

Exploring Effective Strategies to Address Shortcomings in Spoken English Among Students in Rural Primary and Secondary Schools in Non-Native English-Speaking Nations

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the shortcomings in spoken English among students in rural primary and secondary schools in non-native English-speaking countries and finding out effective strategies to address them. The study adopted convergent parallel design as one of the categories of mixed method. The study involved 16 schools, representing both primary and secondary levels, selected from 10 rural districts in Rwanda through systematic and random sampling. The study involved a sample of 100 primary and secondary school students and 16 teachers of English and the data was collected using interviews, focus group discussions, and non-participant observations. Both quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and content analysis respectively. The findings revealed significant shortcomings in spoken English, encompassing grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, accent, fluency, fear, and lack of confidence. The study emphasized a comprehensive approach to language instruction, advocating for diverse strategies such as cooperative activities, drills, pictures, media integration, group discussions, and teacher training. Emphasizing the importance of consistent English communication both inside and outside the classroom, the research highlighted the necessity for a balanced teaching methodology that goes beyond a singular focus on grammar. The study recommended that teachers of English should recognize the complex nature of spoken English proficiency and adopt a comprehensive approach that addresses various dimensions. In addition, school managers should encourage both learners and teachers to engage in English communication to overcome linguistic barriers and create conducive learning environment.

Keywords: Effective Strategies, Spoken English, Primary and Secondary Schools, Non-Native, English-Speaking Nations

I. INTRODUCTION

English, as a global lingua franca, plays a pivotal role in international communication, commerce, education, and cultural exchange (Nickerson, 2005). Proficiency in spoken English is an essential skill that empowers individuals with the ability to engage in cross-cultural dialogues, access information, and participate in the global community (Rao, 2019). In many non-native English-speaking countries, English language education has been integrated into the curriculum, reflecting the recognition of its significance. However, the challenges faced by educators and learners in rural primary and secondary schools in these countries are distinct, requiring a deeper understanding and tailored strategies (Mappiasse & Sihes, 2014).

While English literacy is crucial, proficiency in spoken English holds a unique place. Spoken English is the foundation for effective communication in various contexts, from academic discussions and job interviews to everyday conversations. Mastery of spoken English can bridge cultural divides and improve social and economic

mobility (Jenkins, 2015). Students in rural areas in non-native speaking countries encounter numerous language related problems. Among the issues include non-access to instructional resources, lack of qualified and competent teachers in teaching English and financial related challenges (Pennycook, 2008). Indeed, these issues can compromise quality in English language teaching in the areas.

Countryside regions usually present particular socio-cultural settings and diverse linguistic characteristics (Duff, 2002). Recognizing and respecting these diversities is essential in designing effective language programs. The involvement of teachers, parents, and community members is instrumental in the success of English language education. Teachers are responsible for implementing effective teaching strategies, while parents and communities can provide support and motivation to learners (Gamage, 2017). Understanding the roles and perspectives of these stakeholders is essential. Enhancing learners' proficiency in spoken English in rural primary and secondary schools requires context-specific strategies. What works in urban areas or formal language institutes may not be suitable for rural settings. Therefore, it is imperative to explore the challenges and best practices in these specific contexts.

English is obligatory from the first grade to university in Rwanda (World Education News and Reviews, 2019). Since 2008, English has been the medium of instruction in both public and private elementary schools (Nzitatakuze, 2012; Gahigi, 2008). However, some international schools in Rwanda are permitted to use French, especially in primary education. The transition from French to English as the medium of instruction has posed significant challenges for students and educators (Tolon, 2014). Consequently, the proficiency of learners and teachers in English, particularly in rural primary and secondary schools in Rwanda, remains questionable, aligning with Uwambayinema's study (2019) highlighting low proficiency among teachers and students in implementing the new language policy. Despite these challenges, recent research indicates a rapid increase in the prominence of English in Rwanda post-genocide (Rosendal & Ngabonziza, 2022). However, issues persist in English language teaching, including limited exposure to foreign languages and a lack of relevant teaching aids (Tabaro & Twahirwa, 2018), with few studies proposing solutions.

The impact of these challenges is evident in student performance, particularly in rural primary and secondary schools, where English subject failure rates are notable in both school and national examinations. The 2022 report from the National Examination and School Inspection Authority (NESA) reveals unsatisfactory results in P6 English tests, with only 38.55% meeting the benchmark. Secondary school (S3) results also show that only 42.78% of students met the English test benchmark. Furthermore, rural students consistently exhibit lower English performance compared to their urban counterparts. The 2002 census statistics emphasize the language gap, with only 1.1% of rural dwellers speaking English versus 6% of urban dwellers (MINECOFIN, 2005).

