

## French Background Students' Perception of English as Medium of Instruction at the University of Rwanda: Case of Gabonese Students in Nyarugenge and Huye Campuses

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### ABSTRACT

*One of the most significant advantages of English as a medium of instruction lies in its ability to advance internationalization and collaboration. However, students from diverse linguistic backgrounds may struggle to grasp complex academic concepts and effectively participate in classroom discussions due to limited English proficiency. This can exacerbate existing inequalities and hinder academic success for vulnerable student populations. This qualitative research sought to investigate the perception of Francophone Gabonese students about English as a Medium of Instruction at the University of Rwanda. Focus group interviews were administered to ten and twenty-two Gabonese students from Nyarugenge and Huye campuses respectively. The data collected were categorized and analyzed thematically. The study found that it is difficult for the Gabonese students to learn in English due to their minimum language background and exposure. It was revealed that these students face a big challenge of communicating with national students who only use Kinyarwanda in their academic activities, which induces them to cope with their learning by visiting YouTube tutorials in French. It was recommended that the University of Rwanda set up a teaching and learning environment using English only in the campuses and provide need-based intensive English courses to francophone students.*

**Keywords:** English, Gabonese Students, Huye Campus, Medium of Instruction, Nyarugenge Campus, University of Rwanda

### I. INTRODUCTION

The internationalization of higher education is viewed as one of the ways in which the world's nations react to the effects of globalization. Thus, academic leaders of higher education institutions now view internationalization as a top strategic objective as a means of internationalizing their institutions and establishing connections between their staff, students, and organizations with the rapidly globalizing world (Zaman & Mohsin, 2014). Universities all across the world strive to accept international students in order to provide a standardized education. In addition, many international students find that studying in a foreign environment fosters a deeper understanding of the customs, values, and beliefs of their host nations (Evivie, 2009) and enables them to act as cultural ambassadors between their home and the host nation (Klomegah, 2006, as cited in Evivie, 2009; Lee & Rice, 2007; Marcketti et al., 2006).

Internationalization has been adopted by several African nations' higher education institutions in order to compete on the world stage and end the political marginalization that lingered during the colonial era. For instance, in South Africa, adopting multicultural education, which was one of the strategies for combating apartheid, has now become strong in their education system (Sehoolo, 2006). Since its establishment in 2013, the University of Rwanda has also enrolled students from different countries in Africa, Asia, and Europe.

It is generally accepted that proficiency in the institution's language of instruction is essential for academic achievement (Evans & Green, 2007). Similarly, Wyatt-Smith (1996, p. 2, as cited in Sibomana, 2010) points out that "learning involves thinking about, reflecting on, and solving cultural problems with language," the main features of language proficiency. Higher education institutions in Rwanda have been using English as a medium of instruction since 2009 (Kagwesage, 2013). i.e., all postsecondary courses are taught in English. After its foundation in 2013, the University of Rwanda also had to deal with this language policy.

To that end, one of the most difficult transitions that foreign postgraduate students may have to make is learning in a language that they have only ever encountered as a subject, not as a medium of instruction (Sibomana,

2010). In the Rwandan context, Gabonese students enrolling in UR programs may have encountered difficulties with the medium of instruction. This is a result of the students' limited exposure to English in Gabon. The latter is a multilingual country (i.e., a country with multiple native languages), with French as the only official and national-dominant language (Ndinga-Koumba-Binza, 2007). That makes it the language of instruction in schools and in most businesses across the country. French is also used as a lingua franca by Gabonese, whose native languages are different. On the other side, English is at least spoken by foreigners and learned in schools as a second language (the first language being French); it is taught as a subject from secondary to tertiary education (Binza, 2010). With this minimum background in English, the senior management of the University of Rwanda initiated the remedial classes for the newly enrolled students from Gabon. However, the researchers, who were also part of the academic staff of English for the Gabonese students, have observed their low English proficiency, shyness to speak in English and a lot of absenteeism with seemingly unjustified reasons in those remedial classes. It has also been observed by the researchers that Gabonese students' means of communication outside the classroom is French. This has therefore roused the researchers' interest in conducting a study about these students' perceptions of English as a medium of instruction at the University of Rwanda. The study serves as information for the University of Rwanda to adapt effective measures to facilitate these minority students.

