The Contribution of English Reading Materials to Improving Students' English Performance in Lower Secondary Schools in the Shyira Sector of Nyabihu District, Rwanda

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ABSTRACT

This research aimed to examine the relationship between the use of English reading materials and the improvement of students' English language performance in Lower Secondary Schools in the Shyira sector. Based on the Simple View of Reading (SVR) and the Cognitive Load Theory (CLT), the descriptive research design with a mixed approach was employed. Two selected schools were studied: one with a well-equipped library containing English reading materials and the other with a poorly equipped library lacking English reading materials. The study population consisted of 106 individuals, including 92 lower secondary students, 10 teachers, and 4 Deputy Head teacher in charge of studies /teachers, selected randomly from a population of 145. Primary data and secondary data were collected through questionnaires and interview guides. Quantitative data was analyzed descriptively by use of excel and the Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) while qualitative data was subjected to thematic analysis. The findings reveal the use of various reading materials, such as newspapers, textbooks, handouts, dictionaries, expert opinions, poetry, online readings, and adventure stories in Lower Secondary Schools in the Shyira sector. It was observed that the lack of English reading materials and libraries in lower secondary schools leads to poor English performance among students. The study suggests strategies to improve learners' English skills, including promoting the use of English reading materials, fostering a culture of reading, and motivating students to utilize libraries. Additionally, teachers should serve as English role models and actively encourage reading to enhance students' motivation.

Keywords: Contribution, English Performance, Lower Secondary Schools, Reading Materials

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I. INTRODUCTION

English has grown in prominence as a global language, extending its influence and importance across different continents and particularly in Africa. It serves as a lingua franca, enabling communication among people from diverse backgrounds. In Europe, it is widely spoken and serves as the primary language in the United Kingdom and Ireland. In North America, it is predominant in the US and Canada. In Asia, it acts as a bridge language for intercultural communication and business. In Africa, English has gained prominence due to historical factors, with many countries adopting it as an official language. In South Africa, it is one of the official languages, while in East Africa, including Rwanda, English proficiency enhances opportunities for trade and partnerships. Overall, English's growing importance as a global language promotes worldwide communication, fosters connections, and facilitates socioeconomic development across continents, including Africa. The growing importance of English is due to its role in promoting worldwide communication and fostering international connections. Formal education is essential for increasing and empowering English proficiency in Rwanda and around the world. Scholars like Bower (2019) have investigated the impact of language policy, multilingualism, and education on English in Rwanda, emphasizing the significance of these elements in determining language behaviors. In addition, Gasana and Amoros (2018) conducted a comprehensive study that investigated the policies, methods, and challenges of English language teaching and learning in Rwanda, offering valuable insights into the specific concerns encountered in this educational environment.

Furthermore, Alghonaim (2020) conducted a critical analysis of language policy and politics surrounding the adoption of English in Rwanda. These studies shed light on the effect of formal education in increasing English competence and its consequences for Rwanda's linguistic environment. To improve reading abilities and promote English language development among students, teachers, and school administrators, schools must have libraries supplied with a variety of reading resources such as storybooks, periodicals, newspapers, and subject books. However,

effective English advancement confronts several barriers throughout schools (Sudipa, 2020). Several challenges contribute to Rwanda's limited English performance, including the absence of public libraries, a lack of reading culture, a lack of interest and practice, poor comprehension skills (including hearing loss), insufficient evaluation of language components, inadequate guidance, and reading difficulties influenced by neurological and cognitive factors (Vuzo, 2023).

To handle these issues, it is critical to consult appropriate resources. For example, Almutairi (2018) discusses ways for fostering a reading culture and improving comprehension skills. Additionally, Hibbert (2016) provides advice on evaluating language competency and using relevant assessment methodologies. These websites provide important insights for overcoming the challenges to enhancing English competence in Rwanda." The purpose of this study is to compare the English language performance of Lower Secondary School students in Shyira Sector of Nyabihu District between two schools: one with a well-equipped library and one with insufficiently equipped English reading materials. The goal is to determine if students from the school with a well-equipped library perform better in English.

