# Investigating the Implementation of English as the Medium of Instruction Policy at the Lower Primary Level: A Case of Nyabihu District in Rwanda

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## ABSTRACT

*This study investigated the implementation and effectiveness of the English as the Medium of Instruction (EMI) policy in Rwanda's lower primary education system, specifically from primary one to primary three. The introduction provides a context for Rwanda's language-in-education policy, which mandates English as the primary instructional language. The study aimed to assess whether this policy is followed in practice and to identify challenges and pedagogical practices associated with its implementation. The theoretical framework was based on Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis, emphasizing the importance of using the target language in classroom interactions to aid language acquisition. The research design adopted was a qualitative case study focusing on Nyabihu District, involving a study population of lower primary school teachers and students. Purposive sampling was the method employed in order to use a small population to gain a thorough understanding of the case. Teachers with at least two years of experience in the classroom were used in the study. The researcher needed teachers who were familiar with the language policy of instruction in Rwandan schools and had firsthand experience with the phenomenon, so this was necessary. The study involved 75 participants in total, including 25 teachers and 50 students or pupils. Data were collected through classroom observations, interviews, and analysis of policy documents. Data analysis revealed a significant gap between the theoretical policy and actual classroom practices. Despite the policy, teachers frequently used both Kinyarwanda (L1) and English (L2) in their instruction due to students' limited English proficiency. The study identified several challenges, including lack of policy enforcement, the monolingual nature of classrooms, and teachers' preference for using the Rwandan language. Common pedagogical practices included safe talk, code-switching, simultaneous use of both languages, and translation. Key findings indicated that the EMI policy is not strictly adhered to in practice, and several factors hinder its effective implementation. The study recommends stricter policy enforcement, improvements in English language instruction, increased use of L1 as the medium of instruction, and the creation of an English-friendly learning environment to enhance English usage at the lower primary level. The study's findings provide valuable insights for educators and policymakers, highlighting the need for practical solutions to address the challenges of implementing EMI in Rwanda's lower primary education system.*

**Keywords:** Bilingual Classrooms, Competence-Based Curriculum, Comprehensive Assessment, Language of Instruction, Learner-Centered Methodology, Lower Primary School Pupils

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized world, the role of language in education is pivotal, shaping not only how knowledge is transmitted but also influencing societal integration and economic competitiveness (Rao, 2019). Across continents, nations have grappled with the complexities of language-in-education policies, seeking to balance linguistic diversity with the imperative of equipping learners with skills relevant to a rapidly evolving global landscape. From West to South Africa and now East Africa, the discourse on language policies in education reflects a nuanced interplay of historical legacies, socio-political aspirations, and educational imperatives.

In many African countries, the transition from colonial to post-independence eras witnessed diverse language policies aimed at promoting national unity, fostering educational equity, and preparing students for the demands of a modern economy (Mlambo et al., 2024; Reilly et al., 2024). These policies often navigated between indigenous languages, former colonial languages like French and English, and sometimes a blend of these in bilingual or multilingual approaches. The rationale behind these policies varied from enhancing cultural pride to facilitating access to global knowledge networks.

Globally, experiences from other nations, particularly those transitioning from colonial to post-colonial educational paradigms, provide valuable insights into the dynamics of EMI implementation. Countries like India, Malaysia, and Nigeria have grappled with similar challenges, navigating linguistic diversity while striving for educational equity and economic competitiveness (Phyak, 2017; August & Shanahan, 2006). Lessons from these

contexts underscore the importance of tailored pedagogical approaches and comprehensive teacher training in achieving effective EMI outcomes.

In sub-Saharan Africa, where linguistic diversity is a hallmark, the discourse on EMI has been shaped by diverse socio-cultural contexts and educational priorities (Damisah, 2018). Challenges related to teacher proficiency, student comprehension, and community acceptance have been recurrent themes across the region, highlighting the need for context-specific strategies that respect local languages while advancing educational objectives in global languages like English.

In Rwanda, the trajectory of language-in-education policies reflects a complex historical backdrop shaped by colonial influences and post-genocide reconstruction efforts (Kamal et al., 2024). Following the 1994 genocide, Rwanda embarked on a journey of reconciliation and socio-economic recovery, which included reforms in the educational sector to foster national unity and economic development (Uwambayinema, 2013). These reforms encompassed shifts in language policies, with successive governments exploring various approaches to language of instruction (LoI) in schools.

The introduction of English as the primary LoI in Rwandan lower primary schools in 2008 marked a significant departure from previous policies that had alternated between French and Kinyarwanda (Niyibizi, 2014). Thus, In January 2009, the Rwandan government mandated that all subjects be taught in English. Previously, subjects were taught in French and Kinyarwanda. Many in-service teachers had been educated in these languages and lacked experience in English. Despite the passage of time, teachers and students continue to face significant challenges due to limited proficiency in English.

