

# Challenges from Language Shift: Advocating Intercultural Dialogue as a Commitment Principle for the Millennium Development Goals

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## Abstract

Emanating from language shift would be challenges such as involvement in intercultural dialogue on local and global angles. In intercultural dialogue there are open interactions between individuals from different cultural backgrounds that bring about understanding each other's world views, similarities and differences. Intercultural dialogue then is part of the commitments of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations and the United Nations Academic Impact in support of the Millennium Development Goals. For reasons of socio-economic progress, Rwanda had shifted from French to advocating the English language said to be the universal medium of communication. Anchored on such direction, this study embarked on investigating empirically the effects of the English language as a medium of instruction in selected institutions of higher learning in Rwanda. The findings showed that the learners' performance in the English language needed to be effectively implemented in the process of learning.

**Keywords:** challenges from language shift, intercultural dialogue

## 1. Introduction

Rwanda is one of the few countries in Africa with a common language called Kinyarwanda. However, for educational purposes, French was used before 1994 as a medium of instruction from secondary school and all throughout university studies. French was introduced as an official language in Rwanda during Belgium's rule of the country from 1890 to 1962. Once a school system was established in French, Rwanda became a member of La Francophonie. However, the significance of the French language began to decline after the 1994 genocide, under the new leadership's obvious preference for English. Two years after the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) took power in Rwanda, they declared English an official language alongside Kinyarwanda and French.

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From 1996 to 2008, the language policy required the first three years of schooling be taught in Kinyarwanda, after which the students chose English or French as the primary language of instruction (Mc Greal, 2008). University students were expected to perform equally well regardless of their linguistic choice. For the first 16 years after the genocide, French was more widely used among both ethnic groups in Rwanda, including Tutsi returnees from Francophone countries. However, the linguistic reforms of 2008, including the removal of French as one of three official languages, have reduced the dominance of French. Following the reforms, children now begin their studies in the English language from the first grade and take their secondary school entrance examinations in grade six in the same language (Samuelson and Freedman, 2010). For reasons of assessing the effects of the English language, this study was conducted in selected higher education institutions in Rwanda that

focuses on the understanding in the use of the English language and the challenges encountered in the use of the English language as a medium of instruction.

## **2. Review of Related Literature**

### **2.1 Rwanda's Language Shift**

From the standpoint of history, Rwanda's population in 1994 was 7 million comprising three ethnic groups: the Hutu (roughly 85% of the population), the Tutsi (14%) and the Twa (1%). (UN, 2015). In the late 1880s to the 1950s, the European colonization constructed the divergent ethnic "Tutsi" and "Hutu". Dominantly, the Belgians portrayed physical and social differences in their propaganda for the Tutsis as superior than the Hutus. The Belgian colonialism secured their control over the ethnic groups by building social boundaries such as issuing ethnic identification cards where every Rwandan was either a Tutsi, Hutu, or Twa (Jean, 2007).

After 1994 many Rwandans returned from Anglophone and Francophone countries. At the same time, a massive investment was made within higher education. Most lecturers in all universities were, from the beginning, French speaking but after 1994 an increasing number of lecturers from English speaking countries were employed. Besides, the university started to attract English speaking students. Hence, university education had to become bilingual in French and English. The dual medium of instruction policy stressed that students must achieve an 'advanced' standard of competence in both languages before being allowed to proceed to third year (National Higher Education Council (NHEC), 2007). The policy prevailed until 2008, when Rwanda's cabinet decided that all courses would be taught in English instead of French. Officially the Rwandan decision was a result of joining the English speaking East African Community (MINEDUC, 2008).

The new language policy in the trilingual Rwanda of 1996–2008, assumed that primary and secondary students were able to use English or French as their primary language of instruction, and take Kinyarwanda and the other language as subjects. Students entering the university were expected to do academic work equally well in both English and French. That official plan, however, was far from the reality of an educational system struggling to recover from the devastating losses of teachers, materials and buildings. The language shift was part of Rwanda's membership in the EAC (East African Community) and economic relations with other member states. Rwanda relies on trade with Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania, and since 1994, the country had increased economic ties with the United Kingdom and the United States.