1.1 Problem Statement

The Rwandan government has made English the medium of instruction in Lower Secondary Schools as part of its efforts to provide inclusive education and eliminate exclusion and discrimination among the students as an international competitor student at labor markets. Based on the education system in Rwanda has evolved significantly over the years. Initially, education was informal and within families, with additional training courses called Amatorero covering various skills and using the mother tongue Kinyarwanda and also from 1900 to 1963, French was the language of instruction due to German and Belgian influence. After independence, Rwanda focused on restructuring the system to reach more children, leading to the adoption of English in 2008. The problem statement highlights the difficulties faced by students in Nyabihu District, Shyira Sector, Rwanda, in reading English due to various factors such as limited access to materials, a lack of reading culture, language barriers, and disengagement. These challenges in reading English impact students' English language proficiency and academic performance. To provide statistical citations supporting the problem, it's important to note that specific statistical data related to this particular district and sector may not be available within the provided context. However, we can present some general statistics regarding English language proficiency and education in Rwanda to provide a broader understanding of the issue.

According to the World Bank's World Development Indicators, in 2019, the literacy rate in Rwanda was estimated to be 73.2% for males and 66.8% for females, indicating a significant portion of the population still facing challenges in accessing education and acquiring literacy skills. Additionally, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2016 assessment, conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) in collaboration with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], reported that only 13% of Grade 4 students in Rwanda were proficient in reading.

These statistics suggest that there is a need to address the specific challenges faced by students in Nyabihu District, Shyira Sector, regarding English language reading proficiency. By investigating the impact of reading materials on students' English language proficiency and academic performance, this study aims to contribute to the development of effective strategies that can improve students' access to and motivation for using English reading materials, thereby enhancing their academic outcomes and English language skills.

1.2 Research Objectives
  (i)   To examine the relationship between the use of English Reading materials and the improvement of students' English language performance.
 (ii)   To identify the factors influencing the utilization of reading materials by Lower Secondary School students in selected schools.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The objective of this study is to explore the relationship between the use of reading materials and the English language performance of Lower Secondary School students in the Shyira Sector of Nyabihu District. Specifically, the study aims to identify the factors influencing the utilization of reading materials by students in two schools: one with a well-equipped library and one with insufficient English reading materials.

The study's theoretical framework combines the Simple View of Reading (SVR) and the Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) to better understand the relationship between reading proficiency, academic success, and English

performance. The Simple View of Reading (SVR) emphasizes the importance of both word recognition and linguistic comprehension in reading comprehension. Researchers like Sudipa (2020) and Alghonaim (2020) have supported this framework, highlighting the significance of decoding skills and language comprehension in reading. SVR serves as the most effective solution when the learners are comprehending the words in reading as the students are not the native speaker. Thus, students will gain experience through word recognition and linguistic comprehension with various English reading materials.

On the other hand, the Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) focuses on optimizing cognitive load during the learning process. Researchers like Kirschner et al. (2006) have analyzed the limitations of minimal guidance during instruction and emphasized the importance of cognitive load management. By examining these theories, the study aims to determine whether students from schools with well-equipped libraries, which facilitate access to diverse reading materials and support language development, perform better in English compared to their counterparts in schools with inadequate reading materials.

2.2 Empirical Review
2.2.1 Use of English Reading Materials and the Improvement of Students' English Language Performance

The incorporation of English reading materials into language learning is pivotal for promoting linguistic competence, enriching vocabulary acquisition, and honing reading comprehension skills (Grabe, 2009; Nuttall, 2005; Richards, 2002). This comprehensive approach to language instruction has been consistently linked to improved academic achievement (Nation, 2009; Ellis, 2008; Cobb, 2007).

