



Original Article

Relating English Language Proficiency to Academic Performance among non-English Speaking Undergraduate Students in Kenyan Universities.

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In Kenya, English language is the standard medium of instruction at primary and post-secondary levels of education and training. At universities, English is the primary language of academics and research. Its mastery and proficiency among students and staff also influence the overall learning experience. This research paper examined the influence of English language proficiency on academic performance among non-English speaking undergraduate students in Kenyan universities. These are foreign students whose countries of origin do not use English as the main language of instruction. The study was conducted in six universities that use the Grade Point Average in determining academic performance. The mixed methods research design was utilized to gather both qualitative and quantitative data concurrently. Using the purposive sampling techniques, 61 foreign students and 13 academic staff teaching were selected, while semi structured questionnaires and document analysis guide were used to collect data. The findings revealed a positive correlation between English language proficiency and academic performance (.000). It also emerged that over 76% undergraduate students from non-English speaking backgrounds lacked the expected language skills for quality learning experience. Specifically, students' difficulties in listening and speaking had the strongest influence on their academic performance ($R_s = 1.000$, $p < 0.01$). Finally, the study recommended the need for universities to conduct English proficiency assessment when admitting undergraduate students from non-English speaking countries. It also suggested academic writing and mentor support programs to equip foreign undergraduate students with the requisite English literacy skills. The study further recommended faculty to practice

pedagogical approaches that nurture foreign students to actively engage in the academic and social interactions.

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INTRODUCTION

In a world that is currently interconnected and interdependent more than ever before, English language is one of the major international languages that have evolved into universal languages of the global citizenry. So far, it is indisputably agreed that English language has penetrated into all aspects of human life, including business, information communication and technology (ICT) and, above all, education. According to Chang (2011) and Macaro (2018), English language is now recognized as the primary medium of the global academy. Specifically, it is the major language of instruction and research communication in every modern university of the world. Affirming this, Wachter and Maiworm (2014) reports that the use of English at universities has expanded to the point of 'English-ization' of academic disciplines and most university programs. Similarly, the global demand for strong English language competence among university graduates and professionals has evoked additional interest for universities to mainstream English language instruction and learning including the education systems of non-native English-speaking jurisdictions (Macaro, 2018).

In Kenya, teaching of English language was promulgated in education following recommendations of the Phelps-Stokes Commission of 1924. In the report, English was formally introduced as a medium of instruction from upper primary up to the university (Nabea, 2009). At independence, English was declared the official language of use in all important government sectors, including education. Furthermore, Ominde Education Commission of 1964 emphasized the use of English language as the medium of instruction from the beginning class in primary school to the university. It was also accentuated as a compulsory subject and discipline of study at different levels of the education system (Nabea, 2009, p. 125-127). Since then, English language has remained as the standard mode of instruction, though with some additional use of mother tongue and Kiswahili at the lower levels of schooling (Sawe & Jairo, 2013). As such, English is a language that is expressively spoken and written by most Kenyan school leavers and the public in general.

Within universities, English language dominates all levels of service delivery in teaching, administration, research, and community engagements (Mambo, 2018). In academics, English language is the core language used to

design, deliver, and evaluate most academic programs. It is also a compulsory subject requirement for enrolling secondary school candidates in bachelor degree programs under the Kenya Universities and Colleges Central Placement Service (KUCCPS) (Obwoye et al., 2017). It also the main language of academic discourse and social interaction among students and with the faculty (Meyer, 2012). By implication, undergraduate students are expected that have strong English language mastery and high proficiency to adjust into the scholarly demands of university education. Besides, reports have also shown that when university graduates have elaborated English language proficiency, they have greater chances of employment and professional success within the global economy (Chowdhury & Roshid, 2013).

