

# **Students perceptions of using a second language in a mother tongue dominated environment: Contrastive Analysis**

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## **Abstract**

*While English is an official language which holds a significant role in education not only as a medium of instruction but also a subject of study from primary to tertiary level in Rwandan education system, some students still stick to their mother tongue in an academic environment which impedes second language education and quality education as a whole. Based on Communicative approach and Contrastive Analysis, the present study explores students' perceptions of using a second language in a mother tongue dominated environment. The study involved 36 Diploma students from language education combinations. The questionnaire was used for data collection. Analysis revealed that students' mother tongue environment affects their second language use. It was recommended that efforts be made to practise and improve their English language for effective communication.*

**Keywords:** Foreign language, English, communicative approach, mother tongue, academic environment

## **Introduction**

“The difference between who you are and who you want to be is what you do,” (said Bill Phillip). I choose these words to introduce this study as they embed the idea of ‘practice makes perfect’. A language is a tool for communication and second language knowledge opens the gates for the learner(s) to interact with wider speech communities. Gass & Selinker (2008) advocate that most second language learners do not achieve the same degree of knowledge and proficiency in a second language as they do in their native language and said that some learners appear to achieve native-like proficiency in more than one language. This is mostly due to each of the learners' exposure to and / or efforts in that language. Second language use is affected by a number of factors including but not limited to students' perceived ability in that language; frequency of use with speakers of that language; its use to read for enjoyment; its use for communication at home; integrative motivation; and career aspirations (Latu, 1994) and among these factors environment exposure plays a significant role as language acquirers are not usually aware of the fact that they are acquiring language, but are only aware of the fact that they are using the language for communication( Krashen, 2009). This study is concerned with such issue putting particular emphasis on the impact of a mother tongue dominated environment on foreign language use with particular interest in English, an official language

and medium of instruction in Rwandan schools where it has a profound role in the achievement of the country's vision 2020 to have become a knowledge-based and technology led economy (REB, 2015).

## **Background and problem statement**

Every research project starts with an idea; something that the researcher is interested in knowing more about or is worried about; something that is perceived as a problem or as a knowledge gap that needs to be filled (Hewitt, 2007). The situation of English language use in Kinyarwanda speaking environment is concerned here. Language learning aims primarily to enable learners to communicate and interact with people and the speech community of that language. Ordinarily, language is inextricably tied up with culture, and most people's concern about language is only part of their concern about the whole culture (Taumoeofau qtd in Latu, 1994:1). In fact, two different languages imply two different cultures and, as such, too much exposure to mother tongue environment in second language learning process can impede mastery or fluency of that language. Given that Kinyarwanda and English are two distant languages from each other - one is a Bantu parcel while another belongs to the family of Germanic languages; there is a likelihood that such distance can be a challenge for native speakers of Kinyarwanda to learn and practise effectively English. While the latter is used as an official language that holds a significant role in education not only as a medium of instruction but also a subject of study from primary to tertiary level in Rwandan education system, learners still have a bad culture of resorting to their mother tongue in academic activities. Such a situation still needs be addressed in the best possible way to mitigate related consequences that may impede quality education. As academic staff in the Department of Humanities and Languages Education, I was triggered by students' interaction mainly their conversations often dominated by their mother tongue [Kinyarwanda] while they are always encouraged to practise English language especially in Academic setting, i.e., at the college. When I was usually sitting in my office carrying out academic administration, most of the students who came for some services wanted to state their problems using Kinyarwanda which is their mother tongue. As one of the teachers responsible for language education, I usually tried to grapple with the situation as I could, but the problem still stagnates. I thought that these students go against Falk's belief that students who are most successful when learning a target language [English in this situation] are those who admire the culture of its speech community and have a desire to become familiar with or even integrate into the society in which the language is used. Now that I invited and encouraged them to express themselves in English so that they could be familiar with it, some tried hard, but many got stuck. This made me remember a similar class situation when I assigned learners a group activity during Literature lesson in year one, Diploma Program. In their groups, they had tendencies to discuss using their mother tongue but were forced and grabbed to use English as it was Literature in English. Hence, I realized that some students have difficulties of using English in their academic activities which can impact their language proficiency. As such I decided to conduct a research based on theories of second language learning; paying particular attention to environment they are exposed to and how the latter plays a part in their gaps of using the target language.

## **Study objectives**

The leading objective of this study was to explore students' perceptions of using a foreign language in a mother tongue dominated environment. Further, the study sought to investigate students' ability to use English in a mother tongue dominated environment; to identify the factors impeding students' use of a foreign language in a mother tongue setting, and to propose measures for the problem to be addressed for students' effective communication. In this study, I considered second language acquisition as generally referring to the learning of a nonnative language in the environment in which that language is spoken (Gass & Selinker, 2008).

