

**Factors leading to secondary ordinary level learners' low proficiency in English speaking  
A case of secondary schools in Musanze district**

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**ABSTRACT**

For many Rwandan learners, speaking English remains limited and questioned. This article determined the Factors leading to secondary ordinary level learners' low English speaking proficiency in secondary schools in Musanze district. The study relied on both qualitative and quantitative approaches, purposive and simple random sampling were used to select a sample of 122 respondents. Data were collected using questionnaires and interviews & focus group discussions, and analysed using SPSS and thematic content analysis. Generally, the findings showed that factors leading to low proficiency involve teachers' inability to encourage learners to communicate in English, lack of language practice environment, inadequate classrooms. Findings also uncovered that using morphology awareness to guess estimate new vocabularies and applying computer assisted approach (British e-dictionary) to enhance English pronunciation as well as reinforcing phonetics/ phonologies can enhance learners' English speaking proficiency and play a significant role in improving ordinary level learners' English speaking proficiency in Musanze district.

**Keywords:** *Factors, English, Ordinary level, Learners & Speaking proficiency*

**1. INTRODUCTION**

The idea of this article rolled in my mind when I was conducting research within the learners, teachers and director of studies. During the data collection process, I was inspired by the answers provided by directors of studies, teachers and learners so I was able to determine what factors led to ordinary level learners' low English speaking proficiency in secondary schools in Musanze district namely G.S. Busogo I, G.S. Busogo II and G.S Rusanze, and thus the participants provided answers that touched my heart and boosted my experience in teaching English.

**1.1. Background information**

In the past few decades, English has been regarded as a global language. This international language has been linguistically dominated the world in social, economic, political, and education domains [1]. In many African countries, English, has become the dominant medium of instruction [2]. Since this additional language is also used in teaching and learning, students should endeavor to achieve a level of proficiency necessary for effective learning across the curriculum [3].

In Rwanda, since 1962, Kinyarwanda, Rwandans' mother tongue, and French, the colonizer's language, were both used as mediums of instruction at secondary school level. However, when peace was restored in the country after the 1994 genocide perpetrated against the Tutsis, and Rwandans who had been living in exile in neighboring countries returned to their homeland, it was judged crucial to reform the education system. The Rwandan Government, through the Ministry of Education, declared English and French to be the languages of instruction from secondary school level onwards and Kinyarwanda at primary and nursery levels [4].

In 2008, the government of Rwanda proclaimed English as the sole medium of instruction at all levels of education in the country. However, this shift in instructional language affected both teachers and learners. Most teachers were not well trained to teach in this foreign language [5]. Thus, there had to be a deep preparation of instructors and students to enable them to cope with language changes. As highlighted by Anderson and Rusanganwa[6], this shift in the medium of instruction did not inconvenience secondary school teachers only but also students. In the tertiary level, as they tended to explain the learning material in Kinyarwanda.

According to Freedman and Samuelson [7], Rwandan teachers who lack a good command of English are likely to switch to Kinyarwanda, which hinders the promotion of learners' literacy in both languages and specifically prevents them from developing English speaking proficiency. In schools that are located in Musanze district, it is acknowledged that teachers use both Kinyarwanda and English to help learners to understand the content of their subjects. Obviously, even if the medium of instruction is English, Kinyarwanda is often resorted to in the classroom due to the low level of learners' language speaking capabilities and some teachers' lack of English speaking proficiency. Therefore, as far as academic achievement is concerned, students do not perform at the expected level and their language speaking proficiency remains poor [4]. The present article aimed at determining the factors that thwarting the English speaking proficiency of ordinary level learners in secondary schools in Musanze district. It also intended to suggest potential strategies to cater for these learner's language needs.

## **1.2. Research questions**

- i. What is learners' level of speaking proficiency in English?
- ii. What are the causes of low English speaking proficiency among the learners?
- iii. Which strategies can be used to enhance learners' English speaking proficiency?

## **1.3. Significance and Justification of the Study**

It is envisaged that this article will immensely benefit a cluster of stakeholders among other the researcher herself, other researchers, schools in Musanze district, the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) and Rwandan readers in general. The article will also motivate and stimulate other researchers, hence, they will have the intellectual vigor to continuously advance scholarship into this seemingly domain to improve their skills and practices that might collaboratively help learners to improve their English speaking proficiency.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature was taken from books, journals, government reports and information from Internet based on the key concepts namely English speaking proficiency and how to cater for factors leading to low performance in English speaking.

