

***Rural Basic Education for All:  
The Impact of the Language of Instruction on the Quality***

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**Abstract**

The paper discusses the issues related to the use of English as Language of Instructions (LoI) in rural Twelve-Year Basic Education (12YBE) in Rwanda: Quality questions in education through English as LoI. The use of English, the language of the world and new technology, emerged as an economic and educational solution at improving the quality of education to meet the labour market demand in our region. However, there is an uncertainty related to the contribution of weak skills in English to the quality of education. 12 YBE students have little or no exposure to English. They barely understand the LoI and their teachers also have weak knowledge in LoI. The low standards of LoI are implicated in low quality and examination disadvantages. What can we do to effectively use English as LoI? This research gives the Ministry of Education an overview of the standards of English used as LoI in 12 YBE, and how it affects the quality.

This research is a qualitative study that used the micro-approach to explore the quality in 12 YBE in rural areas. Public and private schools are concerned. Stratified random sampling technique was used to select 25 rural schools for classroom observation and interviews. The results show that, at the end of Ordinary Level and Advanced Level of 12 YBE, students' skills in English required to perform their content subjects are weak and create some descent in their participation in learning.

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## **1. Introduction**

The concept of the Language of Instruction (henceforth LoI) refers to the language used for teaching the basic curriculum of the educational system. Depending on the political and educational need one or two languages can be used as LoI. In Rwandan 12 Year Basic Education (Henceforth 12 YBE), Kinyarwanda, the mother tongue, national Language and official Language, is used only in the first three grades of 12 YBE as LoI, English, second language and official language, is used from the fourth grade until the last year of 12 YBE. The particularity for Rwanda is the language shift from French (LoI in educational system of Rwanda from colonial period up to 2008) to English as LoI. All students in 12 YBE follow their studies in English. Despite pedagogical and linguistics problems caused by this shift, it is a step forward in the educational reform. What we have to do for the new system is to analyze and express our constructive suggestions on how to fill in gaps and strengthen the use of English in the aim of making it a suitable tool to the quality of education.

Many Researches comparing classroom processes in lessons taught in English and in African languages show how English impacts on teaching strategies, but also the potential of teacher professional development to address this (Rubagumya, 2003; UNESCO, 2003; Qorro, 2006). These researches suggest the use of African languages in education, especially in basic education, in order to learn effectively. Nowadays, with the globalization times, with the power of English in the world, with the vibrant penetration of new technology in all corners of the world, with the huge demand of English evidenced by earlier introduction of English into the curriculum and the rapid growth in English medium private schooling alongside the state system in Africa, the reality of teaching and learning in mother tongue in the basic education is no longer profitable, it is out of date because English has become the gatekeeper to academic mobility and employment in the public and private sectors.

In Rwanda, despite their difficulties in English, students in 12 YBE prefer English than any other language (Ntawigira, 2011). Parents wish to see and hear their children speaking English not Kinyarwanda (Ntawigira, 2004). Mother-tongue instruction is effective when there is appropriate terminology for education purposes and sufficient resource materials; when there are appropriately trained teachers and when learners, educators and parents are willing. Is there any willing support to teach and learn in Kinyarwanda? Kinyarwanda, only spoken and used in Rwanda, cannot help to resolve the educational problems in Rwanda. It is not an effective means by which the quality of education in 12 YBE, in this globalization time, can be achieved. With the current linguistic situation of Rwanda, its current cooperation with Anglophone communities, with the regional and world competition on the labour market, using another language rather English in Rwandan 12 YBE as LoI should be a long term poison.

## **2. Historical Review and Current Linguistic Situation**

### **2.1 Rwanda 's Current Linguistic Situation**

The current sociolinguistic situation of Rwanda starts with the end of the Genocide against Tutsis in 1994, and deals with the new population of Rwanda together with its linguistic repertoire. Since June 1994, Rwandese population has comprised people who had been living in Rwanda before 1994 and returnees who had lived in neighbouring countries and other African and European/American countries.