It is against this background that these researchers sought to survey the learning perspectives of the foreign undergraduate students who are admitted in Kenyan universities from non-English speaking countries and jurisdictions. To begin with, scholars have found that most foreign and international students are primarily attracted to Kenyan universities because English language is the main medium of instruction. Similarly, most foreign students and parents perceive Kenya to have high quality university courses, good political climate, and ease of immigration rules for foreign students (Itegi & Njuguna, 2013; Zeleza, 2017). Moreover, the universities also pride in having international students because they catalyse campus diversity and, as Muyaka (2021) argues, this one of the key parameters of university reputation and the ranking of ‘world class universities.

Presently, universities in Kenya hosts over 6,202 foreign undergraduate students drawn from both English and non-English speaking backgrounds. According the CPS Research International, report of 2021, public universities have enrolled 40.6% of these foreign students, while another 44.7% are in the private universities. These students are mainly enrolled in bachelor degree programs, such as Business and economics (75.7%), Engineering (8.3%), and Law (4.5%), among others (34.7%). It is also widely observed that entry into these undergraduate degree programs is mainly tied to national examination of the students’ country of origin, and its equivalent to the Kenyan university

admission criteria. As such, it emerges that English language proficiency, particularly for students from non-English speaking backgrounds, is barely considered at the very first point of entry into the university programs. This is unlike other countries like America where students from non-English speaking countries undertake entry examinations, such as Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or some English bridging courses prior to joining the selected bachelor programs (Michieka, 2005).

Even though this university admission procedure has existed for years, academic reports have revealed that these foreign students encounter numerous challenges affect their academic integration and achievement. Notably, Meyer (2012) indicates that students who enter university education with weak literary skills struggle to cope with the set instructional practices, academic rigor and disciplinary discourse. They also lack the expected scholarly flair and sophistication which emerges from conceptual, reflective, and analytical thinking. Similarly, students who lack mastery and proficiency of the language of instruction encounter social isolation which often leads to anxiety, low academic performance, and subsequent dropout. Enthused by Martirosyan et al. (2015) premise that instructional language proficiency predicts academic achievement, this study sought to establish the relationship between English language proficiency and academic performance among non-English speaking undergraduate students in Kenyan universities.

The objectives of this study were:

- To assess the perceived level of English language proficiency among non-English speaking undergraduate students in Kenyan universities
- Examine the relationship between English language proficiency and academic performance among non-English speaking undergraduate students in Kenyan universities
- Recommend pedagogical interventions and supportive strategies for non-English speaking undergraduate students in Kenyan universities

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In today's global knowledge society, English is a language that has come to be the international language of communication and instruction. Specifically, the introduction of English medium in higher education is now a rapidly emerging phenomenon in most of the non-English speaking countries of the world. Given the rising number of English speakers, university programs have been transformed into English language of instruction as educators and policy makers address the demand for international learning contexts. This involves the use of English to teach academic subjects particularly where the first language of the population is not English (Macaro, 2018). Similarly, scholars now hold that English language learning and high proficiency is a primary qualification for graduates to fit in the competitive global economy or succeed in employment (Rao, 2016; Wachter & Maiworm, 2014).

At the Kenya university education sector, which is the focus of this paper, English is primary language of communication, instruction, and research (Mambo, 2018; Michieka, 2005). In fact, scholars have affirmed that the increasing number of foreign and international students, including those from non-English speaking jurisdictions, is associated with the use of English language as the medium of instruction in Kenyan universities. This demand is further driven by perceived high quality of academic courses, reputation, good political climate, and ease of immigration rules in Kenya (Itegi & Njuguna, 2013; Karimi, 2010). As such, the continuous influx of foreign students has successfully increased student diversity and internationalized university classrooms for increased exchange of traditions and languages.

So far, there are over 70 registered universities in Kenya admitting local and international students for various undergraduate and postgraduate degree programs. Notably, most international students are enrolled under the self-sponsored students' program (SSSP). According to the CPS Research International survey report of 2021, there are over 6,202 foreign undergraduate students admitted in 11 Kenyan universities (five public and six are private). Most of these foreign students (70%) come from East and Central Africa countries and are registered

in programs such as Business (75.7%), Engineering (8.3%), Law (4.5%) among others (34.7%).