### **2.1. Factors influencing learners' low English speaking proficiency**

Factors influencing learners' low English speaking proficiency includes large class size, the level of teachers' motivation and main responsibilities, English teaching and learning environment, level of home support environment, learner's personality influence and poverty.

#### **2.1.1. The teaching and learning materials versus students' performance in English**

One language skill helps the acquisition of another for instance, reading books can help students to increase their vocabularies which will be used in speaking the intended language. For Hayes [1], enough English speaking facilities have been known to contribute significantly to students' English speaking proficiency. It means their absence or inadequacy in schools might hamper effective learning which eventually results into poor speaking English proficiency. Their availability and adequacy could enhance students' effective learning of other courses and better performance in English. Teaching and learning materials are regarded as very important in enhancing learning in schools. Teachers teach according to textbooks, students acquire language input mainly from textbooks, and achievement tests are designed based on the content of textbooks. Therefore, inadequate learning facilities, and especially textbooks, libraries, English speaking clubs are a common feature leading to learners' low performance in English speaking proficiency [8]. Language practice requires language materials as well.

#### **2.1.2. Learners' ability to use English beyond the classroom**

Valuing the out of classroom communication is of a paramount importance in language development especially language speaking. According to Sofi [9], language use beyond the classroom is a very important component of a communicative curriculum. The classroom is a rehearsal, so regardless of the variety of communicative activities in the classroom, their purpose remains preparing learners to use the second language in the world beyond. Lack of student motivation to speak English beyond classroom leads to low learners' English speaking ability [10]. Frequent use of mother tongue (Kinyarwanda) beyond classroom affects learners' ability to fluently speak English [11]. Learners who are fluent in speaking English beyond the classroom have a positive English speaking proficiency than those who do not use English in their communicative competence once classes are over.

#### **2.1.3. Home-school environment impact on learners' English speaking proficiency**

Importantly, home communication has to be more considered in improving learners' English speaking ability, as the role of home-school environment in influencing learners' English speaking performance is evidently necessary. Parents' level of education, their marital status, and their attitudes towards education influence their children's speaking performance. Therefore, parents who do not help their children to deal with their school subjects and who do not provide

all required resources influence negatively their children performance in English. The parents are, however, seen as role models by their children especially if they speak fluent English at home [12]. Parents or other people that learners encounter in their homes play a great role in increasing learners' English fluency.

#### **2.1.4. The effects of affective filter in speaking English**

Affective filter is responsible for individual variation in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) countries. As Yule [13] argues, high affective strainer may override whatever physical and cognitive abilities that learners have. In my humble view, lack of motivation, lack of confidence and being concerned with failure are some causes of high affective filter in speaking English. Low speaking proficiency among learners is, hence, the result of factors affecting their affective filter. There is a proverb saying that "Where there is a will, there is a way". Having the will to speak English will certainly enhance learners' fluency and proficiency in English speaking.

#### **2.2. Strategies to cater for factors affecting English speaking proficiency development**

In a social community, it is very crucial to interact with others. In addition, if someone knowledge of a certain foreign language has to be seen through his/her standard ability of speaking the intended language. Unfortunately, this is not easy for foreign language learners to speak English as a second language.

The practices that can be used to improve students' speaking ability. These are practicing discussions, playing games, singing songs, oral reporting, role playing, small group discussions, giving speeches, news reading, poetry reading and debates. With regard to the learners' improvement of their English speaking proficiency, another method that was put up is using the storytelling wherein language learners are exposed to new vocabulary, real context expressions and pronunciation to be used in oral production. Another approach that has had a great impact on oral production is the communicative language teaching. This strategy helps students more in creating real and understandable phrases instead of repeating and memorising grammar structures. In addition, every teacher is a language teacher [14], so even subject teachers should devise strategies to enhance their students' English speaking proficiency besides delivering content.

##### **2.2.1. Improvement of teachers' English language proficiency**

In order to support learners to acquire English language skills, teachers in Rwanda had to learn English as one their job requirements. It was not easy for some teachers to acquire the new language since it required time and finances. The Government of Rwanda jumped in to give support to them by offering English language courses. The courses were delivered by qualified English language mentors on a daily basis. This was obligatory for each and every teacher teaching in secondary and primary schools. The change was a drop in an ocean to the teachers since there was a lot to be done in little time [15,16 &7]. There was a need of a continuous English training up to the level to which both the teachers and learners would be fully motivated to use this medium of instruction. According to Lynd [17], the government of Rwanda came up with strategies, that is, a help to improve English proficiency of teachers in schools. This was done by professionals in teacher planning and Rwandan teachers who were proficient in the English language. The training took place during school break in June to mid-September. However, the target of reaching many teachers was not successful because of ratio of the number of teachers to one facilitator or trainer.