Reading materials serve as indispensable tools for language acquisition, providing learners with exposure to authentic language usage and diverse contexts (Grabe, 2009). Through engagement with various texts, students encounter new vocabulary, grammatical structures, and idiomatic expressions, thereby expanding their linguistic repertoire (Richards, 2002). Moreover, reading comprehension skills are honed as students navigate through texts, infer meaning, and make connections between ideas (Nuttall, 2005). This active engagement with reading materials fosters critical thinking abilities, encouraging students to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information (Cobb, 2007).

The benefits of incorporating reading materials extend beyond language proficiency to encompass broader academic success. Research indicates that students who are exposed to a rich variety of reading materials demonstrate higher levels of academic achievement across subjects (Ellis, 2008). By immersing students in authentic texts, educators create opportunities for interdisciplinary learning, where language skills are integrated with content knowledge (Nation, 2009). For instance, reading a science article not only enhances English language skills but also deepens understanding of scientific concepts.

Furthermore, the incorporation of diverse reading materials promotes motivation and engagement among students (Richards, 2002). By selecting texts that cater to students' interests, educators can ignite a passion for reading and learning. When students find relevance and enjoyment in what they read, they are more likely to invest time and effort in language learning activities (Grabe, 2009). Thus, the use of reading materials not only enhances language skills but also nurtures a lifelong love for learning.

2.2.2 Factors Influencing the Utilization of Reading Materials by Lower Secondary School Students in Selected Schools

Despite the numerous benefits of incorporating reading materials into English instruction, various factors influence the utilization of these resources among lower secondary school students. Socioeconomic status, access to resources, and cultural/environmental influences play significant roles in shaping students' English language proficiency (Khan, 2015; Rani & Ahuja, 2014; Whitten et al., 2016).

Socioeconomic factors such as family income and parental education level can impact students' access to reading materials and educational opportunities (Khan, 2015). Students from low-income households may have limited access to books and other resources outside of school, affecting their exposure to English language input (Rani & Ahuja, 2014). Furthermore, cultural and environmental influences shape students' attitudes towards reading and language learning. In cultures where English is not the primary language or where there is a lack of emphasis on reading for pleasure, students may face additional barriers to engaging with English reading materials (Whitten et al., 2016).

In addition to external factors, the effectiveness of utilizing reading materials in English instruction is contingent upon teachers' competence and motivation (Smith, 2022). Educators play a crucial role in selecting and implementing appropriate reading resources that cater to students' needs and interests (Richards & McKay, 2018). Moreover, teachers' pedagogical approaches, such as incorporating pre-reading activities, scaffolding techniques, and

post-reading discussions, can enhance students' engagement with reading materials and support their language development (Richards & McKay, 2018).

Furthermore, the availability of resources within school settings, including libraries and multimedia platforms, can influence students' access to English reading materials (Maddison & Kumaran, 2022). School libraries, in particular, play a vital role in providing students with a wide range of reading materials and fostering a culture of literacy (Oliveira, 2018). However, access barriers, such as limited library hours or insufficient funding for library resources, can hinder students' utilization of these valuable resources (Blaschke & Hase, 2016).

Despite these challenges, active school libraries with well-curated English reading resources have been shown to improve students' English language skills and academic performance (Maddison & Kumaran, 2022). Librarians, with their expertise in information literacy and resource management, play a crucial role in supporting students' access to reading materials and promoting a culture of reading within schools (Oliveira, 2018). Moreover, research suggests that student use of library resources is positively correlated with academic success and retention (Maddison & Kumaran, 2022).

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a descriptive research design with mixed-methods approach to examine the relationship between reading materials and English performance among Lower Secondary School students in Shyira Sector. The quantitative data, collected based on questionnaires, measured the relationship, while qualitative data, from semi-structured interviews, explored students' experiences and identified obstacles. Stratified random sampling ensured representative schools, and pilot testing validated the data collection instruments (Sudipa, 2020).

3.2 Population and Target Group

This research involved 2 Head teachers, 2 Deputy Head teachers in charge of studies, 10 English teachers, and 92 students. The targeted/sampled population was 106 individuals after application of formula from a total population. Cluster Sampling and Random Sampling methods were used. The study aimed to gather data from a representative sample of the total population size of 145 individuals of all the students and the school staff (Moser et al., 2019).