This research answers the following questions:

1. How do Gabonese students from Nyarugenge and Huye campuses perceive English as a medium of instruction at the University of Rwanda?
2. What challenges do Gabonese students from Nyarugenge and Huye campuses face in using English as MoI in their academic activities?
3. Which strategies do Gabonese students from Nyarugenge and Huye campuses employ to cope with those challenges?
4. What can the University of Rwanda do to support the Gabonese students from the Nyarugenge and Huye campuses in their use of English as a medium of instruction?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Attitude and Second Language Learning

The Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines attitude as a feeling or opinion about something or someone, or a way of behaving that is caused by something. Gardner and Masgoret (2003) define attitude as an evaluative reaction to some referent or attitude object, inferred on the basis of the individual's beliefs or opinions about the referent (Gardner & Masgoret, 2003). Writing on attitude in language learning is mainly triggered by three major reasons (Baker, 1995). The first reason is that attitude is a part of every individual's system. Second, the attitude survey reflects people's thoughts and beliefs. Third, attitude has been studied and investigated for over sixty years, and different topics ranging from religion to languages have used attitudes as an important explanatory variable (Baker, 1995). In addition to that, attitude is accepted as an important concept to understand human behavior and is defined as a mental state that includes beliefs and feelings. Beliefs about language learning are directly associated with success in language classes (Latchanna & Dagneu, 2009).

Attitudes are important in second language learning. As Tabaro (2019 citing Eshghiner & Gritter, 2016), argues, attitudes constitute an indispensable factor that affects performance in second language learning (Tabaro, 2019). Similarly, Aroujlou & Vahedi (2011) add that a lack of motivation for learners (which can sometimes be attributed to a negative attitude) can result in poor performance. It is asserted, however, that negative attitudes can be changed into positive ones that lead to positive results (Oroujlou & Vahedi, 2011).

### 2.2 Challenges Faced by Students Learning in English as an Additional Language

"The growth of English as the leading language for dissemination of academic knowledge has had a major impact around the world, binding the careers of thousands of scholars to their competence in a foreign language and elevating this competence to a professional imperative" (Hyland and Hamp-Lyons 2002, p. 2, cited by Sibomana 2010).

For the majority of undergraduate and postgraduate students, especially those with French backgrounds, including undergraduate Gabonese students at the University of Rwanda, English is the additional language that they learned as a subject or acquired outside the school. In this regard, it might be a challenge for them to carry out academic activities such as assignments given by lecturers, presentations, and a series of research projects. Language

and cultural diversity conflicts show up in arguments about the benefits of bilingual education for students from minority communities (i.e., immigrants and indigenous people) and in various views about the general lack of support for studying languages other than the language of the majority (Hinkel, 2005).

Burke and Wyatt-Smith (1996) discovered that some students from nations where English is not the primary language of instruction read slowly and wasted time rereading and utilizing bilingual dictionaries due to unfamiliar terminology. They further revealed that this language problem increased the amount of time spent studying. These academics also noted that the students complained about having trouble understanding the lecturers' and other students' use of English. A social justice in language policy has been claimed by Cameroon students who use English as a medium of instruction in schools for the system to cope with international businesses (Kuchah, 2018).

### **2.3 Strategies to Cope with English as MoI to non-English Speaking Students**

There are different strategies to cope with English as a MOI in higher education (Kagwesage, 2013). Johnson et al. (2008) claim that the utilization of the resources accessible in institutions can optimize performance, including a higher education student's ability to acquire a language used in an academic setting. A student can overcome language barriers, including technical vocabulary, understanding lectures, and adhering to disciplinary requirements, with the use of hard work, stories, motivation, and effective learning methodologies in addition to peer learning (Kagwesage, 2013). According to Praxton (2009, as cited in Kagwesage, 2013), translation is a benefit that has been observed in South Africa, where students are switching from English to their native language. Van der Walt and Dornbrack (2011), however, believe that translation takes time. Praxton (2009) claims that bilingual South African students should explain subject content in their own mundane words. Van der Walt and Dornbrack (2011) later concluded that the use of more than one language is very useful for a student to cope with the context and group of peers when tackling subjects like assignments at university.

Social adjustment is another strategy to cope with English as MoI in higher learning education. As Sibomana (2010) puts it, when students integrate themselves into the international society that uses English (or another language of instruction) better than them, they face fewer challenges in that language. In addition, the same study reported that students who struggle with language benefit from cooperation. It was said that language proficiency improves more for struggling learners when they participate in assignments and other activities where they share ideas with their more knowledgeable peers in the target language. Some of the previously mentioned coping mechanisms may be employed by Gabonese students participating in this study to deal with English as a second language in their regular coursework. The results of the investigation must validate the precise procedures that are employed in their educational settings.

## **III. METHODOLOGY**

This research is a qualitative case study of Gabonese students' perceptions of English as a MoI at the University of Rwanda in Nyarugenge and Huye campuses. A case study is an investigation into a case with the goal of answering particular research questions. It looks for a variety of evidence that is present in the case setting but has to be analyzed and compiled to provide the most insightful responses to the research questions (Gillham, 2000). The purpose of the case study in the research context is to get an insight into the issue of Gabonese students who have little background in English from previous levels of their education yet are supposed to carry out their studies in English. The target population under this study is all Gabonese students enrolled in the Nyarugenge and Huye campuses of the University of Rwanda. Given the small number of these students, group focus interviews were administered to all of them on the two campuses, as Ghiglione and Matalo (1985, cited in Sibomana, 2010) say that the size of the study sample affects the quality of any investigation's findings.

