

Factors Contributing to Poor Performance in English Language Learning in Kaziba Secondary Schools

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ABSTRACT: This study explores the underlying causes of underachievement in English language learning among students in secondary schools in Kaziba, Democratic Republic of Congo, during the period from January to June 2023. The investigation was prompted by the persistent observation that, despite completing four years of English instruction, many learners graduate without attaining functional communicative competence. To identify the root causes of this phenomenon and suggest remedial strategies, we conducted a cross-sectional survey involving 484 students across nine strategically selected schools. The selection criteria included socioeconomic background, school infrastructure, teacher remuneration, working conditions, and annual diploma performance. Schools were categorized into «large» «medium» and «small» institutions. After excluding 21 incomplete responses, data from 463 students were analyzed. The research addressed three core questions: (1) What factors hinder students from achieving English language proficiency? (2) How do institutional practices influence opportunities for effective English communication? (3) What interventions can enhance English language outcomes in Kaziba secondary schools? Findings indicate that underachievement is primarily attributed to ineffective pedagogical practices, including outdated teaching methodologies and inadequate instructional materials, compounded by learner-related issues such as low motivation and disengagement. The study concludes with recommendations for curriculum reform, enhanced teacher training, and learner-centered approaches to promote meaningful language acquisition and communicative competence.

KEYWORDS: English language teaching, English language learning, proficiency.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and numerous other French-speaking African countries, English is among the subjects taught in secondary schools. To gain insight into the pedagogical approach employed, numerous research studies have been conducted, which have also identified strategies to assist not only learners in mastering the taught material, but also teachers in enhancing their pedagogical practices. In the DRC, the teaching of English is shaped by a range of cultural, social, and educational considerations. The objective is to equip Congolese citizens with the requisite linguistic abilities in English to facilitate communication and maintain relations with neighboring countries where English is the dominant language.

In light of the aforementioned observations, it becomes evident that the DRC is striving to integrate itself into the global community, where English has assumed a pivotal role as a language of international communication. The proliferation of English language instruction is of paramount importance for the enhancement of communication skills and the provision of access to global knowledge (Kakule, 2022). This emphasises the significance attributed to English as a means of empowerment and international engagement in a context where educational resources are frequently scarce. This concept is further reinforced by Katabe & Tibategeza (2023), who highlights the lack of trained teachers and the lack of suitable materials, both of which impede the effective teaching and learning of English in the DRC. However, the national curriculum for English instruction stipulates that all learners should be equipped with communicative abilities in various life contexts after having learned English. Nevertheless, this objective is not being met in Kaziba secondary schools, where learners are ultimately unable to reach an effective level of communication in English. This is evident during their attempts to communicate with their peers

and teachers of English. They are unable to convey their ideas, feelings, emotions and thoughts in an uninhibited manner. This, therefore, indicates a necessity of conducting research in order to ascertain the underlying causes of this impediment.

Note that this study was carried out by 3 professionals of the teaching of English as a foreign language, all of whom are junior lecturers at the Teacher Training College in the target area. The analysis of the context is therefore based on observations made on students who freshly come from secondary school. It has been observed that due to that poor level of English proficiency, students end up developing negative attitudes towards English that block them from learning it effectively. This therefore, suggests the need for getting deep in research in the teaching of the English in Kaziba secondary schools.

1.1 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite the integration of English into the national curriculum in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the requirement that learners attain communicative proficiency by the end of secondary education, the English language teaching programme in secondary schools in Kaziba is not yielding the desired outcomes. After four years of instruction, many learners remain unable to express themselves effectively in English. This gap between expected outcomes and actual learner performance suggests fundamental shortcomings in the English language learning and teaching process in Kaziba.

This research seeks to investigate the root causes of this issue and explore practical solutions to improve language instruction and learner proficiency. Understanding these causes is essential to reforming the teaching approaches, institutional support systems, and overall pedagogical frameworks that influence English language acquisition in Kaziba's secondary schools.

