Original Article

Students' Attitude and Academic Competencies in Kiswahili Language among Government Secondary Schools Baseline Comparison of North and South Divisions, Mbarara City

Emilly Arishaba, PhD & Dr. Sudi Balimuttajjo, PhD[1]

[1] Mbarara University of Science and Technology, P. O. Box 1410, Mbarara, Uganda.

* Author for Correspondence Email: arishabaemily@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Despite Kiswahili being an official language in Uganda, Government secondary school students show varying attitudes and academic competencies in the subject, A baseline comparison of senior three Kiswahili learners in the North and South Divisions of Mbarara City revealed that students in the South Division had more favourable attitudes toward Kiswahili than those in the North Division, However, no significant differences were observed in academic competence between the two groups, These findings suggest that while administrative divisional context influences attitudes, instructional approaches, and support mechanisms are more critical to language competency outcomes, The study emphasizes the need for tailored pedagogical strategies to enhance both attitude and proficiency in Kiswahili across diverse school settings.

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INTRODUCTION

Across global education systems, academic competencies are a primary focus, with learner-centred approaches gaining emphasis (Sakata et al., 2022). In post-colonial contexts like Uganda, the education sector faces challenges linked to access, quality, and language policy (Abiyo, 2022; Odhiambo et al., 2022). Despite the prominence of English in Uganda's education system, Kiswahili is increasingly recognized for its importance in regional integration, culture, and politics. It is the only African language among the official working languages of the East African Community (Jjingo, & Iddi, 2022). To align with this trend, the Ugandan government made Kiswahili a compulsory subject in secondary schools as part of the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) (Jjingo, & Bakize, 2022).

However, despite this policy shift, many students continue to exhibit low academic competencies in Kiswahili due to limited exposure and proficiency in the language. Academic competencies include key skills such as reading, writing, speaking, and language comprehension, all crucial for success in Kiswahili (DiPerna, & Elliott, 1999).

According to the Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB) report of 2020, students' performance in Kiswahili has been notably poor, with challenges ranging from inadequate vocabulary to poor comprehension and translation skills. These issues are often attributed to students' attitudes towards the language and the quality of instruction they receive (UNEB, 2020). Negative attitudes and inadequate teaching methods have led to underachievement among secondary school students in Kiswahili.

Despite government efforts to improve instruction through initiatives such as curriculum reforms, teacher training, and instructional material provision (Shinagawa, 2019).

Mbarara City Students' academic competence in Kiswahili has remained below expectations, raising concerns about the efficacy of current instructional strategies. Understanding the baseline attitudes of learners and their corresponding academic competencies in Kiswahili is essential for devising interventions that can improve language learning outcomes in this context. This study aims to establish a baseline comparison of the attitudes and academic competencies of secondary school students in the Kiswahili language in Mbarara City, particularly between the North and South Divisions, to inform future pedagogical interventions.

The study focuses on the North and South divisions of Mbarara City, representing two distinct administrative areas within the same city. These divisions were selected to compare potential disparities or similarities in students' attitudes and competencies. Both regions are within reasonable proximity to the researcher's base, making it feasible to conduct fieldwork, such as surveys, interviews, and academic assessments.as Lwanga and Sekandi puts it. "Research on regional divisions in education highlights the importance of selecting areas that are not only administratively distinct but also accessible for comprehensive data collection, ensuring practical and logistical feasibility." (Lwanga, & Sekandi, 2020) This also allows better monitoring and intervention when necessary.

Ensuring that both the North and South divisions are included in the study helps avoid bias. It also allows for more generalizable findings, contributing to the overall academic discourse on language education in Uganda. "As Uganda embraces Kiswahili as a national language, it is imperative to understand regional variations in its acceptance and academic competence to ensure uniform implementation and avoid alienating certain regions." (Ogutu, & Namata, 2023)

The study limits its scope to government-aided secondary schools to maintain consistency in school funding, resource allocation, and curriculum. This eliminates variations caused by private school dynamics. Both divisions have a comparable number of government-aided secondary schools and

student populations. This ensures that data from both regions is adequately representative. The south and north divisions have sociocultural differences that could affect language learning and attitudes toward Kiswahili. For instance, differences in ethnicity, language use at home, and the value placed on Kiswahili vary between regions. Mbarara City's divisions could encompass different urban-rural settings.