The focus group interviews provided qualitative data for the study. Conducting a focus group interview was thought to be a valuable method to gather in-depth insights into Gabonese perceptions of English as a MoI at the University of Rwanda. A week prior to the interviews, the participants on each campus were made aware of the interview and its purpose as a way of preparing them to provide enough information about the matter. The researchers set open-ended questions in English and translated them into French in case there were participants who could not understand the questions well in English. Since it was also anticipated that participants might find it difficult to respond in English, they were also allowed to give their answers in French.

Qualitative data were analyzed following these steps: Step one was about transcribing the interview data. For the second step, the researchers initially gathered a general comprehension of the data and considered its overall ideas. The third step involved using Microsoft Excel to code, categorize, and create themes that were narrated. The fourth step was the writing of all findings and demonstrating how they are related.

Ethical issues were also thought about by the researchers. As academic staff at the University of Rwanda, researchers were not required to apply for ethical clearance from the respective centers for research and innovation in the College of Science and Technology, Nyarugenge Campus, and the College of Arts and Social Science, Huye Campus. During data analysis, anonymity was prioritized when the researchers wished to highlight a specific response. To ensure their anonymity, codes and pseudonyms were provided to the respondents.

## IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

### 4.1 Gabonese Students' Perception of English as MoI at UR

The first question asked during the interview was about how they (Gabonese students at UR) perceive English as MoI. The question mainly probed whether it was easy or hard to conduct academic activities in English. Most of them (27/32) in the group replied that it was not easy for them to follow lectures in English. They replied that this was caused by their little English proficiency, the lecturers' accent in English, and their tendency to switch to Kinyarwanda when they thought the students were confused. For example, Respondent 3 replied:

*C'est un peu difficile premièrement parceque, particulièrement ici a Huye, les professeurs on pour habitude de Parler beaucoup plus kinyarwanda que l'anglais ce qui nous complique extrêmement la vie ajoutez ça au fait qu'on revient d'un pays totalement francophone et qu'on a eu que deux mois d'apprentissage de la langue anglaise (it is difficult for me firstly because particularly on Huye campus, the lecturers are used to speaking Kinyarwanda than English, which makes our lives extremely complicated. That adds to the fact that we come from a totally French-speaking country, and we only had two months of learning the English language).*

The rest of respondents replied that with efforts employed in learning English and taking it as an advantage, it is easy for them to follow lectures and carry out other assignments in English.

### 4.2 Gabonese Students' Challenges Regarding English as MoI at UR

The second probing question was about the challenges that Gabonese students at UR face regarding the usage of English as MoI. The researchers were so curious to know this because most respondents perceive English as a difficult language to use in academic activities. All the respondents replied that they face the challenge of minimum exposure to English language outside the classroom since most students at the two campuses speak their national language, which is Kinyarwanda. They highlighted a challenge, mainly when they are doing group assignments or laboratory experiments, and stated that national students (Rwandan students) always interact in Kinyarwanda, which makes the Gabonese students get lost in the discussions. Respondent Z said:

*Il faut dire que la plupart du temps nous, les étudiants étrangers sommes confrontés à un manque de pratique de la langue anglaise car la plupart des étudiants autour de nous et même dans les groupes de travail utilisent de la langue nationale (it must be said that most of time we, foreign students are faced with a lack of the English language because most of the students around us and even in the working groups use the national language).*

The respondent T also said:

*Lorsque nous avons des devoirs de groupe ou pratique au labo les étudiants ne parlent que dans leur langue et viennent juste me demander les réponse qu'ils pensent que je dois connaître. Je participe à aucune autre activité car tout est en kinyarwanda (when we have group assignments or lab practices, the students only speak in their language and just come and ask me the answers they think I should know. I participate in no other activities because everything is in Kinyarwanda).*

This makes reflect to Hinkel (2005) who says that language and cultural diversity conflict shows up in arguments about the benefits of bilingual education for students from minority communities (i.e., immigrants and indigenous people) and in the general lack of support for studying languages other than the language of the majority.

The majority respondents also revealed a challenge about some lectures' pronunciations of English words and sentences especially the technical ones used in different disciplines. They said that sometimes the pronunciation becomes strange as compared to how they used to pronounce those expressions. Respondent C said:

*Le principal défi est l'accent et la prononciation de tout un chacun. Il peut arriver formulation de certains mots ou certaines phrases soit différente de celle qu'on connaît ou qu'on entend habituellement (the main challenge is everyone's accent and pronunciation. It may happen that the formulation of certain words or certain sentences is different from that which we usually know or hear)*

Burke and Wyatt-Smith (1996) also came up with the view that academics note that the students complained about having trouble understanding the lecturers' and other students' use of English.

