

## Developing University Students' English Speaking Skills: Assessing Hindrances in the Educational Environment of Higher Learning Institutions in Rwanda

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### ABSTRACT

*The study explored the hindrances associated with the educational environment of undergraduates' English-speaking development at one higher learning institution in Rwanda. This study selected the University of Technology and Arts of Byumba (UTAB). It aims to identify specific barriers in the educational environment that inhibit speaking skill development and to propose actionable recommendations. This study adopted a parallel mixed research approach. The sample consisted of 197 students drawn from a population of 850 undergraduate students in Level One across three faculties at UTAB, enrolled in the 2022-2023 academic year. Data were collected using questionnaires and classroom observations and analyzed using descriptive statistical tables and texts. The outcomes of this research revealed inefficient access to language resources, inappropriate teaching methods, and limited interactive speaking opportunities, all of which significantly hinder undergraduates' speaking development. By highlighting these gaps, the researchers proposed teacher training programs, enhanced language resources, and increased opportunities for students to practice speaking in authentic contexts as potential interventions. Recommendations to policymakers and educators included providing a more supportive learning environment that promotes speaking skills development through an interactive learning atmosphere, which is a key factor in undergraduates' speaking development. The implications of this study extend beyond UTAB, offering insights for other higher education institutions facing similar challenges in English language education.*

**Keywords:** Educational Environment, Hindrances, Speaking Development, Undergraduates

### I. INTRODUCTION

The development of speaking is very crucial during language acquisition, especially for undergraduates who need these skills for professional and academic success (Niyibizi, et al. 2018; Ngabonziza & Kagwesage, 2024). Being able to communicate effectively in English, which is sometimes a second language in different countries across the globe including Rwanda, it is not only restrained to measure linguistics proficiency but also an important element for employability and academic performance (Baker & Westrup, 2003; Crystal, 2012). The educational system in Rwanda has shifted from using French to English as a medium of instruction since 2008 (Rosendal & Ngabonziza, 2023; Rwanda Education Board, 2020). This kind of change created a kind of challenge for lecturers and students who have been experiencing the use of French and Kinyarwanda in the context. However, this change in education system would bring many opportunities for students as they would be able to communicate with the world around them.

According to various resources like Johnson (2009), there are ample of factors that influence speaking skills development such as: availability of language resources, extracurricular activities, peer collaboration, classroom interactions and teaching strategies. The mentioned factors together create a positive or negative educational environment that can impact learners during development and practice of their speaking skills (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Moreover, feedback and practice is always hampered by the size of the class and thus, teacher cannot go all around to support students who need special support (Blatchford et al., 2011). In addition, student-teacher interactions have a significant role in acquiring English language, with positive interactions increasing a helpful learning environment to speaking development (Mercer & Dawes, 2008).

According to Lightbown and Spada (2013) extracurricular activities, including language clubs and debate societies, offer additional platforms for students to practice speaking in non-formal settings, contributing to their language development. Authors like (Brown, 2007; Harmer, 2007) also emphasized on the need of appropriate of teaching methods, such as interactive and communicative approaches that could support learners during speaking development. On the other hand, Thornbury (2005) argued that some lecturers are still using traditional methods that cannot help learners in their speaking development. Reference is made to Pang (2013) who asserted that some activities like debate, public speaking, and story-telling sessions boost their confidence and maturity in speaking skills.

Littlewood (2004) also explained that there is a need of availability and utilization of language resources like: language labs, audio-visual aids, and access to English-speaking environments that can enhance students' exposure to the language and provide practical opportunities for use. Besides, Williams (2012) confirmed that many educational institutions from developing countries do not have open access to these effective resources for speaking skills development.

The gap of this study remains on the fact that despite these above mentioned thoughts, there is immense need for a comprehensive study specifically focused on the Rwandan context. There is a limited number of researches carried out on the influence of educational environment factors on speaking skills development among undergraduates, highlighting a gap in literature. Many Rwandan undergraduates use English as a second language, which adds a layer of complexity to developing proficient speaking skills (Nizeyimana, 2020). Preliminary observations suggest that various factors within the educational environment may hinder students' speaking development. This research seeks to identify and analyze these hindrances to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by UTAB undergraduates.