As educators and scholars monitor the results of cross border mobility and university internationalization, alternate debates have emerged around the global acceptance English as the language of instruction. To begin with, recent reports assert that even though only 9% of the global population are native English speakers, about one third of the global population speak English. On the same note, English has become not just the language of global communication, but is a necessary working language in all sectors of life worldwide (Jeraltin & Ramganes, 2013). As a result, many non-English speaking countries have adopted English as a second language among for its citizens. For instance, 26 nations in the Sub-Saharan Africa use English as their official language alongside their African languages. The same nations have adopted the use English language the official language of delivering education and training educational language (Plonski, Teferra & Brady, 2013). As such, most populations today opined that education implies to have good mastery of English and the ability to speak, write and read it fluently.

On the other hand, a series of scholars who cast doubt on this growing trend of *English-zation* of education in non-English speaking countries. Firstly, De Wit (2018) argues that internationalizing university education using English will particularly decrease emphasis on the other foreign languages. The researcher also notes that insufficient focus on the quality of English that is spoken by students and teachers for whom English is not their native language can lead to a decline in the overall quality of education (pp. 2). In other study findings, scholars argue that to emerging trend of internationalizing English, which is a foreign language, has potential repercussions both on the survival of indigenous languages, particularly in jurisdictions where native and ethical languages are not learnt or used at elementary education levels (UNICEF, 2016).

Nevertheless, the use English is increasing globally and the need for its mastery and proficiency among university students remains undeniable. In fact, research findings have affirmed that English language proficiency for non-English speaking

students is an indispensable workforce tool and employability and professional success (Daller & Phelan, 2013; Mataro, 2018; Rao, 2016; Bitrus-Ojiambo et al., 2017). Several other empirical evidences have shown that students' academic achievement depends largely on their level of proficiency in English language (Addow et al., 2013; Qiqieh & Dev, 2016; Roy-Campbell, 2014; Martirosyan, Hwang & Wanjohi, 2015). Thus, this study was conducted to contribute to this growing body of research concerning the influence of English language proficiency on academic performance among university students. Specifically, the researchers focused on the predictive contribution of English language proficiency on academic performance among non-English speaking undergraduate students in Kenyan universities.

MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

This study utilized the mixed methods research design which incorporates both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Enrolled undergraduate students from non-English speaking countries were targeted in six Kenyan universities that use the grade point average (GPA) criteria to measure academic performance. The purposive sampling technique was employed to select respondents from the 1st year undergraduate students who had successfully completed the first semester of study in October 2021. The same technique applied in selecting academic staff from the academic departments where these foreign students were enrolled. Overall, 61 students and 13 academic staff responded to the administered questionnaires. Document analysis guide was also employed to collect related data from the written assignments and examination booklets of the students.

Descriptive statistical analyses including frequencies and percentages were used to present findings on perceptions of English proficiency. Pearson Correlation Analysis was used to establish the relationship between English proficiency and academic performance. Ethical issues that were considered include informed consent, anonymity, anti-plagiarism check and non-falsification of data among others.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the findings of this study under the objectives as follows:

Perceived Level of English Language Proficiency

The study first sought to establish the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. To begin with, 64% of the foreign students were male while 36% were female. Moreover, 77% and 23% were aged between 18-24 years and above 24 years respectively. The majority of these students (46) were from Somalia and attained their secondary education through Somali language of instruction. The others were nationalities of South Sudan (31.1%), Rwanda (6.5%), Congo (6.5%), and Tanzania (4.91%). Besides, the respondents indicated Arabic, French and Kiswahili as the educational languages of their countries of origin as presented in *Table 1*. The same results also indicated that most respondents were studying bachelor programs in business (31.1%), computer sciences (29.5%) and international relations (18.2%). Others were taking courses in media and journalism (9.8%), community health (6.5% and engineering (4.9%).