3.3 Sample and Sampling Techniques

The study applied various sampling techniques to select a representative sample from the population of interest, which included Headteachers, Deputy Head teachers in charge of studies, English teachers, and students. Stratified sampling was used to ensure representation from different levels and perspectives within the population. Purposive sampling was employed for key informants to focus on specific characteristics and contributions. And Purposive sampling is recommended by Kothari (2004) for selecting objects/items that the study deems important and representative of a population with different characteristics and contributions. So, selecting a group of people for sampling in order to measure the characteristics of the entire population. Faster data collection and lower costs are sampling's two main benefits (Neilson, 2011).

The sample for this study was drawn from the target population using the sloven's formula as follows:

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2}$$

n=Sample Size
N=Population Size
e= the level of is confidence=0.05
Population size:145

$$n = \frac{145}{1+145(0.05)^2}$$

n= 106.4222…. $\sim$ 106.

3.4 Instruments of Data Collection

The data collection tools used are questionnaire and interview guide.

3.4.1 Questionnaires

The researcher developed research questions to investigate the influence of English reading materials on English performance among 92 Lower Secondary School students (40 boys and 52 girls) and 10 English teachers. The questions included both closed-ended and open-ended formats, aligning with the study's objectives. The study aimed to explore the impact of reading materials on students' English performance (Crewell, 2014)

Table 1
Population Involved in the Study

	Population	Numbers	Male	Female
School staff	HTs	2	2	0
	DOS	2	1	1
Teaching staff	GS-Gacurabwenge	4	3	1
	GS Vunga	6	2	4
Learners (S1-S3)	GS-Gacurabwenge	59	20	39
	GS Vunga	72	28	44
Total	All population	145	56	89

Table 1 represents the total number of the population from the all corners that will make the study more convinced, there were the 2 Headteachers, 2 Directors of studies, 16 teachers of English and 125 learners from the two selected schools. The total of sampled population was 106 participants selected by using cluster sampling and random sampling techniques.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Findings
4.1.1 Setting and Participants

In this study, the demographic characteristics of the participants were taken into account to ensure credible evidence for the study variables. The participants included both males and females, with a breakdown of their numbers provided. The age range of the participants varied, and the distribution across different age groups was noted. The educational levels of the participants encompassed secondary, and University education, with specific numbers for each category. The participants had varying levels of teaching experience, which were categorized accordingly. Additionally, the participants possessed different teaching qualifications, including Advanced diploma certificates, bachelor's degrees in education, and master's degrees in education. By considering these demographic factors, the study aimed to include a diverse range of perspectives and experiences among the participants presented below.

Table 2
Respondents Characteristics and their Identifications

	Gender		Ages (Years)			Schools' location		Level of Education			Teaching Experience (years)		Teaching Qualification	
	M	F	>18	18-25	<25	Village	Urban	A1	A0	Masters	02-Apr	<4	ED	NED
Students	40	52	81	11	0	2	0	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Teachers	6	4	0	0	10	0	0	1	8	1	4	6	8	2
Dos	1	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	2	2	0
HTs	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	2	2	0
Tot	49	57	81	11	14	2	0	1	12	1	4	10	12	2

Table 2 considered participants' demographic characteristics, including gender, age, location, educational levels, teaching experience, and qualifications. The participants had varying levels of teaching experience, which were categorized accordingly. Additionally, the participants possessed different teaching qualifications, including Advanced diploma certificates, bachelor's degrees in education, and master's degrees in education.

4.1.2 Improving English Language Performance through Reading Materials

The findings presented in Table 3 explored students' perceptions of the influence of different reading materials on their English language skills. The first objective of the research was to examine the relationship between the use of reading materials and the improvement of students' English language performance. To respond to this objective, various questions were asked to respondents and the feedbacks are presented in the table.