By comparing two different divisions, the study aims to identify whether students' attitudes toward Kiswahili differ across regional lines, possibly due to cultural, socioeconomic, or infrastructural factors. Such comparisons are crucial for understanding regional disparities. "Regional disparities in education are often rooted in historical, socioeconomic, and cultural factors, influencing learners' attitudes and academic outcomes." (Ndagire, 2021, p. 34)

Objective

To compare students' attitudes and academic competencies in the Kiswahili language among senior three students of Mbarara City North and South in government-aided secondary schools.

Research Questions

- Is there a significant difference in senior three students' attitudes toward the Kiswahili language between the North and South Divisions of Mbarara city?

- How do academic competencies in Kiswahili differ between students in the two divisions?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study design: This study adopted a cross-sectional survey to assess baseline comparisons of attitude and academic competencies before quasi-experimental research design using the difference-in-differences (DiD) method. Given that this is a quasi-experimental study, the North and South divisions offer two naturally occurring groups for baseline comparison without random assignment.

This helps validate the research design, as differences found can lead to more robust conclusions about Kiswahili education in the city.

Study Population: The study focuses on learners from nine government-aided secondary schools in two divisions of Mbarara city (north and south). This gives the researcher a diverse sample in terms of educational settings and social backgrounds, which is crucial for a meaningful comparison of outcomes (attitude and academic competencies) between these schools. The participants were selected from both the North and South Divisions of Mbarara City, ensuring that the study captured any potential regional differences in learners' attitudes and academic competencies.

Sample Size: The researcher selected 158 students as participants using the Krejcie (1970) Table. This sample was considered large enough to allow for meaningful statistical analysis, ensuring that significant differences in attitudes and competencies between the groups (North and South divisions, or experimental and control) can be detected.

Data Collection Procedure: The data collection process in this study was designed to ensure accuracy, consistency, and reliability in gathering information related to learners' attitudes and academic competencies in the Kiswahili language across the selected government-aided secondary schools in Mbarara City divisions. To ensure consistent data collection, research assistants were trained on how to administer the questionnaires and pre-tests. This training covered ethical considerations, maintaining neutrality, and correctly recording responses.

Instruments: Three primary instruments were used for data collection, questionnaires for the attitudes of learners a standardized pre-test for academic competencies and questionnaires for perceived competencies of learners. The administration of these instruments was carefully

organized to prevent bias and minimize disruptions to the student's regular schedules.

Questionnaires on Learners' Attitude: The questionnaires were distributed to students in a classroom setting. Research assistants provided a brief introduction, explaining the purpose of the study, ensuring anonymity, and guiding students on how to fill out the questionnaires. Research assistants were available to answer any clarifying questions without influencing responses. The attitude questionnaire was designed to capture students' perceptions of Kiswahili, their interest in the subject, their motivation, and their perceived usefulness of the language. It consisted of Likert-scale items ranging from "1-Strongly disagree" to 5b "Strongly Agree."

Students completed the questionnaires within their normal classroom settings under the supervision of the research assistants. The researchers ensured that all students had enough time to complete the questionnaire without external interference. Once completed, the questionnaires were immediately collected to prevent any alterations or influence from peers.

Standardized pre-test on Academic Competence: The pre-test was administered under exam conditions to assess students' baseline knowledge and competencies in Kiswahili. The test covered key areas of the Kiswahili syllabus, including reading comprehension, grammar, composition writing, text listening and oral speaking. The pre-test was timed according to the standard academic testing guidelines (2 hours). All students took the test at the same time within each school to maintain consistency in the administration hence research assistants were 8 in number administered exams in 8 schools done at the same time. Research assistants and class teachers monitored the students during the pre-test to ensure academic honesty and reduce distractions. After the collection of exam scripts from the senior three Kiswahili learners, the pre-tests were securely transported to a central location for scoring by trained Kiswahili language educators to ensure consistency in grading.