Obviously, the number of foreign languages speakers, especially English, in Rwanda has increased. Within a population of 12,012,589 people, almost 100% of the population speaks Kinyarwanda (D 61) (Maho, 2003) the only one local language that unifies all Rwandans. Unlike most other African nations, virtually all Rwandans, speak the everyday Kinyarwanda. 90% speaks only Kinyarwanda, 6% speaks French, while only 3% fluently uses English. Another group of 10% speaks Kiswahili (Ntawigira, 2011).

The evolution of the present linguistic situation of Rwanda can be divided into 2 main periods: The colonial period (after 1900) and post independence period (after 1962). The latter can also be sub-divided into two sub-periods: From independence (1962) until 7<sup>th</sup> April 1994 (Genocide against Tutsis) and from 1994 until now.

### **2.1.1 Colonial Period**

During this period, Germans introduced German and Kiswahili in Rwanda. It was easier for Rwandans to understand and speak Kiswahili than they could do for German, because Kiswahili and Kinyarwanda are both Bantu languages and Kiswahili enjoys structural and lexical affinities with Kinyarwanda. Germans used Kiswahili and German in all political activities. After the end of the First World War, Belgians took over from the Germans in Rwanda. They came with French language and used it in all their political activities where Germans had used Kiswahili and German. French became official language, LoI in primary (second cycle) and secondary schools, subject matter in primary schools, while Kiswahili was called a language of delinquents. The presence and the official status of French in Rwanda result from the influence of European culture, but especially from Belgian culture (Murebwayire, 1979).

### **2.1.2. Post-independence Period**

#### **2.1.2. 1 Before 1994**

During this period, the linguistic situation of Rwanda did not change very much. New Rwandan authorities continued to use French as the official language and Language of Instruction in secondary schools. In 1962, when the National Radio began to broadcast on short waves, three languages, namely Kinyarwanda, French and Kiswahili were used. Kinyarwanda dominated all programs while French and Kiswahili were mainly used for radio news. The use of English was rare. It was accepted in public education in 1963.

A great effort to promote languages in Rwanda took place in 1979 during the educational reform in primary and secondary schools (MINEPRISEC, 1985). Kinyarwanda became the LoI in both the first and second cycles of primary school, while before the reform French was used in the second cycle. In secondary schools, the number of language hours was augmented. English and Kiswahili were taught in some options but with different frequencies according to the specialty of each option. That reform has been a good opportunity to create schools for languages, whose programs were dominated by Kinyarwanda, French, English and Kiswahili from senior one to senior six. Despite that they were taught in classroom, English and Kiswahili remained without official status. This situation continued until 7<sup>th</sup> April 1994, the date of genocide in Rwanda.

### 2.1.2.2 After 1994

After the Genocide against Tutsis of April 1994, one of the main goals of new Rwandan authorities was to repatriate Rwandan refugees from Anglophone and francophone countries. In attempt to manage Anglophone situation in public administration and education system, Rwandan Government has declared English an official language alongside Kinyarwanda and French in the following terms: *The national language is Kinyarwanda. The official languages are Kinyarwanda, French and English (Official Gazette of Republic of Rwanda, 2003, p. 65)*. From 1994 until 2008, both languages French and English were used as LoI in Francophone and Anglophone schools respectively. English was becoming a powerful and prestigious language because it was a language of some important authorities in new administration and army.

In the November 2008, Rwandan Government decided to use English – as LoI at all levels of education system of Rwanda – instead of French. Rwandan authorities, stakeholders consider English as the main tool of development in all vital sectors of national life. It becomes the panacea for the country's economic and educational problems. Referring to the speech of the ex-State Minister of Education Mutsindashyaka Theoneste held in Lycée Notre Dame de Cîteaux in May 2008 in the parents meeting, he said: *“Rwandans, especially youth, we are in the direct running competition with other countries of the whole world. The preferable shoes in running competition are running shoes not boots. To meet our vision 2020 we need to run in conformity with all ICT's techniques in all domains. So, our running shoes is English language, we have to learn and use it in all domains like other developed countries” (My translation, interview)*. The ex-State Minister highlights the power of English in global competition and recommends all students and parents to use English as the main tool to link us to the developed world.