Recently, the Ministry of Education introduced a competence-based curriculum through the Rwanda Education Board to enhance learning opportunities. However, the abrupt implementation of English as the primary language of instruction in 2019 for all public, government-aided, and private schools posed new challenges. Teachers and students in rural areas, where English is not commonly spoken, struggled to adapt.

This shift aimed to align Rwanda's educational system with global standards and regional integration initiatives within the East African Community and the Commonwealth (Oanda, & Matiang'i, 2018). However, the implementation of EMI encountered formidable challenges, particularly concerning teacher preparedness and student engagement in English-medium environments (Kamal et al., 2024).

Against this backdrop, this study investigates the implementation of English as the Medium of Instruction (EMI) in Nyabihu District's lower primary schools in Rwanda. Specifically, it aims to explore prevailing language practices, examine classroom pedagogical strategies, and identify persistent challenges three years post-policy revision. By focusing on Nyabihu District, this research seeks to provide empirical insights that can inform policy refinements and educational reforms aimed at optimizing the efficacy of EMI in Rwandan primary education.

## 1.1 Statement of the Problem

The study of teaching second or foreign languages has evolved over the years, yet many students find it challenging to achieve fluency even after years of study (Wang & Wang, 2007). In Rwanda, the government declared English the sole language of instruction in 2008, but this policy was implemented in lower primary education for only three years. By 2011, subjects from pre-primary to primary grade 3 were taught in Kinyarwanda. In December 2019, the Ministry of Education again mandated English as the language of instruction for lower primary levels.

The competence-based curriculum requires active student participation, but students in communities where only Kinyarwanda is spoken face significant barriers. Many teachers, educated in French or Kinyarwanda, were not proficient in English. The sudden policy change and lack of proper training exacerbated the challenges. Research indicates that most teachers were unprepared to teach in English, and the situation was similar in higher education (Anderson & Rusanganwa, 2011). Teachers often reverted to Kinyarwanda, hindering literacy development in both languages.

The lack of proper transition and training for teachers has led to ongoing difficulties in implementing the policy. With over 99% of Rwandans speaking only Kinyarwanda as their mother tongue, the new language policy has created significant challenges, especially in rural areas where English is rarely spoken. Teachers' limited English proficiency has made it difficult to meet learning objectives. This study aims to investigate the implementation of EMI policy, classroom practices, and related challenges in Nyabihu District's lower primary schools.

## 1.2 Research Objectives

The main objective of the study is to investigate the implementation of the EMI policy at the lower primary level in Nyabihu District. The specific objectives are:

i. To identify the language used as the medium of instruction in lower primary schools despite the government's policy.

ii.   To examine classroom pedagogical practices of using EMI.
iii.  To identify challenges related to using English as the medium of instruction in lower primary schools for three years after the policy announcement.

## 1.3 Research Questions
The study seeks to answer the following research questions:
i.    What language is used as the medium of instruction in lower primary schools despite the government's policy of using English?
ii.   What are the classroom pedagogical practices of using EMI during teaching and learning activities?
iii.  What challenges are associated with using English as the medium of instruction in lower primary schools for three years after the policy announcement?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework
### 2.2.1 Krashen's Comprehensible Input Hypothesis
The research questions in this study take into account the idea of comprehensible input put forth by Krashen in 1982, which emphasizes the value of using the target language in the classroom. According to Krashen, teachers who interact with students in a language other than their mother tongue should use as much of the target language as possible without resorting to the students' native tongue to make their input understandable to them (Bellack et al., 1966). He believed that by utilizing as much of the target language as possible along with various other resources, teachers could aid students in understanding it. These resources consist of, but are not limited to:

Using a graphic organizer that builds on itself so students can see a process over time. Using multiple examples that build on the vocabulary students already know in the target language. Creating a context through which students can understand the vocabulary. Using facial expressions, gestures, intonation, visual cues, drawing. Using cognates, speaking more slowly, and regularly repeating terminology to avoid presenting students with too much new information at certain times (Bellack et al., 1966, p. 2). The ideas presented above (Bellack et al., 1966) place classroom interaction and communication at the heart of any teaching and learning experience. They suggest a key requirement for successfully using a foreign language as a medium of instruction: that teachers be able to use the language and other resources to provide understandable input. In a study of Filipino students, Maminta (1985) discovered that the primary cause of students' poor performance in cognitively demanding subjects like science and mathematics was the use of EMI, particularly in cases where teachers lacked a strong command of the English language. The language used in instruction, regardless of the subject, is also being taught. In other words, as they hear, understand, and later use the language of instruction for whatever purpose, students are exposed to its vocabulary and syntax.