Table 1: Selected socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents

| Factor | Variable | N | % |
|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|----|------|
| Gender | Male | 39 | 63.9 |
| | Female | 22 | 36.1 |
| Nationality and language of instruction | Somalia: <i>Somali</i> | 28 | 46 |
| | South Sudan: <i>Juba-Arabic</i> | 19 | 31.1 |
| | Rwanda: <i>French</i> | 04 | 6.5 |
| | Congo: <i>French</i> | 04 | 6.5 |
| | Tanzania: <i>Kiswahili</i> | 03 | 4.9 |
| | Unspecified nationality: <i>French</i> | 03 | 4.9 |

| Factor | Variable | N | % |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|----|------|
| Undergraduate program | Business and Economics | 19 | 31.1 |
| | Computer Science | 18 | 29.5 |
| | International Relations | 11 | 18.2 |
| | Media and Journalism | 06 | 9.8 |
| | Community Health | 04 | 6.5 |
| | Engineering | 03 | 4.9 |
| Age | 18-24 years | 47 | 77 |
| | Above 24 years old | 14 | 23 |

A similar analysis of the sampled academic staff from the six universities revealed that they were all Kenyans (9 female and 4 male) with satisfactory mastery of English as the sole medium of instruction and research at university. Indeed, four of these academic staff were specialized in linguistics and communication studies, while the others were experts in the other disciplines such as follows: economics (3), engineering (2), management (1), computing (1), economics (1) and community health (1). This finding clearly underscored the importance of English language proficiency for

quality academic teaching and successful students learning experiences at university education.

Secondly, the study examined self-perceptions of English language proficiency and difficulties encountered by foreign students from non-English speaking backgrounds. On English language proficiency rating, majority of the respondents (49%) rated their proficiency as poor, while 31% and 20% rated themselves as average and excellent respectively as presented in *Table 2*.

Table 2: Proficiency level

| English language proficiency level | N | % |
|------------------------------------|----|-----|
| Excellent | 12 | 20 |
| Average | 19 | 31 |
| Poor | 30 | 49 |
| Total | 61 | 100 |

Participants were also asked to rate their English language difficulties in speaking, listening, writing, and reading using *Always*, *Sometimes* and *Not at all*. From the results presented in *Table 3*, almost 90%

of the respondents (41) reported to have persistent difficulties in all the four areas of English language, while a small proportion (10%) indicated that they did not have difficulties in any of the

Table 3: English language difficulties

| Variable | Category | Frequency | % |
|-------------------------|------------|-----------|------|
| Difficulty in speaking | Always | 33 | 54.1 |
| | Sometimes | 24 | 39.3 |
| | Not at all | 04 | 6.6 |
| Difficulty in listening | Always | 34 | 55.8 |
| | Sometimes | 19 | 31.1 |
| | Not at all | 08 | 13.1 |
| Difficulty in reading | Always | 41 | 67.2 |
| | Sometimes | 11 | 18.0 |
| | Not at all | 09 | 14.8 |
| Difficulty in writing | Always | 47 | 77.0 |
| | Sometimes | 07 | 11.5 |

| Variable | Category | Frequency | % |
|----------|------------|-----------|------|
| | Not at all | 07 | 11.5 |
| | Total | 61 | 100 |

These findings were further confirmed in the results of data from all the selected academic staff and document analysis guides. Apparently, the findings showed that majority of the foreign undergraduate students from non-English speaking countries had poor English language proficiencies. They also encountered several language barriers in during lectures and when preparing coursework and assignments. Most of the typical gaps included low levels of concentration in class, inability to comprehend lectures or follow class instructions, low participation in class discussions or presentations, poor pronunciation, and several spelling errors in the written work. The findings also agreed with previous studies indicating that undergraduate students from non-English speaking backgrounds grapple with various academic challenges particularly when they enrol in universities where English is the main language of

instruction and communication (Mambo, 2018; Martirosyan et al., 2015; Michieka, 2005).