In light of these findings, it is evident that urban primary and secondary school learners in Rwanda possess greater English proficiency than their rural counterparts. This study aims to contribute to enhancing spoken English proficiency in primary and secondary schools in non-native English-speaking countries, empowering learners for future academic and professional success. The study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To find out the shortcomings in learners' spoken English in rural primary and secondary schools in non-native speaking countries
2. To explore effective strategies to improve learners' spoken English in rural primary and secondary schools in non-native speaking countries

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the shortcomings in learners' spoken English in rural primary and secondary schools in non-native speaking countries?
2. What are effective strategies to improve learners' spoken English in rural primary and secondary schools in non-native speaking countries?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

English is a mandatory subject in the majority of rural primary and high schools in Rwanda. However, there exists a notable disparity in spoken English proficiency when comparing students from rural and urban areas. The study of Deepa (2021) revealed that students from rural schools are less proficient in English than those from cities. Certain studies attribute these differences in learning outcomes to geographical location, resource availability, technological access, and the quality of instructors (Biswas, 2018). This study aims to explore the shortcomings in spoken English proficiency among students in rural primary and secondary schools in non-native English-speaking countries and finding out effective strategies for improvement (Izquierdo, Zúñiga & Martínez, 2021). Many

researchers have found out various factors leading to learners' challenges in their mastery of spoke English. Some of the factors are discussed below.

2.1 Key Factors Contributing to Learners' Difficulties in Mastering Spoken English

The study of Rababa'h (2005) highlighted various reasons behind the challenges EFL learners face in speaking English. These factors encompass aspects concerning the learners themselves, teaching methodologies, curriculum, and surroundings. One notable issue is the deficiency in vocabulary, which impedes learners from effectively conveying their thoughts and sustaining conversations. Furthermore, insufficient strategic and communication competencies can also hinder their ability to maintain interactions. In addition, Misbah, Mohamad, Yunus, and Ya'acob (2017) conducted a study aimed at identifying the factors underlying students' struggles in learning the English language. The research involved 116 students from seven schools who had failed to meet the state's GPMP standards in English. Utilizing a questionnaire as the primary tool, the study examined the obstacles hindering their performance in the subject. The results revealed three primary themes contributing to students' challenges in English language acquisition: insufficient English vocabulary, the impact of their first language, and the socio-economic status of their families.

Another study by Amoah and Yeboah (2021) aimed at identifying the speaking challenges faced by Chinese EFL learners and their motivation to speak English. Employing a descriptive qualitative methodology, the study gathered data from semi-structured interviews, observations, and focus group discussions (FGDs). The analysis revealed several difficulties encountered by students in the English language education department when it comes to speaking English, including inadequate vocabulary, limited grammar proficiency, incorrect pronunciation, insufficient exposure to English outside the classroom, lack of confidence, and a deficiency in the development of English speaking curriculum. Recommendations from the study emphasized the necessity for a well-designed speaking curriculum, integration of technology and social media into English speaking courses to enhance cultural awareness and knowledge exchange globally. Additionally, it was suggested that educators should facilitate opportunities for students to engage with English-speaking communities to foster more opportunities for English communication both in and out of the classroom.

Khasawneh (2022) investigated how curriculum, teaching methodologies, assessment practices, and both school and home environments impact English language learning difficulties as perceived by students. Employing a descriptive-analytical approach, the study surveyed a sample of 100 fourth and fifth-grade students, evenly distributed with 50 males and 50 females. A questionnaire was utilized to assess the relationship between curriculum, teaching methods, assessment practices, and school/home environments with English language learning difficulties. The findings indicated a high level of association between these factors and students' challenges in English language learning at the primary level. The study underscored the significance of recognizing the role of curriculum, teaching methodologies, assessment practices, and environmental factors in supporting students with learning difficulties, emphasizing the importance of students' awareness of these factors and their impact.

Finally, Al Nakhalah (2016) conducted a study examining the challenges faced by English language learners at Al Quds Open University in speaking, while also investigating the underlying causes of these difficulties. Employing an experimental methodology, the researcher aimed to both demonstrate and measure the speaking obstacles encountered by students. The findings revealed several issues contributing to the students' speaking difficulties, including fear of making mistakes, shyness, anxiety, and a lack of confidence. The study recommended that teachers create a supportive environment that fosters frequent English-speaking practice to address these challenges.