To understand educational environment hindrances on undergraduates' speaking development at UTAB is crucial for developing effective interventions and strategies to enhance language learning. By identifying and addressing these challenges, this research aims to contribute to the improvement of English language education at UTAB and similar institutions. The results from this study will provide valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers interested in promoting speaking proficiency in second language learners.

### 1.1 Objective of the study rationale

Excellent speaking skills are the key to success not only in academic life but also in professional careers. However, speaking skills development among undergraduates at the University of Technology and Arts of Byumba has been a critical concern, posing a challenge for students and lecturers. Several studies have shed light on various barriers in the educational environment that hamper speaking development such as insufficiently trained faculty, limited access to resources, and a lack of practical speaking opportunities (Brown, 2014; Richards, 2015). Among many other obstacles, inadequate interactive language practices in the classroom is the most prominent hindrance. According to Harmer (2007), interactive activities in the classroom are very necessary for improving students' speaking skills, but many universities including the University of Technology and Arts of Byumba (UTAB) are still struggling to integrate these activities properly. This has been a big challenge to many institutions due to the class size that limits personalized speaking learning and the provision of individual feedback (Ur, 2012).

In addition, some educators are still using traditional teaching methods that prioritize theoretical knowledge rather than stimulating learners to speak (Nunan, 2013). Other authors insisted on the lack of access to modern learning technologies that would actively engage students in speaking practices, thus supporting speaking development (Chapelle, 2003; Warschauer, 2004). However, the use and availability of these technological tools are still limited which contributed to the existing speaking challenges. On the other hand, the educational environment at UTAB still faces a socio-culture challenge because of the dominance of the first language. This does not allow studying English speaking from a real-life context (Crystal, 2003). Along the same line, most undergraduate students are afraid of making mistakes when practicing speaking English. They fear to be embarrassed and humiliated by colleagues or instructors which limits their speaking practice and adds a layer to this speaking challenge (Tsui, 1996). Addressing these issues is very important for improving the speaking proficiency level of undergraduates at UTAB. This study therefore sought to investigate the specific educational environment factors that hinder undergraduates' speaking development and propose practical solutions to overcome these challenges.

This study has the following main objectives: to identify the key educational environment that hinders speaking development among undergraduates at UTAB, to assess the factors influencing students' speaking abilities, and to propose actionable recommendations to improve the educational environment and enhance speaking development.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Theoretical Review

This research was framed by Social Interactionist Theory. It sheds light on how someone can learn and develop speaking skills with the help of people around them including peers, lecturers, and family members. The Social Interactionist Theory was proposed by Lev Vygotsky who put the emphasis on the need of social interaction in language development. According to the author's thoughts, language acquisition is deeply rooted in social processes and is mediated by interaction with more knowledgeable others, such as parents, teachers, and peers. For him, the students' highest level of proficiency can be achieved when guided by an expert within their Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978). According to this theory, undergraduates improve their speaking skills through

collaborative dialogue and scaffolding, which help them to internalize language patterns and structures (Bruner, 1983). This kind of interaction facilitates learning vocabulary and understanding complex grammatical structures and pragmatic aspects of language use. This theory explains why lecturers should be proficient so that they can help students improve their speaking skills too. It also highlights the need for a better learning environment that allows students' interaction and socialization to improve their proficiency level.

## 2.2 Empirical Review

To successfully teach speaking skills, teachers need to understand the factors that affect students' speaking skills. Developing speaking skills into undergraduate students has always been, and remains, challenging for language instructors when it comes to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners including Rwanda (Alrasheedi, 2020). According to (Alrasheedi, 2020) barriers associated to speaking skill development are classified into five categories which are insufficient exposure to the target language, low motivation, anxiety and lack of confidence, inadequate language knowledge, and ineffective teaching pedagogy (Brown, 2007; Harmer, 2007).

Some factors like: performance conditions (time pressure, planning, standard of performance and amount of support), affective factors (such as motivation, confidence, and anxiety), listening capacity, Topical Knowledge and feedback during speaking activities improve speaking skills of the students (Prayuda, 2021). According to Al-Hosni (2014), factors such as low backgrounds of learners, shyness, and lack of interest in English language activities affect students' speaking skills development. In addition, the most important thing in language learning, specifically oral communication, is exposure to a good source of language. According to Hecheng and Peihao (2020) and Lightbown and Spada (2013), this is the most prominent for EFL language learners since the teachers are non-native speakers of English. Their accent, pronunciations and sentence structures are highly influenced by their mother tongue which is their first language (Kinyarwanda).