## **Study questions**

This study is concerned with using English as a foreign language in Kinyarwanda dominated environment. The research was guided by the main question underpinned by three primary questions in line with the study objectives: The primary question is: What are the students' perceptions of using a foreign language in a mother tongue dominated environment? The Secondary questions are the following: How far are students able to use English in Kinyarwanda dominated environment? What are the factors affecting students' use of English language in an academic environment? How can the problem be addressed for students' effective communication?

## **Study scope and significance**

Research originates from dissatisfaction with what we know and have today and the need for more to improve the current conditions as regards the gap between theory and practice (Sibomana qtd in Bazimaziki, 2017). This study was conducted on level two students of diploma program during the academic year 2017-2018. All students were not involved. Rather, I intentionally chose Department of Humanities and Language Education specifically language education combinations. The reason is grounded in that they are being trained to teach English and are consequently much more concerned with language issue than other students within the same department. The study significance is two-fold. First, it reveals the situation as regard language learning and teaching so that, having known their gaps, students and teachers can take action to improve where necessary. Second, teachers of English language will have a good picture of their students' challenges in using that language. Further, researchers in the same ground will investigate into language education having some background knowledge about using the second language in a mother tongue exposed environment. Thus, this study is empirically, theoretically and practically significant.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Linguistic competence without communicative competence cannot suffice for a language learner to interact with other language users. This is why there had been a shift from the linguistic structure centered approach

to communicative approach in the late 1970s and 80s (Ankitaben, 2015). A language is a tool of communication and in fact, ought to be learned using communicative approach. In this regard, bearing in mind the nature and aim of this study, I deemed necessary to frame it on Richards (2006) principles of communicative approach besides Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) which posits that if similarities between two languages exist, the language learner will acquire the second language more easily, but if differences are encountered the acquisition of the target language will be more difficult (Fries & Lado qtd in Byung-gon, 1992), i.e., “in the comparison between native and foreign language lies the key to ease or difficulty in foreign language learning...Those elements that are similar to [the learner’s ] native language will be simple for him, and those that are different will be difficult”. While grammatical competence is an important dimension of language learning, it is clearly not all that is involved in learning a language since one can master the rules of sentence formation in a language and still not be very successful at being able to use the language for meaningful communication. The latter is understood in terms of communicative competence and includes the following aspects of language knowledge: knowing how to use language for a range of different purposes and functions, knowing how to vary our use of language according to the setting and the participants (e.g., knowing when to use formal and informal speech or when to use language appropriately for written as opposed to spoken communication), knowing how to produce and understand different types of texts (e.g., narratives, reports, interviews, conversations), knowing how to maintain communication despite having limitations in one’s language knowledge (e.g., through using different kinds of communication strategies).

Communicative language learning, according to Richards (2006), was formerly viewed as a process of mechanical habit formation. Good habits are formed by having students produce correct sentences and not through making mistakes. Errors were to be avoided through controlled opportunities for production (either written or spoken). By memorizing dialogs and performing drills, the chances of making mistakes were minimized. Learning was very much seen as under the control of the teacher. However, in recent years, language learning has been viewed from a very different perspective. It is seen as resulting from processes such as interaction between the learner and users of the language, collaborative creation of meaning, creating meaningful and purposeful interaction through language, negotiation of meaning as the learner and his or her interlocutor arrive at understanding, learning through attending to the feedback learners get when they use the language, paying attention to the language one hears (the input) and trying to incorporate new forms into one’s developing communicative competence, trying out and experimenting with different ways of saying things. Thus, the theory of Communicative approach as described above fits for a study of this type.

## **Literature Review**

Second language learning and the influence of mother tongue in second language use, in particular, have been so far the topics of interest in the ground of various linguistic studies. Mother tongue or mother language denotes the language learned in the home from older family members (UNESCO, 2003) while second language refers to the target language or the language of the classroom or the foreign language (Richards & Rodgers, 2002) or a non-primary language; a language beyond the native language, any