2.2 Strategies and Best Practices for Improving Learners' Spoken English

Al Hosni (2014) conducted research on the speaking challenges faced by young EFL learners. The results indicated that fifth-grade students encounter various speaking difficulties, which could be addressed by prioritizing the development of this skill. The study highlighted several factors, including teacher-related issues, teaching methodologies, curriculum design, extracurricular activities, and assessment regulations, that should be taken into account. Additionally, the study concluded that teacher training is necessary to integrate speaking with other language skills in a communicative manner. It emphasized the importance of raising teachers' awareness of language acquisition and learning processes. Finally, the study recommended enlightening teachers about diverse teaching strategies that could minimize their reliance on the students' native language in the classroom. In addition, Ibrahim (2024) contended that many English language learners possess a solid grasp of English grammar rules but express frustration over their inability to speak the language fluently. He advocated that the most effective approach to enhancing spoken English

skills is consistent practice through speaking. Additionally, he emphasized the importance of active engagement in the learning process to improve pronunciation and fluency. Ibrahim stressed the necessity of regular exposure to English, active conversation in English, and daily learning of vocabulary and grammar rules as key components for achieving rapid improvement in spoken English proficiency.

Besides, Ferlazzo's (2023) research findings highlighted effective strategies for enhancing English learners' speaking skills. These strategies involve (1) fostering learners' confidence in their speaking abilities by cultivating a classroom atmosphere that promotes speaking up without fear of judgment, where errors are embraced and considered part of the learning process, (2) providing opportunities for students to engage with the language naturally, and (3) encouraging English speaking opportunities both within the classroom and beyond, such as encouraging conversations between classes, in communal areas like hallways, cafeterias, and playgrounds.

Finally, Anggarista and Wahyudin (2022) examined the language learning strategies employed by EFL students and their correlation with students' English proficiency levels. The study utilized an Ex-post facto quantitative research design, collecting data from students' Language Learning Inventory responses and their most recent English Proficiency Scores. Thirty-eight English major students participated in the study. Findings revealed that metacognitive strategies were the most commonly utilized, followed by cognitive, compensation, memory, affective, and social strategies. Additionally, a noteworthy correlation was observed between the utilization of language learning strategies and students' English proficiency levels.

In essence, all the above findings indicate Key factors contributing to learners' difficulties in mastering spoken English and Strategies for improving learners' spoken English. The findings end with some recommendations which serve as guiding tools to teachers of English as well as school principals when striving to improve learners' proficiency in spoken English.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employed the convergent parallel design as a category within the mixed methods design framework (Creswell, 2012). This research design incorporated both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis techniques to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the research questions. Specifically, this investigation relied on both qualitative and quantitative data, which were integrated to explore the deficiencies in learners' spoken English proficiency, the primary challenges faced by learners in mastering spoken English, and to identify effective strategies for enhancing learners' spoken English proficiency in rural primary and secondary schools in non-native English-speaking countries.

3.2 Population and Sampling

This research took place in 8 primary schools and 8 secondary ones located in 8 rural districts of Rwanda. The study used systematic sampling in selecting the schools. The 8 district were selected in 4 provinces of Rwanda (North, South, West and East) whose main parts are located in rural areas. Two districts per province and two schools (one primary and one secondary) per district were involved in the study. Districts were selected using a simple random sampling technique. The study included a sample of 100 students (50 primary and 50 secondary students), selected through purposive sampling techniques. Additionally, the study involved a sample of 16 teachers of English. The participants comprised only Primary 6 and Senior 6 students, a deliberate choice made to identify gaps in spoken English proficiency between primary and secondary school graduates.

3.3 Research Tools

In terms of data collection, semi-structured interviews were conducted with primary and secondary school English teachers, allowing flexibility and exploration of participants' experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) in teaching English, focusing on learners' challenges in mastering spoken English and strategies for improvement. A set of pre-determined open-ended questions guided these interviews, which were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed for analysis. Focus group discussions were also employed with primary and secondary school learners, involving 10 groups with 10 participants each. The discussions aimed at exploring the loopholes in spoken English by the selected learners. The researcher transcribed the audio recordings of these discussions verbatim, considering participants' non-verbal cues, pauses, and tones, as they may convey additional meaning (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Finally, the study utilized the observation method in data collection, adopting a non-participant approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The researcher did not partake in the learning activities;

instead, they were provided with a chair and table in the class, observing and listening to what transpired in the English classes.

