

Causes and Remedies for Secondary School Learners' Low English Speaking Proficiency in Musanze District, Rwanda

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Abstract: This study sought to explore causes and remedies for secondary school learners' low speaking proficiency in English in Musanze District, Rwanda, using the quantitative approach. Out of the population of 459 teachers and students in three selected schools, the study sampled 27 teachers and 81 students, making a sample of 108 through purposive and random sampling. The questionnaire data was edited, coded, summarized and analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences in terms of descriptive statistic. The study concluded that low proficiency in English speaking was due to shyness to practice speaking, lack of English clubs and lack of speaking motivation. Being in an endoglossic country, the students preferred to use their mother tongue (Kinyarwanda) most of their time and were fearful of criticism in attempt to speaking in English. English club and inter-class debate clubs provided positive effect in improving students' fluency. Therefore, English clubs and inter-class debate clubs constitute a suitable initiative to improve students' English speaking ability. Therefore, it is important for schools to establish and sustain English club and inter-class debate clubs which will improve the English fluency of students.

Keywords: Response; English; ordinary level learners; speaking proficiency.

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Introduction

English is a tool of communication to convey ideas and convey feelings (Sirbu, 2016). English has been regarded as a global language. The inter-national language has dominated the world in social, economic, political and educational domains (Hayes, 2017). According to Boonkit (2017), English

language has been used universally in communication. For this reason, English-speaking skills are taught and developed along with the other English language skills in order to improve the learners' language pronunciation and speaking. In many African countries, English has become the dominant medium of instruction (Brock-Utne and

Alidou, 2016). Since this additional language is used in teaching and learning, students should endeavor to achieve the level of proficiency necessary for effective learning across the curriculum (Ellis, 2012).

In Rwanda, English is regarded as a foreign language; however, it is taught formally in school. Every learner in Rwanda needs to learn and master this language because it is used in many formal and informal settings. Therefore, learners make various efforts to achieve good proficiency in English, one of which is by joining English clubs. Bowen (2016) explains that speaking club members have to speak and listen to each other about a particular topic of conjoint concern, and during the inter-class group discussion, each member has an opportunity to present information and ideas.

In 2008, the Rwandan Government, through the Ministry of Education, declared English and French to be the languages of instruction at the secondary school level and Kinyarwanda at primary and nursery (MINEDUC, 2011). Later in 2013, English was declared a sole medium of instruction at all levels of education in Rwanda.

In Rwanda, teachers use both Kinyarwanda and English to help learners understand the content of their subjects. Even if the medium of instruction is English, Kinyarwanda is mostly used in the classroom due to the low level of learners' language-speaking capabilities and teachers' lack of English-speaking proficiency. Speaking clubs and inter-class discussions may be one solution to the speaking problem since the club may facilitate the students' practice of speaking and learning English. It was found out that English-speaking clubs and inter-class English discussions can make people practice speaking in a pleasant way to enhance their proficiency. Niyibizi, 2010). In Rwanda, students do not speak English at the expected level, and their language proficiency remains poor in secondary schools (MINEDUC, 2011). Therefore, this study sought to establish causes and remedies for secondary school learners' low English speaking proficiency in Musanze District, Rwanda.

Literature Review

This section presents the literature review related to causes and remedies for speaking proficiency.

Causes of Learners' Low English

Academically, the first motivation for teachers is learners' success. However, this is hard to achieve when learners do not have a good proficiency in

English (speaking, reading, writing and listening) (Komba, 2012). There are several factors that can affect learners' English proficiency in schools. According to Sofi (2015), the use of language beyond the classroom is a very important component for improved language proficiency. If students do not speak the language outside the classroom, they are likely to experience limited proficiency in such a given language (Ur, 2011). In Rwanda, the use of Kinyarwanda in discussions outside the classroom negatively affects the learners' fluency in English (Bennell & Akyeampong, 2017). Learners who are confident in speaking English beyond the classroom have a higher level of English proficiency than those who do not use English in their normal life (Noyes, 2014). Additionally, home communication has a crucial influence on learners' abilities and attitudes towards English-speaking skills. Therefore, the role of the home environment in influencing learners' English-speaking is not overemphasized (Hashakimana, 2011). Parents' level of education and their outlooks towards education may affect their children's speaking proficiency (Mart, 2019).