1.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research aimed to explore the various academic, pedagogical, psychological, and environmental factors that hinder learners from achieving communicative proficiency. Therefore the research are stated as follows:

- What are the underlying factors contributing to learners' inability to achieve the set objectives in the English language learning process?
- To what extent do educational institutions facilitate opportunities for learners to communicate effectively in English?

1.3 HYPOTHESES

The underlying factors contributing to learners' underachievement of the set objectives in English learning process would be the limited opportunity to use the English language, teacher-training and professional experience, and limited resources for learning like textbooks, technological tools, etc.

Educational institutions do not facilitate students' opportunities to communicate in English. In the classroom, teachers appear as masters of the speech. They take all the time speaking while learners have to listen simply. The chance for learners to interact in the class using English becomes reduced. In the school environment and even at home, students use Kiswahili, French and Mashi to communicate with their peers. In this occasion, learners do not find any opportunity to use English. Therefore, they end up forgetting about it, which in turn negatively impacts their communicative proficiency.

1.4 STUDY OBJECTIVES

Generally, this study aims at investigating the reasons for underachievement in English language learning in Kaziba secondary schools. Specifically, the study seeks to:

- Evaluate to which extent educational institutions contribute to empower students communicative abilities,
- To evaluate the way teachers of English in Kaziba deal with teaching and learning methods, and teaching materials,
- Propose remedies to the reasons behind students' underachievement of English language learning goals in Kaziba.

2 STATE OF RESEARCH

This section presents an overview of the existing literature on the teaching and learning of English as a subject in secondary schools in the Democratic Republic of Congo, with a particular attention on Kaziba. The discussion is structured around three key areas: the teaching of English as a subject in secondary schools in Kaziba, the factors that influence foreign language learning, and the teaching of foreign languages and the achievement of learning goals. These topics will be examined in the

context of the ideas and insights proposed by researchers and scholars who have conducted research in the field of English language teaching.

2.1 TEACHING AND LEARNING OF THE ENGLISH SUBJECT IN KAZIBA SECONDARY SCHOOLS.

The teaching and learning of English in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as well as in many other countries, represents a significant concern in the current globalised world, where English is used as a lingua franca. The importance of learning English in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, particularly in Kaziba, is heightened by the multiple roles it plays in contemporary society. It is therefore expected that the teaching and learning of English in Kaziba will meet the educational learning objectives set out for the whole country. The objective is, as Ly (2024) notes, not merely to impart knowledge of grammar or vocabulary; it is also to equip students with the ability to use English effectively in real-life contexts. This idea aligns with the national curriculum, which places greater emphasis on functional language proficiency rather than the memorisation of linguistic concepts and structures. Additionally, there is a growing recognition of the importance of cultural knowledge in the context of English language learning. Oana-Antonia (2019) emphasises this point, suggesting that an understanding of cultural nuances is crucial for effective communication in the global context. This objective points towards a significant pedagogical shift towards intercultural competence in language education.

In addition to these curriculum-related elements, some research studies have focused on Congolese English teacher training and learners' attitudes towards English language learning. To illustrate, Kakule (2022) investigated the overall efficacy of English language instruction in Congolese educational institutions. The findings of the study indicated a notable deficiency in the provision of adequate resources, coupled with the observation that teachers lacking the appropriate training were experiencing difficulties in effectively imparting knowledge of the English language. This has a detrimental impact on the learning of English. With regard to the attitude of learners, Tshotsho et al., (2015) investigation revealed that, despite the challenges they face in their learning process, Congolese students recognise the importance of English for their future opportunities. This recognition translates motivation and indicates the necessity for teachers and all educational actors to provide students with the necessary support to enable them to achieve the learning goals for English.

