Original Article

Constraints of English Teaching Proficiency on Students' Mastery of English Language Skills in Community Secondary Schools in Morogoro District Council

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ABSTRACT

This study focused on investigating the Constraints of English teaching proficiency on students' mastery of English language skills in community secondary schools in Morogoro District Council. The study used case study research design and mixed research approach. The targeted populations in this study were ward education officers, School head masters, English teachers, and students from 5 rural community secondary schools in Morogoro district council. Sample size for this study was 130 respondents. Purposive sampling technique was applied in selecting Ward education officers and school head masters and simple random sampling technique was used in selection of students and English teachers. Collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The findings emphasize that low teaching proficiency is a significant factor contributing to poor student performance in community secondary schools. The overuse of code-switching, although aimed at aiding comprehension, may negatively impact students' English language development. Improving teachers' proficiency is crucial for enhancing students' communication skills and overall academic performance. The results emphasize the need for targeted professional development to address teaching deficiencies and support better educational outcomes. To address these challenges, educational institutions should invest in professional development programs that enhance teachers' English proficiency and reduce code switching. Regular assessments of teaching effectiveness and the integration of language support tools will further improve instructional quality and boost students' academic performance.

INTRODUCTION

This study focused on investigating Constraints of English teaching proficiency on students' mastery of English language skills. The history of English language proficiency and students' mastery of English language skills in Tanzanian secondary schools can be traced back to the enactment of the language policy in 1995. This policy established English as the medium of instruction for secondary education, while Kiswahili was designated as the medium of instruction in primary schools and a compulsory subject across all levels of education. The policy stipulated that while Kiswahili would remain compulsory, English would be the primary language of instruction in secondary schools, except for the teaching of other approved languages (MOEC, 1995)

The transition from Kiswahili in primary education to English in secondary education has posed significant challenges in communication and the overall teaching and learning process. This shift has been attributed to deficiencies in English language skills resulting from insufficient exposure during primary education (Mwamkoa, 2020). Theoretical evidence suggests that since English was adopted as the medium of instruction in public secondary schools in Tanzania, one of the persistent issues has been teachers' proficiency in teaching English. This deficiency has contributed to many students struggling to master English language skills (Makuwa 2004). Makuwa 2004 highlights that many English Language (EL) teachers in sub-Saharan Africa lack proper training in language-sensitive pedagogical practices, which impedes both Teachers and their students' ability to achieve fluency in English.

Teaching proficiency is a crucial factor in students' mastery of language skills. Consequently, this study investigates how Constraints of English teaching proficiency affects students' mastery of English language skills in community secondary schools in Morogoro District Council. Dearden (2014) points out that, in the African context, teachers often lack adequate language proficiency and competencies to effectively teach English, regardless of their academic qualifications. This inadequacy in teaching proficiency contributes to students' struggles with English language skills, impacting their performance not only in school but also in real-world scenarios. For instance, a lack of proficiency can hinder students' success in job interviews or their ability to advance to higher education.

Swila (2009) asserts the importance of mastering English for accessing tertiary education and various professional opportunities. English serves as a language of opportunity, influencing access to high-ranking jobs, legal and diplomatic fields, advancements in science and technology, and international trade and business. Therefore, understanding the constraints of English teaching proficiency on students' mastery of English language skills in Morogoro District Council's community schools is essential for addressing these educational challenges and enhancing future prospects for Tanzanian students.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

This study is grounded in Social Constructivism, a theory of knowledge that emphasizes the role of social interactions and cultural contexts in the construction of knowledge and understanding. Social Constructivism, primarily developed by Lev Vygotsky, provides a theoretical framework for examining how individuals construct knowledge through social interactions and cultural practices (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky's pioneering work in the early 20th century laid the foundation for this theory, focusing on the idea that learning is a collaborative process that occurs within social contexts.

One of the key ideas of Social Constructivism is the concept of the "zone of proximal development" (ZPD). The ZPD refers to the difference between what learners can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance and support from more knowledgeable others (Vygotsky, 1978). This concept highlights the importance of social interaction and scaffolding in the learning process, suggesting that learners can achieve higher levels of understanding and skill development when they receive appropriate support from teachers, peers, and cultural tools. Another crucial aspect of Social Constructivism is the role of cultural and historical context in shaping cognitive development. According to Vygotsky (1978), knowledge is not merely transmitted from teacher to student but is actively constructed through interactions with the cultural environment and participation in communal practices.

The relevance of Social Constructivism to this study lies in its emphasis on the social and contextual factors that influence language learning and proficiency. In the context of investigating teaching proficiency and students' mastery of English language skills in Morogoro District Council's community schools, Social Constructivism provides valuable insights into how teaching methods, teacher-student interactions, and cultural contexts impact language acquisition. By focusing on the social dynamics and support structures that facilitate language learning, Social Constructivism underscores the importance of effective teaching practices and the role of educators in supporting students' development of English language skills.

Additionally, Social Constructivism aligns with the study's focus on the constraints of English teaching proficiency on students' language mastery. The theory highlights the significance of teachers' ability to create supportive learning environments and to engage students in meaningful, socially-mediated learning experiences. This perspective suggests that improving teaching proficiency and addressing pedagogical challenges can enhance students' mastery of English by providing the necessary scaffolding and support for their language development (Vygotsky, 1978; Wood et al., 1976). Thus, Social Constructivism not only informs the theoretical underpinnings of the study but also offers practical insights for addressing educational challenges and improving language proficiency in the context of Tanzanian secondary schools.