The framework for the current study comprises these ideas. The study investigates the implementation of English as the medium of instruction at the lower primary level, aiming first to examine the language practically used as the medium of instruction in lower primary schools despite the government's policy, the classroom pedagogical practices of using EMI during teaching and learning activities, and the challenges related to the use of English as the medium of instruction at the lower primary level in Nyabihu Public, government-aided, and private primary schools for three years after the announcement of the policy.

### 2.2 Empirical Review
The use of English as the primary language of instruction in communities where English is not the native tongue has been the subject of numerous studies. The law establishing the EMI policy was passed on October 28, 2008 and the policy's implementation in the educational system got underway in the 2009–2010 school year. Little research has been done on the policy thus far because it is so new (Uwambayinema, 2013). This literature review looked at three topics to see what information was available: (1) the Rwandan EMI policy, (2) difficulties using EMI in countries where English is not the native tongue, and (3) the literature on classroom pedagogical practices of using EMI.

### 2.2.1 English as a Medium of Instruction Policy in the Rwandan Education System
According to Niyibizi (2014), the language-in-education policy in Rwanda has experienced seven shifts from the creation of Rwanda up to 2011. Kinyarwanda, French, and English have been used as mediums of instruction interchangeably, and sometimes bilingual, trilingual, and monolingual policies were introduced. On December 5, 2019, the eighth language-in-education shift took place, where the Ministry of Education introduced the use of English as the medium of instruction at the lower primary level, replacing Kinyarwanda which had been in place since 2011.

Following the war and genocide in 1994, which complicated the language backgrounds of Rwandan students, the country's educational system adopted a multilingual policy to aid students in learning in the language in which they were more fluent (Kagwesage, 2013). Under the multilingual policy, English and French were taught as subjects, and Kinyarwanda was used as the LoI from grades P1 through P3. From P4 onward, students could choose either French or English as their LoI, depending on their home languages, while Kinyarwanda continued to be taught as a subject.

Despite some shortcomings, this program aided students in acquiring cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP), particularly at the preschool and primary levels (Kyeyune, 2010). CALP stands for classroom language proficiency necessary for academic success, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing about subject matter. When students' everyday language differs from the academic language, CALP is crucial. Research by Thomas and Collier (1995) suggests that children whose primary language is not the classroom language may take 7 to 10 years to catch up academically to their peers without language development support in school. Consequently, a language policy aiding students in acquiring CALP is advantageous to their performance in all subjects.

Teacher shortages were less severe under the previous language policy than they are now. Allowing children to begin school in their mother tongues can combat early school resentment and increase school likeability, making school seem similar to home with their families. The policy assumed that students would choose their preferred foreign language at the P4 level according to their language background and stick with it throughout their academic career (Kyeyune, 2010).

However, on October 28, 2008, the Rwandan cabinet made a significant linguistic change in the nation's educational system by requiring that English be the only LoI from the first year of every child's education (Gahigi, 2008; Nogic, 2009; Samuelson & Freedman, 2010). According to the new policy, English had to be taught as a subject at all levels and used as the only LoI from pre-kindergarten to tertiary education. This was termed the English as the Medium of Instruction (EMI) policy.

There were many factors involved in this language change, some of which were political (McGreal, 2008; Nogic, 2009). Some saw the policy as evidence of the political elite's desire for avenues for the country's sustainable socioeconomic growth (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010). According to Nogic (2009), the incrementalism theory and the rational choice theory are the two political frameworks that best explain why any country needs to change its language policies. Incrementalism theory applies when a situation changes gradually, while rational choice theory describes deliberate choices among alternatives. The rational choice theory best explains the Rwandan case because the political elite decided to implement a specific change making English the only LoI. They saw this as a logical decision compared to other options like making French or Kinyarwanda the LoI, allowing students to choose their preferred language, or using various languages in different schools.

Government representatives believed that English should be used primarily in business, information technology, and education. Despite never having been colonized by Britain, Rwanda joined the East African Community (EAC) in July 2007 and the Commonwealth on November 28, 2009 (Alidou & Brock-Utne, 2011). Since English is the official language in both these organizations, it was clear Rwanda needed to teach its citizens English to participate actively. One main justification for the language switch was to increase Rwanda's competitiveness in the EAC and internationally (Kimenyi, 2008).

The switch to EMI meant that the Rwandan "financial sector [would] operate better... because all the financial transactions in the region are done in English," according to James Musoni, the former Minister for Local Government (as cited in Kamal et al., 2024, p. 10).

Other reasons for the language change have been proposed. McGreal (2008) thought that because all Rwandan officials were of Anglophone descent, they were eager to abandon French. The officials were educated exclusively in English while in exile. McGreal also asserted that deteriorating relations with France drove the new language policy. Rwandan officials accused French military personnel of supporting the Hutus in committing genocide against the Tutsi population. France accused top Rwandan military figures of participating in the downing of a plane carrying the country's former leader, leading to strained diplomatic relations.

