. For example, S57 stated that "Mastery of rules governing writing in Kinyarwanda like capitalisation, punctuation, sentence structure, paragraph and essay writing contribute to the improvement of this skill". S101 added that "Reading skills in the mother tongue can help acquire reading skills in a foreign language". The researchers' opinion is also that skills in the home language can be transferred to another language, English in this case. This complies with Xu and Fan's (2024) assertion that competence in the first language may facilitate the learning of the second language. According to Canagarajah (2005), "the local should not be of secondary relation or subsidiary status to the dominant discourses" (p. xiv) since first language "can help build a bridge to the second language" (…)   and smoothly integrate it in students' existing language repertoire (Canagarajah, 1999, p. 80). In a few words, competence acquired in the first or home language can be transferred to the second or foreign language.

4.1.2 Use of Context-Situated Teaching/ Learning Materials

2 among the above-mentioned 9 respondents posited that English learning materials depicting the Rwandan culture or history were attracting to students, so they promoted proficiency in this language. The following excerpt from S2 supports this claim: "Materials on English or American culture do not motivate us. We need materials focusing on Rwandan culture if we want to promote our culture and improve our skills in English". S39 confessed, "When teachers use texts related to Rwandan context, we are motivated to learn English; but when they use commercial books we are not". The researchers, who are also lecturers of English, agree that when they provide students with learning materials such as tales and proverbs portraying their culture, history and everyday life experiences, the latter implicitly acquire skills in the second or foreign language. In a similar vein, Soomro et al. (2015) hold that using learners' cultural context and awareness allows them to develop proficiency in the target language.

In a study on "My students hardly speak English; do I need to decolonise my teaching practice? A dialogue with a critical friend" in Malaysia, Loo and Sairattanain (2024) argue that rather than being driven by hegemonic views of language teaching and learning, teachers should devise their own teaching strategies. These authors propose that teachers should create meaningful learning environments for their students to be able to engage them in the learning process. Maqsood et al. (2024) also posit that, as language normally involves students' beliefs, values, and practices, the incorporation of these cultural factors in foreign language learning and teaching promotes "a holistic language learning experience". The implication from the above views is that students' exposure to native-like English or Standard English and the culture embedded in it alone hinders interaction between teachers and students throughout the teaching and learning process.

4.2 Negative Effects of Culture on Students' Performance in English
4.2.1 Non-conducive Linguistic Environment

36 respondents stated that the Rwandan linguistic environment hampered the acquisition of English language skills. They explained that it is not conducive to the learning of this language as almost every Rwandan speaks Kinyarwanda. For instance, S46 stated,

> … We really likely to speak Kinyarwanda because we are in society where most people do not speak English. Our culture cannot influence us to develop our level of speaking English. It affects us negatively because of facilitating our mother tongue wherever we are except when we are at school that it where we likely to speak English at many times.

S88 affirmed,
> Rwandan culture affects my English negatively because there is no English environment where we practise our knowledge in English means at school we may acquire or learn receptive no productive skills but in terms of producing it becomes a very big problem. Nowhere to practise English.

The above extracts imply that English is used only at school, and it is Kinyarwanda that serves as a medium of communication in other contexts. Indeed, Rwandans do not need to resort to other languages to understand each other. It goes without saying, hence, that Rwandan linguistic landscape is unfavourable to the students' learning of English mainly as there is lack of exposure to this language.

Saud et al. (2023) maintain that the environment plays an essential role in language acquisition as it is where people practise the target language. In the case of Rwanda, it is mainly in the school setting that students have the opportunity to learn English. The lecturers of English must thus ensure that, during pair or group work, students negotiate and construct meanings using this target language. In fact, the researchers have noted that when students are

interacting in pairs or groups, they are always tempted to express themselves in Kinyarwanda because it is the language that they all understand well and in which they feel more comfortable.

Adamson et al. (2024) assert that using a foreign language may be unfavourable to the learning process. This claim implicitly reveals that learning takes place only when the students use a language they master, Kinyarwanda in this context. However, this can only work in mainstream subjects, particularly in sciences, and not in language classrooms. The researchers suggest that, in English language classrooms, students should be encouraged to use this medium because it is through practice that they will learn it. Hence, it is up to lecturers of English to use interactive strategies that motivate students to engage in the learning process through English language. Some such techniques are using learning materials addressing students' needs (Dewi et al., 2024), depicting their cultural values, discourses and interests (Son, 2024), and promoting extracurricular activities (Upadhyay, 2024) like those carried out in English language clubs; for example, debates, reading, writing, and interclass competitions.

