Students' Perceptions on Communication Skills: A Case of EFL Learners at TTC Kirambo, Burera District, Rwanda.

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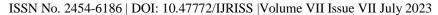
ABSTRACT

In order to succeed in Rwanda's and the rest of the world's competitive and rising market economies, TTC Kirambo students must have good oral communication abilities in English language. Given that TTC Kirambo students often perform poorly in speaking English, the study was conducted to assess students' perceptions on the importance of speaking abilities and the urgency of engaging in language-enhancement activities. Based on the data obtained from instruments, the findings show that the majority of students perceive English-speaking skills important. A sample of 38 participants comprising 30 students,4 English Tutors and 4 parents provided rich data analysed in the study. Data was collected through in-depth interviews and focus groups utilizing a qualitative approach technique. Responses to several questions reveal students' perception on the value of oral communication skills, degree of oral communication, and the necessity of taking part in the extra coaching programs the college offers. Data collected demonstrates that participants are aware of the value of communication skills for achieving and surviving in the job market, developing one's personality, and meeting social demands. It also demonstrates their need to attend additional language training sessions outside of their regular routine classes.

Keywords: Communication Skills, Students' Perceptions, Extra coaching.

INTRODUCTION

English is the most commonly spoken language in the world today and is a dominant language in trade, education, and tourism due to its apex position in the globalization process. In order for the Middle Eastern countries to compete with the rest of the world for jobs and scholarships on a global scale, they are making every effort to teach English to its young people. (Ahmad & Ahmad,2015). There is a plethora of research on students' perceptions on the importance of communication skills,however, there is no study that goes into detail on students' perceptions on their existing communication skills and their needs to participate in language training programs. Due to the incorporation of contemporary technology into educational institutions and the revolutionary changes in the new world of media, mass communication, and the internet, it is now crucial for students enrolled in TTC's to change their perceptions on communication skills. (Harmer, 2012).

Students are of the perception that it is challenging for them to communicate in English language because lecturers frequently switch to Kinyarwanda and do so when explaining concepts. They encounter challenges both in and outside classroom. This research has been done to bring out student's perceptions on the importance of communication skills development for English language learners whose first languages are Kinyarwanda, Kiswahili, or French. The four skills, that of listening, speaking, reading, and writing are all important, but speaking seems to be the most important because speakers of a language are assumed to be educated . As a result, speaking is usually the aspect of learning a foreign language that students are most interested in Cam (2017) asserts that

"English has recently become the language of "globalization". In order to help students, adapt to modern life and help their countries develop, English as a foreign language has been seen as important in the curriculum in the majority of African countries".

The most common way that language is used is through oral communication, which also serves as the foundation for literacy. Similarly, Brown (2011) claims that

"Language is essential to a student's social and personal growth. It improves their social connections and helps them comprehend themselves and others.

Students are of the perception that, by learning about themselves, their thoughts, their feelings through spoken communication and mastering the ability to respond to others' talk, they can successfully engage in the society (Harmer,2012).They are of the view that the ' inadequate communication and self-expression skills are the cause of the issue and they frequently lack the language or vocabulary necessary to convey their purpose (Carter and Nunan, 2001).

According to Carter and Nunan (2001), the ongoing dissatisfaction with TTC Kirambo students' performance in English courses points to a lack of fundamental standard in curriculum design, measuring oral communication abilities, and the adoption of effective teaching methods at college level. They do not engage in many communicative activities in the classroom, which is a major barrier to acquiring the language for communication. Mother tongue interference and lack of practical applications for what has been learnt are the two main causes of the issues (Abadi, 2015). It makes it harder for teachers to teach students English language in general and speaking abilities in particular as it brings out the perception that students lack exposure to effective learning strategies.

Rwanda Education Board spent a significant amount of money hiring highly skilled teachers from Zimbabwe to support the education system, particularly in improving English. To strengthen the education system and to inspire students' interest in learning English for communication at the college level, it is necessary to use contemporary techniques, approaches, and methodologies. Leong & Ahmadi (2017) states that students require longer time to practice and sometimes some of the students avoid speaking because they fear their tutors and shy that their friends' will laugh at them.