Some believe the push to abandon French and adopt English was primarily motivated by the acrimony in diplomatic ties between the two nations (Uwambayinema, 2013). However, given French's decline as an international or business language, this theory is debatable. Even French people themselves see the language in decline. French was losing to English, and Xavier Darcos, the French Minister of Education (from May 18, 2007, to June 23, 2009), mandated that French students start learning English intensively and continue taking English lessons throughout the summer. He warned that "in the future, very few people outside of France will be able to speak French". He added, "Speaking better English is the key to success. Since all international business is now done in English, having poor English has become a 'handicap'" (as cited in Damisah, 2018), para. 2-3.

Current research points to Rwandan government officials' rational decision to adopt the EMI policy, aiming to give students the tools needed to compete globally and raise their socioeconomic standing. But did the nation possess the equipment required to successfully carry out the policy? This study's main objective was to provide an answer to that query.

## 2.2.2 Classroom Pedagogical Practices of Using EMI

Even though it can be difficult to teach English in Nepalese public schools, it was found that when teachers used student-centered teaching strategies, audio-visual materials, ICT, and locally accessible resources to deliver the content in English, EMI was successful. In contrast to the findings of this study, Phyak's (2017) study found that the majority of the classes in Nepalese schools where EMI is used are teacher- and textbook-centered. This study showed that the student-centered approach successfully implemented EMI in the current Nepalese context, despite Phyak's research finding that EMI classrooms were teacher-centered. Additionally, they made use of technology to display videos or look up words in a bilingual "Nepali English" dictionary. For instance, a Social Studies teacher looked up words like "province," "territory," "index," and "density" in a bilingual dictionary to learn their definitions. However, few resources were available besides textbooks, actual local objects, and mobile phones to give students enough exposure to English (Phyak, 2017).

As a result, most educators employed the translanguaging strategy. While instructing and learning, they frequently changed their code. August and Shanahan (2006) argue in favor of code-switching in the English language classroom, saying that ELLs should be given effective instruction that allows them to switch between the target language and their native tongues. Students remained passive when they struggled to communicate their ideas in English. The students who attempted to voice their opinions in class frequently switched back and forth between English and their native tongues. It was discovered that the students were not required to speak only in English in his classroom by the teachers. Instead, they deliberately used Nepali to encourage them to speak English. The students were urged to use English after the teachers spoke both Nepali and English. Thus, it can be inferred that to engage students in English language lessons, teachers must use their native tongues, take a flexible approach, and draw on their prior linguistic knowledge.

## 2.2.3 Challenges to the Implementation of the EMI Policy in Rwanda

According to Kyeyune (2010), an instructional language is thought to be a helpful tool that makes it easier for students to learn content. This implies that to facilitate effective teaching and learning, both teachers and students need a high level of proficiency in the language of instruction. The current globalization phenomenon has forced many nations to adopt English as the language of teaching and learning, even where English is a second or foreign language to learners (Tamtam et al., 2010). In theory, using English as a second or foreign language for teaching and learning might not prevent learners' conceptual abilities from fully developing, provided they are fluent in the language of instruction (Kagwesage, 2013).

However, Kagwesage (2013) claimed that extensive research has shown that many African learners are not fluent enough in English to use it appropriately as the language of instruction. This has been evidenced by various authors in the African context (Alidou & Brock-Utne, 2011; Brock-Utne et al., 2004; Kyeyune, 2010; Mwinsheike, 2002; Rubagumya, 1997; Rugemalira, 2005; Vavrus, 2002; Kagwesage, 2013). In Rwanda, Kinyarwanda is the mother tongue and is used almost exclusively outside of the classroom for communication between teachers and students. As a result, according to Uwambayinema (2013), this situation has forced teachers to consistently speak in Kinyarwanda rather than English in class and prevents them from changing the lesson's content to suit their students' needs when it comes to using English.

## III. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Research Design

This qualitative case study design aimed to investigate the use of English as a medium of instruction in Nyabihu District's Lower Primaries. The research was carried out in five (5) schools in the Nyabihu district of Rwanda's Western Province. The students and teachers in lower Primary in the chosen district made up the study's population. The researcher requested permission from the District Mayor to use the schools under his control for the study by presenting him with a letter to gain access to the participants. After being given the go-ahead, the researcher visited the chosen schools and spoke verbally with the principals and teachers there to get their permission to use their facilities and participate in the study.