In fact, teachers who enrolled in these programmes were at different levels of English proficiency. Some of them were beginners, others middle or advanced. As learning a language is a long process these groups of teachers needed a continuous training to learn the English language.

##### **2.2.2. Use of communicative output activities**

The Communicative approach is one of the action that include any activities that encourage and require a learner to speak with and listen to other learners, as well as with people in the program and community. As a result, this breaks down the barriers of learning the English language and promotes confidence and fluency among the communicators. This also makes the language a tool not an end in itself as they say. Further, this approach uses a technique of asking questions asked by their fellows' towards their personal information so as to involve meaningful communication in the teaching and learning process. Eventually, from these communicative output activities, learners learn from each other and create a collaborative teaching and learning environment.

##### **2.2.3. Using language to talk about language**

According to Hill and Flynn [18], language learners tend to be shy when talking to a person they do not understand. Teachers can support their students to gain confidence by letting them know that not understanding someone does not mean that you cannot communicate but asking for clarification is a vital aspect for effective communication to take place. There is no need of fear and shyness for students because making mistakes is normal, and we all learn through mistakes. If you do not make mistakes, you learn nothing. Clarification, and questions are very important to reduce misunderstanding. Thus, through practices, students develop their capability to regular use of English in learning activities.

### **2.3. Theoretical framework**

The findings of this article guided by Canale's and Swain's [19] 'integrative theory of communication competence' and speaking language proficiency theory because two theories share common sense that when students operate in the classroom with alimited communication skills /speaking English skills, the quality and quantity of language learnt and what the language learners produce in oral and written form may be relatively poor and weak.

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

The article adopted a case study cross sectional survey design where both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used. A triangulation of responses was made by comparing quantitative data (collected using questionnaire), qualitative data (gathered using interview) and secondary data (obtained using documentary review technique).

### **3.1. Study population and sample size**

The respondents summed to 122 were selected using simple random and purposive sampling techniques. The specific respondents include: 3 directors of studies, 36 class teachers and 83 learners drawn from 639 population of interest in three secondary schools in Busogo Sector (G.S. Busogo I & II and G.S. Rusanze).

### **3.2. Sampling techniques**

Purposive sampling and simple random techniques were used to select the respondents. Purposeful sampling was applied to select teachers to whom the questionnaire was administered and school staff with whom interview protocols were conducted since their number is small thus easy to manage and they possess all the necessary information. Simple random sampling techniques were applied while choosing the students to respond to the interview (FGD) items.

### **3.3. Research instruments**

The study employed the following methods and instruments: questionnaires, interview Schedules and documentary review. The five scale structured questionnaire was developed and administered to 36 class teachers in Busogo sector. 33 (91.6% of total distributed) questionnaire items were retrieved and analysed to give empirical evidences of the study. However, the interview schedule was only used with the director of studies, and learners in form of focused group discussion. This involved face -to -face interactions between the researcher and the participant through discussion. Structured interview was given to the director of studies and learners to obtain brief and specific responses. Furthermore, documentary review guide was used to collect secondary data.

Documents such as school enrolment records, school's black books, letters from student suggestion boxes, newspapers and reports were also analysed to get information pertinent to the study. Moreover, the instruments were validated by focusing on the questions that the researcher asked experts and a pilot study was conducted. Critically, the experts scrutinized the contents of the questionnaire. The validators effected necessary corrections on the draft copy before accepting it as suitable for further procedures. For the questionnaire, the instrument had two sections. Section A collected respondents' demographic data, while section B had 8 items which measured the factors that contributed to creating difficulties in the English speaking proficiency of ordinary level learners and the strategies to promote the English speaking proficiency. The instrument had a 5-point rating scale as follows: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Undecided (U) Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD).

## **4. RESULT PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION**

The present study applied quantitative analysis employing statistical analysis using IBM SPSS statistics version 20.0 to evaluate data. Quantitative data collected using questionnaires were analyzed using SPSS with descriptive statistics. Additionally, the researcher used mean values and standard deviation to interpret the findings. Qualitative data collected using interview and FGD was narratively analysed.

### **4.1. Results presentation**

The results are presented referring to guiding questions of the study and the research questions were addressed in the following manner

**Research Question 1:** Which factors lead to ordinary level learners' low English speaking proficiency in public secondary schools in Musanze district?