Parents perceptions on communication skills.

Improving communication between parents and teachers and fostering a relationship in which they work together will decrease the blame from one another for lack of student motivation, poor performance in speaking activities. Improved communication will allow teachers to establish partnerships with parents and keep them informed of their child's progress or lack of progress in communication activities. (Danesh, 2016. Parents have to know and understand the importance of communication skills thus understand its importance to the learners. Parents perception on oral communication is that, students who can speak English so perfectly are learned and intelligent thus some urge learners to communicate in English and even take them to private schools where they communicate in English. Some parents would prefer their learners to converse with whites so as to improve their communication skills. Parents feel being conversant in English gives students the leverage to do well in the business world and interviews as they look for work in real life situations where English is needed.

Teacher's perceptions on communication skills.

Teachers' perceptions on speaking abilities, according to Ahmad and Rao (2012), are the most crucial skills for all students who want to learn English in order to advance their careers, improve their businesses, boost confidence, find better employment opportunities, give public speeches, go on job interviews, take part in

debates and group discussions, participate in presentations, and so forth. Everything in the current, technological world is connected to speaking abilities. In agreement with Ahmad and Ahmad (2015) asserts that a person with a knack for speech can rule the entire globe. The key to better career chances is effective communication. In contemporary interviews, candidates' abilities are evaluated based on how well they do in group discussions, debates, presentations, and other tasks. Therefore, in order to seize greater prospects, job seekers must develop strong oral communication abilities. Once the students have mastered these speaking techniques in their classes for English as a Second Language or as a Foreign Language, they perform well in both inside and outside of the classroom activities.

According to Littlewood (2011), in order to achieve our goals and carry out our activities, we must exchange ideas and thoughts with individuals all over the world. Every English language learner's perception is to strengthen their speaking abilities in order to compete in today's global market. Additionally, they feel that the majority of employment decisions are based on a person's communication abilities, particularly their speaking abilities. According to Danesh et al. (2016), interviewers are able to identify candidates' talent for speaking within a short amount of time. Job searchers who can demonstrate their abilities at that specific time will hold the finest positions in their careers. These speaking abilities help learners advance their careers.Persons working in business groups might benefit more from these speaking abilities by promoting their companies and it is common knowledge that learners are greatly inspired and motivated by speakers who are excellent, remarkable, and inspirational.

Speaking abilities are important in many areas, according to Abadi (2015, hence students of English as a Second Language or as a Foreign Language need to focus more on them. In order for students to be more involved in developing speaking skills in their English classes, they are of the perception that tutors are also encouraged to put a number of helpful methods into practice. The speaking abilities of English language learners can be greatly improved with even a little consistent practice. They can then successfully participate in class discussions and debates and gradually hone their speaking abilities. By letting go of all the fears they previously held in their heads, they will be able to give presentations on their own. They can give brief talks in the classroom if they regularly exercise these abilities. Additionally, they develop self-confidence among one another and improve their ability to make decisions and solve problems. According to Leong and Ahmadi (2017), students can effectively market their enterprises and create solid working relationships with other business partners. English Language Learners do better in their job interviews so that they can receive the best opportunities to establish themselves successfully in their careers. They can endeavor to advance their own career while getting along well with their coworkers. Speaking abilities are crucial for improving the overall performance of English Language Learners. The diagram below illustrates teacher's perceptions on communication skills:

Model on the importance of communication

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Language anxiety and motivation for communication