## 3.2 Sampling Technique and Sample Size

Purposive sampling was the method employed in order to use a small population to gain a thorough understanding of the case. The district was chosen because the researcher is the district's chief inspector of education and is thus close to the chosen schools (research sites). As a result, the schools and participants were in constant contact, which sped up the data collection procedure. Additionally, the schools were chosen because the researcher discovered during inspection in the region that some permanent teachers of the schools were instructing in classes where they were supposed to use English using L1 (Kinyarwanda) (L2). Teachers with at least two years of experience in the classroom were used in the study. The researcher needed teachers who were familiar with the language policy of instruction in Rwandan schools and had firsthand experience with the phenomenon, so this was necessary. The study involved 75 participants in total, including 25 teachers and 50 students or pupils. In other words, there were five teachers from each school and ten (10) pupils/students from each school.

## 3.3 Data Collection Strategy

Semi-structured interviews and extensive observation were both used as data collection methods. The triangulation of these data collection techniques made the study credible and reliable. Both teachers and students participated in focus group interviews. There were five focus groups, as there were ten students or pupils in each group. Five focus groups of five teachers each were selected from the five schools. The length of each interview varied from 45 minutes to 1 hour. Due to their limited English proficiency, the pupils/students' interviews were conducted in both their L1 (Kinyarwanda) and English. The majority of the time, the researcher had to translate her questions into the participants' L1 (Kinyarwanda) for them to comprehend and respond. Additionally, because students had trouble expressing themselves in English, the majority of their responses were better made in the L1. Mobile phones were used to record the interviews, class observations, and FGDs, which were then transcribed. Additionally, the researcher made some notes while participating in FGDs and observing classes; these notes were incorporated into the transcriptions.

For the 25 teachers who participated in the interview, the researcher also used a comprehensive observation technique. The following subjects: English, Social Studies, Mathematics, Science, and elementary Technology were all observed being taught by each teacher. Lessons were observed to last for forty minutes. These topics were picked because they are the ones that are most frequently covered in school curricula. To prevent teachers from changing their instruction should the interview be conducted first and more study information become public, the observation was conducted prior to the interview.

## 3.4 Data Analysis and Presentation

The inductive analysis and creative synthesis approach was the data analysis method used. This strategy was chosen because it enabled the researcher to formulate themes and classify them conceptually to better describe the phenomenon under study. Researcher categorized responses in this data analysis based on the opinion that the replies were comparable. Later, the researcher conceptualized these parallels and developed categories for the domains to be categorized. In qualitative research, a bottom-up approach to data analysis is essential. A thematic approach was used to analyze the study's data as well. The transcriptions were first carefully read several times by the researcher, who then color-coded them to create standard codes. Researcher then divided common codes into more general categories, which were then divided into emerging themes. The researcher used quotes from the participants to preserve their voice. To protect the privacy and confidentiality of the research subjects and research environment, the researcher used pseudonyms. The narrative logic approach was used as the presentation strategy in this study. This method was chosen because it allowed the researcher to switch between examples in storytelling, just as narrators do.

## IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Findings

The three primary research questions mentioned earlier in this study served as the foundation for the findings and discussions. The purpose of the current study was to determine whether teachers in Rwanda adhere to the country's language policy in the lower primary, where English is intended to be the primary language of instruction. The study also sought to investigate the challenges associated with using English as the language of instruction at the lower primary level in Nyabihu public, government-aided, and private primary schools for three years following the announcement of the policy, as well as the classroom pedagogical practices of using EMI that teachers are able to employ in their instruction. However, before addressing these inquiries, the study's teachers' demographic data is presented.

#### 4.1.1 Teacher Demographics

The study gathered demographic data from teachers, including class taught, academic background, teaching experience, native language, and second language. The data is summarized in the table below:

**Table 1**

*Demography of the Teachers*

| Teacher | Gender | Class Teaching | Academic Qualification | Teaching Experience | Native Language | Second Language |
|---------|--------|----------------|------------------------|---------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 1 | FEMALE | P1 | A2 in NP | 20 YEARS | KINYARWANDA | FRENCH |
| 2 | MALE | P1 | A2 in TSM | 6 YEARS | KINYARWANDA | ENGLISH |
| 3 | FEMALE | P1 | A2 in EKK | 8 YEARS | KINYARWANDA | FRENCH |
| 4 | MALE | P1 | A2 in LE | 3 YEARS | KINYARWANDA | FRENCH |
| 5 | FEMALE | P1 | A2 in MEG | 11 YEARS | KINYARWANDA | ENGLISH |
| 6 | MALE | P1 | A2 in Math-Physique | 14 YEARS | KINYARWANDA | FRENCH |
| 7 | FEMALE | P1 | A2 in SSE | 5 YEARS | KINYARWANDA | ENGLISH |
| 8 | MALE | P1 | A2 in MCE | 4 YEARS | KINYARWANDA | ENGLISH |
| 9 | FEMALE | P1 | A2 in Agronomy | 13 YEARS | KINYARWANDA | FRENCH |
| 10 | MALE | P2 | A2 in SME | 7 YEARS | KINYARWANDA | ENGLISH |
| 11 | FEMALE | P2 | A2 in BCG | 5 YEARS | KINYARWANDA | ENGLISH |
| 12 | MALE | P2 | A2 in MCB | 6 YEARS | KINYARWANDA | FRENCH |
| 13 | FEMALE | P2 | A2 in TSS | 4 YEARS | KINYARWANDA | ENGLISH |
| 14 | MALE | P2 | A2 in HEG | 10 YEARS | KINYARWANDA | ENGLISH |
| 15 | FEMALE | P2 | A2 in TML | 9 YEARS | KINYARWANDA | ENGLISH |
| 16 | MALE | P2 | A2 in ECLPE | 2 YEARS | KINYARWANDA | ENGLISH |
| 17 | FEMALE | P2 | A2 in MEG | 11 YEARS | KINYARWANDA | FRENCH |
| 18 | MALE | P3 | A2 in LFK | 3 YEARS | KINYARWANDA | ENGLISH |
| 19 | FEMALE | P3 | A2 in MCB | 9 YEARS | KINYARWANDA | FRENCH |
| 20 | MALE | P3 | A2 in PCB | 12 YEARS | KINYARWANDA | FRENCH |
| 21 | FEMALE | P3 | A2 in Science humaines | 22 YEARS | KINYARWANDA | FRENCH |
| 22 | MALE | P3 | A2 in Bio-Chimie | 20 YEARS | KINYARWANDA | FRENCH |
| 23 | FEMALE | P3 | A2 in PCM | 2 YEARS | KINYARWANDA | FRENCH |
| 24 | MALE | P3 | A2 in LEG | 2 YEARS | KINYARWANDA | ENGLISH |
| 25 | FEMALE | P3 | A2 in EFK | 12 YEARS | KINYARWANDA | FRENCH |

According to the table above, all 25 teachers (100%) were native speakers of Kinyarwanda, the sole language spoken in the study area. This enabled them to engage in teaching and learning activities with the pupils in Kinyarwanda, influencing the use of the language of instruction in the classroom. Additionally, the data indicates that 12 out of 25 teachers (48%) speak French as a second language. Before the policy change requiring English as the primary language of instruction, 19 out of 25 teachers (76%) were accustomed to teaching in Kinyarwanda.

The predominance of Kinyarwanda as the native language and the previous use of French in instruction highlights potential challenges in adopting English as the primary language of instruction, as the teachers and students may be more comfortable and proficient in these languages.

#### 4.1.1.1 Impact of Demographic Factors

The demographic profile of the teachers, all native Kinyarwanda speakers with a significant proportion speaking French as a second language, suggests that the transition to English as the primary language of instruction may be challenging. The teachers' linguistic background influences their teaching practices, with a preference for using Kinyarwanda to facilitate comprehension and participation. This finding underscores the need for targeted professional development programs to enhance teachers' English proficiency and pedagogical skills in using English as a medium of instruction.

#### 4.1.2 Language Used as Medium of Instruction

Despite the policy mandating English as the medium of instruction, the study revealed that both English and Kinyarwanda were used in classrooms. Observations and interviews showed that Kinyarwanda was more frequently used than English, even in lessons meant to be taught in English. Teachers often switched to Kinyarwanda to ensure

students understood the lessons, as students struggled with English comprehension. English is seldom used exclusively; instead, a bilingual approach is prevalent, with Kinyarwanda being used more frequently than English. Examples from interviews include:

A Lower Primary 3 student: "Iyo teacher yigishije mu Cyongereza gusa simbyumva, yabaza ikibazo ngaceceka" (Eng. Trans: "If they try to teach me in English, I won't understand and won't answer questions. I take a seat quietly. When the teacher notices this, he responds in Kinyarwanda before I can understand and respond.").

Another student: "Iyo mwarimu yigishije mu Cyongereza nta kintu numva" (Eng. Trans: "I can't speak English, so I can't understand anything my teacher says in English, but I do respond with 'yes sir' to everything he says.").

Students' lack of English proficiency led teachers to use a mix of both languages. This practice was necessary for students to understand lessons and participate actively.

Both teachers and students prefer this bilingual method due to the students' limited proficiency in English. The necessity for teachers to translate lessons into Kinyarwanda to ensure comprehension underscores the practical difficulties in implementing the EMI policy. This finding aligns with previous research indicating that comprehension and participation are higher when students are instructed in a familiar language (Mwinsheikhe, 2002).