Associating English Language Proficiency with Academic Performance

In this section, the study examined the relationship between English language proficiency and the academic performance of the 61 students who participated. Using the GPA as the most common criteria of measuring academic success at university, over 40% of the respondents (24) attained GPA between 2.00-2.99 in their first semester examination. The others 60% attained GPA of 3.00 -3.99 while none scored a GPA less than 2.00 and 4.00 - which is often the highest score as presented in *Table 4*. *Table 4: GPA of the participants*

| GPA | N | % |
|----------------|-----------|------------|
| 4.0 | 00 | 00 |
| 3.00-3.99 | 37 | 60 |
| 2.00-2.99 | 24 | 40 |
| Less than 2.00 | 00 | 00 |
| Total | 61 | 100 |

Source: Document analyses in the university (2021)

Participants were also asked whether English language of instruction limited the reported GPA and the overall academic performance in the semester on a scale of *Yes*, *No* and *Do not know*. The findings showed that 73% responded in affirmation (*Yes*), while 19% and 8% indicated *No* and *Do not know* respectively. Similarly, majority of the selected academic staff agreed that the academic performance of most students from non-English speaking countries struggle academically due to weak English literacy skills. As one of the respondents noted,

“These students attain low GPA because of low content mastery, while others do not complete their course assignments.

Another academic staff noted:

“They (foreign students) have poor writing skills and they do not ask for help from us (lecturers) or even their peers in class”.

To statistically test the strength of relationship between English language proficiency and academic performance, the study used the Spearman’s Rank Correlation Coefficient. The finding presented in *Table 5* indicated a statistically significant and positive relationship between English language proficiency and academic performance ($R_s = .851$; $p < .01$). This positive relationship implies that the more proficient students are in English language, the better the academic performance of such students. However, it emerged that difficulties in writing result dictates that English language proficiency of Somali higher education students is more likely not to predict the

academic performance of such students. Table 5: Correlations

| | | | AP | PL | DIS | DIL | DIR | DIWR |
|-----------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Spearman's rho | AP | Correlation Coefficient | 1.000 | .851** | .722** | .693** | .552** | .436** |
| | | Sig. (2-tailed) | . | .000 | .000 | .000 | .000 | .000 |
| | | N | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 |
| | PL | Correlation Coefficient | .851** | 1.000 | .835** | .802** | .638** | .504** |
| | | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | . | .000 | .000 | .000 | .000 |
| | | N | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 |
| | DIS | Correlation Coefficient | .722** | .835** | 1.000 | .958** | .792** | .678** |
| Sig. (2-tailed) | | .000 | .000 | . | .000 | .000 | .000 | |
| N | | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 | |
| DIL | Correlation Coefficient | .693** | .802** | .958** | 1.000 | .842** | .737** | |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | .000 | .000 | . | .000 | .000 | |
| | N | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 | |
| DIR | Correlation Coefficient | .552** | .638** | .792** | .842** | 1.000 | .851** | |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | .000 | .000 | .000 | . | .000 | |
| | N | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 | |
| DIWR | Correlation Coefficient | .436** | .504** | .678** | .737** | .851** | 1.000 | |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | .000 | .000 | .000 | .000 | . | |
| | N | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 | |

***. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

Key: AP = Academic Performance; PL = Proficiency Level; DIS= Difficulty in Speaking; DIL = Difficulty in Listening; DIR = Difficulty in Reading; DIWR = Difficulty in Writing

This finding further agreed scholars who have raised concerns of declining standards and low scholarly output within the universities. In a study on the challenges faced by undergraduate students in academic writing, Karimi (2010) and Mwangi (2015) noted low writing skills due to students' failure to adhere to the principles of good writing. The author noted persistent gaps in grammar, punctuations, choice of vocabulary and sentence structure. In another study, Bitrus-Ojiambo et al. (2017) reported that undergraduate students who enter university education with weak English skills, particularly those from non-English speaking backgrounds, lacked the required literary skills for academic success. Meyer (2012) adds that today's university students' work lacks flair that emerges from conceptual, reflective, and analytical thinking because of rote learning among students and the lecturers' lack of deep cognitive and academic skills.