To encourage students to communicate with one another in realistic and meaningful ways using the target language is the main goal of oral communication in the classroom. According to Nur and Riadil (2019), it is critical to employ engaging themes in discussions, but even more crucially, the discourse must serve a purposeful goal if instructors want their students to interact with one another and express themselves freely in the target language. According to Martinez (2012), students should have frequent exposure to and opportunities to utilize the target language in the foreign language classroom. The major duties of a language instructor are to assist students who are reluctant or afraid to talk in class to do so in English by giving them enough linguistic help, feedback, and encouragement. Due to their shyness and reluctance to speak in front of others, students frequently find it difficult to express themselves, especially when asked for personal information or an opinion. Concerns of speaking poorly and so losing face in front of their classmates are common (Harmer, 2012). Before the speaking activity, have students participate in brainstorming exercises to help them come up with ideas. Students can build a framework for the upcoming speaking challenge through brainstorming (Brown, 2007). Because communicating to one another in a foreign language is difficult and uncomfortable, and while speaking in their mother tongue makes them feel less "exposed," students who share the same mother tongue may be more likely to use it in classes.

According to Atta-Obeng & Lamptey (2013), social anxiety disorder is the most prevalent anxiety disorder and the third most prevalent mental disorder in the United States. This condition causes the sufferers to feel distressed, especially when engaging in activities like public speaking, asking questions, giving reports in groups, expressing disagreement, and speaking in class, because they feel that they will embarrass themselves and that others will judge them negatively. This distress is different from the usual nerves experienced by many people in new social situations. "They frequently judge themselves harshly and perceive other people's reactions to their performance as negative," further argues Atta-Obeng & Lamptey (2013). Because of this, those who experience it either avoid circumstances that cause them stress or have physical and psychological symptoms as tachycardia, elevated blood pressure, trembling, quivering voice, shortness of breath, perspiration, and poor eye contact. Such issues can be resolved by giving pupils ample opportunities to use their newly acquired language both within and outside of the classroom.

There are four skills that students should master when learning English. In addition to speaking and writing, there is also listening. They are all significant and connected to one another. Speaking is the most crucial of the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), according to Tang (1997), because it requires background knowledge and many language learners are motivated to acquire speaking. Speaking is the most important talent, according to Tang, rather than the other skills, because being able to speak a foreign language indicates that a person is knowledgeable. Additionally, the researcher deduces that speaking is advantageous in that it gives us a vital talent that enables us to contribute in the society or even our country, as per Nur & Riadil (2019), as mentioned in Swary (2014).

Given the significance of foreign language speaking abilities, English language learners should be capable of speaking English fluently and with confidence. However, a lot of English language learners actually struggle with speaking. Speaking issues are issues that cause someone to perform poorly when speaking. According to Riadil (2019), linguistic issues might negatively impact pupils' academic achievement. Students with weak speaking skills frequently have linguistics issues with their vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. These issues prevent children from developing their speaking skills. Psychological issues are another issue that affects pupils' capacity to communicate verbally. Psychological issues can include issues with self-efficacy, nervousness, and feeling shy when speaking in English, as well as issues with emotional and physical health. According to Tang (1997), there are a few issues with speaking activities, including inhibition, a lack of anything to say, low or uneven involvement, and the usage of one's mother tongue.

a) Inhibition

Speaking requires some degree of real-time communication with an audience, unlike reading, writing, and listening. Because they are worried about making mistakes, hesitant about speaking in a foreign language, and frightened of judgment, students are frequently discouraged from trying to communicate in a foreign language in class.

b) Nothing to Say

Students frequently lament their inability to speak up. Additionally, they lack the desire to express themselves.

c) Low or Uneven Participation

There will always be one student in a group of pupils who speaks the loudest in order to be heard, while the others have little or no opportunity to speak. The tendency to be more dominant than the other is brought on by this condition.

d) Mother-Tongue Usage

In the realm of education such as school and college, learners mostly come from the same area that uses the same mother tongue. It leads them to use it in communicating to each other because it is easier and flows naturally than the foreign language.

Brown (2007) stated that there are eight cases in which speaking is difficult, they are: clustering, redundancy, reduced form, performance variable, colloquial language, rate of delivery, stress, rhythm, and intonation, and the last is interaction.

Research Questions

1. What are students' perceptions of, and experiences with the communication skills course?
2. To what extent are communication courses preparing students for real life communication in the workplace?
3. How do parents and teachers perceive communication skills?