Table 3

Impact of Using English Reading Materials

Statement	Mean	Std. Dev.
Newspapers and poetry help you develop a better understanding of the English language over time	2.39	0.925
Learning English through English dictionary can increase students' English performance.	3.24	0.882
Using different Online readings in learning English language makes me easier to cooperate with my classmate in English language.	3.09	0.736
English language grades or test scores improved after incorporating Textbooks and handouts materials in the curriculum.	2.85	1.037
Learning English through written expert opinions and adventure stories reading makes me feel confident in practicing English language.	3.43	0.905
The students have engagements with reading activities outside of school	3.41	0.698
Using reading materials is unimportant factor to develop English language from learners	2.87	0.94

N=92

The findings revealed mixed opinions among students, with some resources considered helpful while others had varying effectiveness. The results emphasize the importance of considering students' perspectives when designing language learning materials to enhance effectiveness. It is well matched with the literature review where the following researchers affirmed with the supports of their positive impact on language development and academic achievement (Nation, et al., 2009). Incorporating diverse reading materials in the English curriculum of lower secondary schools enhances students' language skills, critical thinking abilities, and overall academic success (Iheakanwa, 2021).

4.1.3 The Use of Reading Materials in Improving Students' English Performance

The table 4 represents analysis of students' perceptions revealed that reading materials can positively impact vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, language proficiency, and graduation rates, with some variations in opinions.

Table 4

The Role of Reading Materials in Improving Students' English Performance

Statement	Mean	Std. Dev.
I believe that reading materials have helped students to improve graduation rate to the students.	3.77	1.049
Enhancing class participation through the integration of reading materials in English language.	4.07	1.256
The availability of reading materials in your school has positively influenced the students' English language performance on the grade obtained.	4.42	0.917

N=92

Table 4 represents analysis of students' perceptions revealed that reading materials can positively impact vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, language proficiency, and graduation rates, with some variations in opinions. Students strongly believe in the effectiveness of incorporating reading materials in English lessons. This is matched with the literature review where the following scholars provided the information related to the information from the sampled people such as: According to Krashen (1989), reading materials provide comprehensible input, exposing students to authentic language use and promoting subconscious language learning. Smith (2004) further suggests that reading materials offer opportunities for students to encounter new vocabulary in context, which enhances vocabulary acquisition and improves overall language skills.

4.1.4 The Contribution of Reading Material to Improve English Performance

To gather information from the 10 language teachers' perception, questionnaires were used to identify whether reading materials can improve English performance to the learners. A number of responses were listed and ticked. The data collected from teachers feedbacks are presented in the table below:

Table 5
The Number of Students Interested in Reading With Academic Purpose

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	9	90
No	1	10
Total	**10**	**100**

As observed the data shows that 90% of teachers believe that reading materials contribute to improving students' English performance. Only 10% of teachers responded negatively. This highlights the widespread recognition among teachers of the positive impact of reading materials on language learning as mentioned to the school with well equipped with reading materials performed well in English language rather than the school with poor reading materials. And also, the following researchers from literature review confirmed like the information from the findings from the participants. According to Grabe (2009), Nuttall (2005), and Richards (2002) are scholars who have explored the role of reading materials in language learning. Their findings support the ideas that Reading materials provide learners with opportunities to engage in meaningful language use and develop their English performance.

4.1.5 The Correlation between the Use of Reading Materials and Students' Performance in English Language
The results presented on the table that show the relationship between Reading materials and English performance based on the English National Examination 2022-2023 aggregates from well-equipped schools with reading materials and with the other without the package of English Reading materials.

Table 6
Reading Materials VS English Language Performance

Weighted aggregates	School y (Poor-Equipped library)	School x (well-equipped library)
6	0	5
5	0	8
4	0	4
3	7	26
2	15	14
1	42	5
0	1	0
Total	**65**	**62**

This table showed the correlation analysis of the data reveals a significant positive relationship between the use of Reading materials and students' English language performance based on the English performance in national examination 2022-2023 results of school x and y based on the performance of the students. The correlation coefficient s between Reading material and student performance is indicating a strong and statistically significant correlation. This finding suggests that as the use of reading materials increases, there is a corresponding improvement in students' English language performance.