The observed bilingual approach in classrooms reflects the practical realities of language use in education. The necessity for translation and code-switching to Kinyarwanda indicates that the students' English proficiency is insufficient to allow for exclusive use of English. This practice, while essential for ensuring comprehension, may hinder the full implementation of the EMI policy. The study highlights the importance of adopting flexible language strategies that accommodate the current linguistic capabilities of students while gradually increasing the use of English.

The adoption of the English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) policy in Rwanda has been both a strategic and controversial move. The findings of this study align with the literature that discusses the multifaceted motivations behind this policy shift. Mlambo et al. (2024) highlights the numerous language policy shifts in Rwanda, culminating in the EMI policy aimed at enhancing Rwanda's competitiveness in the East African Community (EAC) and the Commonwealth, as discussed by Kimenyi (2008). This strategic alignment with international bodies where English is predominant underscores the government's rational choice, as outlined by Nogic (2009).

However, the practical challenges highlighted in this study echo concerns raised by other scholars regarding the proficiency of both teachers and students in English. Kagwesage (2013) and Kyeyune (2010) emphasize the insufficient fluency in English among African learners, a sentiment corroborated by the present findings. The necessity for high proficiency in the language of instruction for effective learning, as discussed by Tamtam et al. (2010), is a significant barrier in Rwanda, where Kinyarwanda remains the dominant language outside the classroom.

**4.1.3 Classroom Pedagogical Practices**

The study revealed that teachers employ various strategies to mitigate the challenges of using English as the medium of instruction. These included student-centered teaching methods, translation, code-switching, and the concurrent use of both English and Kinyarwanda, use of concrete materials, and locally accessible resources. Translanguaging and code-switching were common practices to aid comprehension. The use of these strategies highlights the need for a flexible approach to language instruction, acknowledging the current proficiency levels of both teachers and students. The necessity for teachers to foster a supportive classroom environment that encourages the use of English without fear of punishment is also emphasized.

The effectiveness of student-centered teaching methods, translation, code-switching, and the concurrent use of both English and Kinyarwanda, use of concrete materials and locally accessible resources, as well as Translanguaging and code-switching is evident. However, the limited availability of audio-visual and ICT resources poses a significant challenge. The study suggests that enhancing the availability and use of these resources could facilitate a more effective implementation of EMI. Additionally, the importance of creating a supportive classroom environment where students feel comfortable using English without fear of punishment is emphasized. This approach aligns with best practices in language instruction, which advocate for an encouraging and non-punitive learning environment.

Teachers often switched between English and Kinyarwanda, sometimes confusing students. They used questions like "Are you with me?" to check understanding, but students often responded affirmatively without comprehension. Participants suggested extending the use of Kinyarwanda as MoI to at least Primary 4 or 5 to facilitate a smoother transition to English. They believed that a gradual shift would help students apply their L1 knowledge to learning English.

The study's findings on the effectiveness of student-centered teaching strategies and the use of technology in EMI classrooms reflect similar success in other contexts, such as Nepal. The use of audio-visual materials and ICT to facilitate learning in English aligns with the effective practices identified by August and Shanahan (2006). However, the prevalent use of code-switching and the translanguaging strategy observed in Rwanda is a pragmatic approach to

bridge the language gap, aligning with the arguments of August and Shanahan (2006) in favor of flexible language use in classrooms.

Phyak's (2017) observation of predominantly teacher-centered classrooms in Nepal contrasts with the more student-centered approaches found effective in this study, suggesting that pedagogical practices significantly impact the success of EMI policies. The use of bilingual resources and the encouragement of code-switching to support students' understanding aligns with the findings of this study and supports the notion that strict adherence to English-only policies may not be feasible or beneficial.

### 4.1.4 Challenges Related to EMI

The challenges associated with EMI in Nyabihu District are multifaceted. Key issues include Students' low English proficiency that hindered their ability to understand and participate in lessons, the monolingual nature of the classrooms, Teachers lacked sufficient vocabulary to conduct entire lessons in English, The lack of resources, such as textbooks and audio-visual materials, made it difficult to provide adequate English exposure and the lack of enforcement of the EMI policy. Teachers often resort to using Kinyarwanda to ensure students' comprehension and participation, reflecting the practical difficulties of adhering strictly to the EMI policy. This situation is exacerbated by the insufficient training of teachers in using English as a medium of instruction and the absence of adequate instructional resources.

Teachers recommended enforcing the policy more strictly and providing training for teachers to use English effectively as MoI. They also suggested creating an environment that encourages the use of English without fear of punishment for mistakes. The challenges in implementing the EMI policy in Rwanda are consistent with the broader African context, as identified by Alidou and Brock-Utne (2011). The reliance on Kinyarwanda by teachers, as noted by Uwambayinama (2013), underscores the difficulty in transitioning to English. This situation aligns with the findings of Mwinsheike (2002) and Rubagumya (1997), who also identified the struggle of African students and teachers with English proficiency. The shortage of adequately trained English teachers exacerbates these challenges, as seen in the Rwandan context.