Theoretical Framework

Communicative Competence Theory make up the theoretical framework that serves as the foundation for this investigation. The hypotheses are a good fit for my research since it clearly illustrates how communication skills classes helps students strengthen their speaking skills.

Communicative competence theory

The research is useful to the communicative competence hypothesis because it highlights the value of communication courses in helping students improve their speaking. Communication skills are what allows a student to know when to talk and when to be silent, which code to use, when, where, and to whom (Martinez, 2012). To react to genuine communication demands in authentic second language contexts, the second language learner must have the chance to engage in meaningful communicative interaction with highly proficient language users. Littlewood (2011) asserts that the communicative competence that the learner has acquired through the acquisition and use of the native language and that is similar to the communication skills required in the second language must be used to its fullest in the early stages of second language acquisition. Theorists have advanced various models of communicative competence as the idea has evolved over the years. The researcher used the model created by Canale and Swain

The capacity to listen, speak, read, and write in a certain language is referred to as having good communication skills. Students in Rwanda are taught the four fundamental language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—as part of their basic communication skills instruction at the college level. This is true because Rwanda's official language for commercial communication is English. The development of what Ahmad and Rao (2012) called communicative competence in learners is the ultimate goal of the communication skills course. According to Brown (2011), the ability to "…*deliver and understand messages and to negotiate meanings interpersonally within specific situations*" is a sign of communication competence. Four key components make up communication skills. Linguistic proficiency comes first. According to Brown (2011), linguistic competence—also known as grammatical competence—involves having a working grasp of language rules as well as other types of information that make it possible for a person to participate actively in conversation. It also includes understanding of lexical elements, semantics, morphological (word formation) rules, syntactic (sentence construction) rules, and a language's sound system (phonology). Students should therefore be able to correctly use the English Language norms in speech or writing by the end of the communication skills training course.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, a case study methodology was employed. A case study is a method for learning about complex phenomena in a context, making it a strong choice for this study because it allowed for a thorough investigation of a single unit, a thorough evaluation of a single place, a thorough examination of a single subject, or a thorough examination of a specific occurrence. Meltem (2007). The researcher focused on a single college because colleges differ and offer a variety of communication skills curriculum. Other colleges might not experience the same problems as TTC Kirambo.

Population

The population of the study was made up of 33 lecturers and 500 students from TTC Kirambo.

Sample

Thirty (30) first-, second-, and third-year college students were chosen at random from all academic areas based on their enrollment in the English communication skills course. Four lecturers from the fields of ELCPE (Early Childhood Primary Education), LE (Language Education), SSE (Social Science Education), and SME (Science Mathematics Education) who teach these students were chosen.

Data collection

In-depth interviews and focus groups were used to gather data.

In-depth Interviews

Interviews with four lecturers who taught first-, second-, and third-year undergraduate students were conducted to learn more about their opinions on the students' academic writing. About fifteen minutes were spent on each interview. The researcher took notes during the interviews. Common themes were found and recorded.

Focus group discussions

According to Barbour (2014), a focus group is a discussion about a specific research topic between four and ten participants. Focus group discussions were used to elicit information in order to get a general picture of the challenges surrounding the necessity of communication in the development of academic writing at teacher training institutes. The 30 chosen students were divided into 3 focus groups, each with 10 students.

Atta-Obeng & Lamptey (2013) reported that focus group interviews allowed the researcher to gather data from the participants in a single session in a situation where they felt relaxed and at ease. The researcher used focus group conversations to compile data and identify issues when they were brought up in the group.

DISCUSSION

Communication skills development for students depends heavily on their capacity to communicate what they know. Teachers' ought to promote student involvement in discussions and other small-group activities because they recognize the importance of oral communication development. In her allegations Deepa (2012) stated:

A multitude of academic and general discipline functions are served through oral communication. Students must communicate clearly in their personal life, potential employment, social interactions, and political endeavors. They will be required to speak at meetings, participate in discussions and debates, and work in groups. If the necessary training and speaking opportunities are made accessible, students can achieve a number of goals and improve as communicators and speakers.