### 3. The Rationale of the Shift to English as LoI in 12 YBE

In October 2008, the Rwandan government, in line with its goal of achieving universal primary education by 2010 and education for all by 2015, made English the mandatory LoI from primary school to university. The new direction took shape in all levels of education, and somehow directly affecting students' learning. The mandate looked to a bigger picture where the command of English would enable Rwanda to become a major economic player, not only in Africa, but the world over. This came shortly after Rwanda joined the East African Community and before the country became a member of the British Commonwealth in November 2009.

Reasons for choosing English as LoI are fundamentally educational and economic. First, Rwandan authorities emphasize that the eagerness to switch languages is not first choosing the Anglophone world but choosing the path toward a consistent and quality education that will enable new Rwandan generations to compete with their peers in this globalization time characterized by a mushrooming of new ICT's ideas. This decision comes to complete and sustain the existing goal of Rwandan Government “to achieve on universal education for all capable to international competition” (MINEDUC, 2010).

By quality of education, we mean education that transmit new ideas to students but also prepare them to understand how those new ideas relate to those that we already know. The quality of education is that one which opens new doors to students, and it does not disorient or alienate students from their society, but rather gives them a new perspective on it. English language is the preferred means to use for our education to make Rwandan new generation able to know what is happening in the whole world and express themselves around the world. The quality of education we want through the use of English as LoI can be viewed in terms of the correspondence between the goals, or expectations of society and changes that take place in the learners, the education system and the society as a whole. Expectations of society, according to Mmari quoted by Qorro 2006, are expressed in terms of educational goals that can broadly be classified into three categories, namely: (i) Learning goals, which focus on equipping learners with knowledge, skills, values and attitudes as defined in a given curriculum; (ii) System goals, which relate to measurable inputs and outputs that keep the system working; and (iii) Educational goals, which are based on the dominant ideas within society. Since every society has its dominant ideas, it follows that the goals of education between societies will naturally differ; and to that extent the meaning of quality of education will also differ (Qorro, 2006).

The quality of education in Rwanda cannot be divorced from the goals and objectives of education in Rwanda. Hence, as we are discussing quality of education in relation to the LoI in Rwandan rural 12 YBE schools, we need to bring into the picture the goals and objectives of education as mentioned by MINEDUC(Ministry of Education) 2010. The goals and objectives of MINEDUC reflect its national and international aspirations to underpin education sector development as stated in the following words: *The mission of the Ministry of Education is to transform the Rwandan citizen into skilled human capital for socio-economic development of the country by ensuring equitable access to quality education focusing on combating illiteracy, promotion of science and technology, critical thinking and positive values* (ESSP2010, p.1). English language is the main tool for Rwandan to achieve and implement educational sector priorities as stated in ESSP 2010-2015:

1. Ensuring that educational quality continues to improve through closer integration of curriculum development, quality assurance and assessment, improved textbook distribution, improving teaching and learning while introducing English as the medium of instruction, setting up a system of monitoring of learning achievement at school ...
2. Developing a skilled and motivated teaching, training and lecturing workforce through development of comprehensive teacher development and management system... an implementation plan for the use of English as medium of instruction ...
3. Ensuring that the post basic education (PBE) system is better tailored to meet the labor market needs... and introduce of open, distance and e-learning and regional harmonization with the East African Community (EAC).
4. Strengthening the education in Science and technology through specific intervention to address the under- developed skills in all areas of science and technology and the limited resources in teaching institutions to support the teaching of quality science and technology education, and integrating ICT within all subjects areas .

The above mission of MINEDUC shows that the use of English as LoI comes as an attempt to find solution to the educational problems. English as LoI come to remove educational limits in our education and make it international, sustainable and open it to the whole world.