Proposed Interventions and Supportive Strategies for Non-English Speaking

This study also sought to establish the factors that were perceived as English language dilemmas among the foreign students. From the collected data, the respondents reported several barriers that affected the success learning experiences as foreign students. Among them, the level of speed and English language vocabularies affected their ability to take class notes and participate in learning process. Students also indicated they encountered difficulties in content mastery and handwriting problems. Similarly, academic staff also indicated that students lacked good academic writing skills including basic skills in spelling words correctly, punctuations and sentence structure when writing examinations or note taking. This finding confirmed Pineteh (2014) assertion that most undergraduate students demonstrated low quality of academic writing standards, skills to research and apply knowledge across different contexts. Table 6: Interventions and Strategies

| Factor | Reported barriers: |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Attending lectures | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unable to comprehend lectures • Slow speed of note taking in dictation • Pronunciation of words and concepts • Lecturer's accent • Speed of speech among students and lecturers • Afraid to participate in the class discussions • Scared to ask questions or give explanations • Difficult terms, vocabularies, and technical language by lecturers • Lecturers mix English and Kiswahili languages in class • Following presentations |
| Interacting with peers and faculty | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Isolation by classmates and peers in social life • Few English-speaking friends and peers • Stereotypes and discrimination • Anxiety and stress • No sense of belonging • No extra-curricular activities |
| Writing assignments and examinations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to comprehend and follow instructions • Ability to research and apply content • Grammar and spelling errors • Poor sentence skills • Poor academic writing skills |

Finally, the respondents alluded to the need for specialized support services targeting foreign students from non-English speaking backgrounds. Specifically, universities need to establish an admission criteria where foreign undergraduate students undergo some English proficiency test to assess their English language skills, in addition to the national examination grades. This is because students who have difficulty in the English language skills may not function well in academics and communication. Moreover, students, particularly those enrolled in technical and science courses, need demonstrate fluent and accurate English skills to grasp the underlying concepts. It is also widely accepted that English proficiency remains an essential predictor of student's academic performance and social integration at all levels of education and training (Kong, Powers, Starr, & Williams, 2012). On the other hand, English language proficiency is also one of the acculturative stressors of foreign students when it is not addressed properly (Mambo, 2018).

The study also recommended universities to design English language programs and mentoring sessions

that target foreign students from non-English speaking background. These include: English classes for writing and reading skills, English clubs for debates, public speaking and recreation activities that promote social interaction and inclusion. Moreover, the study recommended the need for faculty and academic staff to apply language and pedagogical approaches that accommodate students with low English language proficiencies. This may include peer teaching, counselling sessions, and adjusted course orientation programs and different methods of instruction. They also need to be more empathetic when dealing with problems and prejudices that are associated with English language proficiencies among the foreign students. As Mountford-Zimdars and Sabbagh (2013) assert, efforts to ensure academic and social success among foreign students helps universities to retain them.

CONCLUSION

Based on the main findings above, it is very clear that many foreign students are attracted to Kenyan university education because of the demand to

acquire English language proficiency and for employment success. This study concludes that English language proficiency is an important determinant of academic performance among non-English speaking undergraduate students. It is also noted that students from non-English speaking backgrounds encounter English language difficulties in writing, reading, speaking, and listening though at different levels. Finally, these findings affirm the need for all universities to conduct English language proficiency among foreign students at the first point of admission. They also need to establish appropriate English language support programs to teach English language to the foreign students who demonstrate low proficiencies. Universities should also provide mechanisms to support foreign students adjust and cope with expected academic rigor at university level. This should include mentoring, counselling and academic writing seminars.

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