METHODOLOGY

The study used case study research design and mixed research approach. The targeted populations in this study were ward education officers, school head masters, English teachers, and students from 5 rural community Secondary Schools in Morogoro District Council. Sample size for this study was 130 respondents. Purposive sampling technique was applied in selecting Ward education officers and school head masters and simple random sampling technique were used in selection of students and English teachers. Collected data through, Questionnaire, interviews, and focus group discussions were analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis.

FINDINGS

Table 1 illustrates the Constraints of English teaching proficiency on students' mastery of English language skills in community secondary schools. It details how English teaching proficiency correlate with students' ability to acquire and apply English language competencies.

Table 1: The Effect of English Teaching Proficiency constraints on Students' Mastery of English Language Skills

	Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	Despite other factors, low teaching proficiency in my school is one of the primary causes of poor overall student performance.	8 (40%)	7 (35%)	3 (15%)	2 (10%)	0 (0%)
2	I often switch to Swahili because students struggle to grasp new concepts when only English is used.	6 (30%)	9 (45%)	2 (10%)	2 (10%)	1 (5%)

3	Frequent code-switching into Swahili impacts students' fluency in speaking and writing.	7 (35%)	8 (40%)	4 (20%)	1 (5%)	0 (0%)
4	The poor communication skills of students in your school may be attributed to low teaching proficiency.	5 (25%)	10 (50%)	2 (10%)	2 (10%)	1 (5%)
5	Low teaching proficiency is a contributing factor to students' failures in writing tests and exams.	9 (45%)	6 (30%)	3 (15%)	1 (5%)	1 (5%)

Source: Field Data (2024)

The table shows that 75% of the respondents believe that low teaching proficiency is one of the most significant causes of poor student performance in their schools. These findings concur with study by Mwinsheikh, (2008) who found that teachers' low English proficiency level negatively affect the acquisition of English in various ways. It limits learners receive in the classroom for teachers and students tend to switch to Kiswahili as coping. As emphasized by the head of school and Ward education officers that "*The quality of teaching is a critical factor in determining students' overall academic achievement, particularly in the context of community secondary schools.*" This suggests that improving teaching proficiency is essential for enhancing students' academic performance and underscores the need for targeted efforts to elevate the quality of instruction in these settings.

The data indicates that 75% of the respondents (30% strongly agree and 45% agree) resort to code switching into Swahili during lessons because students struggle to understand new concepts when taught exclusively in English. This implies that teachers with low proficiency in English may rely on code switching as a pedagogical strategy to facilitate students' comprehension, but this practice can potentially hinder the development of their English language skills. According to ward education officers and heads of schools' responses'; English teachers don't use collaborative pedagogies frequently and strategically while teaching in the classrooms, due to low teaching proficiency. These findings are in agreement with study by Powel and Kalina (2009) who suggested that, understanding these stages and teaching within the ability of students to grasp concepts logically and intellectually is main goal of all teachers. Effective learning occurs when clarity begins.

A significant percentage of respondents (75%) believe that frequent code switching into Swahili during instruction negatively affects students' fluency in speaking and writing English. The head of school commented, "*While code switching is often used with good intentions to support student understanding, its overuse can ultimately hinder the development of students' English language proficiency.*" This finding suggests that, although code switching may aid comprehension, its excessive use can hinder the progress of students' English language skills. Responses from head of schools and Ward education officers Highlighted that; English teachers in Community schools find difficult to avoid the use of codeswitching due to poor students' English language foundation. The findings concur with study by Mwamkoa (2020) who pointed out that, the shift of the language of instruction from Swahili in primary education to English in Secondary education has created problems in communication as well as teaching and learning because of deficiency in English language skills caused by insufficient exposure of learners to the language in primary schools.

The data shows that 75% of the respondents attribute the poor communication skills of students in their schools to the low teaching proficiency of their instructors. This implies that the quality of teaching, including the teachers' own command of the English language, plays a pivotal role in shaping students' communication abilities and overall language development. This perspective, supported by the focus groups, which emphasized that critical role of teaching quality in shaping students' communication abilities. The discussions highlighted that instructors' own command of the English language significantly influences students' language development. Therefore, enhancing teachers' proficiency is essential for improving students'

overall communication skills and addressing the observed deficiencies. The findings are in agreement with study by Harmer (2000) who suggested that good pronunciation avoids misunderstanding in communication.

A majority of respondents (75%) believe that low teaching proficiency is one of the primary causes of students' failure in writing tests or exams in their schools. The head of school observed that, "*The teachers' ability to effectively teach and assess writing skills is closely linked to the students' performance in these assessments.*" This finding suggests that enhancing teaching proficiency in writing is crucial for improving students' performance in writing tests and exams, underscoring the need for targeted professional development in this area. These findings are in parallel with study by Richards (2015) who suggested that teachers need to have an advanced level of target language proficiency so that they can provide meaningfully explanations, rich language input to Slearners, and respond spontaneously and knowledgeably to their learners' questions on language and culture.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings emphasize that low teaching proficiency is a significant factor contributing to poor student performance in community secondary schools. The overuse of code switching, although aimed at aiding comprehension, may negatively impact students' English language development. Improving teachers' proficiency is crucial for enhancing students' communication skills and overall academic performance. The results emphasize the need for targeted professional development to address teaching deficiencies and support better educational outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the challenges identified, it is recommended that educational institutions invest in comprehensive professional development programs aimed at enhancing teachers' proficiency, particularly in English. This should include targeted training to improve language skills and pedagogical strategies that minimize over-reliance on code switching. Schools should also implement regular assessments of teaching effectiveness and provide ongoing support and resources for educators. Additionally, integrating language support tools and strategies that promote English language acquisition in the classroom can help mitigate communication issues and improve students' overall academic performance. These measures will contribute to elevating the quality of instruction and better preparing students for academic success.

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