Students and lecturers are constantly interacting and exchanging ideas in their first language which not only reduces the speaking ability, but also limits their level of fluency. Many lecturers prefer to teach almost in the first language as a way of accelerating the teaching process (Hecheng & Peihao, 2020). In addition, if teachers who are considered the source of language are making mistakes, students who are exposed to them would make double mistakes. According to the Oxford Dictionary, motivation is defined as a reason or reasons for acting or behaving in a particular way. Undergraduate students with motivation for internal or external reasons (Tabaro, 2015) become successful speakers in English (Prayuda, 2021). They make mistakes, but they accept and use corrections for the best of their future practice. Students should be told about their learning process and request them to work in as a way of boosting their motivation as a stimulating factor (Felpeto, 2019). As is the case in Rwanda, students are not motivated to learn speaking skills since they know that they will not be tested in this area, specifically during national examinations. This can serve as an external motivation that should push them to learn this crucial skill.

According to Al-Hosni (2014), shyness and lack of interest are the major factors that hinder students' learning speaking skills. According to (Alrasheedi, 2020) "Anxiety and (lack of) confidence are internally produced, but can be exacerbated or mitigated by external factors." EFL learners develop internal fear that becomes an obstacle for developing speaking skills which are anxiety of being negatively evaluated in error correction and low proficiency level that reduces their confidence of speaking a foreign language and therefore they become unwilling to communicate (Alrasheedi, 2020). Students from EFL classrooms feel "insecure" when they are asked to express their feelings and emotions due to the fact that they don't want to be "humiliated" by the instructors' feedback and they find it safe to remain silent (Hecheng & Peihao, 2020). This kind of thinking and behavior contribute to their inability to communicate orally.

According to Alrasheedi (2020) method of teaching speaking skills can be a key external factor that influences learners' attitude and motivation; only when it engages learners in the lesson, will it reduce fear and anxiety of learning a language. In terms of teaching speaking skills, the curriculum is loaded with many other materials, but rarely planned for teaching speaking skills (Gudu, 2015). This does not give opportunities for learners to practice the language in order to develop the communicative language. According to Hecheng & Peihao (2020) lecturers should expose learners to quality language inside and outside of the class. This formally and informally help learners to practice the language. Therefore, methodologies should be improved and refined (Hecheng & Peihao, 2020). Authors like (Felpeto, 2019) suggest the use of Task-based activities with open-ended tasks that will require students to produce their own inputs because they help learners to develop this proactive skill.

According to Kuning (2019), Technology is the vehicle to get access to this modernized world. People use it in their daily activities including trading, socializing, and educating. Tools like the Internet, podcasts, video conferencing, videos and speech recognition software are considered the best tools for teaching speaking skill (Kuning, 2019). For Sosas (2021) technology is an added tool for teaching for improving students' speaking skills. Relying on technology has increased in the past decades and it can support teaching speaking skills through videos and videoconferencing (Ibrahim & Hashim, 2021). On my behalf, the information provided in this way (including



videos, podcasts, news articles, and interviews to expose students to real-life language usage) is authentic material that learners and lecturers from non-native speakers can rely on.

To conclude, different authors from the literature section above highlighted various factors that support students during speaking development. The most important factors are pedagogical aspects, exposure to quality inputs, use of technology, and classroom dynamics during teaching and developing English speaking skills.

### III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a parallel mixed research. This approach incorporated both quantitative and qualitative data. This approach allowed for the triangulation of data, providing a more robust analysis of the research problem (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The sample of 197 students from three faculties was drawn from the population of 850 undergraduate students of level one enrolled in the academic year of 2022-2023 at UTAB by using Taro Yamane’s formula for sample size calculation. Questionnaires were set to gather data about students' perceptions of various educational environment factors, such as classroom resources, teacher-student interactions, and opportunities for speaking practice. Descriptive statistical tables along with texts were used to analyze quantitative data.