**Table 1:** Factors leading to learners' low proficiency in English speaking

Factor items	Mean	Std.deviation	Rank	Interpretation
Lack of English clubs	3.99	.647	4	Agree
Insufficient students English text books	4.53	.502	5	Strongly agree
Teachers who are not role models in speaking English	4.87	2.07	5	Strongly agree
English language variety (British & American)	1.89	.535	2	Disagree
Study in different languages	3.08	1.27	3	Undecided
Lack of language practice environment	4.81	.849	5	Strongly agree
Basic education background	3.85	.011	4	Agree
Personal language ignorance	2.11	1.12	2	Disagree

Source: Field Work, 2022

Table 1 shows that insufficient students English text books, teachers who were not role models in speaking English and lack of language practice environment were factors leading to ordinary level learners' low English speaking proficiency in public secondary schools in Musanze district.

**Research Question 2:** What are the strategies to promote learners' English speaking proficiency?

**Table 2:** The strategies to cater for the factors for English speaking proficiency development

Responses	Mean	Std. deviation	Rank	Interpretation
Promoting interclasses debates in English	4.12	.876	4	Agree
Providing many English books	3.65	.321	4	Agree
Encouraging classroom participation in English	4.01	.380	4	Agree
Reinforcing phonetics and phonology	3.90	.450	4	Agree
Using morphology to guesstimate vocabularies	4.66	.532	5	Strongly agree
Applying computer assisted approach (British e-dictionary) to enhance English pronunciation	4.39	1.08	4	Agree
Motivating students to read English books (short stories and newspapers)	3.62	.918	4	Agree
Using audio-visual aids of English to enable students to imitate	4.00	.718	4	Agree

Source: Field Work, 2022

Table 2 shows that the majority of respondents suggested use of morphology to guesstimate vocabularies (game theory), use of English audio-visual aids to enable students to imitate and application of computer assisted approach (British e-dictionary) to enhance English pronunciation.

#### 4.2. Discussion of Findings

The results in this study were discussed in this section based on the research objectives.

##### Objective 1: Factors leading to ordinary level learners' low English speaking proficiency

The results presented in table 1 revealed that there were many factors leading to ordinary level learners' low English speaking proficiency in secondary schools in Musanze district. This was attributed to the fact that the majority of the respondents strongly agreed that students' English text books were insufficient (Mean= 4.53, Std=.502), teachers were not role models in speaking English (Mean=4.87, Std=2.07) and there was lack of language practice environment (Mean=4.81, Std=.849). In addition, some, respondents agreed that English clubs were non-existent (Mean =3.99, Std=.647) and basic education background was lacking (Mean= 3.85, Std=.011).

The interview with the respondents was confirmatory of these results: In fact, the director of studies in charge of academic activities in one sampled school revealed that lack of skillful teachers who could help learners, and studying in different languages did not allow learners to master any language (English or French). This was also reinforced by the director of studies at another school in the sample saying that:

- English is not the learners' mother tongue; it is a foreign language. They have been learning it with less motivation up to now, for they successfully communicate using Kinyarwanda, the language every Rwandan knows.



- Teachers (role models) are not competent, and not all of them motivate learners to participate in English.
- English is said to be the classroom language, however, learners take English notes and get Kinyarwanda explanation.

The findings also rhyme well with the potential interviewer (another school where investigation was conducted) that learners' low English speaking proficiency was linked to the teachers' inability to encourage learners to communicate in English. Additionally, low English speaking proficiency is the result of the environment; for example, Rwandans are used to speak Kinyarwanda, hence learners have no chance for immersion in spoken English. Indeed, the potential interview found that phonological variations and lack of self-confidence as well as shortage of books led to the learners' low English speaking proficiency.

This result is also in agreement with Hayes [1], who contends that enough English speaking facilities such as English text books and computers) have been known to contribute significantly to students' English speaking proficiency. It means their absence or inadequacy in schools might hamper effective learning which eventually results into low speaking English proficiency. Hayes shares the same view with Yeya[8] that inadequate learning facilities, and especially textbooks, libraries, and English speaking clubs are a common feature in learners' low performance in English speaking proficiency.

### **Objective 2: Potential strategies to promote learners' English speaking proficiency.**

The result of findings in table 2 revealed many strategies to enhance learners' English speaking proficiency in three secondary schools in Busogo sector. Potential strategies are promoting interclasses debates in English (Mean=4.12, Std=.876), providing of many English books (a mean value of 3.65), reinforcing phonetics and phonology (Mean= 4.01 and 3.90), using morphological instruction on morphological awareness and reading comprehension. Other strategies consist of enabling learners to acquire more vocabularies (Mean=4.66 and Std=5.32), applying computer assisted approach (British e-dictionary) to enhance English pronunciation (Mean= 4.39, Std=1.08), motivating students to read English books (short stories and newspapers) (Mean= 3.62, Std=.918), and using audio-visual English materials which enable students to imitate (Mean= 4.00, Std=.718).

