

## The Challenges for Using English for Burundians: For an Effective Integration into the East African Community

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### ABSTRACT

Effective communication requires social and cultural norms in addition to linguistic competence. This study explores the challenges that people who studied English in Burundi face when communicating in English. It, also, seeks to determine the causes of these challenges. To this end, people who often participate in meetings, conferences, or workshops where the working language is English were identified and given a questionnaire made of open-ended and multiple-choice questions. Results indicate that respondents do not know which elements of the language are essential for communication. They consider that the linguistic competence alone is enough for being able to communicate. For example, learners consider that being able to pronounce correctly the language and knowing the technical terms may be enough for them to communicate their ideas. It is also found out that the causes of this lack of effective communication may lie in the inadequate teaching methods adopted in Burundi.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching a foreign language for effective communication is a very complex task. It requires a combination of many factors: good pronunciation, a wide range of vocabulary, grammatical accuracy and pragmatic, sociolinguistic and strategic competence in that language. Effective communication, therefore, presupposes knowledge of not only the language, but also social and cultural norms and ability to respond appropriately in a variety of situations.

Unfortunately, it is not always easy to know whether learners have acquired the language or not. Many studies have been conducted on learners' perception of their language performance. These studies include Gasiorek and Van de Poel (2018) Williams and Burden (1999), and Doe (2004). They point to the conclusion that learners tend to judge their progress on various factors, one of which is grades. However, such studies have not been carried out yet in Burundi. It is, therefore, worth attempting to carry out such a study to find out how learners / graduates would assess their language performance in English.

As this paper is concerned with effective integration into the East African Community, the knowledge of English required to the learners goes beyond mere linguistic knowledge of English. This self-assessment will comprise not only pronunciation and grammatical structures, but also knowledge of culture

of this language. This is why the requirements of the integration into the community should not only involve academic and professional knowledge but also Plurilingualism, social and intercultural skills and attitudes (Richmond, 1983). To better achieve this objective necessitates a good mastery of the official language of that community through which all the activities are carried out. This, therefore, implies that the teaching of this language should be done with the help of appropriate methodologies accompanied with adequate teaching materials and qualified and devoted teachers. It is for this reason that learners' self-assessment of language performance is very useful. This paper is set out to analyse the problems that the participants face to achieve the aims of communicating effectively in English. In addition, this paper intends to determine whether the teaching methods have had any impact on the learners' use of English. Finally, it is also important to know how these participants in the study perceive their progress in the use of English in communication. In other words, this study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the problems that Burundian participants face in communicating in English?
2. Do the teaching methods have an impact of the participants' perception/assessment of their performance in English communication?
3. What are the participants' needs in English language training?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 *Background of the teaching of English in Burundi*

Teaching English in Burundi started with the first years of the Independence of Burundi (Richmond, 1983). The purpose of teaching a language is to enable learners to communicate in that language. In order for this objective to be achieved, several elements must be taken into account, including the curriculum of the language in question, the methodology used, the teachers who implement the program and the conditions under which language is taught.

English language teaching program used did not take into account the reality of Burundi; whereas, any linguistic program should be inspired by the learners' socio-cultural reality. This program was devoid of any context familiar to learners. Hence, English could not be properly acquired. Furthermore, teaching English was entrusted to people who had some knowledge of the language, but who were not trained for its teaching (Richmond, 1983).

Efforts have, nevertheless, been done to diversify the textbooks and teaching methods used although they have not always been appropriate for teaching English for communicative purposes. The expected goal has not been fully achieved. Learning was achieved through the memorization of grammatical structures and selected texts out of any realistic context. Methodological approaches were used and course programs were tried without obviously different effects on the learners. Higher education institutions have been established to train qualified teachers for secondary education in all areas including English. In the following paragraphs, we briefly discuss these different methodological approaches, manuals, and curricula that have been used.