The decision to distance Rwanda from the French language also had implications for the country's post-genocide identity project. That it allowed for a break from the colonial past and ties with Belgium and France, factors which the Rwandan government specified as key in the development of genocidal ideology. The government had taken ambitious steps to change how Rwandans perceived their identity. In an effort to "eradicate genocide ideology" the government was hoping to eliminate affiliations based on ethnicity and create a single national identity (Samuelson and Freedman, 2010: 196). "The way to heal the divide and heal Rwanda was to promote Rwandan identity above all other identities," meaning "Rwanda first, Hutu and Tutsi later" (Whitelaw, 2007). Adopting one foreign language for the purpose of economic and social betterment of all, "a language of progress", seemed appropriate in a country that was trying to overhaul its image.

In Rwandan context, English as a medium of instruction was established in a bid to make Rwanda more competitive and fully functional in both the East African Community and the International Community at large where English was mainly used (Kimenyi 2008; Ministry of Education 2008, Lynd 2010).

### **2.3 Challenges from Language Shift: Use of the English Language In Rwanda**

Shifting to the English language enables Rwanda's needs to materialize local and global socio-economic and dialogue involvements. Thus to quote Mironko and Karekezi (2013) that failing to overcome the challenges in language shift can "complicate access to local and global cultural exposures necessary for the socio-economic development of Rwanda".

Studies by many researchers worldwide revealed that many participants met challenges and difficulties in using the newly adopted language of instruction in their everyday academic activities. However, it had been noticed that the current instrumental motivation attached to English pushed students to argue in favor of the English medium of instruction despite the overtly voiced problems related to implementing the policy in the learning process. Since students were instrumentally motivated to be instructed in English medium while their English command did not match with the communicative demands of their academic work responsible code switching, (Garcia, 2009) could have been allowed as one of the possible ways to negotiate and make sense of the content subjects. That was to promote critical thinking skills and academic output expected from university students. Also, collaboration and peer support could have been encouraged in order to enhance deeper processes of learning at higher education level. It was the sudden and fast changing language in education policy that necessitated the importance of research in the use of the language as a second national language.

Zakaria and Aziz (2011) examined the students' performance in Mathematics when English was used as a medium of instruction in higher education in Malaysia. Their findings revealed that students performed poorly when English was used. They however noted a positive perception of English as the language of teaching even among the less proficient students.

### **2.2 Intercultural Dialogue by UNAI and UNAOC as a Commitment Principle for the Millennium Development Goals**

"Dialogue between cultures, the oldest and most fundamental mode of democratic conversation, is an antidote to rejection and violence. Its objective is to enable us to live together peacefully and constructively in a multicultural world and to develop a sense of community and belonging" (Council of Europe International Dialogue). The United Nations launched the (1) United Nations Academic Impact (UNAI) in support of the MDGs with a framework for promoting intercultural dialogue and understanding, and the "unlearning" of intolerance (UNAI, 2010) and the (2) Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) to implement a global framework of initiatives on intercultural dialogue, stressing on interreligious dialogue, cultural pluralism at the local, regional and national level as well as regional and sub-regional. Expressions of extremism and fanaticism are discouraged but highlighting instead, values and principles that bring people together (UNESCO, 2005).

Under the auspices of the United Nations, UNAOC was established in 2005 on the initiative of Spain and Turkey to improve understanding and cooperative relations among nations and peoples across cultures and religions as a bridge builder and convener (promoting trust

between people and organizations); catalyst and facilitator (reducing polarization between nations and cultures); an advocate to help calm cultural and religious tensions; a platform for building bridges between cultures; and a “resource providing access to information and tools drawn from successful initiatives which could be used by Member States, institutions, organizations or individuals seeking to initiate similar projects” (UNESCO, 2005).