Second, the drive towards English is in part economic. The use of English as LoI comes as a globalization and economic development trend. The main goal was to reform local education and prepare new Rwandan generation to think, react and operate in within economic realm in this globalization time. If Rwandan new generations in 12 YBE, especially in rural areas, are well familiarized with English, the language of the world economy, language of new technology, the backbone of economic development, they will be well equipped with English skills as essential for economic competitiveness, for entry into the knowledge economy, for access to foreign investment and technology.

As the community resources become increasingly linked to the movements of global resources and as opportunities become similarly tied, educational demand also changes. Rwandans have to look at globalization as a social process in which the constraints of geography on social and cultural arrangements recede and losing value. Rwandans are becoming aware of the efficacy of globalization and what they are receding. From this perspective, the use of English as LoI is seen as the key to success in the global economy. The goals of schooling become directly related to the world's economic needs. Education and the economy are seen as having an interdependent relationship. Therefore, on one hand, competition in the global economy is dependent on the quality of education while on the other hand; the goals of education are dependent on the economy.

The use of English as a LoI in schools is intended to meet the desired global standard. Globalization immediately evokes the image of privileged people. Rwandans need to live in any part of the world without hindrance. Mastering English is a way of avoiding international isolation that can easily keep many Rwandans in perpetual problems. The use of English as a LoI is the main way to liberate Rwandans to pursue a long-term process of trans-local connectivity that is both economic and educational.

#### **4. Students and English in the Classroom**

Results from my observation, interviews and questionnaires show different levels of English among students in classroom. According to my observation, students in 12 YBE are eager to learn English and use it as LoI (85%) but the linguistic environment and many other pedagogic problems related to English as LoI create a obstacle to improve easily and adequately. Students have a limited English proficiency and they need a regularly, efficient, adequate support and well tailored to their environment. Students use code switching (80%) to express their opinions in classroom and their teachers encourage them to use English and advise them to use it in their everyday experiences. However the big number of students (60%) understands instructions given by the teacher in English and they give immediate feedback in approximate English (10%), in code switching of English and Kinyarwanda (40%), in Kinyarwanda or gestures (10%). The problems most commonly encountered were listening, reading, writing and spelling errors made by learners:

1. Listening: learners did not understand instructions (40%).
2. Speaking: limited vocabulary (45% of learners).
3. Reading: learners were unfamiliar with phonics (50%).
4. Writing: learners had difficulty spelling (30%).

Statistics on the language issues covered in the research clearly indicated that the teachers' limited English proficiency affected their students' master of English and, subsequently, their Learning in other subjects. This was especially highlighted in the qualitative component of the research, where statistics indicated that various forms of English language errors were transferred to students.

### Summary of errors that students make

<b>Listening</b>	<b>Speaking</b>	<b>Reading</b>	<b>Writing</b>
Poor concentration	Sentences too short	Unfamiliar with phonics	Spelling
Do not understand instructions	Mixes languages	poor word attack skills	Poor handwriting sentences
Unable grasp main idea/crux	Poor pronunciation	Reversals	Word order
Unable discriminate auditory sounds	Limited vocabulary	No comprehension	Incomplete sentences
Other	Other	Other	Other

Throughout the data of our research a weak English proficiency regarding teacher and students emerges. It is axiomatic that LoI acts as the basic communication channel for knowledge transfer and learning from the teacher to the students. If the knowledge communication channel is obscured and hindered by limited English proficiency, both on the side of the students and of the teacher, knowledge transfer cannot be effective. Language issues that the inexperienced teachers have to face include: the LoI, doubtful informal exposure of students to English, teachers' perceptions of their own needs and proficiency in English, and limited English resources availability.

English as LoI is the language preferred by teachers and students despite that their home language is Kinyarwanda. The 12 YBE language policy and the social language environment do not correspond. The discrepancy between LoI and home language of students and teachers contribute to the slow knowledge transfer, consequently to the quality of education.

Concerning the informal exposure of students in rural areas, the results show that it is very low. The only available exposure is the watching television and this also is not available to all students. Only 5% of students can watch television, and have access on some English programs. We can recall that English programs on Rwandan Television are rare and the number of parents who are able to buy parabolic antenna-with the capacity of pick up English programs from UK , USA and other Anglophone countries - in rural areas is limited. A small proportion of students have English reading matter and a small proportion speak English at home. These limitations contribute to the weak English efficiency.