In the *Grammar-Translation Method*, teaching English was based on textbooks whose basic texts were irrelevant to the Burundian socio-cultural context. The grammatical structures and vocabulary taken from these texts were given to students for memorization. The students had little chance for finding their meaning by themselves. Ultimately, this teaching was not different from that of other subjects such as chemistry or history. As a result, this method did not help in teaching English for communication.

In the *Oral-Audiolingual Method*, the language is presented orally in a form of small, highly controlled structures. These structures are acquired through exercises and dialogues that are memorized and repeated in class. During the rehearsals, the learners

are not entitled to the error because according to the behaviorism, only good stimuli should be reinforced and therefore encouraged. But this method is contrary to the principles of trial and error learning. Even children who learn to speak their mother tongue make mistakes that will be corrected as they progress. Until this period, our syllabi were designed as lists of structures, which were taught according to the following strategy (Finocchiaro, 1983): the structure is presented and learned, practiced in context, then move on to a next structure. In fact, this way of teaching traumatizes learners who should focus their attention on the shape of the structures to reproduce it correctly. This hinders communication, which is the goal of language learning. In the same line of thought, Hymes (1972) points out that language is not a structure normal linguistic behavior includes innovations, formation of new sentences and models according to the laws of pure abstraction in its complexity. It is based on these criticisms that have been proposed the communicative approach as the most effective method for teaching the second language and the foreign language. However, the audio-oral method is still used since memorization and repetition are easier for teachers and adapted for teaching pronunciation. It must also be said that it arouses the interest of the learners because with the repetition and the memorization of the dialogues in class, they seem to be using the language. This has the merit of allowing them to overcome the fear of speaking a foreign language.

At a certain point, it was found that the methods used did not lead to the expected results, so an *eclectic method* was used, combining different methods of teaching a language. For the specific case of teaching English in Burundi, the combination of the audio-oral method and the communicative approach is still used. Since real situations cannot be found in the classroom, the teacher is obliged to ask learners to make simulations, using grammatical structures and vocabulary learned in class. In this situation, we cannot speak of acquisition, because the terms are prepared in advance while we know that the purpose of learning a language is to develop in the learner a communicative competence, that is to say, an ability to understand and express oneself, orally or in writing, in different situations with which one would be confronted (Hymes, 1972). However, in this method, these interactions occur occasionally; the reason we cannot talk about the use of the language or its acquisition.

It is in the early 1990's that the *communicative approach* was timidly introduced in the teaching of English. It put an emphasis on the presentation of communication activities in the classroom. Here, the

goals are based on all the components of communicative competence and are not limited to grammatical or linguistic skills. The ultimate criterion for effective communication is the transmission and reception of the message. But this method is difficult to apply in Burundi because the classrooms are overcrowded.

## **2.2 learners' Self-Assessment in English Performance**

Many definitions of self-assessment have been given by different scholars, but some have kept our attention. Andrade and Du (2007) defined self-assessment as a process of formative assessment during which students reflect on and evaluate the quality of their work and their learning, judge the degree to which they reflect explicitly stated goals or criteria, identify strengths and weaknesses in their work, and revise accordingly. Boud (1995) quoted in Spiller (2012) that all assessment including self-assessment comprises two main elements: making decisions about the standards of performance expected and then making judgments about the quality of the performance in relation to these standards. In addition, studies on learners' perception / self-assessment of their language progress have been conducted by many scholars to find out how learners assess their progress in their language learning / communication. For instance, Gasiorek and Van de Poel (2018) have conducted a study on the assessment and comparison of nurses' perceived cross-cultural preparation and skillfulness in their interactions with patients from other cultures when speaking both their L1 and L2 and found that there is a language-specific component to cross-cultural skillfulness, and that there is thus a need for language-specific skills training to address L2 skill deficits. Doe (2004), on her part, has conducted a study to determine whether grades, peers and successful use of the language are indicators of students' perception of progress. She found that even though students used looked at feedback and comparison to their peers as an indicator, a distinction should have been drawn between grades as an indicator and successful use of language as an indicator. Williams and Burden (1999) looked at how students who were learning French perceive their successes or failures. They found that the students tended to judge their progress on various factors, one of which was grades. Based on these definitions and studies conducted, it would be interesting to find out how graduates from the system of English education in Burundi described above would assess how they communicate in English as a result of this teaching.