language learned after learning the L1, regardless of whether it is the second, third, fourth, or fifth language (Gass & Selinker, 2008). Opitz (2011:1) explains that whoever has learned a second language (L2) at some stage in their life will, without using that language for some period of time, have experienced certain changes and increased difficulties to communicate in it in conversation in particular as some previously mastered structures will be forgotten hence loss of fluency and of the ability to use language idiomatically. In other words, their language skills become "rusty." The situation stands that language learned for communication purpose gets lost easily in case it is not used. The issue is that second language learners more exposed to a mother tongue environment are likely to face challenges and do not have the same chance of mastering that language as those exposed to a different environment where their second language is practised. Lan (2005) advocated that more exposure to a foreign language offers a mere chance and an authentic environment to be able to use it for real and meaningful communication with its speakers. The author agrees that exposure to English enabled her to develop her basic interpersonal skills (BICS), as developed in Cummins (1980) i.e., social language for interaction, such as ordinary greetings and leave-takings; and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), i.e., the vocabulary, forms, and pragmatics necessary for succeeding in an academic setting. The point she made is without any doubt a witness that learning a language can be much easier when the learner lives with people who use that language in their daily activities, particularly in an academic setting. Klein (1986:25) explored similar point as echoed by the proponents of contrastive analysis hypothesis who claim that if similarities between two languages exist, the language learner will acquire the second language more easily, but if differences are encountered the acquisition of the target language will be more difficult. Paul Nation as qtd in Jancova (2010) claims that learners often avoid using the target language because they do not want to feel embarrassed about the mistakes they make. Inherently, in second language learning mistakes must not be avoided as they are part of learning. The problem with many second language learners is that they feel embarrassed and the more they fear, the more they will stay behind practice. Thus, it must be noted that young children learn [and use] a second language in different ways depending upon various factors, including their culture, particularly the status of their culture, language, and community within their larger social setting (Ball, 2013). Be that as it may, while English is currently a dominant global language, academics and scholars from non-English backgrounds are at a disadvantage since they have to adhere to a medium that is different from their mother tongue (Sibomana, 2016) the latter having a big influence on second language use especially when the two languages are far distant from each other.

## **Methodology**

This research is a descriptive survey study that mainly used mixed methods integrating qualitative and quantitative methods. Wisdom & Creswell, (2013) opine that mixed methods approach refers to an emergent methodology of research that advances the systematic integration of quantitative and qualitative data within a single investigation or sustained program of inquiry. This study agreed with this method as it involved both qualitative and numerical data generated from the questionnaire. The study was conducted using a sample of 36 students selected purposively from College of Education by their combinations namely Swahili English Education, Kinyarwanda English Education and French English Education.

Convenience sampling technique was used to determine the sample size for this study. As research put it, a sample of convenience sampling consists in selecting from the target population by their accessibility or convenience to the researcher. Convenience samples are sometimes referred to as ‘accidental samples’ for the reason that elements may be drawn into the sample simply because they just happen to be situated, spatially or administratively, near to where the researcher is conducting the data collection (UNESCO, 2005). Data were collected using questionnaire which consisted of 10 closed questions regarding students’ perceptions of using English in Kinyarwanda dominated environment. These questions covered the themes such as the use of English in academic environment, challenges in practicing English and how they can be mitigated, i.e. the role of the learners, teachers and the college in general. The questionnaire intended to reveal if learners’ mother tongue has a considerable impact on their language proficiency. A four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 4, (1. Strongly agree; 2. Agree; 3. Strongly disagree; and 4. Disagree) was used to indicate the perceptions of respondents on those questions. Besides, three open questions were used to know the respondents’ views as regard measures to improve students’ use of English. As the major ethical issues that govern the research include making consent with respondents, respect for anonymity, confidentiality and respect for privacy and security (Bryman, 2008), this study took it into consideration. Before collecting data, the researcher explained the respondents the purpose of the research so that they could have a complete understanding about what was expected from them. Participants’ choice to participate in the study was free. Data from participants were treated with confidentiality and were solely used for the research purpose they were intended for by the researcher. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for data analysis.

**Presentation of results**

The results presented below are generated from respondents’ views as reordered in Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

**Table 1: Tables showing Demographic situation of respondents Respondents’ age**

Category	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
20	3	8.3	8.3	8.3
21	10	27.8	27.8	36.1
22	11	30.6	30.6	66.7
23	6	16.7	16.7	83.3
24	6	16.7	16.7	100.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	

As indicated in the above table the age of respondents ranges between 20 and 24. Majority of respondents are 22 years old ( 30,6%), next comes the category of 22 years (27.8%), then 23 and 24 years(16.7% for each category) and a few respondents(8.3%) are 20 years old.

**Respondents' gender**

Category	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	21	58.3	58.3	58.3
Female	15	41.7	41.7	100.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	

The above table reveals that most respondents (63.9%) are from SEE (Swahili English Education), 22.2% are KEE (Kinyarwanda English Education) students while few of them (13.9%) are FEE (French English Education) students. It is important to mention here that all these students were doing Diploma program of University of Rwanda- College of Education.