It emphasized the need of incorporating reading resources into language learning curriculum to improve language skills and overall academic progress. The discovery of a strong positive link between the usage of reading materials and students' English language performance complements prior research demonstrating that reading can improve vocabulary, critical thinking skills, and creativity (Hassan et al., 2021). Furthermore, the study's emphasis on the relevance of incorporating reading resources into language learning curriculum to improve English language abilities and overall academic accomplishment is consistent with existing research. According to Ndikubwayezu (2009), proficient and adaptive readers are more likely to achieve academically and in other areas, validating the notion that reading is critical to educational success. The study's findings are further highlighted by the reference to the widely held belief in Oman that Omani pupils do not have a reading culture (Al-Musalli, 2014).

4.1.6 Factors and Barriers Affected to Learners' Access and Engagement with Reading Materials
During interviews with teachers and school staff, their responses highlighted several common factors and challenges that may influence the English language performance of students in lower secondary schools, specifically in relation to reading materials. These factors and challenges can vary depending on the specific context of schools, such as x or y school. Here are some possible responses from the teachers and school staff:

One factor identified is the socioeconomic background of the students. It was noted that students from rural or urban areas may face disadvantages and have limited exposure to English outside of school. This lack of exposure can have an impact on their English language performance. And also, the home environment was also recognized as a crucial factor. Teachers and school staff emphasized that a supportive home environment, where English is spoken and reading materials are readily available, can have a positive influence on students' English skills. Conversely, students who miss out on such opportunities may face challenges in their language development. After that the quality of teaching emerged as another significant factor. The effectiveness of English teachers and their use of teaching aids, including reading materials, was identified as crucial in determining students' learning outcomes. Teachers and school staff highlighted the importance of utilizing appropriate reading materials and the negative impact on student learning when such materials are lacking or not utilized effectively. Additionally, the availability of resources, particularly access to suitable reading materials such as textbooks, storybooks, and supplementary resources, was recognized as a key factor in enhancing students' reading skills. Teachers emphasized the importance of providing students with a wide range of reading materials to support their language development.

Moreover, the regular exposure to English through multimedia sources, such as TV shows, movies, and music, was mentioned as a beneficial factor. Teachers and school staff noted that such exposure can reinforce language learning and contribute to improved English language proficiency.

Briefly, these responses are hypothetical and based on common factors and challenges that can influence English performance in lower secondary schools. the information was from the conduct interviews with teachers and school staff from the two schools one with equipped library and other with less equipped.

The many researchers' conclusions are matched with information from the interviews of the teachers and school administrators such as: Khan (2015) conducted a case study in rural Pakistan to emphasize the impact of socioeconomic factors on English performance. Rani and Ahuja (2014) identified socioeconomic characteristics as significant predictors of English language proficiency among Indian college students. Similarly, Whitten et al. (2016) discovered a substantial relationship between socioeconomic characteristics and English language proficiency among secondary students in Bangladesh.

V. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusions

In order to address these issues, teachers and school staff should provide ample opportunity, dedicated time, and motivation for reading in addition to making sure that materials are easily accessible. This study sought to determine the effects of reading materials on English performance in lower secondary schools. The data were collected through teacher interviews and student questionnaires. These results showed that students acknowledged the potential of reading materials to improve English ability but faced challenges like a lack of motivation for reading, time constraints, and poor access to libraries and reading resources.

5.2 Recommendations

The study's suggestions focused on encouraging students to actively engage with the reading materials that were provided, ask for help when needed both within and outside of the classroom and have access to relevant reading materials in order to enhance their English proficiency. While providing direction and support to their pupils in the classroom, teachers are expected to make use of a range of reading resources and stimulating activities. In addition to MINEDUC advocating for high-quality reading materials, providing assessments, offering teacher training, and facilitating, headteachers and deputy head teachers in charge of studies should also track reading initiatives, allocate resources, and support professional development.

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