### **3. Methods and Techniques**

The mixed explanatory method (quantitative and qualitative) was employed where the data were collected utilizing semi-structured questionnaires, interview schedule and observations in the use of the English language in lectures and on campus from 124 respondents composed of administrators, lecturers and students from four selected universities in Kigali, Rwanda. Frames were constructed after coding and quantitative data were analyzed using frequency counts, explanations and descriptions in presenting the findings.

### **4. Findings and Interpretations**

#### **4.1. Demographic Characteristics**

**4.1.1 Students:** Most of the respondents were still young (below 20 years and at the age of 20 years) and were able to pick up a new language easily. Majority (50%) used Kinyarwanda and 29% used the English language in their normal usual life. Most of the respondents answered disagreed with 92 % to the question of learning in English only at the university. This was a big percentage compared to 8 % of the respondents who disagreed. Most of the students entered university with advanced level of education.

**4.1.2 Lecturers:** 58% were in their thirties; 21% in their forties and 13% were in their fifties; 54% used Kinyarwanda while 42% used the English language as their respective common languages. Most lecturers attained masters’ level; most were foreigners and Ugandans in nationality.

**4.1.3 Administrators:** 8 % were in their thirties; 42 % were in their forties and 50 were in their fifties; the administrators were mostly doctorates and foreigners dominantly Kenyans.

#### **4.2 Challenges in the use of the English Language**

Most of the students agreed (mean=3.26) that they understood the lectures in class after interpretation; the understanding after discussing what was lectured using the English language only was at high degree (mean=3.96).

Sixty five percent of the lecturers disagreed that the students used the English language in the lecture rooms but strongly agreed that the students understood after discussing what was lectured using the English language only.

Fifty percent of the administrators strongly agreed that the lecturers used the English language in the lecture room and agreed (3.33) that the students understood the lectures using the English language.

#### **4.3 Ways to address the Challenges in the Use of the English Language**

Based on the responses from the students, lecturers and administrators, the ways to address the challenges are: to make English speaking a must/rule in institutions of higher learning; make English language a national language for medium of communication everywhere in the country; train all teachers at any level of education starting from primary level up to the university; organize usual debates, public open talks and seminars; organize and sponsor competitions of essay writings; create news papers like young and youth talks; organize short

English courses; increase English lessons/hours at all levels, government to come in to give help like supplying English books; building up libraries all over the country and lastly, to campaign and advocate for English usage in everyone's life at anywhere in institutions of higher learning in Rwanda.

#### **4.4 Findings Based on Observation**

Observations were made though many institutions were in examinations. Some lecturers were not feeling at ease to be observed when lecturing. From the information gathered when moving around the university compound or in the staff room: the English language was used in the lecture rooms and only when the lecturer is lecturing. When students were alone, they used only Kinyarwanda. Most of the lecturers, especially foreigners, were using the English language in lecture rooms, staff rooms and in the compound.

#### **4.5 Findings Based on Interview**

##### **4.5.1 Use of the English Language**

Students were being true in revealing to have been using Kinyarwanda when in the university. Many tried to use the English language when the learning was taking place. When they were free or left alone, they used Kinyarwanda only. Foreign and "modern" students were the ones who used the English language only everywhere. The students, lecturers and administrators agreed that using the English language was affecting students' performance academically. Everyone believed that there was a gradual improvement every new academic year.

Most of the students studied in Francophone system. When interviewed, most of them confessed that they began learning in English language from advanced level of education. Those were students in first year and second year. There were also students in third year and fourth year who said that they started learning the English language at the university level. Most students did not get a chance of learning the English language privately because of different reasons. This brought them to have difficulties in English speaking and understanding. There were a few of students who did not have any problem with the English language. These students attended their former levels of education from Uganda, or had Ugandan teachers in Rwanda especially in private schools. All the lecturers had enough background of the English language either from their former education levels or private arrangements. Many respondents, let it be students or lecturers, accepted strongly that they learned the English language from radio, television and films.