3.4 Validity and Reliability

To establish validity of the interview guides as well as the observation checklist, the researchers used a panel of experts to review them and add some inputs for improvement. In establishing the reliability of instruments the researcher conducted pilot interviews with a small sample to identify any issues with question wording, sequencing, or interpretation. Then, the researcher refined the interview guides based on the feedback and experiences from the pilot phase.

3.5 Statistical Treatment of Data

Data from interviews were analyzed using content analysis, involving systematic coding and categorization of text to identify patterns, themes, and meanings (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Data from observations were systematically analyzed by examining and interpreting information collected through direct observation and listening to how learners spoke English in class, based on a checklist used in data analysis.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section outlines the findings and their corresponding discussion in relation to the research questions. The findings articulated herein originate from the data collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with English teachers, focus group discussions involving primary and secondary learners from rural school, and observations conducted within primary and secondary schools in Rwanda. The findings corresponding to each research question are discussed in the subsequent sections.

4.1 Shortcomings in Learners' Spoken English in Rural Primary and Secondary Schools in Non-Native Speaking Countries

The results of this study indicate the shortcomings in English proficiency among primary and secondary schools in Rwanda. The shortcomings were discerned through classroom observations as well as focus group discussions conducted by the researcher in the selected primary and secondary schools. The spoken English deficiencies, as revealed by the findings from this research, are categorized into the following dimensions: grammar and syntax, vocabulary mastery, pronunciation and accent, fluency, fear, and lack of confidence in speaking. In analyzing the data, the research employed different categories to describe the proficiency of learners in spoken English in the selected schools. The respective findings are presented below.

4.1.1 Shortcomings in Grammar and Syntax

The results from classroom observations and discussions with students indicated that a majority of learners in the selected rural primary and secondary schools make numerous grammatical errors when speaking English. It was observed that high school students commit fewer errors than those in secondary schools, but there are a few primary school learners who exhibit better English proficiency than their secondary school counterparts. Among the grammatical mistakes detected by the researcher are:

Incorrect Verb Tenses: It was found that 77% of the involved learners do not use verb tenses correctly, especially with irregular verbs. For instance, some learners were found unable to identify the simple past and present participle of verbs such as *"have, do, go, come, see, eat, take, and speak."* Through discussions with the learners, it was revealed that some of them express, *"I seen him, I haved some money, he comed here, we eated good food, he taked my pen, he speaked quickly."* It was evident that learners in primary school tend to believe that the past tense and past participle of all existing verbs are formulated by adding *"ed"* or *"d"* only, overlooking the irregular verbs' exceptions. Another common mistake is the omission of an *"s"* on the third person singular, and some learners confuse *"she"* with *"he"* when speaking English. Furthermore, the findings revealed that majority of learners in primary schools struggle with the use of the present perfect tense, saying, *"I was gone"* instead of *"I went"* or *"I was come"* instead of *"I came."*

Subject-Verb Disagreement and Improper Use of Pronouns: The study found that some learners use incorrect subjects in certain cases when speaking English. For example, it was observed that some learners do not match subjects and verbs well in sentences, with a majority in primary school saying, *"I were"* instead of *"I was"* or *"they plays"* instead of *"they play."* The findings revealed that some students in both primary and secondary schools

still struggle with distinguishing between “she/he” and “me/I.” Additionally, unnecessary repetition of pronouns (e.g., “Me, I was there”) was noted.

Omission of Important Words and Addition of Unnecessary Words: The study found that 73% of the involved students in rural primary and secondary schools in Rwanda omit certain words, especially articles, when speaking English. Examples from interview responses include “*I have pen,*” “*I reading book,*” and “*We going to break soon.*” It was also observed that some students add unnecessary words when speaking English, as evidenced by statements such as “*We did not study it well English*” or “*I can see them the students*” All the above grammatical mistakes were identified through discussions the researcher held with the selected students as well as classroom observations. The problem of grammar usage was identified in both selected primary and secondary schools, but it was found that learners in rural primary schools exhibit more grammatical mistakes than those in rural secondary schools.

4.1.2 Shortcomings in Vocabulary

The study brought to light a concerning limitation in the vocabulary proficiency of learners in rural primary and secondary schools in Rwanda. Through insightful discussions with the selected learners, several vocabulary-related challenges emerged; shedding light on the nature of their linguistic struggles (Smith & Jones, 2018). The identified problems regarding vocabulary use include: significant difficulties in naming everyday objects around them (53%), difficulties in expressing their ideas (62%), repetition of the same words while speaking (71%), logical sequence of thoughts (76%), keeping silent when asked a question in English (42%), wrong use of words (37%) and difficulties in catching up the question which leads to asking the speaker to repeat (59%). The findings demonstrate that there is a need for helping the students in addressing the quantitative aspects of vocabulary acquisition as well as social and emotional factors which hinder the learners’ proficiency in spoken English (Brown & Miller, 2013).