Lastly, all respondents revealed another challenge about some lecturers who switch to Kinyarwanda when teaching. According to them, lecturers occasionally believe that students do not fully understand a concept or that they would like to further clarify a lesson in their mother tongue, Kinyarwanda. This presents a problem for those of us who do not speak or understand Kinyarwanda.

#### 4.3 Gabonese Students' Strategies to Cope with English as MoI at UR

When asked what coping mechanisms they use to deal with the aforementioned difficulties, respondents reported that they commonly use the following:

Some of them (56%) said that they engage much concentration during the lectures and other academic activities. That helps them to catch up with the content that has been taught. Respondent B said:

*J'essaie de maintenir un certain niveau de concentration pendant les cours ou autres activités académiques. Cela me permet de parfois me rattraper sur certains détails qui m'échappent. Mais ça reste difficile (I try to maintain a certain level of concentration during classes or other academic activities. This allows me to sometimes catch up on certain details that escape me. But it is still difficult).*

According to some other respondents, in order to better grasp the course, after class, they must look for YouTube instructors who offer identical subject that has been studied and is taught in French. This links to Praxton (2009) who states that translation is a benefit that has been observed in South Africa, where students are switching from English (which is used as a medium of instruction) to their native language. A small percentage of these students who responded stated that they made the decision to stop participating in the group discussions, and instead resorted to conducting their own independent research on the given activities. They mentioned that they took such a decision after seeing that it was a waste of time for them to work with other group members who solely use Kinyarwanda.

#### 4.4 Gabonese students' suggestions on how UR can support them to cope with English as MoI

Respondents provided different recommendations to UR so that French background students can be facilitated in their use of English as MoI in their learning.

They recommended that UR should encourage lecturers to adapt their English to the international students who struggle to learn in English especially the Gabonese students. Where it is necessary, lecturers can explain the main points in French, which would help them learn smoothly. It was also suggested that UR should set a regulation for students to use English only in the academic activities be it in class or outside. Respondent H said:

*Je proposerai que l'université du Rwanda puisse établir un règlement qui emmène les étudiants à user au maximum de la langue afin de pouvoir améliorer les compétences de ces derniers (I would propose the UR can establish the regulation for all students to use the language (English) as much as possible to improve their skills).*

## V. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 Conclusions

This study investigated the perceptions of the Gabonese students studying at the University of Rwanda towards the use of English as a medium of instruction. More precisely, the study's aim was to explore the Gabonese students' views about their use of English as the medium of instruction at the University of Rwanda, the challenges they face learning in that language, the strategies they use to overcome those challenges, and their suggestions about what the University of Rwanda can do to support smooth learning in English for those students. These Francophone students find it challenging to utilize English as a language of instruction at the University of Rwanda because, despite having no prior exposure to the language, they are not provided with any assistance in terms of a suitable language learning environment for effective usage of English as a MOI. The study revealed that the root cause of these French-speaking students' challenges to getting used to English as a second language is twofold: First, these minority students encounter difficulties with group work and laboratory activities because most national students utilize Kinyarwanda for academic purposes outside of the classroom. Second, lecturers switch to Kinyarwanda and use unfamiliar English pronunciation for some technical expressions and key explanations when teaching their subjects. It was reported that, with such practices, these French-speaking students do not grasp what the lecturer wants them to learn, and their English proficiency does not improve either. In order to overcome these obstacles, the Gabonese students who are unable to pay close attention to the lecturers' language to learn the content choose to grasp the content of the lessons and complete their homework by themselves by looking for French tutorials on YouTube. In order to fill the language gap, these students recommended that the University of Rwanda establish rules requiring national students to use

English exclusively for academic purposes, urge lecturers to modify their language usage for francophone students, and provide additional English language instruction.

## 5.2 Recommendations

After investigating the issue of English as a Medium of Instruction for francophone students, namely Gabonese students at the University of Rwanda, the researchers recommend key players in this case take action so that these minority students can be facilitated in their learning.

The University of Rwanda should strengthen the remedial and intensive classes for these students so that they can enhance their English language, which would enable them to conduct academic activities. The UR should also set a regulation prohibiting using any other language than English in academic activities in and outside the classroom. If it is possible, the UR can make a French handbook of the content learned so that these students can grasp the content in their language. When instructing, lecturers ought to take francophone students into account. They should constantly assess their comprehension to make sure the language isn't impeding the delivery of the topic. Rwandan students should embrace the language diversity on the campuses and try to use English as a lingua franca when they are conducting academic activities. This is how Gabonese students will be involved in those activities. English lecturers should devote time and try by all means to coach these students to uplift their English proficiency.

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