The study emphasizes the notion that students of EFL or ESL develop negative attitudes regarding speaking and are likely to lack the desire to practice more. The capacity of students to communicate in a foreign or second language clearly and effectively has a significant impact on their success both throughout their academic careers and beyond graduation. According to Danish (2016), language learners who haven't spoken the language before could feel reluctant to express themselves. Because they are afraid of making mistakes and seeming foolish in front of others, they always avoid receiving comments and corrections. In order to enhance learning, generate interest in the classroom, and promote speaking as a whole, some of the most well-liked communicative language teaching strategies entail having students engage in communicative activities including dialogues, role plays, storytelling, and interviewing. According to Barbour (2014) theory, a communicative task has a goal, input, activities, context, and roles. The tasks' main goals are to help students become more proficient in discourse, sociolinguistics, and strategic communication.

The following are the findings about the issues with speaking activities, specifically: inhibition, having nothing to say, poor or uneven involvement, and mother tongue use:

Inhibitions

Speaking issues called inhibitions are caused by students. concerns when speaking in English. Students' worries about using the wrong words, their body language, their lexical choices, or their pronunciation, their worries about being judged, as well as their feelings of shyness when speaking English, are all parts of this speaking issue. According to the results, pupils struggle with inhibitions at all points. The first is that they are concerned of uttering inaccuracies. The second component of inhibition is fear of criticism, and the third component is feeling shy. The study's findings indicate that students' inhibition-related issues still require additional attention. Because they are worried about the language's grammatical structure, pronunciation, and vocabulary, students are reluctant to speak it. They fear that other students will be critical of their work. In the meantime, the researcher discovered that practically all of the responders shared the same issues, indicating that they all shared a stance or knowledge that they had never acknowledged for themselves. The student frequently believes that they are the worst even when they are actually on the same level. On the other hand, the study discovered a favorable response from students regarding their confidence in speaking English. More over half of the respondents are comfortable speaking English, despite the fact that some still experience some shyness. The results are consistent with Tang's (1997) theory that students' speaking difficulties are caused by inhibition—a fear of making mistakes and a fear of criticism. The majority of respondents, according to the study, are not shy when speaking English.

Nothing to Say

According to the findings, students are struggling with having nothing to say about anything. It also demonstrated that the respondents' lack subject understanding. The findings also demonstrate that students are having issues with both elements of nothing to say. Nearly two thirds of the respondents claim that while speaking with others in English, they lack topical expertise. Students who are not knowledgeable about the subject being discussed typically don't speak and instead just listen. According to Tang (1997), because they are unfamiliar with the topic the teacher has chosen, students often avoid speaking about it.

Low or Uneven Participation

The students typically speak English in class infrequently or inconsistently. There is a tendency for some students to dominate the class due to different possibilities for pupils to speak English.
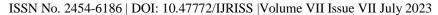
Mother Tongue Use

Students who travelled overseas to learn a foreign language spent the first several months translating everything into their mother tongue and building a vocabulary knowledge base using a bilingual dictionary. In reality, studies have revealed that all language learners automatically switch between languages and translate, and the L1 is actually a crucial tool for learning the second language (L2) (Cook, 2001; Woodall, 2002). For these reasons, educators should attempt to cooperate with rather than against this fundamental tendency. In addition, Goldstein (2003) discovered that students simply did not speak, used their L1 quietly, and felt a sense of shame when they were punished for using their mother tongue in circumstances where it was not even permitted in private spaces. Students' lives should be made richer by learning a new language; their native language and culture should not be diminished in any way. Students would learn that learning a second language is a beneficial experience if L1 use was permitted. They don't have to feel bad about doing what comes naturally since they have access to an important resource that supports them.