Data Management

The data collected from the questionnaires were entered into Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 26 for quantitative analysis. Double entry was employed to reduce errors. Similarly, the pre-test scores were carefully recorded and entered into the system. All hard-copy questionnaires and pre-test results were stored securely in a locked file, while electronic data were stored on password-protected computers accessible only to authorized research personnel.

Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study aimed to interpret both the Kiswahili learner's attitude and perceived competencies data (from the questionnaires) and the academic competencies data (from the pre-test) in the Kiswahili language. A variety of statistical methods were used to draw meaningful conclusions about the learners' attitudes and their academic competencies. Below is a detailed description of the data analysis process: Given that the study utilized quantitative data analysis from both the attitude questionnaires and the standardized pre-tests, several statistical techniques were employed to analyze the data.

Descriptive statistics were used to provide an overall summary of the data, including the demographic characteristics of the participants (e.g., age, gender, school type, caregiver, transport, and friends), as well as their attitudes toward Kiswahili and academic competence scores.

Frequencies and Percentages: For categorical data such as gender, school type, and geographic division, frequencies and percentages were calculated to show the distribution of participants across different groups.

Mean, Standard Deviation, and Range: These were used to describe the central tendency and variability in the students' attitudes (e.g., average scores on attitude scales) and their academic competencies (e.g., average pre-test scores).

Independent Samples t-test: The independent samples t-test was used to compare the mean differences between two groups, students from the North Division and students from the South Division. The goal was to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in, Attitudes toward Kiswahili, Based on the scores from the Likert-scale questionnaire.

Academic Competence: Based on the scores from the standardized pre-test. The t-test was used to compare the means of the two independent groups (North vs. South) to test the null hypothesis that there were no differences between them in terms of attitudes or academic competencies. A p-value of less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant, indicating that any observed differences were unlikely to be due to chance.

ANOVA (Analysis of Variance)

In cases where more than two groups were involved (e.g. when comparing performance across multiple schools or grade levels), a one-way ANOVA was used. This allowed the researchers to determine whether there were significant differences in attitudes or academic competencies across different groups. The ANOVA tested for differences in means across several categories (such as different schools) simultaneously. In cases where students did not fully complete the questionnaires or missed the pre-test, the researchers employed mean substitution to handle missing data without skewing the results. This ensured that the analysis could still be robust despite any incomplete data entries.

The statistical analyses were carried out using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), which provided tools for running descriptive statistics, t-tests, ANOVA, and correlation analyses.

RESULTS

Table 1: Baseline Characteristics of Respondents (Students)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Sex	Female	53	33.5
	Male	105	66.5
Age (years)	Mean ±SD	16.9	1.0
Residence	Rural	59	37.3
	Urban	99	62.7
Religion	Catholic	46	29.1
	Protestant	76	48.1
	Muslim	15	9.5
	Others	21	13.3
Tribe	Other	37	23.4
	Banyankole	121	76.6
Primary caregiver	Parent(s)	91	57.6
	Others	67	42.4
Transport to school	Walking	40	25.3
	Car	79	50.0
	Others	39	24.7
Number of friends	Mean ±SD	8.0	5.0
Schooling	Day Scholar	34	21.5
	Boarder	124	78.5
Attitude	Mean ±SD	2.2	1.0
Academic competence	Mean ±SD	205.7	49.8
Marks (%)	Mean ±SD	40.2	9.8

Of 158 participants, the majority were males (66.5%), with an average age of 16.9 years (SD = 1.0). A majority resided in urban areas (62.7%), with most being Banyankole (76.6%). Most participants had parents as their primary caregivers (57.6%) and used cars for transport to school (50.0%). The average number of friends was 8 (SD = 5), and the majority were boarders (78.5%). At baseline, participants had an average attitude score of 2.2 (SD = 1.0) and an academic competence score of 205.7 (SD = 49.8), with average marks before intervention at 40.2 (SD = 9.8).