The aforementioned strategies were supported by the findings of FGD that there were many possible suggestions and strategies to enhance learners' English speaking proficiency at G. S. Busogo (I & II) and G. S. Rusanze in Musanze district. These were the words of learners from group discussions; "Our English speaking proficiency should be enhanced through increasing libraries and providing more English dictionaries as well as creating more English speaking clubs at schools". Assuredly, "punishing learners who are accustomed to using Kinyarwanda in the classroom using speakers while learning to boost learners listening skills, giving rewards to teachers and students who promote English speaking in and out of the classroom as well as launching English speaking clubs in our schools can improve our self-confidence in English speaking proficiency.

In few words, the findings obtained using questionnaires and group discussions tend to agree with the interview with the director of studies proposition that learners should be encouraged to try to use new vocabularies to make new sentences with new words. Derivational morphology as the ability to manipulate derived words, recognise relationships between different morphological forms of a word, and production of new derivations of words should be used to enhance learners English language proficiency, as good pronunciation is a basis for a successful communication. If the speaker uses incorrect pronunciation, their speaking confuses the listeners and it will result in communication failure. To avoid such failure, application of computer assisted approach (British e-dictionary) to enhance English pronunciation can help learners to know how a given word is pronounced correctly.

Primary data are in collaborate evidence from the literature. The practices such as playing games, singing songs, oral reporting, role playing, small group discussions, giving speeches, news reading, poetry reading and debates can enhance English speaking proficiency among learners in secondary schools. With regard to the learners' improvement of their English speaking proficiency, another method that were suggested is using storytelling (game theory through morphological words guessing skills) wherein language learners are exposed to new vocabulary, real context expressions and pronunciation to be used in oral production.

## **5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **5.1. CONCLUSION**

The study undertaken at three public secondary schools in Busogo sector (G.S. Busogo I & II and G.S. Rusanze) aimed at determining and exploring the factors leading to ordinary level learners' low English speaking proficiency in public secondary schools in Musanze district and the strategies to develop these skills.

Findings reveal that factors leading to the learners' low English proficiency were the teachers' inability to encourage learners to communicate in English, lack of sufficient English books, no family involvement in encouraging learners'

English speaking outside the classroom, lack of language practice environment, inadequate classrooms as well as lack of motivation and materials such books and dictionaries to read and search for new words and vocabularies.

Harmoniously, Rwandan being a non-conducive environment to accommodating a foreign language and the fact that rural schools are not equipped with relevant and update teaching materials constitute a hindrance to the learning and teaching process. These challenges can be addressed by using morphology awareness to guesstimate new vocabularies, applying computer assisted approach (British e-dictionary) to enhance English pronunciation and reinforcing phonetics and phonologies. Not only the above stated techniques, but also supplying more English dictionaries, creating English speaking clubs at schools, allocating more time to speaking rather than to taking notes, and upsetting teachers' mindset habit of using Kinyarwanda during explanations, are strategies that can enhance learners' English speaking proficiency at G. S. Busogo (I & II) and G. S. Rusanze.

## 5.2. Recommendations

As suggestions, teachers and learners highlighted the issue of devotion in the teaching/learning process, timely availability of updated teaching aids, and creating English clubs where only English will be used. Teachers insisted on increasing trainings on how to teach in English and helping them get access to current teaching materials.

Moreover, the government of Rwanda should increase REB budget for training teachers, increasing libraries and providing more English dictionaries. The Rwanda Ministry of Education should also discourage teachers' mindset habit of using Kinyarwanda during explanations to enhance learners' English speaking proficiency in Rwanda in general and in Musanze in particular. Furthermore, teachers should be supportive of learners who find English language challenging to enable them to develop the routine of communicating in English language. Teachers should also provide special coaching, and encourage the use of English language outside the classroom; for instance, in the dormitory, sports hours, meal time, open debates, competitions in easy writing, and reading of school news bulletins. Indeed, teachers have to promote poetry by creating poems and reciting them to encourage learners' English speaking proficiency. As it has been drawn upon the findings, we cannot leave behind parents. They are as well recommended to encourage their children to speak English even outside their schools particularly at home.

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