### 4.2 Discussions

Krashen's concept of comprehensible input is central to the discussion on EMI. The necessity for teachers to provide understandable input in English, using various resources and strategies, is critical for successful language acquisition. This study's findings support Krashen's theory, emphasizing the importance of using multiple examples, visual aids, and cognates to facilitate understanding. The practical application of these strategies in Rwandan classrooms, as observed in the study, aligns with Bellack et al. (1966), highlighting the importance of interaction and communication in the classroom. Maminta's (1985) findings on the negative impact of EMI on students' performance in cognitively demanding subjects resonate with the challenges identified in this study. The struggle with English proficiency among teachers and students hampers effective learning in subjects like science and mathematics, emphasizing the need for robust language support mechanisms in EMI contexts.

The study's findings highlight the need for a pragmatic and flexible approach to implementing the EMI policy in Nyabihu District. While the policy aims to enhance English proficiency among students, its effective implementation requires consideration of the current linguistic capabilities of both teachers and students. By adopting a gradual transition to EMI, providing targeted professional development for teachers, enhancing instructional resources, and fostering supportive classroom environments, the goals of the EMI policy can be more effectively achieved. The study contributes to the ongoing discourse on language policy implementation in education and provides valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and researchers.

In conclusion, the findings indicate that while the EMI policy aims to improve English proficiency, its implementation faces significant challenges. Addressing these challenges requires a combination of policy enforcement, teacher training, gradual transition from L1 to L2, and an encouraging classroom environment. The study explored the implementation of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) policy in Rwanda, focusing on its practical application, classroom pedagogical practices, and associated challenges. The key findings are summarized as follows:

The EMI policy was introduced to enhance Rwanda's competitiveness within the East African Community (EAC) and the Commonwealth, where English is the predominant language. This strategic decision aligns with international integration goals, aiming to boost socioeconomic growth and participation in global markets.

A significant challenge is the insufficient proficiency in English among both teachers and students, which hinders effective teaching and learning. The predominant use of Kinyarwanda outside the classroom and by teachers within the classroom complicates the transition to English. There is a shortage of adequately trained English teachers, exacerbating the difficulties in implementing the EMI policy.

Effective EMI implementation was observed in contexts where student-centered teaching strategies, audio-visual materials, and ICT were used. The pragmatic use of code-switching and translanguaging strategies helps bridge the language gap, allowing students to utilize their native language alongside English for better comprehension. Flexible language use and the encouragement of bilingualism in the classroom were found to be beneficial for student engagement and understanding.

There is a critical need for language support mechanisms to aid both teachers and students in navigating the challenges of learning and teaching in a non-native language. Overall, the study reveals that while the strategic motivations for adopting EMI in Rwanda are clear, the practical challenges related to language proficiency and pedagogical practices are substantial. Successful implementation of EMI requires comprehensive support for both teachers and students, flexible approaches that incorporate native languages, and effective use of bilingual resources.

## V. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 Conclusions

The primary goal of this study was to determine whether the language policy mandating the use of English as the Medium of Instruction (MoI) from primary one to primary three is adhered to in practice. Although Rwanda's language policy officially requires English as the primary instructional language for these grades, the reality shows a different picture. In practice, teachers often use both their first language (L1) and English (L2) in the classroom. The main reason for this discrepancy is the students' limited proficiency in English. Additionally, the study identified several factors contributing to the policy's inconsistency, including a lack of policy enforcement, the monolingual nature of the classrooms, and the teachers' preference for using the Rwandan language. Common teaching techniques included safe talk, code-switching/mixing, simultaneous use of both languages, and translation. The findings suggest that stricter enforcement of the language policy, improvements in English instruction, increased use of L1 as MoI, and the creation of an English-friendly classroom environment could enhance English usage at the lower primary level. These insights are crucial for educators and policymakers, providing a realistic view of bilingual lower primary classrooms and helping them address the challenges effectively.

### 5.2 Recommendations

This study holds significant value for educators and policymakers in the educational sector. It highlights a clear disconnect between the Rwanda Education Service's deployment unit and the language policy planners. The findings reveal the practical implementation of the educational language policy in monolingual lower primary classrooms, where language barriers are evident. In terms of the medium of instruction, it is recommended that translanguaging pedagogical approaches be integrated into the instructional language policy for monolingual classrooms. This would allow for the flexible use and alternation of available languages in the classroom, benefiting all students. It would further develop the various discursive techniques that students bring to the classroom, enhancing understanding, communication, and academic comprehension. Essentially, young learners would be able to strategically use their first languages to fulfill different communicative purposes and follow instructions, promoting active participation and idea-sharing during the teaching and learning process.

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