On the other hand, research tools such as classroom observational Studies, and document Analysis were used to analyze qualitative data. questionnaires were used to collect data from students, lecturers, and administrators and were conducted online or in person, depending on accessibility and convenience. Observation sessions were paid for in English classrooms to vividly witness interactions and teaching practices used by lecturers during lesson delivery. Finally, the researchers did a review of the teaching curriculum and teaching materials to understand the emphasis on speaking skills. Qualitative data was analyzed through thematic analysis. This method involves coding the data and identifying recurring themes that capture the key factors hindering speaking development and suggested improvements (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To maintain validity and reliability of the study, piloting study was done on a small scale before expanding it to the full study. In addition, the questionnaire and observation checklists were checked by English language research experts. On the other hand, to keep this study ethically cleared, authorization was obtained from the university authorities, and participating in this study was by personal will. Therefore, the researchers asked for personal consent from the participants before their participation.

### IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

#### 4.1 Factors Hindering Speaking Development among Undergraduates

The findings are briefly presented and discussed in this chapter. For reminding, this research has three main objectives which are: to identify the key educational environment that hinders speaking development among undergraduates at UTAB, to assess the consequences of these factors on students’ speaking abilities, and to propose actionable recommendations to improve the educational environment and enhance speaking development.

For the first objective, the students were asked to give their perceptions about factors that hinder their English speaking skills development and their answers are indicated in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
*Students’ Perceptions about Educational Environment Factors that Hinder English Speaking Performance*

Statements	D	SD	N	A	SA
Lack of public speaking opportunities in academic coursework contributes to poor speaking skills	14.7%	8.6%	13.1%	29.9%	32.9%
Limited access to resources or training for improving speaking skills	7.6%	7.1%	8.6%	43.6%	32.9%
Limited access to quality inputs (lecturers, peers, podcasts etc.)	3.5%	7%	1%	48.5%	40%
Psychological factors such as anxiety or low self-esteem hinder speaking abilities	6%	7.1%	12.1%	41.1%	33.5%
Lack of encouragement or positive reinforcement from instructors	12.6%	10.6%	11.6%	41.6%	23.3%
Technology dependence (e.g., relying on slideshows instead of verbal communication) affects speaking proficiency	8.6%	6.5%	17.2%	42.1%	25.3%
Limited engagement in extracurricular activities that promote speaking skills (e.g., debate clubs, public speaking workshops)	10.6%	8.1%	6%	36%	39%

N=197

As shown in Table 1, 124 students agreed to the fact that speaking skills can be influenced by the Lack of public speaking opportunities in academic coursework that contributes to poor speaking skills. On the other hand, 151 students confirmed that speaking skills performance can be boosted by Limited access to resources or training for

improving speaking skills. 147 students agreed that speaking performance can be increased through Psychological factors such as anxiety or low self-esteem that hinder speaking abilities. 128 students answered that speaking performance can be increased through a Lack of encouragement or positive reinforcement from instructors. Moreover, 133 students believe that Technology dependence affects their speaking performance and finally 148 students confirmed that Limited engagement in extracurricular activities that promote speaking skills affects their speaking skills performance.

The findings in this section agreed with other authors from the section of literature. Al-Hosni (2014) stressed on some factors such as shyness while Alrasheedi (2020) emphasized other factors including anxiety and confidence which are still low. On the other hand, Hecheng & Peihao (2020) stressed the external factors that include teaching practices including my findings like giving ample opportunities for students to practice in and outside of class (extra-curricular activities). In addition, Prayuda (2021) stresses on affective factors like motivation, confidence and anxiety.

The findings from observation sessions proved that some lecturers are still using traditional methods during teaching English. These methods do not facilitate students to interact and socialize which are the key elements for developing speaking skills. During these sessions, the researcher openly witnessed that some observed lecturers were using common traditional methods. Most of the lecturers are still translating the content into their mother tongue instead of using other supper methods. In the classroom, there is still code-switching, code-mixing, and translation which may influence students' speaking positively or negatively. Some observed methods are the Grammar-Translation Method, Task-Based Language Teaching, and Content-Based Instruction. Some lecturers try to use group and peer discussion, but these techniques are not well-displayed.