Table 2: Baseline Comparison of the Characteristics between Intervention and Control Arms

Characteristics	Control (North)	Experimental (South)	P
	N=79	N=79	
Sex			
Female	18 (23)	35 (44)	0.004**
Male	61 (77)	44 (56)	
Age (years)	17.1 (1.0)	16.8 (0.9)	0.050*
Residence			
Rural	26 (33)	33 (42)	0.250
Urban	53 (67)	46 (58)	
Religion			
Catholic	24 (30)	22 (28)	0.900
Protestant	38 (48)	38 (48)	
Muslim	8 (10)	7 (9)	
Others	9 (11)	12 (15)	
Tribe			
Other	26 (33)	11 (14)	0.005**
Banyankole	53 (67)	68 (86)	
Caregiver			
Parent(s)	29 (37)	62 (78)	<0.001***
Others	50 (63)	17 (22)	
Transport			
Walking	20 (25)	20 (25)	0.980
Car	39 (49)	40 (51)	
Others	20 (25)	19 (24)	
Number of friends	8.3 (3.6)	7.9 (5.4)	0.540
Schooling			
Day Scholar	16 (20)	18 (23)	0.700
Boarder	63 (80)	61 (77)	
Attitude	2.0 (0.9)	2.5 (1.0)	0.001**
Academic competence	231.2 (18.7)	160.9 (55.5)	<0.001***
Marks	40.6 (5.7)	39.8 (12.7)	0.630

*p0.05. **p<0.01 ***p<0.001

The table presents comparative data between control and experimental groups across various characteristics, highlighting statistically significant differences. In terms of sex distribution, a significant difference is observed, with a higher percentage of females in the experimental group (44%) compared to the control group (23%), indicated by a p-value of 0.004. Additionally, the mean ages of participants in both groups are similar, with a borderline significant difference (p = 0.050) suggesting that age may vary slightly between the two groups.

Regarding residence, there are no significant differences, as both rural and urban distributions are relatively consistent with a p-value of 0.250. The

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analysis of religious affiliations shows no significant differences among groups, as all categories yield high p-values, particularly Catholic (p = 0.900). When looking at tribal representation, a significant difference emerges, with a higher proportion of Banyankole in the experimental group (86%) compared to others (p = 0.005).

The type of primary caregiver also reveals a significant difference, with a notable increase in parents serving as caregivers in the experimental group (78%) compared to the control group (37%), indicated by a p-value of less than 0.001. In terms of transportation methods to school, no significant differences are observed (p = 0.980), suggesting similar patterns between the groups. The average number of friends reported is not significantly different (p = 0.540), nor is the schooling status (p = 0.700), as both day scholars and boarders show consistency across the groups.

Significant differences are also found in attitude scores, where the experimental group reports higher average scores (2.5) compared to the control group (2.0), reflected in a p-value of 0.001. Academic competence shows a highly significant difference, with the experimental group averaging 160.9, compared to the control group at 231.2 (p < 0.001). However, no significant difference is observed in marks, suggesting similar academic performance levels between the two groups, with a p-value of 0.630. Overall, significant differences are noted in sex distribution, tribal representation, primary caregivers, attitude, and academic competence, while no significant differences are found in residence, religion, transport, friends, schooling, and marks.

DISCUSSION

Most participants were male (66.5%) and urban-based (62.7%). Significant differences existed in sex, tribe, caregiver, attitude, and competence between groups. More females (44%) and Banyankole (86%) were in the experimental group. Parents were primary caregivers in 78% of the experimental group. Attitude scores and academic competence showed significant variation, favouring the control group's incompetence. Other factors like residence, religion, transport, and marks showed no significant differences between groups.

The findings of this study align with existing literature that underscores the critical role of student attitude in academic performance. Juma, & Atoni (2022) demonstrated that students with positive attitudes toward Kiswahili outperformed those with negative attitudes. Similarly, in this study, the experimental group had a significantly higher attitude score compared to the control group (2.5 vs. 2.0, p = 0.001), which may contribute to differences in academic competence between the two groups. As Chambers (1999) and Ombui (2012) argue, students with positive attitudes are more likely to achieve higher academic performance, which is also evidenced here.