4.1.3 Shortcomings in Pronunciation and Fluency

Through verbal interaction with the students, the study found that majority of learners in Rwandan rural primary and secondary schools have the following difficulties in pronunciation.

[θ] Sound Mispronunciation: [t] “tink” instead of [θ] “think,” or [f] “fing” instead of [θ] “thing”; “free” instead of “three,” [s], “sing” instead of [θ] “thing.”

[ð] Sound Mispronunciation: Some students pronounce [d] “de man,” [v] “ve man,” or [z] “ze man” instead of [ð] “the man.”

“r” Sound: Many students in primary and secondary schools in Rwanda confuse the semi-vowel [r] with [l]. For example, some students pronounce “lead” instead of “read.”

Vowel Sounds Mispronunciation: Many students in primary and secondary schools in Rwanda pronounce [I] instead of [i:]. For example, they pronounce “bit” instead of “beat” or “ship” instead of “sheep.”

Word Stress Mispronunciation: “re-FRID-ger-a-tor” instead of “re-frig-er-A-tor” or “IN-ter-net” instead of “In-ter-NET.”

Silent Letters Mispronunciation: Some primary and secondary school students pronounce /debt/ instead of /dæt/.

Other pronunciation problems found include pronouncing the same word differently on different occasions and pauses or hesitations during speech. Regarding fluency, it was found that the majority of the selected learners are not fluent in English. The findings revealed the following deficiencies in relation to learners’ fluency in English: mispronouncing many words, speaking with frequent pauses, and speaking very slowly with hesitation. Additionally, it was found that many of the selected learners have a poor vocabulary and make many grammatical mistakes. All of these factors contribute to inadequate fluency in English among learners in both primary and secondary schools. Overall, the study categorized the learners in accordance with their levels of Spoken English proficiency. The results are shown in table one below.

Table 1*Level of Primary School Learners' Proficiency in Spoken English*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Grammar	50	1.00	4.00	2.8200	.89077
Vocabulary	50	2.00	4.00	3.1000	.63888
fluency	50	1.00	3.00	2.0000	.63888
Pronunciation	50	1.00	3.00	2.1600	.65027

Note: **Note: Beginner level**= [1-2[=Very Low mean; **Elementary level**= [2-3[=Low mean; **Intermediate level**= [3-4[=moderated mean; **Advanced level**= [4-5[=High mean; **Proficient level** = [5- [=very high mean

Table 1 presents a comprehensive analysis of the language proficiency levels of respondents in primary schools, focusing on various aspects of spoken English. The data reveals that a significant proportion of the respondents are at the elementary level in English grammar ($\mu=2.8200$), fluency ($\mu=2.0000$), and pronunciation ($\mu=2.1600$). This indicates a notable area for improvement, suggesting that foundational elements of spoken English need attention in primary education settings. However, a contrasting trend emerges in vocabulary, where the majority of respondents exhibit an intermediate level ($\mu=3.1000$), surpassing their proficiency in other linguistic domains. These findings highlight demonstrate that primary school learners are more capable of memorization of new words than secondary ones. Although they have capacity in memorizing new words they still have low level of vocabulary package such that their lexical repertoire should be enhanced by teachers of English. These findings corroborate with those of (Nation, 2001; Beck et al., 2002) which highlight the essential role of vocabulary in improving learner's language acquisition as well as their overall academic performance. In their study Kamil (2008) and Webb & Miller (2000) suggest that integrating both interactive and engaging activities like storytelling, games and multimedia resources may help in revamping vocabulary capacity among learners. In the same vein, the studies of Snow (2005) and Graves (2006) conclude that teacher of English should be trained on innovative methodologies which promote fascinating learning environment and application of the acquired vocabulary package. Although learners in primary school demonstrate higher level of vocabulary acquisition, there are still shortcomings in spoken English which need further improvement through methodical didactic intervention.