Nevertheless, upgrading students' performance in English should not be the concern of lecturers of English only. Content subject lecturers must also contribute to the promotion of students' English language proficiency by providing them with appropriate assistance whenever required (Ningsih et al., 2024). Moreover, language learning should be aligned with professional development to enhance students' performance in English (Abdanbekova, 2024) and enable them to meet job requirements after they graduate.

4.2.2 Negative Transfer from the Mother Tongue/L1

Findings from the current study also revealed that interference from the home language can be an obstacle to second or foreign language performance. Some student respondents (N=14) declared that they were challenged by the issue of language interference. For instance, S92 claimed,

> Rwandan culture affects our English. It impacts us and in our pronunciation we usually speak like those who are speaking Kinyarwanda. … The pronunciation looks that of Kinyarwanda, for example, you may find someone who is speaking English like Kinyarwanda, without speaking like Americans or other speakers like that of British….

It is true that many Rwandans, including students, speak English with a local accent. Zhang (2024) explains that there is normally negative transfer from the home language that hinders performance in the second or foreign language particularly when there is no correspondence between words in both languages, which is the case of Kinyarwanda and English. According to Kurniawan and Thren (2024), people in countries where English is a foreign language are likely to mispronounce words in this language. As an illustration, during interviews, some respondents were heard pronouncing words like "sigisi, sree, brue" instead of "six, three, blue".

With regards to the native-like accent stipulated in the extract from S92, the researchers believe that its acquisition is only possible if the students have regular interactions with native speakers of English, are immersed in an environment where English is used as the only means of communication, or attend elite schools where English is given prominence. However, one's performance in English cannot be measured against the way words are pronounced. Put differently, mispronouncing words does not necessarily mean that one is not proficient in a language. A second-language learner may even be more proficient than a native speaker of that language. This assertion is corroborated by Mutari (2020) who contends that an expert non-native speaker might be more competent than an unknowledgeable native speaker taking the TEFL or the TESL. Mutari goes far and suggests that deviations from native standards in English should be considered as signs of creativity to make second or foreign language speakers of this language own it.

Even though respondents focused on speaking as the most affected skill, some of them avowed they also made interference errors in grammar. Examples are grammatical gender errors where respondents confused the subject personal pronouns "he" and "she" or the subject personal pronoun "I" and object personal pronoun "me". For Drahan and Zhyla (2022), the phenomenon of grammar interference is a complex one. They explain that some grammatical errors may be caused by inattention, others by literal translation from the first language, and some others by improper use of analogies wherein the first language standards influence the construction of the second or foreign language rules. Drahan and Zhyla (2022) advise teachers of English to encourage students to think in the language they are learning instead of translating every word.

4.2.3 Code-Switching

40 out of 109 respondents claimed that their lecturers switched to Kinyarwanda to explain their lessons. For example, S 57 stated,

> Some teachers when they are teaching, they suppose that or they imagine that students will understand well their content when they explain it in our mother tongue. So, meaning that I can say they use it like I can say like translation when they explain just they use Kinyarwanda and that time for the students to be accustomed or to be familiar with English it is a

problem. So that is why I say the culture of our country is affecting English proficiency to Rwandan learners including us.

The extract above from S57 indicates that lecturers' explanations through Kinyarwanda is a practice that prevents students from developing skills in English. The student' s allegation might be right in case lecturers translate every single English word uttered in the classroom into Kinyarwanda, but if Kinyarwanda is sometimes used to make the class understand difficult concepts, particularly technical terms embedded in teaching and learning materials, there then appears to be a misconception of codeswitching as an approach to teaching and learning.