However, unlike the non-significant gender differences in Kiswahili performance noted by Juma, & Atoni (2022), the present study found that academic competence varied significantly between the groups, with the experimental group scoring lower than the control group (160.9 vs. 231.2, p < 0.001). This suggests that while positive attitudes may enhance learning, other factors, such as the quality of instruction or socioeconomic background, might explain these variations in academic competence.

In this study, the results indicate significant regional differences between students in the North and South Divisions of Mbarara City regarding their attitudes and academic competencies in Kiswahili. Specifically, students in the South Division demonstrated more positive attitudes toward Kiswahili and exhibited lower academic competence in the language compared to their counterparts in the North Division who had low attitudes and scored high in academic competencies.

Stronger Cultural Ties to Kiswahili, In the South Division, there is a deeper historical or cultural

association with Kiswahili, given the language's role in broader East African communication and trade. Communities here place a higher value on Kiswahili as part of their cultural identity, leading to positive attitudes toward the language among students. Festivals, community activities, and local traditions integrate Kiswahili, making it more prevalent in everyday life. This cultural reinforcement of the language encourages students to embrace Kiswahili more readily, both in and out of the classroom. Students come from homes where the community actively encourages learning Kiswahili as a key language of East African integration and future career opportunities. "Cultural values that promote the use of a language in everyday life significantly contribute to students' positive attitudes toward learning that language in formal settings" (Nambirige, 2021)

In the North Division, Kiswahili is not as deeply embedded in the cultural fabric. Instead, local languages and English dominate the cultural and social environment. This distance leads to less enthusiasm and lower competence in Kiswahili among students. Cultural attitudes resist the use of Kiswahili, viewing it as less relevant or important compared to local languages. This results in students feeling less inclined to engage with Kiswahili in the classroom. A lack of cultural reinforcement for Kiswahili demotivates students, leading to poorer attitudes and academic performance in the subject. "When a language is seen as culturally distant or irrelevant, learners often struggle to engage with it, affecting their attitudes and competence" (Mwanika, 2022).

Historical Linguistic Context, The South Division has a historical connection to Kiswahili, where the language has been traditionally spoken or used in everyday life. This historical context can foster a natural inclination towards the language. According to Mukasa (2021), regions where a second language has historical and cultural significance are likely to produce learners with more positive attitudes, as the

language is embedded in both formal education and informal social interactions."

In the North Division, local languages such as Runyankore or English dominate in households, with less frequent use of Kiswahili. The lack of Kiswahili in home environments can limit students' exposure to the language outside school, making it harder for them to grasp and engage with Kiswahili lessons. Families in the North Division do not see the immediate practical value of Kiswahili in daily life, students perceive it as less relevant to their personal or future needs. This reduces their motivation to invest effort in learning the language. "Students who do not encounter the language of instruction outside of school are at a disadvantage compared to those who use it in their daily environments" (Kabugo, 2021). The presence of Kiswahili in the home environment in the South Division fosters better attitudes and competence, while the dominance of local languages in the North Division limits students' exposure to and proficiency in Kiswahili.

Perceived Professional Relevance of Kiswahili, Students in the South Division see Kiswahili as an essential skill for future careers, especially in sectors like trade, tourism, regional diplomacy, or cross-border communications within the East African Community (EAC). This professional orientation motivates students to develop a stronger interest in learning Kiswahili. The South Division has more professionals, such as business people or civil servants, who use Kiswahili in their daily work, serving as role models for students. The presence of these role models can significantly influence students' attitudes toward the importance of mastering Kiswahili. "Students with clear career aspirations that involve language use often show higher motivation and competence in language learning" (Ogwang, 2023).

Limited Professional Relevance, in contrast, students in the North Division do not see Kiswahili as directly tied to their future career aspirations and their perceived professional paths (e.g., local

business or farming) do not require Kiswahili, they may show less interest in the language, viewing it as unnecessary for their future success. There are fewer professionals in the North Division using Kiswahili in prominent roles, students do not see the practical benefits of the language, leading to lower motivation and competence." Without exposure to role models who value and use the target language in professional settings, students may struggle to see its relevance" (Mwongera, 2021).