Another problem is that teachers themselves expressed their anxiety about their English proficiency. This was evidenced by errors and weak English observed in teachers' preparation notebooks and students' homework notebooks. We examined the contents of the teachers' notes to identify the teachers' written errors as well as the learners' written errors. These errors were compared and analyzed to determine to what extent the teachers' language transference influenced their learners' written language. Based on the data collected, we identified substantial similarities in notes which led to the conclusion that teachers' LoI forms are many times transferred to their learners' language forms and reflect the teachers' "quality" in English language proficiency.

## **5. How English Affects the Quality in Learning?**

The majority of 12 YBE students use Kinyarwanda as the language of daily communication. However, English has become a language of power in all vital sectors such education, economy, politics etc. In Rwandan society, in our region, English confers a great advantage in securing well-paid posts in the government and the commercial field, and provides the means for social, economic and academic upward mobility. This prestigious status of the English is reflected in 12 YBE which aims at producing students who are proficient in English and Sciences. There is a need in Rwanda to enhance the level of proficiency in both English and Sciences in order to satisfy the economic, political, educational and cultural demands that are being placed on individuals and the community.

Consider that the responsibility of Rwandan education throughout 12 YBE is to produce graduates who are proficiency in English as LoI and in their respective subject matters in order to ensure sustainable development in different domains of our countries, the use of English in 12 YBE has to be strengthened. One of the adequate and suitable ways to strengthen its use is first to know and identify students and teachers problems in classroom. The results show that:

- The classroom is conducted in code switching (Kinyarwanda – English) communication to express their opinion. This means that students are not able to communicate in English only as LoI. They have to mix English and Kinyarwanda to express their opinions.
- When instructions are given in English, three groups are observed:
  1. A small group (under 30%) that give immediate feedback in approximate English;
  2. A big group (above 40%) that give feedback in code switching English Kinyarwanda;
  3. A small group (15%) that give their feedback in Kinyarwanda.

The main cause of the above group creation is the degree of the mastery of English as LoI in Listening, Writing, Speaking and Reading.

- Listening problems affect the concentration of student in classroom: Student is unable to discriminate auditory sounds and he/she cannot understand instructions and he/she is unable to grasp main ideas of what he/she is learning/listening.
- Speaking problems affect the communication between student and teacher: Student produces ungrammatical sentences which lead to no sense sentences



and teacher cannot catch the meaning/opinion expressed by students. Student has a limited vocabulary and this leads to the code switching of Kinyarwanda –English which is not pedagogic in academic communication, especially in advanced levels of 12YBE.

- Reading problems affect the general comprehension of what student must read in order to prepare his/her assignments /homework and exams: Student has a poor word attack skills. Sometimes this problem leads to reversals and student understands the opposite of what he/she was supposed to understand.
- Writing problems affect also the writing communication between student and teacher: Student produces poor handwriting sentences and the teacher gets difficulties to decode student's writing. This writing is many times complicated by incorrect word order and incomplete sentences.

All those problems are obstacles to communication between teacher and student. If we consider LoI as the pipe that transmit knowledge between teacher and student, those problems come to block that pipe.

## **6. Results**

English Language proficiency is low for about the half of the students for 25 rural 12 YBE schools visited.

- According to all respondent teachers, students are aware of importance of English in classroom achievement and its importance in social mobility but it is hard for them because they do not have enough exposure to it. But they like it despite some problems of not mastering it! A respondent teacher told me that “Students found science classes hard to understand in English, especially were exams have limited time”. Another one “As myself I use a very little of English, students found my mathematics classes hard to understand...and ask me to translate most of the questions in Kinyarwanda”.
- On the other hand, teachers have slightly different view, according to three of them students like using English but they find it hard to deal with LoI during exams. A teacher reported, “Students like to study in English, and they like to use English in chemistry, biology and physics, but they find it harder in exams”. Teacher stated, “Students prepares themselves to join classes carefully, and because all computer languages are in English, students tries to understand and works hard to learn”. Teacher said that “Students like to communicate in English in classes specially in Mathematics classes that have Math terms and they prefer it better, in exam time students like to explain questions if it is in English in more details”.
- Poor English skills are implicated in poor educational performance in 12 YBE. Little or no exposure to English lead students to barely understand English. 80% of respondent teachers have reported that the use of English has bad impacts on students' scores and overall performance. Almost all the teachers of 25 schools accept that the poor skills in English as LoI lower the performance of students in exams and lower the previous good grades.