Code switching is considered as the use of two languages in a conversation and is a common practice in multilingual societies (Kumar et al., 2021) where it enables people to meet communication demands (Bhatti et al., 2018). Kumar et al. (2021) declare that, even though code switching is negatively perceived, it is an important linguistic requirement in bilingual classrooms as it helps interpret complex ideas, translate questions, seek confirmation, check students understanding and build solidarity. Similarly, Bhatti et al. (2018) findings revealed that code switching allowed teachers to maintain discipline, translate new words, and build solidarity and intimate relationships with their students. These scholars observed that this technique was an efficient tool in EFL classrooms as it facilitated understanding of complex concepts. The researchers also consider that codeswitching enables students with limited English proficiency to cope and interact with teaching and learning materials and prevents them from lagging behind their peers.

Furthermore, the researchers see the use of a monolingual policy in learning as a colonisation of mind and a denial of rights to mother tongue usage. Monolingualism might not promote understanding of difficult words and/ or expressions while codeswitching plays a significant role in facilitating content delivery and comprehension, raising students' motivation and connecting them with their own culture (Ndizeye, 2022). In line with this, Ghaderi et al. (2024) findings showed that codeswitching was used to avoid low-proficiency students' misunderstandings and build rapport with high-level students. Teachers and students should, therefore, switch to their mother tongue when necessary to mitigate learning blocks.

Nevertheless, codeswitching might be a hindrance to students' engagement in classroom activities and understanding of the content. At the University of Rwanda, for example, international students would lose focus and interest in the teaching and learning process if lecturers switched to Kinyarwanda, a language they do not speak. According to Rust and Nel (2024), there are occasions where the monolingual approach is beneficial and other circumstances requiring the use of codeswitching.

4.2.4 Lack of Reading Culture

53 respondents confessed that they rarely engaged in reading. Some avowed that they read only when they were compelled to because their lecturers had given them research-based assignments or when they were preparing for continuous assessment tests or examinations. For instance, S19 affirmed,

Our parents are not organised our well-being for children to read … Also here at university it is not easier to improve our English proficiency. In fact, we do not read. Most time, our target is to get marks, to pass exams rather than to know more.

Other respondents admitted that they did not like reading because their families did not instill the reading culture in them as they themselves did not read. Therefore, they were neither encouraged nor motivated to practise this skill. This lack of reading habits is illustrated in the following extracts from S29 and S71 respectively:

My mother used to tell me that she owned P2. My dad did not attend school. They never bought me books to read. Their educational level affected my performance in English because they never stimulated me to read.

Both my parents are not educated and cannot support my studies. Their level of education have a great impact on my studies. They didn't teach me how to read. They did not buy me books. I have never seen them reading something.

Another respondent, S25, posited, "My mum works in the public sector. She is a primary school teacher. My father runs some business …. And they did not buy me books on English.

All the above extracts indicate that the reading culture is lacking in the respondents' families regardless of the latter's levels of education. Cox and Abbott (2021) corroborate these respondents' declarations stating that Rwandan culture is largely oral and Rwandans do not generally read. In line with the above assertions, the researchers contend that lack of reading culture is likely to negatively impact on students' reading proficiency and hinder the development of other English skills.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Conclusion

This research aimed at investigating cultural factors that can affect Rwandan students' performance in the English language. The findings showed that culture could have both positive and negative effects on this medium of instruction. The identified favourable effects were positive transfer and use of context-situated teaching and learning materials. The detrimental effects were non-conducive linguistic environment, negative transfer from the home language to the target language, code-switching, and lack of reading culture. Positive transfer occurred when the respondents' competence in Kinyarwanda was transferred to English, and the use of context-situated teaching and learning materials facilitated the teaching and learning process. The negative effects prevented students from upgrading their performance in this target language.

5.2 Recommendations

The researchers recommend language-in-education policy makers to ensure proper implementation of the competency-based curriculum at all levels of education to familiarise students with English from an early age. They also advise teachers of English to devise engaging teaching strategies and materials to help develop their students' proficiency in English as most of them have the opportunity to practise this language only in the school setting. The teachers of English should also provide students with attracting reading materials to promote their love for reading and enable them to develop good reading habits. On the other hand, subject teachers ought to feel responsible for their students' performance in English and help address the language challenges they may encounter. Furthermore, as the Rwandan linguistic background is not conducive to the learning of English, Rwandan students should be conscious that the skills they acquire from class are not sufficient and strive to work out techniques that may help boost their performance in English.

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