## **2.3 Challenges of Acquiring/Teaching English for an Effective Communication in Burundi**

The acquisition of a foreign language is the product of many interrelated factors. Without perfect knowledge of these factors, one cannot master the process of acquiring a foreign language. The way in which English teaching in Burundi was practiced did not allow learners to learn and use it to communicate effectively. The learning of a language ranges from linguistic knowledge to the ability to use it in real-time speech. Some theories about how a foreign language is learned by learners have been proposed to shed light on this complex process. Paradise (1997), Kecskes and Papp (2000) have shown that the architecture of bilingual memory and the representation of its content can help determine the causes of difficulties in the acquisition of the sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence for learners. Paradise (1997) distinguishes three levels of representation in memory: first, a level containing phonological and morphosyntactic information; then, a semantic level containing information that is explicitly accessible making it possible to link words to other words; it contains idiomatic expressions and all the information about polysemy. Finally, a conceptual level containing multimodal information based on the experience of the world. It is called procedural or implicit memory.

As mentioned above, teaching English in Burundi covered only the first two levels of representation. This deficiency is undoubtedly due to the fact that we did not realise that linguistic competence alone did not allow effective communication. The conceptual basis is paramount in the acquisition of a language for effective communication. In the same vein, Pavlenko (1999) has pointed out that linguistic forms can themselves be conceptual categories. According to him, a grammatical concept will also be characterized by three levels: the surface level (phonological and morphological characteristics); the semantic level (explicit knowledge of grammar rules) and the conceptual level (multimodal mental representations). This observation explains the fact that foreign language learners can accumulate grammatical and communicative knowledge without having the conceptual basis of the target language. Pavlenko reminds us that the context of acquisition plays a role in the development of conceptual competence. A lack of genuine interactions limits the richness of the conceptual representation to which the word is linked and does not allow any non-linguistic application.

In the case of learning English by Burundian learners, the problem arises in this way since the teaching

manual is not designed to allow learners to become familiar with the language through authentic contexts. By memorizing grammatical structures and dialogues, learners accumulate only grammatical knowledge that is secondary to pragmatic competence. In the leaning of English, learners make use of the first two levels, the level containing the phonological and morphological information and the semantic level, which contain only linguistic information. The conceptual level that allows students to link this information to the experience of the world is not accessible to them.

According to Kecskes and Papp (2000), the fact that a learner can nevertheless be fluent in the target language without having its conceptual basis is linked to the fact that many aspects in language learning are not conceptual but perceptual and denotative and can be mastered without much difficulty. However, without the conceptual basis of the target language, learners will not be able to effectively communicate in the target language even if they are able to use it fluently.

Teaching English in Burundi has been confronted with very concrete problems relating to the methods and conditions in which it was carried out. In most cases, teachers could not do this properly because of lack of appropriate teaching materials, inadequate qualifications, or too overcrowded classes. However, the appropriate methodology for teaching English for effective communication is the communicative approach whose requirements are very difficult to meet. Effective communication means that interlocutors must be able to express themselves both orally and in writing in an appropriate manner.

All the methods of teaching a foreign language described above could not get students to learn English as a language of communication in all situations. This is due, again, to the fact that teaching grammatical structures has made possible only the acquisition of the linguistic competence. Also, as Allen and Widdowson (1974) point out, students who have had several years of formal English teaching in developing countries often remain deficient in their ability to use it in actual communication, both spoken and written. Acquiring a language does not require extensive use of grammatical rules nor does it require repeated drills. Indeed, when individuals communicate, they do not just use words, but they also share knowledge about the topic under discussion.