Some lecturers claimed that they do not have enough resources such as computers, internet access, and subscriptions to well-rated software that would help them to develop the speaking skills of the students. Students were also asked about extra-curricular activities they mostly do at school. One student replied, "Nothing really, except when I have to enjoy football or basketball. That's all". Another student claimed insufficient of extra-curricular activities like debate, public speaking, or storytelling opportunities. This does not fit the suggestion (Pang, 2013) that students improve their speaking abilities through extra-curricular activities planned by the school. Lightbown & Spada (2013) also argued that extracurricular activities, such as language clubs and debate societies, offer additional platforms for students to practice speaking in less formal settings, contributing to their overall language development.

By reviewing teaching materials, the researcher noticed that students are not given ample opportunities to practice speaking skills. Most of the planned activities are for knowledge and skills of Grammar, and linguistics than activities that would allow students to interact and discuss. Only a little attention is paid to speaking development and testing. For this reason, students learn by memorizing rather than expressing their thoughts. This is also a challenge because researchers like Felpeto (2019) and Hecheng & Peihao (2020) suggested that teaching methodologies and materials should give opportunities for students to discuss and produce their own ideas. Kinyarwanda is the first and mother tongue of many students from UTAB and their teaching staff. Some students claimed that some lecturers are not even proficient in English which also affects the way they speak English. One said "Some of our lecturers mispronounce or misspell words. This makes it impossible for us to improve our speaking." Here, educators are considered as a source of language and they make mistakes, students would do the same too, Hecheng & Peihao (2020) and Lightbown and Spada (2013).

## 4.2 Undergraduates Speaking Development

The findings from this study also revealed that UTAB undergraduates' speaking development is impacted by the following: The first is teaching strategies. During observation, most of the lecturers were observed making their lessons boring by using traditional teaching techniques. These techniques weaken the speaking development of the students. This aligns with Alrasheedi (2020) who argued that ineffective teaching methods can affect the development of speaking development. Lecturers should be using more interesting techniques such as group discussion, role-play, and debates that help learners interact and practice their speaking skills (Pang, 2013), and therefore teaching methodologies should be improved and refined (Ngabonziza, 2014; Hecheng & Peihao, 2020). Some participants kept emphasizing the fact their speaking level is still a problem due to the way they are taught.

The second factor that affects students' speaking development is the influence of the mother tongue. During classroom observation sessions with the students, the researchers witnessed this influence. The instructors often explain the content in the first language of the students for two distinct reasons: on one hand, the majority of lecturers are not native speakers their fluency level is limited which pushes them to translate into their mother tongue to make it easier for both lecturers and students (Hecheng & Peihao, 2020). On the other hand, this is done to help students who are not strong in communicative language. Some students reported that they learn better when the subject matter is explained in their mother tongue language. However, this kind of mother tongue interference influence significantly affects their pronunciation, intonation, and the use of some grammatical structures (Hecheng & Peihao, 2020). This can therefore explain why UTAB undergraduate students are still struggling when it comes to speaking skills.

Finally, inadequate resources were observed as a key factor that impedes the development of speaking skills. In the period of this research, the researchers witnessed the lack of access to language learning resources like audio-visual materials and language labs which limited the development of speaking skills among undergraduates at UTAB. However, Sosas (2021) argued that access to adequate resources would support language learning. Data collected from students and lecturers revealed that technological infrastructures are still a problem which still bothers both of them. Limited access also means limited opportunities for language practices and improvements. The findings also aligned with Ibrahim & Hashim (2021) who asserted that using technology gives students access to authentic language resources.

## V. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 Conclusions

This research investigated educational environmental factors that affect students' speaking development. The findings revealed some key factors such as limited exposure to quality language and well-prepared teaching materials, lack of enough access to resources, poor and no planned extra-curricular activities for students to practice English language, and teaching methodologies that do not allow students to interact and practice English speaking. These factors negatively affect undergraduate speaking abilities by making them unable to express their thoughts clearly. The effects of speaking poorly do not stop with education failure only but also follow them after school in their careers.

### 5.2 Recommendations

The researchers recommended higher institutions like UTAB equipping their language centers with adequate resources that facilitate learners to access quality English language such as podcasts, movies, and language labs. They also recommend revising their curriculums and teaching materials to include more activities and methodologies like role-play, group discussion, Fluency-Building Exercises, and Incorporating Real-Life Situations that would boost students' English speaking abilities. However, this study was limited to only one higher learning institution due to financial reasons, and the researchers would suggest further research on undergraduate English-speaking issues to deeply understand it and find solid solutions after conducting countrywide research.

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