Table 2*Level of Secondary School Learner' Proficiency in Spoken English*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Grammar	50	1.00	4.00	3.8200	.89077
Vocabulary	50	2.00	4.00	3.4000	.63888
fluency	50	1.00	3.00	2.5000	.63888
Pronunciation	50	1.00	3.00	2.4600	.65027

Note: **Note: Beginner level**= [1-2[=Very Low mean; **Elementary level**= [2-3[=Low mean; **Intermediate level**= [3-4[=moderated mean; **Advanced level**= [4-5[=High mean; **Proficient level** = [5- [=very high mean

The results in table 2 show that majority of secondary school learners are at in grammar usage ($\mu=3.8200$) and vocabulary ($\mu=3.4000$) which demonstrate a good step in these two aspect spoken English.

Conversely, the learners exhibit elementary proficiency levels in fluency ($\mu=2.5000$) and pronunciation ($\mu=2.4600$), signaling potential areas for improvement in the aspects of spontaneous expression and articulation. This pattern suggests a potential imbalance in language instruction, aligning with the observation that English language educators in Rwanda may prioritize teaching grammatical rules over other language skills.

The findings resonate with the broader discourse on language education, emphasizing the need for a balanced approach that encompasses all facets of language acquisition (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Acknowledging the prominence of grammar instruction, the results prompt a reevaluation of pedagogical strategies to address the observed disparities. Research by Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2013) advocates for a task-based language teaching approach which emphasize real-life communication and which could enhance fluency and pronunciation alongside grammatical competence.

Moreover, the learners' apparent proficiency in vocabulary acquisition aligns with Nation's (2001) assertion that intentional vocabulary instruction is crucial for overall language development. However, it is essential to ensure that the acquired vocabulary is not only extensive but also applied effectively in communicative contexts (Nation,

2008). Collaborative efforts between language educators and curriculum developers are pivotal in devising strategies that balance the teaching of grammatical structures with fostering fluency and pronunciation skills.

To optimize language instruction in secondary schools, educators should consider incorporating diverse and interactive activities, such as role-playing, debates, and storytelling, to promote a holistic language learning experience (Nunan, 2004; Richards, 2015). Additionally, professional development programs for English teachers should focus on equipping them with pedagogical tools that address the complex nature of language acquisition (Freeman & Johnson, 1998). Through these efforts, educators can contribute to the holistic development of secondary school learners, ensuring their proficiency across various dimensions of spoken English.

4.2 Effective Strategies to Improve Learners' Spoken English in Rural Primary and Secondary Schools in Non-Native Speaking Countries

In order to find out strategies to enhance learners' English proficiency in English this study referred to the experiences from teachers of English in Primary and secondary schools and these were captured through the responses from interviews with them. In addition, the researcher conducted observations in classes of English in order to find out how these are conducted and devise some strategies to improve learners' spoken English. As a results, the majority of respondents agreed that the following strategies can boost speaking skills into learners in rural primary and secondary school.

4.2.1 Use of Cooperative Activities

The majority of respondents suggested that the use of cooperative activities such as creative tasks, drilling and interactive games can improve learners' proficiency in spoken English. However, the respondents opined that for this strategy to be effective the students need to use English language in all of their integrations. The respondents said that learners fail to speak English due to the lack of enough exposure to the language. So they suggest that more interactions in English are crucial in providing to the student opportunity to use or speak English.

T1: *"Our students fail to speak English because of few opportunities to speak English"*. T2: *"Our students do not actually practice English adequately, in most cases their interaction is in their mother tongue"*.

These findings align with those of Anjaniputra (2013) who found that cooperative activities play a crucial role in teaching speaking skills to learners.

4.2.2 Use of Poems, Chants, Stories, Drama and Games

The majority of respondents suggested that the use poems, chants, stories, drama, games can enhance spoken English among learners in primary and secondary schools. These findings are supported by Khamies (cited in Saragih, Batubara, Halawa, Sipayung & Napitupulu, 2022) who stated that using media such poems, chants, stories, drama, games, and Total Physical Response (TPR) activities can be used to enhance English speaking skills among the learners. To this researcher, these media can be used to teach language and enhance learners' English interlanguage. With regard to this strategy, one respondent (T5) provides advice to teachers of English. He said,

"Teachers of English should pay attention while using poems, chants, stories, drama and games in teaching, Any negative criticisms to learners may discourage them from continuing learning English".

Thus, teachers of English should always pay attention while giving instructions or clarifications while using poems, chants, stories, drama and games in teaching English, use of polite and positive expressions is recommended while teaching English.