The major problem faced by professionals in teaching a foreign language, especially English, is to be able to go beyond grammatical rules while teaching their

students to communicate effectively and spontaneously in the foreign language. By creating interactions, the learner learns a little more than the simple use of language, as Xiaoju (1984) puts it well: Communicative competence does not mean the only ability to pronounce words and sentences, but it also involves the ability to react both mentally and verbally in communication situations. The mental reaction is the basis of the verbal reaction. To achieve this, the learner must, in addition to his linguistic knowledge, master pragmatic, sociolinguistic and strategic skills. But as we know, the acquisition of these skills requires mastery of the culture of the target language. This is why English teachers should also master the cultural elements of the language under study.

Teaching a foreign language for effective communication can only be completely achieved if learners can get authentic communication situations that enable them to practice it. As it is not possible to have authentic communication situations in Burundi, appropriate teaching materials are needed to overcome these shortcomings. Also, the teacher should be able to easily control the activities assigned to the learners. Given the class sizes, it is almost impossible to do these exercises in class. However, if one does not have real situations to practice, the acquisition of the language for communicative purposes cannot take place.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### ***3.1 Participants***

In order to answer questions examined in this study, the researcher conducted a study on thirty people who often participate in meetings, conferences or workshops in the East African Community and elsewhere the working language is English. These people are civil servants working in different ministries, private sectors and national and international organisations. The participants should not have studied in English speaking countries. Participants in the study were selected from the sectors that are more involved in the East African Community activities than others. It is namely the Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Higher Education, and Ministry for the East African Community, Trade and Industry, Finance, and World Health Organisation. Most of these informants have learned English as a subject for seven years. Before giving the questionnaire, the researcher went to the different ministries and organisations to inquire on their staff participation in meetings in English speaking countries particularly in the East African Community. Furthermore, he informed them on the profile of the participants to whom he intended to give the questionnaire. Then, he handed the questionnaire to

the responsible of the staff so that she /he could give it to those people who usually participated in those meetings. A total of 30 participants were identified and given a questionnaire, but only 27 of them returned their responses.

### **3.2 Questionnaire**

A questionnaire in the form of open-ended and multiple-choice questions was developed for the study. This questionnaire was devised to determine whether participants were able to know what components of the language were important for their effective communication in English. The questionnaire comprises three main areas that were taken as indicators of the participants' self-assessment. Those aspects of the language taken as indicators are: linguistic competence, successful use of language, and needs in English capacity building. Although Doe (2004) subdivides the indicator successful use of language into three types namely real communicative tasks, intended language use, and academic use of language, in this study only real communicative use of language was considered because it deals with graduates using English in real communicative situations where they had to express their views and opinions in ESL environments. Thus, the questions in the questionnaire aimed at determining whether the participants were able to identify which phrases were appropriate to this use of language. A total of 10 questions were designed. Questions 1, 2 and 5 on the questionnaire helped answer the first research question on the challenges of effective communication Burundians may face in their communication. Questions 3, 4, 6 and 7 helped answer the second research question about the impact that the teaching methods have on the participants' perception/assessment of their performance in English communication. Questions 8, 9 and 10 were used to answer the third research question on the participants' needs in English language training to improve their communicative skills.

### **3.3 Analysis Procedure**

The data analysis was done using both the qualitative and quantitative methods. The responses provided by the participants for each phrase given as options from which to choose were counted (simple counting) and then compared. This enabled the researcher to know which components of the language use caused more difficulty while communicating in the meetings conducted in English. In order to crosscheck whether they were consistent in their responses, the participants were asked to order those items following whether they caused fewer or more problems to effective communication. It was also requested to give the elements of the language, given

in the questionnaire, for which they would like to have intensive courses.

As the questions aimed at finding out how the participants perceived their progress in the use of English in communication, the analysis was done following the indicators of learners' perception/ self-assessment of language progress proposed by Doe (2004), the successful language use, and needs in English training were used as indicators. The successful use of language was further categorized into two types: real communicative tasks and linguistic competence.