The state of research reveals that research on the teaching of the English language in Kaziba secondary schools is yet to be undertaken. However, an analysis of the situation on the ground indicates that it is not distinct from the broader context of the DRC. On the one hand, Ndongo Ibara (2016) concentrated his research on the diverse teaching methodologies used in English classrooms. The findings of his research were critical of the conventional lecture-based methodologies that were prevalent in the classroom. This pedagogical approach does not facilitate effective learning and comprehension of the taught materials by the learners. It is recommended that English classroom activities involve contributions from both the teacher and learners in order to stimulate classroom interactions. This approach has the potential to combat learner passiveness during English lessons. On the other hand, Kanyuka (2020) marked that communicative language teaching methods, which would facilitate effective learning, are underused in the DRC due to a lack of training for teachers. These findings highlight the pivotal role of teacher training in addressing the challenges learners encounter in their pursuit of English proficiency. Furthermore, there is a notable absence of technology integration into English teaching methodologies (Bui, 2022), which also affects the quality of foreign language learning.

In light of the aforementioned evidence, it can be deduced that the outcomes of English language teaching and learning remain inadequate. Nevertheless, levels of satisfaction with the current state of English language teaching and learning vary considerably across different regions of the country. Significant disparities are evident between urban and rural areas. In urban areas, for instance, access to quality teaching and learning resources and trained teachers has facilitated more advanced results in the attainment of English proficiency than in rural areas like Kaziba, which is confronted with considerable challenges. One of the few research studies on the teaching of English in Kaziba is that of Ndala (2022). His investigation revealed a notable lack of opportunities for students in Kaziba to practise their English. A significant proportion of students (70%) reported feeling unprepared for English national examinations as a consequence of this lack.

It is therefore recommended that further studies be conducted on the teaching and learning of English in Kaziba in order to identify solutions to the challenges currently faced by teachers and learners of English. Furthermore, it is important to note that the discrepancy between rural and urban contexts for English instruction necessitates specific attention and systemic reform by educational stakeholders to guarantee that all Congolese students achieve their language learning objectives.

2.2 FACTORS INTERACTING WITH FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

This section gives an overview of the factors that influence foreign language learning, drawing on insights from scientific discourse. It is of great importance to have an understanding of the term 'foreign language' in advance. In their 2017

publication, Blattner & White posited that a foreign language is a language that is not the native language of the speaker. It is frequently acquired for a variety of reasons, including travel, work, education, or cultural exchange. In developing this section, attention will be on teacher training and professional development, socioeconomic factors, cultural factors and technological advancement.

- **Teacher training and professional development**

The quality of teacher training and ongoing professional development is a significant factor in the efficacy of foreign language instruction. Inadequate teacher training programmes restrict educators' capacity to implement effective teaching strategies in the context of foreign language learning (Boudersa, 2016). A more recent study by Komiljonova (2024) provides a comprehensive and insightful account of the significance of teacher training. The researcher posits that investment in teacher training not only enhances the quality of instruction but also has a positive effect on students' engagement in foreign language learning, thereby improving language skills. Similarly, Ampomah, Manu & Akyina (2024) underscore the significance of mentorship programmes. In this context, they posit that mentorship can markedly enhance the confidence and competence of novice teachers in the delivery of foreign language instruction.

- **Socioeconomic Status**

Socioeconomic status represents a significant factor influencing students' access to quality foreign language education and their overall motivation to learn. The disparities in the availability of resources for students from disparate socioeconomic backgrounds represent a significant concern in the context of foreign language learning. Students from lower social backgrounds frequently lack access to essential learning materials and extracurricular language programmes, which impedes their ability to learn effectively (Vadivel et al., 2023). As Ariani and Ghafournia (2016) note, there is a direct correlation between socioeconomic factors and students' academic performance in foreign language learning. Students who have greater access to resources tend to perform better than those who lack such resources.

- **Cultural Factors**

The cultural perception of foreign languages can either facilitate or impede students' motivation to learn and engage with the language in question (Celik & Yıldız, 2019). Such perspectives can inform the design of instructional strategies and shape attitudes towards the learning of a foreign language. Furthermore, the incorporation of culturally relevant instructional materials has the potential to enhance student learning outcomes. Consequently, the incorporation of culturally relevant content into foreign language courses has been demonstrated to foster students' enthusiasm and connection to the subject matter (Yuliantari & Huda, 2023). In order to provide further support, Celik and Yıldız (2019) emphasised how exposure to the target culture via exchange programmes serves to enhance and inspire pupils to acquire the foreign language.