Parents could be potential role models to their children, especially if they speak English fluently at home, which plays a great role in increasing the learners' English proficiency (Okaye, 2013). Nevertheless, students who do not perform well in English speaking proficiency exist in many parts of the world, especially in countries that English is not spoken as the mother tongue. English language has always played a key role in the Rwanda nation development, but the English proficiency level of learners in Rwanda especially in Musanze District is still far from satisfactory (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010).

Besides, teacher's ability to speak English has an influence learners' English proficiency. Learners in secondary schools are petrified to practice the English language because they fear making mistakes (Gan, 2013). Another reason is having poor vocabulary and pronunciation and feeling shy about taking part in a conversation in front of larger groups in their classroom or beyond (Fallah, 2014; Mahdi, 2014). In fact, the debates and discussions held on the causes of learners' low English proficiency in Rwandan secondary schools revealed that some teachers do not have enough skills to teach in English and they prefer to mix English and Kinyarwanda, whereas the students are required to study in English only. This prevents learners from

developing English skills effectively (Kagwesage, 2012; Nzitabakuze, 2011 and Marie, 2013). John and Ehow (2011) stated that English speaking proficiency challenges result from many different factors, such as school resources, class size, quality of teachers and school attendance. Murray and Christison (2010) observed that some learners think English is only a school subject and they don't see its significance for their prospective employment to work with multinational or national organizations, where English is regularly used. According to Susanna (2022), weak students usually have poor strategies and give up easily when they are in struggle.

Remedies for Proficiency in English

This section presents literature about remedies for proficiency in English.

English Speaking Clubs

In Indonesia, English clubs contribute toward students' development of their speaking skill in the classroom or outside the classroom (Melviza et al., 2017). Major English club activities include storytelling, speech and debate competition. In India, English club is used as a program for students to improve their English ability in a friendly and supportive environment (Rusli, 2014). English Club is used in Pakistan to encourage students to study literature, theatre, poetry and creative writing (Widdowson, 2015). In South Africa, English language clubs make an enjoyable and stress-free language learning situation (Pereira et al., 2013). Applying English club discussion is an effective way in improving learners' speaking fluency at the second grade in secondary schools in Nigeria. An experimental study revealed that English clubs not only give the students a motivation, more knowledge and experience, but also give them comfortable atmosphere for practice their speaking ability (Harris, 2016).

English speaking Clubs are one of effective language learning strategies that improve students' speaking ability (Sharma, 2018). Establishing, enforcing and financing English speaking clubs increase students' English speaking ability (Pereira et al., 2013; Xu, 2018).

Inter-class Debate Clubs

The inter-class debate club is one of the most famous events whereby students from two or more classes compete against each other in terms of speaking, reading and writing. This approach

improves language proficiency (Thonbury, 2018). In Singapore, inter-class debate clubs encourage thinking skills and offer motivating contexts for learners to communicate with one another. Debate can also enhance active learning, where opposite points of view are presented and argued (Gokhale, 2015). Canadian schools and colleges use inter-class debate clubs as an excellent activity for language learning because they engages students in a variety of cognitive and linguistic ways. In addition to providing meaningful listening, speaking and writing opportunities, inter-class debate clubs are also highly effective in developing argumentation skills for persuasive English speech and writing (Jerome & Algarra, 2016).

A study conducted by Burek and Asonto (2014) in Ghana revealed that students' components of speaking such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency and comprehension could be enhanced through inter-class debate clubs. According to Chan et al. (2016), inter-class debate clubs have had a significant impact on oral production because it involves activities that promote and require a student to speak and listen to others. Inter-class debate clubs break down barriers to learning English and enhance communicators' confidence and fluency (Bertilsson, 2019). Some teachers in Rwanda use inter-class debate clubs as a strategy to enable students to master the art of speaking, which is the single most important aspect of learning English as second or foreign language. This is because success in speaking is measured in terms of one's ability to carry out conversations in English (Gardner, 2016).

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted the quantitative approach. Quantitative research is the process of collecting and analyzing numerical data to describe, predict or control variables of interest (Keinath & Oliver, 2020). This type of research helps in testing the causal relationships between variables, making predictions, and generalizing results to wider populations.