## **4. RESULTS**

### **4.1 Problems English Users Are Faced with in Their Communication**

The first research question formulated as, *what problems did English users face in their communication in English?*, aimed at determining the difficulties that the participants had in communicating in English. Questions asked were on linguistic competence and on successful use of English. In relation to the linguistic competence, on 27 participants that returned the questionnaire 10 indicated that they had problems to understand the pronunciation of their interlocutors while 8 said that they lacked technical terms to use in their communication. Five of them mentioned that their pronunciation was not good and only four reported that they could not express themselves in English. Concerning the question about the successful use of English, the participants also gave various responses. The item introducing one's idea was considered by six informants as the one hampering effective communication while 13 reported that convincing in English was a challenge for communication. Convincing without being impolite or rude seems to be causing fewer problems because only three participants chose it. Knowing how to use appropriate terms in different contexts and being able to interpret the subtleties of English were selected by the same number of participants that is 13.

### **4.2 Impact of Teaching Methods on Students' Communication Abilities**

The second research question, *Did the teaching methods have an impact on the participants' perception/ self-assessment of their performance in English communication?*, sought to check whether the participants knew what elements were important for effective communication. Thus, the participants were requested to rate those phrases given as options from which to choose depending on the degree of difficulty from those that caused fewer problems to those that caused more problems. First, the items

used to assess the linguistic competence were compared, and we had the following responses: Seven participants rated the component “knowledge of the technical terms as the ones causing fewer problems” while only three said that it was the one that caused more problems to communication. For the item “understanding the pronunciation of their interlocutors”, four participants ranked it as causing fewer problems, and five said that it was the one that caused more problems. The component pronouncing English correctly caused fewer problems to six participants while four noted that it caused more problems. The item “express oneself in English” was ranked among the components of the language that did not cause problems to the participants by three people while four noted that it caused more problems. The other participants considered that these items were neither easy nor difficult; they put them in the middle of the scale.

Second, the participants were asked to rate the items in relation to the real communicative language use of English from those that caused fewer problems to those that caused more problems to the participants, and the informants gave the following responses: To the item introducing one’s idea, seven participants responded that this item caused fewer problems while three said that it caused more problems. The item convincing in English was said to be causing fewer problems by four informants while five considered it as causing more problems to effective communication. Convincing without being impolite or rude was selected by six participants as causing fewer problems, but four said that it caused more problems. As for the item knowing how to use appropriate terms in different contexts, three participants reported that it caused fewer problems while four indicated that it caused more problems. From the figures given above, it can be noted that the participants chose many items at the same time. It should be also noted that no participant chose the last item (Being able to interpret the subtleties of English). It is hard to tell whether it did not cause any problem or whether they did not know what it meant.

#### **4.3 Needs in English Capacity Building**

The third research question, what were the participants’ needs in English language training?, sought to know in which components of the language the participants would like to get intensive courses. Respondents gave various responses, and the major ones are outlined in the following lines: Nine participants reported that they would like to be trained in technical terms while six said that they need to improve their speaking. Five informants hoped to be trained in listening and three in writing while two participants expressed the need to improve

their pronunciation. There are two participants who did not respond to this question. It is worth noting that the participants’ needs did not take into account the difficulties that they faced in their communication in English. This is an indication that they did not know what is essential to achieve effective communication in a language. The participants seem to be much worried about linguistic elements at the expense of other aspects involved in effective communication, such as knowing how to convince without being impolite, introducing correctly one’s idea, and knowing which appropriate terms to use in each situation.

#### **5. DISCUSSION**

This study was conducted on 30 people who often were participating in meetings, conferences or workshops in the East African Community and elsewhere where the working language is English. These people are civil servants working in different ministries, private sectors, and national and international organisations. The study explores the extent to which Burundians perceive their communication in English as they attend meetings in the East African Community, related challenges, and the aspects/areas where they feel should be improved for an effective communication.