- **Technological Advancements**

In the contemporary era, technological advancement has transformed the accessibility and methodologies employed in the teaching of foreign languages. It is of paramount importance to integrate this technology into foreign language instruction. As posited by Fitzgerald & Evans (2024), digital tools provide opportunities for differentiated learning experiences that align with the diverse needs of students engaged in foreign language acquisition. Kiryakova & Kozhuharova (2024) maintains that educators must possess digital competencies to effectively integrate technology into their pedagogical practices. However, Haleem et al., (2022) asserts that, given the rapid advancements in technology, educational institutions must adapt their curricula to enhance foreign language learning.

- **Foreign language teaching and goal achievement**

The term "foreign language teaching" is used to describe a systematic approach to instructing students in a language that is not their native tongue. It entails the creation of opportunities for learners to engage with the language in a meaningful manner, thereby facilitating both linguistic and cultural understanding (Richards, 2017). The efficacy of foreign language teaching hinges on the provision of opportunities for learners to engage in authentic interactions. In Congolese classrooms, the creation of environments conducive to the practice of English through authentic conversations, potentially with native speakers or through exchange programmes, has the potential to significantly enhance students' language proficiency (Long, 2014). Dörnyei (2001) posits that motivation is a pivotal factor in foreign language teaching and learning. He suggests that language learning is closely linked to students' aspirations for enhanced career prospects or participation in global discourse. Therefore, encouraging students to assume responsibility for their learning process enables them to use the language in an effective manner.

In concluding this section, which has discussed the scientific literature on students' underachieved objectives for English instruction in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, it is important to note that the teaching and learning of English in DRC,

and more particularly in Kaziba, is influenced by a complex interplay of factors, including socio-economic conditions, cultural status, teacher training and professional development, and pedagogical approaches. These elements have a significant impact on the learning of foreign languages and the achievement of educational objectives. To enhance English language proficiency in the DRC, it is essential to address these interacting factors. Researchers have begun to do so by improving training for educators, increasing access to resources, and promoting a positive attitude towards language learning within the community.

3 METHODOLOGY

This investigation employed a quantitative approach to examine the potential causes of the observed deficiencies in linguistic proficiency among students of English in Kaziba secondary schools, after four years of learning. The participation and procedures were conducted in accordance with the methodology described below.

3.1 PARTICIPANTS

Nine church-based schools from different socioeconomic and cultural environments in the Kaziba chiefdom, South-Kivu (DRC) took part in the survey. The schools were classified into three groups based on a comprehensive set of criteria, including school infrastructure, teacher remuneration, working conditions, the state of latrines, and the annual average of diplomas produced. The groups were designated as follows: "large schools," "medium schools," and "small schools." Consequently, three schools were selected from each group. Out of these 9 schools, a total of 484 final class students participated in this study. Of these, 21 students were excluded due to errors or omissions in their answers or due to an insufficient command of French. Consequently, a total of 463 participants provided complete responses to the questionnaire, resulting in the data set used for this investigation. The below table summarizes the distribution of participants:

Table 1. Participants

Schools	Number of students	Gender		Percentage
		Boys	Girls	
Kashozi secondary school	37	21	16	8
Namurhera secondary school	64	39	25	14
Chirimiro secondary school	51	43	8	11
Lycee Kaziba secondary school	46	28	18	10
Lubaba secondary school	56	30	26	12
Mulama secondary school	42	29	13	9
Kabonwa secondary school	56	37	19	12
Cibanda secondary school	60	37	23	13
Kafindjo secondary school	51	27	24	11
Total	463	291	172	100

The participants were at 63% boys, (291) et 37% des filles (172), ranging from 16 to 23 years of age.