##### **4.5.2 Understanding in the Use of the English language in Selected Higher Institutions of Learning in Rwanda**

Many students had difficulties in understanding what was taught and in expressing themselves in the English language. It was after a lecturer or the first learner had interpreted for them using mostly Kinyarwanda that all students understood. In a strict university where using English language was a must, students opted for discussions after the lecture. In these discussions, the language used was purely Kinyarwanda.

##### **4.5.3 Challenges Encountered in Using the English Language as a Medium of Instruction in Rwanda**

Many respondents agreed that they found using the English language difficult. No one agreed that he failed examinations at the university. Yet, the majority was failing to get average in their examinations. Results were pinned openly on the notice boards of all the universities with below average underlined or marked with black color. The lecturers agreed that their students had no problem with answering in English but the problem was learning

everything using the English language. Reasons here were many but the one which was at hand were that they did not understand what was lectured using the English language. Other reasons were: having no time for revision and discussion, being reluctant on studies, speed and accent of the lecturers, lecturing not teaching, inferiority of the students and assumption of the lecturers that the students were of university level not of primary or secondary level.

#### **4.5.4 Ways of Handling Challenges in the Use of the English Language in Rwanda**

So many suggestions were given by the respondents especially from the students. Some suggestions are focused to the administrators of institutions of higher learning and others to the “government” as they pointed out. Most of the students suggested that it should be made a rule/ policy/ a must to use the English language in all universities whether in lecture rooms or university compound. Other suggestions given were: training of teachers/ lecturers, organizing and sponsoring debates, seminars, workshops, open talks, discussions, presentations and public talks. Some bright respondents thought of creating educational news papers for the youth or students such that they can read or contribute in English. Internet and English video shows were also suggested.

### **5. Conclusions**

Institutions of higher learning of Rwanda are well equipped with enough youth and educated manpower needed by a developing country to implement its English language policy . There are appropriate and qualifying education consumers and suppliers of which, if well planned, organized and guided, can enhance the use of the English language in the universities. The level of understanding when lecturing in English only is still low in most of the higher institutions of higher learning in Rwanda. Students in institutions of higher learning are facing a lot of challenges in learning and doing examinations using the English language.

### **6. Recommendations**

Teaching in English today is significantly different from previous decades as teachers use curriculum documents emphasizing an “outcomes” based approach, and students are socially and experientially different. It is argued “today’s students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach” (Prensky, 2001, p. 1). Compared to students from previous generations, students today, “think and process information fundamentally different” (Prensky, 2001). Students today are growing up in a society whereby English materials are available to them on demand, at the touch of a finger, using modes such as the world wide web, email, mobile phones and instant text messaging. This shift in students’ thinking patterns and the types of English materials available has serious implications for teachers in the way they plan, teach and assess curriculum understanding, especially the use of the English language. Innovative reading, speaking and writing practices need to be embraced by teachers so students today can effectively engage in English reading and speaking activities at school.

Recreational English activities engagement be institutionally created and implemented, publicly promoted and positively celebrated within the institutions of higher learning in Rwanda. Students’ recreational and English activities need to be publicly promoted and positively recognized in institutions of higher learning - Rwanda. Guided group English activities be a key instructional approach to the teaching in English language all over institutions of higher learning in Rwanda. Guided English reading and speaking is an effective strategy for the teaching of in English as students are grouped together for activities in English predominantly on the basis of their academic English levels.

A range of text types (both print and electronic) be purchased and made available for students to independently read, and for lecturers to use in group shared reading activities across all University year levels. Starting from primary level up to university level, teaching using the English language should be structured so that students are scaffolded appropriately and can develop positive attitudes towards themselves as English users. Training of teachers/lecturers should be planned and be implemented. Seminars and workshops or even short courses.

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