With the first research question on the problems that Burundian participants face in communicating in English, the participants seemed to be more worried about language aspects, mainly pronunciation and knowledge of technical terms. The participants’ responses and their ratings led me to believe that pronunciation and knowledge of technical terms were considered as the most important components of language that made effective communication in English possible. Clearly, linguistic competence was taken as a determining indicator of and challenge for an effective communication. Like many studies on learners’ perception of their performance that found that grades were taken as an indicator of progress in language progress (Gasiorek & Van de Poel, 2018; Doe, 2004; Williams & Burden, 1999), this study indicates that the components of the language that are frequently assessed in class are considered as indicators of performance in English. This is motivated by the way learners have been taught and assessed. Given the teaching and evaluation techniques that were used by teachers, no emphasis was put on the communicative use of English. Regarding technical terms, the results from this study are corroborated by Widdowson (1974) when he notes that learners who have passed many years of formal learning of English in developing countries are not capable to use it effectively and to understand its use in real communication. This is exactly the

reason why the participants in this study reported technical terms as one of their stumbling blocks for an effective communication. Students may indeed know the technical terms but fail to use them in negotiating meaning, which requires the acquisition of the sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence. Furthermore, while it is true that appropriate terms are useful for communication, this linguistic knowledge constitutes only the first two levels of bilingual representation in memory (Paradise, 1997); the level containing the phonological and morphological information and the semantic level, which contain only linguistic information. The participants in this study could be considered as lacking the conceptual level that allows people to link this information to the experience of the world and, hence, to communicate effectively.

With the second research question on the impact of teaching methods on performance self-assessment, the results indicate that the participants assessed the linguistic competence rather than effective communication. They consider that correct pronunciation and knowledge of technical terms would enable them to communicate effectively. But as Widdowson (1997) points out, students who have had several years of formal English learning in developing countries often remain deficient in their ability to use it in actual communication, both spoken and written. Learning a language does not require extensive use of grammatical rules nor does it require repeated drills. The participants were taught formal English and, consequently, in their assessment, they put much emphasis on this formal English.

Regarding the third research question about the needs the participants in this study felt they need, results indicate that priority is that they would like to be trained in technical terms and pronunciation. This is explained by the fact that they did not know what elements were important for effective communication. As a matter of fact, they did not know in which components of the language they needed capacity building. The only possible explanation is that the participants gave importance to the elements of the language that were taught as part of communication as Widdowson observes in the previous section.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

The present study examined performance perceptions and challenges as well as needs for improving communication in English at the work floor. As discussed in the above section, the results indicate that the participants do not seem to gauge what their real challenges are as they consider linguistic competence as the most challenging aspect

for an effective communication. Furthermore, the aspects considered as the most challenging are related to the teaching methods adopted in Burundi. The linguistic aspects taken out of context of authentic communication settings are indeed the focus of the teaching methods in place in Burundi. Indeed, teaching English has focused mainly on the accumulation of stored and repeated linguistic elements outside of any context; its use emphasizes the pronunciation and construction of grammatically correct, but pragmatically incorrect sentences. Ultimately, it can be implied that effective communication entails that the interlocutors are able to express themselves orally and in writing culturally according to the situation. It is clear that due to the lack of authentic situations in teaching English, it cannot be acquired for effective communication. This was also due to the fact that the teaching methods were not adapted to the teaching of a language for communication purposes. This was further confirmed from the participants' perceived needs as they were all related to linguistic competence. Teaching English should meet this goal of establishing a connection between what is taught and the real world. Based on the results from this study, two recommendations are put forward. Firstly, teachers at all levels should be aware that language competence alone cannot get learners to communicate in the target language. For this, they should use situations of communication that are close to authentic situations in their teachings. This would help them introduce the learners to the socio-pragmatic aspect of the language. Secondly, the pedagogical offices should provide schools with teaching manuals and teaching materials suitable for teaching languages.

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