In the South Division, students perceive Kiswahili as having significant professional relevance, motivating higher engagement. In contrast, students in the North Division do not see the language as crucial to their career paths, resulting in less motivation and competence.

Peer and Social Network Encouragement, Students in the South Division are part of social networks that encourage the use of Kiswahili, reinforcing positive attitudes. Peer groups that use Kiswahili in informal settings can make the language more attractive, increasing both competence and interest. Kiswahili is used as a language of social integration within the South Division, helping students navigate diverse social settings. This added utility strengthens students' commitment to mastering the language. "The role of peers in promoting language use in informal settings cannot be understated; they play a key part in reinforcing positive attitudes and proficiency" (Nyakana, 2023).

While in the North Division, peer networks do prioritize local languages and English for communication, reducing the perceived social value of Kiswahili. Students do not feel encouraged by their peers to invest in learning Kiswahili, especially if it is seen as less prestigious or useful in social settings. The lack of regular opportunities to practice Kiswahili in social situations can hinder students' ability to improve their competence, further contributing to negative attitudes toward the language. "Social networks that do not reinforce the use of the language being taught in school create a

disincentive for students to engage with it actively." (Aroko, & Kajubi, 2022).

Parental and Community Attitudes Toward Education, In the South Division, parents and communities place a higher value on learning Kiswahili, encouraging their children to study the language more diligently. The local community's role in fostering positive attitudes toward Kiswahili is pivotal, as supportive environments contribute to better academic performance. "Family and community support play a crucial role in shaping students' attitudes toward language learning, especially when the language is part of the community's linguistic repertoire." (Namyalo, & Mukama, 2020).

Rural-Urban Dynamics, The South Division has a more rural or peri-urban context compared to the more urbanized North Division. It has more stable cultural values and practices that align with the use of national languages like Kiswahili. In contrast, urbanized areas face linguistic fragmentation, with multiple competing languages being used, which could dilute the focus on Kiswahili. "In rural or peri-urban areas, students often show stronger language loyalty, especially when the language is promoted within the community. Urban areas, on the other hand, may be more linguistically diverse, leading to less focused language learning outcomes." (Mwangi, 2023).

Daily Exposure to Kiswahili, The South Division has more exposure to Kiswahili in everyday life, such as in markets, transportation, and local government interactions, enhancing students' familiarity with and appreciation for the language. Greater exposure leads to more opportunities for practice and use, contributing to higher competence. Kiswahili is perceived as a language of opportunity in trade or employment within the South Division, and students develop a stronger interest in mastering the language to improve their prospects. "Regular exposure to a language in daily social and economic activities has a profound impact on student's attitudes and proficiency, as they can see

the practical benefits of learning the language." (Kato, & Nakitende, 2021).

CONCLUSIONS

The study highlights significant differences in attitudes and academic competencies in the Kiswahili language among government-aided secondary school students in Mbarara City, particularly between the North and South Divisions. The findings reveal that students in the experimental group, characterized by higher positive attitudes, displayed notable differences in academic competence compared to the control group. Factors such as gender distribution, primary caregivers, and tribal representation also influenced these results. This underscores the importance of fostering positive attitudes toward language learning to enhance academic performance. Overall, the results indicate a need for targeted interventions that promote positive attitudes and address the disparities in academic competencies in Kiswahili, particularly in light of the varying demographic factors within Mbarara City.

Ethical Approval

Anonymity and Confidentiality, Students' identities were protected throughout the process. Each questionnaire and pre-test was assigned a unique identifier code to maintain confidentiality while allowing the researchers to track responses for data analysis. Approval and Consent, before data collection commenced, ethical clearance was obtained from relevant authorities, including the Mbarara University of Science and Technology Research Ethics Committee (MUST REC), the Dean Faculty of Science, and the Mbarara City Education Office to go and conduct research. Additionally, consent was sought from the schools' administrators to allow the researcher to collect data in their schools.

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