**STATEMENTS**

**STUDENTS' VIEWS**

	<b>SA (%)</b>	<b>A (%)</b>	<b>SA&amp;A (%)</b>	<b>SD (%)</b>	<b>D (%)</b>	<b>SD &amp; D (%)</b>
1. I have difficulties in speaking English and cannot use it in the college	0.0	6.6	6.6	33.3	60.1	93.4
2. I can hold a conversation in English	2.8	63.9	66.7	11.1	22.2	33.3
3. I use English only for classroom activities	2.8	22.2	25	41.7	33.3	75
4. When I want to interact with others colleagues, I prefer English	16.7	44.4	61.1	2.8	36.1	38.9
5. When I go to contact lecturers, I use English but not Kinyarwanda	27.8	41.7	69.4	1.2	29.4	30.6
6. When I go to other offices, I use Kinyarwanda	33.3	38.9	72.2	13.9	13.9	27.8
7. I don't use English outside classroom because Kinyarwanda is commonly used in the college	36.1	22.2	58.3	16.7	25	42.7
8. I don't use English because my colleagues prefer Kinyarwanda	36.1	36.1	72.2	19.4	8.4	27.8
9. I don't use English because I fear to be embarrassed when I make mistakes	38.9	27.8	66.7	11.2	22.2	33.3
10. I don't use English for other offices because they prefer Kinyarwanda	31.6	21.2	52.8	30.5	16.7	47.2

**Respondents' views on coping with challenges of speaking English in the college**

The results presented below are the respondents’ views on the role of students, teachers, and University to grapple with challenges that impede effective use of English in an academic environment. Three questions were given to students such as: (1) what can students do to improve their communication skills in the English language? (2) What should the teacher do to help students improve their language? (3) What can University do to help students improve their communication skills in English? I presented the results in a table as shown below. Most respondents suggested the following solutions grapple with students’ difficulties of little use of English in an academic environment:

**Table showing respondents’ views on mitigating challenges that impede effective use of English**

<b>Students’ role</b>	<b>Teachers’ role</b>	<b>University’s role</b>
Join clubs and other group discussions.	Stick to English as a medium of instructions without translating into Kinyarwanda what is being taught.	Establish rules and regulations of using English within University or College community.
Avoid fear and feel confident in themselves.	Not allowing students to give their answers in Kinyarwanda in other subjects.	Provide teachers with enough audio-visual teaching and learning materials and build a language laboratory
Read enough and listen to English texts including TV, Radios.	Create and give enough opportunities for learners to speak during the teaching and learning exercise and assign them works to be presented orally and be considered as part of Continuous Assessment Tests	Encourage employees to stick to English during service delivery in their offices.
Attend conferences and meetings held in English, Watch movies in English.	Use audio-visual teaching and learning materials.	Hold students’ meeting in English only.
Use English whenever they need a service from an office in the college.	Ensure that each student can describe something in English.	Regular inter- combination competitions on debates and public speech delivery.
Engage conversations and discussions in English among themselves.		Organize inter-universities competitions at national and international levels and empower language clubs and media clubs.
Tell stories and jokes in English, Commitment to using English outside the school.		

**Discussion**

The primary aim of language learning is communication. As the saying goes that practice makes perfect, second language learners must practice the language if they want to be fluent in it. However, lack of practice of English due to Kinyarwanda influence among students impedes fluency in that language. In fact, respondents’ view revealed that they could use English, but practice is what matters. Most students (93.4%) posit that they don’t have special difficulties to speak English. They are thus able to use it because they have learned it as a second language and have been trained in it all their studies as a medium of instruction in Rwandan Education system from primary to tertiary education. Similarly, a great number of respondents

posit that they can hold a conversation in English (66.7%). The two situations can lead to the conclusion that students can use that foreign language. Unlikely, few of them revealed that they use English regardless of any mistakes they may make while (66.7%) revealed that they don't use English because they fear to be embarrassed when they make mistakes. Now that they are able but fear, the problem still that they need a lot of opportunities to practice English so that when exposed to debates and other kinds of public discussions, they can grapple with such barriers. It is important that students would like to use English even beyond the classroom as 75% posited that they prefer using English not only in the classroom but also outside. In the similar situation, 27.8% strongly agree that they resort to English when contacting their teachers while 41.7% agree that they do so. The implication is that (69.4%) of respondents use English when they are going to their teachers' offices which is interesting as teacher-student- interaction is concerned. Contrary, outside classroom, Kinyarwanda interferes and impedes them to interact in English as 72.2% contended that when they want to use English, their colleagues prefer Kinyarwanda. In connection with this point, 58.3 % of respondents said that the fact that Kinyarwanda is commonly used in the campus affects greatly their will to use English, unlike 41.7%. Regarding students use of English when they go to other offices in the college, the majority (52.8%) revealed that they don't use English when going for services from offices in the college. While offices in the college should help learners improve that language by encouraging them to ask for service using English, students views show that in most offices English is not mandatory. It follows that students use the language that is used there as there don't encounter any problem in that situation. Thus, it is a big challenge for students to practice English as the environment does not push them to make efforts to use that language.