4.2.3 Using Drills and Pictures

An alternative method suggested by a majority of interviewees for teaching speaking is through the use of drilling. Houston (2013) defines drilling as a technique for standardizing the pronunciation of a language item and cultivating fluency, characterized by the ability to swiftly and easily introduce language. This approach proves beneficial for teaching English word pronunciation, facilitating an easier grasp of pronunciation by students. Harmer (2007) describes drilling as a mechanical method to guide students in demonstrating and practicing specific language items in a controlled manner. It involves repetitive or continuous practice to develop practical capabilities and proficiency in the acquired knowledge. According to T3,

"Using drills in teaching English can ensure that the acquired knowledge or abilities become permanent, steady, and can be utilized by the students at any time."

Educators can also employ visual aids, such as pictorial stories, to enhance spoken English skills among learners. A pictorial story consists of vivid images depicting stories or chronological sequences, serving as effective

media for teaching English, particularly for speaking skills. Neuman (2010) associates media with communication tools, defining it as any device conveying information from the source to the destination. In the context of teaching English, the use of pictures receives widespread approval from respondents who believe it stimulates learners' attention, aids in mental concept formation, and translates into verbal responses. T4 P1 emphasized,

"Using pictures stimulates learners' attention, helping build mental concepts that can later be expressed verbally," while T3 P5 added, *"Pictures are crucial for improving spoken English, especially when learners are prompted to provide verbal comments about the pictures."*

4.2.4 Use of Media and Group Discussion

In daily life, various communication channels such as television, radio, newspapers, magazines, leaflets, billboards, and posters are collectively referred to as media. These mediums play a role in facilitating the transfer of information. In educational settings, educators frequently employ media to enhance the learning process and make student activities more accessible. Pictures, for instance, allow students to elaborate on their ideas or narratives by deriving inspiration from images and expressing themselves in their unique language and preferred style. All respondents confirmed that incorporating media is effective in enhancing students' speaking skills. The respondents were asked how media can be used in teaching spoken English. One of the respondents (T4 S3) replied,

"Teachers select the media which can stimulate the students' interest, show it to students and ask them to talk about it".

Indeed, media is crucial in teaching spoken English as it can engage students into discussion among themselves or with the teachers. However, teachers should make sure that all the learners use English in all of the conversations. If not, using this strategy can't be as useful as it should be. On this point T5P3 said,

"The fact that all the students understand each other in Kinyarwanda, they prefer to use their mother tongue (Kinyarwanda) in group discussions".

That means, teachers should always push learners to use English whenever they are in class, whether in class activities or any other activities which call for any verbal interaction.

All respondents unanimously agreed that group discussion stands out as one of the most effective strategies for enhancing learners' speaking skills. According to Ernasari (2011), group discussion is a dynamic and structured exchange of opinions aimed at addressing problems, sharing ideas, and seeking solutions, involving participation from multiple group members. Additionally, Sukardi (cited in Saragih, Batubara, Halawa, Sipayung & Napitupulu, 2022) defined group discussion as a gathering of two or more individuals for the purpose of sharing opinions and experiences, typically leading to decisions based on collective deliberation. T6 P3 expressed,

"By employing the discussion group strategy, students become more actively engaged as they work in small groups." P5P2 added, *"Discussion groups assign learners topics relevant to their concerns, fostering conversations among group members to explore solutions collaboratively."* T3P2 commented, *"In discussion groups, students not only address problems verbally but are also encouraged to think critically, enabling them to articulate opinions through speech."*

The responses collectively suggest that the implementation of the discussion group strategy fosters a more positive mindset among students compared to those working independently. Consequently, the discussion group emerges as an effective teaching strategy for enhancing students' speaking abilities, promoting proper grammar usage.

4.2.5 Adequate Trainings to Teachers of English

Through the observation made in classes of English, the researcher could realize some gaps in speaking skills among both the teachers and the learners. It was found that teachers' English pronunciation is very poor especially in primary schools, they possess short package of English vocabulary and they commit many typographical and grammatical errors. Among the gaps in English, speaking skills are the widest compared to writing and grammatical ones. With regard to students, the gaps are even wider than the teachers' because they are supposed to be trained well in English before being allowed to teach English. All the interviewees agreed that they need to be trained in spoken English so that they may help the learners as well.

T9 S4 suggested, *"We need to be trained in spoken English especially in native speakers' accent so that we may help our learners to improve their spoken English"*.

Lack of mastery of English by the teachers remains the most important cause of learners' difficulties in speaking English. This was reiterated by one of the respondents (T8P5). He said,

"Every one gives what he/she owns; teachers can't teach English well unless they know it well, for that reason learners can't speak English when the teachers don't".

This quote is tangible evidence that teachers need adequate training in English.

