Research Article

Speaking competence in an English-medium education system: Challenges among Francophone and Arabic-speaking students in Rwandan higher learning institutions. Case study of INES Ruhengeri

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Abstract

Background: English as the medium of instruction (EMI) in higher education has contributed to improved access to global knowledge and international academic opportunities. It has also posed a challenge for students from non-English-speaking backgrounds, especially in terms of competency development in the speaking aspect. The study aimed to examine the constraints that hinder students from achieving English speaking competence in INES Ruhengeri, Rwanda; reveal students' and lecturers' views on the constraints; and discuss institutional measures put in place to assist students in developing their oral competence. **Methods:** A case study design was used in a qualitative study. The respondents were recruited using purposive sampling, which included 20 undergraduate students with diverse languages and 8 lecturers dealing with English-medium instruction. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data obtained from semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observation, and document analysis. **Results:** The results identified three main types of challenges. The first was that students had limited vocabulary, grammatical errors, and difficulties with pronunciation, resulting in limitations in communication. Second, psychological factors like fear of error, language anxiety, and low self-confidence were major factors in lowering the participation of students in the classroom. Thirdly, exposure to English in contexts other than the classroom was low, which reduced meaningful opportunities for English speaking. Students and teachers recognized that their poor speaking ability had an impact on classroom interaction, engagement, and learning. Participants found that while the institution offers courses in English and provides opportunities for students to learn English through interaction in the classroom and with peers, these measures are inadequate to meet the students' needs for speaking English fully. **Conclusion:** The study concludes that students' competence in speaking English in English-medium higher education institutions needs to be improved by giving them continuous support beyond preparatory language courses. Using activities that require continuous speaking in the regular classroom, increasing the number of language support programs, and providing opportunities for learners to communicate in real English can help boost their confidence and oral language skills. The results give specific evidence to guide language policy and teaching practices to support the development of English-speaking skills in multilingual higher education contexts.

Keywords: English-medium instruction, English-speaking competence, higher education, francophone students, Arabic-speaking students, language support.

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1. INTRODUCTION

English has now emerged as a global language and has been the primary language of teaching in many universities around the world in the last few decades. The implementation of English as a medium of instruction (EMI), even in contexts where English is not the first language (Chatterjee, 2023), has been growing in popularity among countries that want to enter the academic and economic community of the world. This transformation is especially noticeable in multilingual nations, where English is used as a common academic language and means of internationalization (Mosha, 2019). One such country is Rwanda, which has English as the official language of learning in all educational levels. This policy is designed to promote the access of students to global knowledge, ensure competitiveness in the global job market, and promote regional and international integration (Nshimiyimana, Bazimaziki et al., 2024). The switch to an English-medium education system has, however, posed some linguistic challenges, particularly for students who have had their education in other languages like French or Arabic (Nshimiyimana et al., 2024).

The challenge is more salient in higher education institutions because of students' mobility. Institutions like INES Ruhengeri have a variety of students who include many from francophone and Arabic-speaking countries. This brings linguistic complexities, however, due to the diversity of languages spoken, especially when it comes to English-speaking competence; as Marie (2013) stresses, it enriches the academic environment. The skill of speaking is an essential and important language learning skill and is essential for academic success. It allows students to join in class discussions, give presentations, work in groups, and communicate with the lecturer and their peers (Elder et al., 2007). Students whose first language is not English, however, have a tendency to have problems fluently and accurately expressing themselves in English. Some of the challenges can be due to lack of exposure to English, linguistic differences, lack of confidence, or insufficient practice opportunities (Bergey et al., 2020).

In the context of higher education, such as in INES Ruhengeri, where English is the language of instruction and the main language of communication in academic and social settings, lack of English-speaking skills may limit students' participation in learning activities (Elder et al., 2007). In the same way, Bergey et al. 2020) cited that this situation could also impact students' academic achievement and learning experience. Moreover, a growing number of students from non-English-speaking backgrounds have made this a more apparent issue. Many of these students have difficulties who can express themselves in English in a fluent and accurate manner, and are limited in their ability to engage in classroom discussions, group tasks, presentations, and other classroom tasks. This can, therefore, have a detrimental effect on their learning and their ability to fit into the learning atmosphere.