According to the teacher, speaking to students in their mother tongue helps to strengthen the interaction between them and the teacher (Harbord, 1992). Simple greeting of "Hello, how are you?" (muraho/amakuru in Kinyarwanda) in the students' native tongue can set off a fit of laughter and frequently prompts students to approach the teacher to ask what more (s)he can say in their native tongue(s). Additionally, being able to communicate with children in the L1 can be more effective and free up time for more beneficial activities. For instance, asking a student who does understand to translate for the full class would give the activity more time and alleviate a lot of stress for teachers and students if the directions to the activity were complicated and the students did not appear to understand the English explanation.

On the other side, translation may cause both teachers and students to become overly reliant on their native tongues (Harbord, 1992). Students become less confident in their capacity to speak in English as a result. They could believe that they can only fully comprehend what the teacher says after it has been translated. Alternatively, they speak in their native tongue despite being completely capable of saying the same thing in English.

As a result, students may have less opportunities to use their English, and they may not understand the need of using it in class activities to advance their language abilities. Oversimplification is another issue that translation frequently causes. due to the fact that many linguistic and cultural nuances cannot be accurately translated (Harbord, 1992). For instance, in English, the phrase "That's so cool!" denotes anything that is fantastic or incredible. This expression is the result of the English language's ongoing development, which was influenced by the particular culture at a particular time. While there is merit to both sides of the issue, it is obvious that the benefits of having pupils use their first language for English language development do not exceed the drawbacks. Is it possible to maximize the advantages while minimizing the drawbacks?

Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study indicate that TTC Kirambo students have some speaking challenges that can be resolved by emphasizing this ability more. Numerous concerns relating to educators, instructional methods, curricula, extracurricular activities, and evaluation regulation need to be taken into account. Teachers must receive training on how to teach speaking in a communicative manner and how to incorporate it with other abilities. Their understanding of language learning and acquisition should be increased. Additionally, teachers need to be educated on the various teaching methods that could limit their usage of L1 in their classes. The curriculum should contain communicative tasks so that pupils have numerous speaking chances. In those assignments, the emphasis should be on getting pupils to communicate meaning rather than form. This can improve students' language acquisition, according to numerous researchers. Students can have more opportunities to utilize the language by being involved in extracurricular activities, and they will be exposed to it outside of the classroom as well. The Rwanda Education Board personnel, school administrators, and all English teachers should collaborate to accomplish this in order to align what is taught in textbooks with how it should be tested, assessment tool designers and curriculum designers should collaborate.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that grammatical issues, the usage of one's mother tongue, and inhibition are the primary speaking challenges faced by TTC Kirambo students. Students struggle to communicate in English because they lack the appropriate grammar and vocabulary. They also struggle with sentence structure, which causes them to use their native speech. Students also consider speaking blunders in front of their classmates to be extremely embarrassing, which leads them to refrain from speaking in order to avoid such circumstances. These speaking challenges are a result of five primary factors: the curriculum, extracurricular activities, evaluation rules, and teachers' judgments and implicit ideas about teaching speaking. The study demonstrates that although teachers place a high value on speaking instruction, they do not devote enough time to it due to time constraints and the need to cover textbook material, which places a greater focus on teaching reading and writing than speaking. By emphasizing the teaching of grammatical rules and vocabulary words, the teachers' teaching practices place an emphasis on teaching the language's form. Short, precise statements are all that are expected of students, but communication is all but ignored. Additionally, teachers believe that it is crucial to use L1 while defining terms and outlining grammar rules. To ensure that the pupils understand the meaning and the point, they think it is crucial to use L1. Additionally, it was discovered that student textbooks from years one through three do not give students enough tasks that are specifically made for speaking and do not frequently give them opportunities to use English in a communicative manner. Additionally, the majority of children only encounter English in the classroom. There are very few extracurricular events designed to help pupils with their spoken communication, and the only one that is offered regularly is the English assembly. Speaking ability receives less training emphasis because it is the sole skill that is excluded from tests. Along with grammar and vocabulary, reading and writing are the key areas of emphasis. Speaking instruction can be incorporated into the teaching of other skills, such as reading and writing, but teachers believe that there isn't enough time for that. As a result, other skills are prioritized above speaking because those other skills are tested while speaking isn't.

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