4.2.6 Encourage Learners and Staff to Speak English

As mentioned in the aforementioned sections, mother tongue is among notable factors that hinder the acquisition of the second language. Its negative effect is more aggravated when all the citizens speak the same mother tongue. Indeed, this is the case of Rwanda because all Rwandese speak Kinyarwanda. The fact all Rwandese can understand one another in all of their interactions make it hard to master other languages other than Kinyarwanda. That means, since the students understand one another in Kinyarwanda, most of the interactions are facilitated in Kinyarwanda and this hampers the mastery of other languages. In countries where the citizens speak more than mother tongue, the students use English as the language of communication and therefore, they master it quicker than those speaking the same mother tongue. In order to improve English speaking, learners in the countries with one mother tongue should encourage learners to maximize the use of English in almost all of occasions in schools or outside the school. One of the respondents said,

“Our learners like to speak Kinyarwanda, even in classroom and this prevent them from mastering English well”.

So, it's up to the teachers and school staff to encourage the learners to speak English wherever they are. This will help them improve their speaking skills. Another respondent said,

“Even the teachers and other staff speak Kinyarwanda in class or school. This does not help learners in mastering English quickly”.

This really, indicates that schools should encourage the staff as well to speak English in order to help learners in mastering English. Speaking English should start with teachers and staff then spread among the learners and strong measures to enforce the use of English in rural and primary schools should be implemented. One of the measures is to prevent learners from speaking their mother tongue in asking questions, solving problems and giving any comments in class, and in communicating to any staff in school. However, this will be possible if the staff also stop speaking their mother tongue. Through classroom observation the study found that 70% of the teachers in primary schools and 40% of secondary spoke Kinyarwanda in their classes on English. This is evidence that even teachers don't speak English all the time in class which can hinder learners' spoken English.

4.2.7 Avoid Focusing more on Teaching Grammar than other Skills

In the observations by the researcher, it was also found that teachers in primary and secondary schools in Rwanda teach more English grammar than focusing on other skills like speaking, listening, writing and reading. In majority of observed classes, 76 were teaching English grammar. This is evidence that more teachers of English in Rwanda like to teach Grammar at the expense of other English skills (speaking, reading, listening and writing). Indeed, focusing on grammar only can't help learners to develop all of their English skills. This also shows that teachers of English in Rwanda need training on approaches to be used in teaching all the English skills. When asked why the almost teach grammar only, one respondent said,

“As my teachers of English taught me much grammar during my studies, I am attempted to do the same in my own classes”

That means teaching more grammar than other English skills is rampant among teachers of English. Therefore, they need more training on how to teach English in a way that considers all skills. These findings corroborate with those of Nunan (2004) who found the prevalence of grammar instruction in language classrooms and suggested a more balanced approach to teaching language.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The study highlights significant shortcomings in the spoken English proficiency of learners in rural primary and secondary schools in Rwanda. The shortcomings encompass various dimensions, including grammar and syntax, vocabulary, pronunciation, accent, fluency, fear, and lack of confidence in speaking English.

The comprehensive exploration of strategies and best practices to enhance speaking skills among learners has revealed a complex approach essential for effective language instruction. The findings underscore the pivotal role of teaching strategies in determining language learning success, emphasizing the need for educators to adapt their approaches based on the unique circumstances of their students. The research suggests various strategies to be applied to enhance learners' proficiency in spoken English. These include cooperative activities, the use of poems, songs,



stories, drama, games, and role play. Other strategies include using drills and pictures, media integration, group discussions, and adequate training for teachers of English. In short, the findings underscore the use of wide range of strategies in order to enhance learners' English proficiency.

5.2 Recommendations

With regard to the above conclusion the study recommended that teachers of English should adopt a comprehensive approach that addresses various dimensions of spoken English such as grammar, syntax, vocabulary, pronunciation, accent, fluency, fear, and lack of confidence. School managers should encourage educators to employ a range of teaching strategies to enhance language instruction. Both learners and teachers should emphasize the significance of consistent communication in English within and outside the classroom. School managers should encourage both learners and teachers to engage in English communication to overcome linguistic barriers and create conducive learning environment. School language centers should advocate for a more holistic approach to language instruction that goes beyond an exclusive focus on teaching grammar. The study suggests balancing the emphasis on various language skills to ensure comprehensive language development among learners. The Ministry of education should recognize the challenges faced by teachers and learners in rural primary and secondary schools, particularly in the context of English proficiency and pronunciation. The Ministry of education should address these challenges by offering additional training for teachers to enhance their skills and knowledge.

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