While there may be language support programs in the institution for students, there is limited empirical evidence concerning the nature and extent of students' difficulties with speaking and how students experience these difficulties in real academic contexts. Moreover, there is little research available that examines the difficulties as seen by students and staff and if the current institutional strategies are effective in solving the problem. Although English-speaking challenges are known to exist in English-medium institutions, there is a lack of context-specific research in INES Ruhengeri that (1) systematically assesses students' speaking competence, (2) incorporates the viewpoints of both students and staff, and (3) assesses the effectiveness of support mechanisms.

Without these, it is not easy for the institution to plan for any intervention that would enhance students' speaking abilities. The aim of this study is to fill this gap and engage in an investigation of the challenges of English speaking, to hear the

voices of the stakeholders, and to evaluate institutional responses at INES Ruhengeri.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was a qualitative case study to explore the problems that cause English-speaking problems of students in an English-medium education system at INES Ruhengeri in Rwanda. The participants included 20 undergraduate students with different native languages and 8 lecturers who engage in English-medium education. Participants were selected using purposive sampling up to the point of data saturation. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and document analysis. The interviews took around 30-45 minutes and asked participants to think about what they had experienced, their interpretations of the challenges encountered, and institutional support provided in terms of competence in English. The classroom observation involved in this study was conducted to see students' use of English in learning activities and lecturers' strategies to encourage students to communicate orally. Contextual information was gathered by using institutional document analysis techniques such as language policy and Course Syllabus. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. Interviews, observation notes and documents were transcribed and organized into themes corresponding to the study purposes. Triangulation of methods and member checking were used to enhance credibility and an audit trail was used to ensure dependability. Ethical approval and institutional permission was obtained before data collection and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Throughout the study, confidentiality and anonymity were ensured.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Introduction

In this chapter, the outcome of the study on the competence of English language speaking among the students of English language INES, Ruhengeri is presented. The data collection techniques used in this study were semi-structured interviews, observation in the classroom, and document analysis. The findings are presented thematically, in line with the objectives of the study: challenges faced by students in developing English speaking competence, stakeholders' perceptions of these challenges, and institutional practices in supporting the development of English speaking competence. Interview data is supplemented by classroom observations to gather evidence of students' speaking practices.

3.2 Challenges students encounter in English speaking ability

Data analysis showed that there are some difficulties in the students' oral communication in English, which is not fluent or confident. Based on the data analysis, it can be seen that there are some difficulties that students face in speaking English fluently and confidently. These problems were identified by students and academic staff and supported by observations of lessons.

3.2.1 Linguistic barriers

Limited vocabulary, grammar skills, and pronunciation skills were identified as a major challenge by students. Students often had difficulty formulating complete sentences and ideas into a complex form. One student commented: *"I know some words, but sometimes it is hard to put them together in the correct order, and sometimes when I say them, I make mistakes, and this makes me nervous to speak in class."* This was also confirmed by the teachers, who

explained that sometimes students hesitate to be involved in discussions due to language mistakes. One lecturer said, *"Sometimes students do not speak because they don't understand the lecture, or sometimes because they are afraid of grammatical mistakes and mispronunciation of words."* These challenges were confirmed with classroom observations. Many students stopped frequently in the discussion, code-switched to French and Arabic, and sometimes used single words instead of complete sentences, indicating the effect of language constraints on participation.

3.2.2 Psychological factors

Fear, anxiety, and lack of self-confidence were other challenges identified. Pupils said that often they do not speak in class because they are embarrassed. A student said: *"Sometimes I want to answer queries, but I am afraid that my English will sound off, so I keep quiet."* Similar behaviours were observed by teachers; some students speak only when addressed and avoid interacting with one another. In a small group discussion, students who were reluctant were hardly involved in the conversation; it has been observed that even in a small group setting, students' opportunities to practice English were affected by psychological barriers.

3.2.3 Lack of exposure and practice

Overall, limited exposure to English outside the classroom was a consistent theme. Most of the students said that most communication with the people around them was in their mother tongues, limiting the practice of using the language for communication. Teachers acknowledged that students had a problem adjusting themselves to the EMI environment because they never had enough exposure to it before. Students' use of gestures and non-verbal communication was also noted, particularly when presenting, and was a further indication of a lack of understanding or productive language use.