Population and Sampling

This study was conducted in Busogo sector, Musanze District in Rwanda, focusing on only three secondary schools. The researchers chose the three secondary schools among 59 secondary schools because the selected schools experienced poor academic performance due to poor language

proficiency compared to other schools in the study area (Musanze District, department of Education, 2023). Out of the population of 459 individuals (students and teachers), the study picked 81

students and 27 teachers, making the total of 108 respondents, selected through purposive and random sampling as seen in table 1. Both groups respondent through a questionnaire.

Table 1: Study Population, Sample Size and Sampling Techniques Used

Respondents	Targeted population		Strategy			Research tools	
	Population	Sample size	Types of sample size	Sampling			
Teachers	G.S Busogo I	8	8	Universally	Purposively	Questionnaire	
	G.S Busogo II	12	12	Universally			
	G.S Rusanze	7	7	Universally			
Students	G.S Busogo I	107	S2:11	Systematically	Randomly	Questionnaire	
			S3:9				
	G.S Busogo II	205	81				S2:21
			S3:18				
		120	S2:12				
	E.S Rusanze		S2:10				
Total	459	108					

Validity and Reliability

The study ensured acceptable validity of the instruments through expert judgment. The experts commented where to adjust to improve the instruments before data collection took place. The questionnaire was subjected to statistical test to establish an acceptable reliability, which was 0.7 Cronbach's Alpha.

Statistical Treatment of Data

Collected data was edited, coded, summarized and analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) in terms of descriptive statistics and presented in tables.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the results of the study and it is guided by research questions as follows:

Research Question 1: What are the causes of learners' low proficiency in speaking English in secondary schools in Musanze District?

Literature shows only 10.92% of learners in Musanze District can speak English confidently without mixing with Kinyarwanda, without fear (Musanze District Report, 2023). This situation causes the learners to code-switch and/or code mix from English to Kinyarwanda because they were not self-confident and they got afraid to fully engage in English conversations.

Table 2: Respondents' Perceptions on the Causes of Learners' Low Proficiency

Respondents' Perceptions	Agreement		Undecided		Disagreement	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Shy to speak	108	100	0	0	0	0
Lack of English clubs	101	93.5	0	0	7	6.5
Lack of speaking motivation	90	83.3	0	0	3	9.1
Lack of language practice environment	45	41.6	21	19.4	33	30.3
Lack of English books	30	27.7	0	0	78	72.3
Lack of qualified English teachers	15	13.9	0	0	93	86.1

Information from table 2 shows respondents' perception on reasons for students' low proficiency in English. The majority of the respondents considered shyness (100%), lack of English clubs (93.5%) and lack of speaking motivation (83.3) as reasons for learners' low proficiency in English. In the same manner, a bigger portion of respondents (41.6%) considered lack of language practice

environment as a reason for low proficiency. These findings are in line with literature, which shows that shyness and lack of motivation towards speaking English in the classroom atmosphere leads to low English proficiency among the students (Asher, 2017). However, the majority (72.3%) disagreed that lack of books for English was a reason for low proficiency in English. This is attributed by the

available books in all secondary schools in Musanze District at 2:1 to mean 1 book to two students (Ministry of Education (2022)).

Furthermore, most of respondents (86.1%) disagreed that lack of qualified teachers was a reason for low proficiency. The findings are supported by empirical data that the ratio of learners-teachers in secondary schools in Musanze is sufficiently at 10:1(10 students per teacher) (Musanze District Report, 2023). This ratio allows teachers to facilitate a healthy learning environment that provides individualized help. Lower ratio classrooms are also more task-focused, disciplined and engaged (Musanze Public school review, 2023). The ratio of learners-teachers was sufficiently enough at 18:1 in 2021 and 10: 1 in 2023.

Research Question 2: Do English speaking clubs improve learners' proficiency in English?

This research question sought to establish the opinion of respondents whether English speaking clubs improve the learners' proficiency in English. The table indicates that the majority of respondents agreed with all the items in table 3. Particularly, they (89.8%) agreed that speaking clubs give

students chance to practice English. The findings are in line with literature that English speaking clubs improve learners' English-speaking behavior (Richards, 2019). Furthermore, English speaking clubs enable conversations between learners as they express themselves in utterances that are relevant and easily comprehensible to each other, leading to acceptable level of language accuracy (Shumin, 2017).