3.2 INSTRUMENT

In order to gain insight into the underlying causes of underachievement in secondary schools in Kaziba, this investigation employed a questionnaire designed by Alshammari (2022). The questionnaire comprises ten items of content, in addition to a number of demographic questions. The questionnaire was translated into French to facilitate comprehension for the participants. Prior to the commencement of data collection, the translated questionnaire was subjected to cross-checking by two duly authorised translators.

4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results obtained from questionnaires submitted to secondary school students in Kaziba indicate that several factors contribute to the failure of linguistic skills development in English. Based on a review of the literature, several factors were identified as potential predictors of this outcome. These were then included in the questionnaire, which was designed to assess their influence. The results are presented in the table.

Table 2. Findings

Statement	Mean	SD
I feel that I need to improve my English skills	4.78	Low
My English level is okay	2.89	High
I think learning English means learning English culture	3.77	Moderate
I feel bored of learning English	3.51	Low
The English teacher has good experience	2.89	High
Teachers usually talk and we listen	4.58	Low
I care about grades more than learning English	4.56	Low
I don't want to learn English anymore	2.64	High
The textbook is difficult to understand	4.23	Low
I usually revise my English lessons at home	2.89	High

Source: Data

From these findings, the overall implications for English language learning in Kaziba Secondary Schools suggest that while students recognize the need to improve their English skills, issues such as boredom, disengagement, and inconsistent teaching quality are hindering their progress. Many students prioritize grades over actual language mastery, which could be limiting their intrinsic motivation. The textbook is seen as difficult to understand, and students show low engagement in revising their lessons at home. To improve outcomes, schools should focus on enhancing interactive, student-centered teaching, providing consistent professional development for teachers, fostering intrinsic motivation through more meaningful assessment methods, and offering additional support materials and study resources to help students effectively engage with and improve their language skills.



Fig. 1. Findings

The first item was designed to ascertain the extent to which learners are committed to acquiring proficiency in the English language course. A total of 87% of learners indicated that they strongly agree with the statement that they require improvement in their English skills, while 7% of them expressed agreement. This suggests that students perceive a need to develop their English language skills. This is a significant finding because it demonstrates the importance of learners understanding the value of learning English as a foreign language. The recognition of the advantages associated with the target language serves to enhance motivation and commitment to language studies. However, the feelings and practices of these participants in relation to this learning are diametrically opposed. The results for item 4, which concerns feelings of boredom with regard to learning English, item 8, which concerns the continuous desire to learn the target language, and question 10, which aims to ascertain the frequency of practice among participants in order to improve their proficiency in the target

language, indicate the opposite. Literature has indicated the necessity of practicing at a regular basis the target language; emphasizing the fact that skills such as vocabulary retention, grammatical accuracy, and pronunciation become increasingly challenging to maintain without regular use. The lack of serious engagement in learning, coupled with a lack of desire to pursue learning and a sense of boredom with the learning process, can prove detrimental to the learning process itself. Such outcomes may result in a reduction in confidence and an increase in anxiety when attempting to communicate, which are not conducive to successful learning.

The second item targeted the learners' estimation of their English proficiency. This question indicates that the participants perceive their level of English to be inadequate. This is to be expected, given that in the preceding question, they indicated a clear need to learn. 194 out of 364 participants (representing 42% of the total sample) indicated that they do not believe their level of English is satisfactory. An additional 89 participants (21%) indicated a strong disagreement with this statement. However, the data suggest that despite these self-assessments, participants continue to indicate that they prioritize grades over learning in the English course, as evidenced by the results of Item 7. This has a deleterious effect, as it fosters a superficial understanding of the language. Students tend to prioritise the memorisation of vocabulary and grammar rules over meaningful practice and understanding, with the sole objective of achieving high scores. It is worth noting that research has indicated that a competitive atmosphere is pervasive in the Congolese educational context, which has the potential to impede collaborative learning among students.