3.3 Students' and staff's perception of the competence in speaking

3.3.1 Students' perspectives

Speaking skills for academic achievement and future careers were a consistent theme mentioned by students. Speaking was cited as the biggest challenge in adapting to an English-medium curriculum by many. One student said: *"Although I grasp the concepts, I can't put them into words and feel like I'm not included in conversations."* The perceptions were corroborated by observations. Students who were reluctant to take part in the interview, they also had a low level of participation in classroom activities, indicating their worries about speaking competence.

3.3.2 Academic staff perspectives

The teachers noted that students' speech barriers impacted learning and teaching. They observed that students tend not to engage with the content but remember it, rather than understanding it. One teacher said: *"Students know what to say but are not comfortable enough with the English language to say it. This is problematic for classroom interaction and/or learning outcomes."* Classroom observation indicated that, even when teachers prompted students to talk, they were still silent, which coincided with the lack of a gap in understanding and speaking. Speaking competency is noted as a continuous challenge by both students and teachers, as it is important to engage in class activities.

3.4 English supporting strategies in higher learning institutions

3.4.1 Language support programs

The college provides English language courses and preparatory courses for students with backgrounds other than English language. These courses emphasize academic communication, grammar, and vocabulary. The students indicated that these programs helped them, but were not enough to completely solve the problem of speaking. One student said: *"The English courses are helpful, but too short, and students need more practice in speaking."* Teachers reported that there is a need for ongoing speaking practice in class as well as the foundational support from the programs. It was observed that the students who had studied at the preparatory courses performed better in structured speaking activities, while they did not perform well in spontaneous conversation.

3.4.2 Classroom-based strategies

Students are encouraged to speak by lecturers through interactive group discussion, presentation and peer interaction. These strategies were observed and determined to be effective when encouraging participation depending on the size of class and the confidence of students. One teacher commented: *"At the group level, students can have practice speaking English, yet some still need to be encouraged to speak openly."* Students' observations revealed that they talked more when the class was small group, but less when the class was large group, and this suggested that supportive classroom structures is important to improve students' speaking skills.

3.4.3 Informal peer support

Pupils are likely to have unstructured study groups to practise English outside of lessons. The sessions provide students an opportunity to express themselves freely without any judgment on what they say. One pupil reported that he felt more confident when speaking English with his friends, as he made less mistakes than he did in class. Teachers understood the advantages of peer interaction and accepted it as not being a substitute for institutional support. Observation of peer study sessions indicated that there was greater engagement and smoother speech in the informal setting, suggesting that this could be used to supplement formal study sessions.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of the above study are presented in this chapter which includes findings on the competence of the students of INES Ruhengeri in the English-medium education system as well as challenges faced. The aim of the study was to find out the English learning problems of students, students' and staff's understanding of the problems of students' learning English and the institutional policies to help students' learning English. Thematic analysis was conducted to analyze the data obtained from interviews, classroom observations and document analysis, and conclusions were drawn. The study found many factors that needed to be highlighted regarding English-speaking competency: students face barriers such as limited vocabulary, grammatical errors, pronunciation problems, lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes, and insufficient exposure to English outside the classroom. These challenges were confirmed by classroom observations as being a significant factor in reducing active involvement in discussions, group activities, and presentations. Moreover, students and teachers alike acknowledged the importance of being proficient in English to achieve in school and prepare for the world. Students indicated anxiety and hesitation as significant obstacles, and lecturers reported that these were a significant constraint on

engagement within lectures and learning outcomes.

The observations confirmed these impressions, indicating that pupils frequently use non-verbal means of communication or are silent in class. Furthermore, INES Ruhengeri employs a number of methods in order to develop speaking competence, such as preparatory language courses, interactive activities in the classroom, and informal peer practice sessions. These programs offer some help, but the students and teachers alike pointed out that it is not enough because the support given is not sufficient for improvement.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the results, the following conclusions were made: For students from francophone and Arabic-speaking backgrounds, competence in English continues to be a great challenge in an environment where English is the language of higher education. Language barriers, practice and psychological issues all make it difficult for students to participate in learning activities. Pupils and staff express views on the challenge and highlight the importance of speaking English not just for academic purposes but also for integration with the wider academic and working community. Perceptions align – that everyone sees the urgency to address these challenges. Institutional strategies have a positive impact but these strategies are not sufficient. The opportunity for students to practise with peers and interactive class activities is provided in Preparatory courses, but deeper, more structured and sustained interventions are needed for students to develop the ability to speak confidently and functionally in English.

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