All respondents agreed that speaking clubs improve students' speaking skills. This implies that English club is a suitable teaching strategy to advance students' English speaking ability in the secondary schools being investigated. All respondents agreed that speaking clubs increase students' fluency. In harmony, literature shows that English speaking clubs develop students' ability to speak fluently and interactively (Richards, 2019).

All respondents agreed that speaking clubs reduces the learners' fear to speak. They agreed that speaking clubs reduces the learners' fear to speak. Finally, the majority (86.1%) agreed that speaking clubs enable the mastery of English skills.

Table 3: Respondents' Perceptions of the Role of Speaking Clubs

Speaking clubs.....	Agreement		Undecided		Disagreement	
Give students chance to practice English	97	89.8	3	2.7	9	8.3
Improve students speaking skills	108	100	0	0	0	0
Increase English Fluency	108	100	0	0	0	0
Build confidence to speak English	105	97.3	3	2.7	0	0
Reduce the learners' fear of speaking	108	100	0	0	0	0
Teach basic English Skills	93	86.1	9	8.4	15	13.8

The field results agree well with Harris's (2009) finding that English clubs improve all constituents of speaking, such as pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension, which reduce the students' fear and anxiety of speaking in English. Speaking clubs give to students chance to practice English, enhance their speaking abilities and fluency, boost their confidence when speaking English, lessen fear of making mistakes while speaking and supplies fundamental English skills (reading, writing and speaking) (Thornbury, 2015). The benefits of English speaking clubs include promoting interaction between students and teachers, improving communication skills, providing opportunities for real-life language use, and making language learning enjoyable (Shumin, 2017).

Research Question 3: Do inter-class debate clubs improve learners' proficiency in English?

This research question sought to express the opinion of respondents whether inter-class debate clubs improved learners' proficiency in English. Table 4 (p. 71) indicates that the majority agreed with all the items in the table. For instance, they (94.4%) agreed that inter-class debate clubs improve oral production improves learners' proficiency in English. Similarly, Sharma (2018) revealed that one of the potential techniques to improve students' speaking abilities is inter-class debate clubs.

Table 4: Respondent' Perceptions of Inter-class debate Clubs

Inter-class debate clubs in improving the learners' proficiency in English?	Agreement		Undecided		Disagreement	
Improve oral production	102	94.4	6	5.6	0	0
Reduce promote English fluency	99	91.6	9	8.4	0	0
Create collaborative learning Environment	99	91.6	6	5.6	4	3.7
Give more vocabulary to the learners	30	97.3	0	0	3	2.7
Enhance communication competence	102	94.4	0	0	6	5.6
Improve students' potential talent and interest	104	96.3	4	3.7	0	0

The majority of the respondents agreed that inter-class debate clubs promoted English fluency, create collaborative learning Environment, give more vocabulary to the learners, enhances communication competence and improve students' potential talents and interests. The findings are supported by the literature that inter-class debate clubs improve learners' English fluency and comprehension (Richard et al., 2012). The inter-class debate clubs increase the students' real-Life Communication, enhancing communication while boosting English speaking confidence (Rivers, 2018). Similarly, Richard and other authors found that inter-class debate clubs boost learners' English speaking engagement (Richard et al., 2012). Urrutia and Vega (2010) indicated that the clubs play a significant toward learners' cooperation, self-confidence, vocabulary building and attainment of speaking skills. Prieto (2007) performed a study about cooperative learning tasks and showed that one way to improve speaking skill is to interact with others and learn from others.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that low proficiency in English speaking was due to shyness to practice speaking, lack of English clubs and lack of speaking motivation. Being in an endoglossic country, the students preferred to use their mother tongue (Kinyarwanda) most of their time and were fearful of criticism in attempt to speaking in English. English club and interclass debate clubs s provided positive effect in improving students' fluency. Therefore, English clubs and interclass debate clubs constitute a suitable initiative to improve students' English speaking ability. Therefore, it is important for schools to establish and sustain English club and interclass debate clubs which will improve the English fluency of students.

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