As to how these challenges can be mitigated, students' perceptions involved the three sides in acting as one in a bid to promote communication in English. Students' views based on answers to three questions about the role that should be played by each of the three sides such as students, teachers, and the university. Among other things, respondents suggested that students should be active and be committed to knowing English by joining the clubs and other group discussions within the college. They add that they should avoid fear and feel confident of themselves, attend conferences and meetings held in English, read enough and listen to English texts including TV, Radios, watch movies in English, tell stories and jokes in English Engage conversations and discussions in English among themselves, use English not only in class but also outside the school, thus use English whenever they need a service from an office in the college and do their best to be exposed to English speaking situation.

On the other hand, the role of the teachers cannot be left out. In fact, teachers are those who guide students and facilitate their learning. As respondents suggested, teachers should stick to English and break down the culture of translating into Kinyarwanda for learners. As Fromkin et al. (2011:464) translating from the target language into the native language implies little use of the target language for communication. It emphasizes the teaching of grammar rules, focusing on accuracy, and writing with little or even no systematic attention paid to speaking or listening "Its principal method is translating from and into the target language, and the learners' native language is maintained as the reference system in the acquisition of the second language." This cannot happen by, and large help learners improve their communication skills. As respondents suggested that teachers ought to create opportunities for students to participate in

oral presentations of their group actively works to enhance their communication skills. Inherently, teachers ought to minimize, if not discourage, students resort to mother tongue during teaching and learning exercise.

University role to grapple with challenges impeding students' use of English cannot be undermined. Facilities can trigger learners to improve and fill the gaps in some knowledge practice. The College ought to provide teachers with enough audio-visual teaching and learning material and language laboratory as well. Further, intra and inter-universities competitions at national and international level can contribute to solving the issue progressively. Encouraging employees to regularly use English during service delivery and holding students' academic meetings in English can motivate students to improve their language too.

## **Summary and conclusion**

Education, second language education, in particular, is better when it benefits the trainees, and the latter's pride lies in their mastery and effective use of the acquired knowledge, competencies and skills for the betterment of their future. This has been the main concern in this study where Kinyarwanda dominated environment still impedes second language mastery. Framed on Communicative Approach and Contrastive analysis Hypothesis to a certain extent, the study used the questionnaire as a research instrument to gather information. Qualitative and quantitative analysis revealed that a number of factors are at the center of students' lack of English practice such as exposure to Kinyarwanda language which is a distant language from English; fear and feeling of being embarrassed if they make mistakes while they can use it if they break down that fear and feel confident. To grapple with the issue, new method of language teaching particularly communicative language teaching approach ought to be given more room so that at the completion of their degree studies graduates cannot feel frustrated due to poor communication skills which often disqualify them from job competition. Teachers should use audio-visual teaching and learning materials to help learners get in touch with English use in different situation. Teachers should stick to English as a medium of instruction. Learners should be given enough opportunities for group work presentations. Learners, particularly students whose combinations are related to languages education, are advised to play their part and break down that bad culture of not using English in school environment and even beyond particularly because Rwanda Education Board (2015) believes that besides being one of the official languages, English is also useful for learners to integrate into business and working situations in Rwanda. University should provide teachers with enough audio-visual teaching and learning aids. A language laboratory should be availed to facilitate students' practice. Should all offices in the college use English in service delivery to students, the latter would feel responsible for using it. Respondents suggested that students' academic meeting be held in English for them to be familiar with that language too. As the present study was carried out on a small group of students in College of Education, University of Rwanda, this is one of the limitations. Due to this drawback, I cannot pretend that the situation is the same in other colleges. So, based on the study findings, it is high time I recommended further researches to be carried out to investigate similar issues using a considerable sample that can find out more about English and other foreign languages taught in the University of Rwanda. Researchers of this kind can use observation and

more research tools to bridge the gaps in the present. In the same line, teachers' perceptions of teaching English language or foreign languages in a mother tongue dominated environment can be investigated as related studies.

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