Despite all English problems faced by students and teachers in 12YBE, all respondents agreed that to interact with the world and get benefits one has to be proficient in English. Knowing English is an asset for all those who want to excel in

their professional carriers. English is the international language of world and hence one could not neglect its importance. Participants of the survey are also well aware of its importance but they also have concerns related to it. It has been reported that if students have graduated and studied in English, the future is open for them in Rwanda and over the world, and they would also have good opportunities for good job and to get technical training programs abroad.

## **7. What can be done?**

The use of English itself “Standards English” does not anything harm to teaching and learning of any subject when the both sides, teachers and students, really master English. But when both sides or one has poor skills in English, this later has bad impacts on students’ scores and overall performance. The reality from 12 YBE schools is that “Students who have better English perform well and then can get good job and they may get more opportunity to have grants from government to study abroad, they still have more opportunity in labour markets in Rwanda, in our region and all around the world”. So what can be done to sustain and strengthen the standards English?

Consider that, English is the main key to open up possibilities for new Rwandan generations to operate in East Africa Region and Beyond; English is the way forward to global fellowship and international competition; English provides means for social, economic and academic upward mobility; There is a need in Rwanda to enhance the level of proficiency in English, and this will lead to improve the quality in sciences and other subject matters. The problem in 12YBE is the weak English skills for both sides students and teachers. If students and teachers were able to use English correctly, any problem should occur!

The use of English as LoI in 12 YBE is an irreversible change. How to manage this change?

- To create prolonged exposure to English language for 12YBE schools. For instance to subscribe to different English Journals/ Media/ Newspapers/ which are incredibly using Standards English in their programs; Motivate ( not punish students who do not use English) student to use English at school when they are not in classroom; Organise conferences /debates/talks regularly in English ; Create English Clubs in schools and strengthen English mini libraries .
- To regularly organize short professional development workshops for teachers
- To intensify the communication between ministry offices and rural schools. Officers from the Ministry of education should come regularly to visit and guide teachers in rural areas.
- To create insensitive means in rural schools areas to attract qualified teachers to go there.
- To Make available enough Textbooks and other teaching materials in rural areas.
- To create cooperation between Anglophone schools (English native speakers) and 12 YBE in Rwanda
- To develop and Strengthen English learning and teaching in high education in order to prepare qualified English teachers.

- To create a vertical consultancy between 12 YBE teachers and Stakeholders/ Policymakers in the Ministry of Education.

## **8. Conclusion**

The accessibility of 12 YBE students in rural areas to English language is not equal to that one of 12 YBE in urban areas. If education is supposed to be accessible and optimal for everyone, one prerequisite is that everyone can take part of it. In the case of 12 YBE, the low accessibility to English language is an obstacle for students in rural areas that do not come into contact with it in a natural way in their environment. Hence, many students in rural areas have problems with understanding the instruction because of LoI, and then their performance in classroom is not promising. The majority of 12 YBE students use Kinyarwanda as the language of daily communication. However, English in Rwanda, in our region, in the whole world, has become a language of power in all vital sectors such education, economy, ICT, politics etc. The proficiency in English is now in a panacea for all classroom problems. English guarantees well-paid posts in the government and the commercial field, and provides the means for social, economic and academic upward mobility. There is a need in rural Rwandan 12 YBE to enhance the level of proficiency in both English and Sciences in order to satisfy the economic, political, educational and cultural demands that are being placed on individuals and the community.

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