Regarding the teachers and the textbooks used in teaching English, the results show that the participants are not sure that their teachers have sufficient experience. In item 5; 255 participants i.e. 55% disagree and 64 i.e. 14% strongly disagree that their English teachers have good experience. Teaching is done with more teachers talking and students listening, as shown by the results of item 6. This can affect both the learning environment and student engagement as it limits the opportunities for learners to express themselves and practice their skills. It also creates an imbalance in the teacher-pupil dynamic. Students may end up seeing the teacher as the sole authority on language use, which discourages them from exploring their own language skills. Additional challenges to this assertion are that participants perceive language learning as a process that is only complete when coupled with an understanding of the culture of the speakers of that language. This is evidenced by the results of item 3. However, the data indicate that the textbooks themselves are a source of difficulty. A total of 357 participants, representing 59% of the total number of participants, provided a definitive confirmation that the textbooks utilized by educators are inherently challenging to comprehend. It is also important to note that, in accordance with the education policy in the DRC, English is taught in secondary schools through the English for Africa programme. This textbook has already been the subject of criticism from numerous scholars.

The aforementioned evidence suggests that the underachievement of linguistic skills in English at Kaziba secondary schools, after four years of training, can be attributed to a number of factors. The results of this research indicate that pedagogical factors, such as the textbooks and the teaching methodology employed in this course, and motivational factors, such as a lack of desire to learn and boredom with the subject matter, are responsible for these outcomes. This highlights the necessity for a more in-depth qualitative investigation within the context of Kaziba secondary schools to ascertain the underlying causes of these factors.

5 CONCLUSION

This article has been investigating the underlying causes of underachievement in English language learning in Kaziba. The results of the study were collected from nine educational institutions in Kaziba, selected according to some established criteria including socioeconomic and cultural environments, infrastructure, teacher remuneration, working conditions, and other factors. On the basis of the aforementioned criteria, the schools were regrouped into three categories, namely big schools, medium schools and small schools. In each group, three schools were selected for inclusion in the study. In all the selected schools, a total of 484 final-year students were invited to participate in the study. Following the exclusion of 21 students due to incomplete or partially completed responses, a total of 464 students provided complete responses to the questionnaire, which formed the basis of the data for this investigation.

Following an in-depth analysis, it became evident that the students' suboptimal performance in English language learning in Kaziba secondary schools can be attributed to a combination of pedagogical and motivational factors. The complexity of the textbooks and the teaching methodology employed during the course were identified as key pedagogical challenges. Additionally, motivational factors such as a lack of motivation to learn and a general disinterest in the English subject were identified as significant contributors to the students' underachievement. Furthermore, the findings indicated that teachers do not provide learners with sufficient opportunities to engage in verbal communication within the classroom setting. This observation was corroborated by 83% of the respondents. A 55% majority of respondents indicated that they had concerns regarding the teacher's experience. As evidenced in the literature, factors that impede students' proficiency in language

learning include teacher professional expertise and a lack of opportunity for language practice. These findings align with those pertaining to teacher experience and students' language exposure, corroborating the research hypothesis (1), which posits that constrained opportunities for language practice, teacher training, and professional experience can impede students' language development.

Additionally, the results of this study reveal at which extend the teaching and learning of English in kaziba is undermined by various challenges which hinder the effective learning. Yet literature review has revealed an insufficient rate of researches oriented on the teaching of English in kaziba secondary schools. This is therefore a call for further studies on the teaching of English in kaziba and other corners of the country where the teaching of English is failing to achieve the learning goals.

5.1 PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATION

To fight against underachievement of English language learning objectives, we suggest the following:

- To teachers of English:

Use appropriate teaching methods which help learners learn and comprehend the materials they are taught. Give them meaningful times to communicate in English through classroom tasks originating from different contexts including cultural, social, etc.

- To school leaders:

Equip teachers with textbooks which will help them prepare lessons and teach valid and reliable contents to learners. Avail technological tools which will help the teacher implement well different materials. Give learners instructions to communicate in English in the school environment and organize language clubs where learners can find opportunity to use English out of the classroom.

- To the ministry of education:

Equip rural schools like Kaziba with learning resources like textbooks taking into account learners' social and cultural contexts. Avail good learning environment to rural learners by providing them infrastructures which offer them good learning conditions.

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