# Interrogating Students' Low performance in English Language Subject in Government Primary Schools: Evidence from Dodoma City Council

Gloria Nangawe Urassa, and Dr Michael Msendekwa Local Government Training Institute, P. O Box 1125, Hombolo, Dodoma, Tanzania <u>nangaweglory@gmail.com</u> msendekwab@yahoo.com

Abstract	NG Journal of Social Development
This study aims at exploring the factors contributing to	Vol. 16 Issue 1 (2024)
low performance of English language subject in	ISSN(p) 0189-5958
government primary school in Dodoma city council. The	ISSN (e) 2814-1105
study using descriptive survey design which is appropriate	Ноте паде
for collecting detailed data needed for the study. Data	https://www.aiol.info/index.php/naisd
were collected using questionnaire and In-depth-	
interview. The questionnaire targeted English teachers and students, while interviews were conducted with head	
of schools and educational administrator. Data from	
interviews were analyzed thematically. Themes were	2
identified and coded to understand patterns and insights	performance, English language
related to the factors affecting students' performance.	perjormance, English language
Results indicate that the factors contributing to low	
performance of English language in government primary	Antiala Wistom
schools were; weak English background among pupils,	Article History
multilingual classes, and incompetent teachers on	_
language usage, limited resources, crowded classroom,	1
and overreliance on Swahili language, shortage of English language teachers and lack of parents' support and	
interest. These findings offer valuable insights and it is	DOI.
recommended that Ward Education Officer (WEO) and	$-$ n $\ln s^2//\ln x$ $\ln \alpha$
head teachers need to report the correct and most useful	
data about the number of English language teachers per	
school, availability of teaching and learning resources like	
books, its deficits and the quantities needed; this would	
effectively enable the government to equally allocate these	
resources. Moreover, students should be motivated to acquire confidence wherever they make mistake in	
language classroom to in courage them in language	
learning.	

#### **1. Introduction**

Language is a source of communication through which people share ideas, feelings and thought with others. Every country has their own national language in addition to a variety of local languages spoken and understand by their people in different regions Ilyosovna (2020). The author further noted that, some languages are spoken by millions of people and others by only a few thousand. In the today's global world English is the common language spoken in almost everywhere. Hence, its importance can neither be denied nor ignored (Ilyosovna, 2020; Nishanthi 2018) It is a prestigious medium of communication across the world. This is mainly due to the historical high spread and the magnitude of its demand in terms of commercial activities, cultural exchange and education requirements nearly in different countries, whether it is their first or second language (Wallwork, 2011). Studies further indicate that English plays a vital role in official communication, instructional media in schools and students life, inter-state communication also it helps securing jobs in multinational organization (Jositta, 2020; Ilyosovna, 2020). English is the global language and one of the most dominating languages of the world which is having its impact on every field of work (Shrishthy, 2022). Understanding the importance and the significant role played by English language, many counties include English as a second language in their school syllabus and children start learning English at a young age (Ilyosovna, 2020).

In Tanzania, as in many Commonwealth countries, English has been an official language alongside Swahili since the period of British rule. The English language plays a crucial role in international communication, foreign trade, high courts, and educational settings (Rubagumya, 1990). Furthermore, it is extensively used by the government in drafting contractual documents, interviewing job candidates, conducting international meetings and conferences, and in the tourism sector, as well as in preparing court documents (Ideh & Tibategeza, 2022). Recognizing the importance of English, the Tanzanian government has made it a compulsory subject in primary schools through its education policy (Mtallo, 2015; Mosha, 2019). It was anticipated that students would leave primary school with a sufficient command of English to effectively use it as the medium of instruction throughout secondary school and higher education. However, contrary to these expectations, students' performance in English at the primary level remains notably poor (Malekela, 2006). This low performance subsequently affects their ability to succeed in secondary education, diminishes their competitiveness in both local and international job markets, limits their participation in international trade, and impacts their engagement in contractual agreements.

While numerous studies have explored students' performance in English at both primary and secondary levels, there is a significant gap in research specifically addressing the factors contributing to the low performance of primary school students in this subject in Tanzania. Some studies have focused on stakeholders' perceptions of English learning and performance (Kahangwa & Kafanabo, 2023; Mushi et al., 2021; Mapunda, 2018; Akida & Kazuzuru, 2020) or investigated the significance of English language education in primary and secondary schools (Yue Qi, 2016; Jositta, 2020; Clement & Murugavel, 2018; Nishanthi, 2018). However, there is a dearth of research specifically examining the underlying reasons for the low performance of primary school students in English in Tanzania. This study aims to address this gap by identifying the factors contributing to the poor performance of primary school students in English language subjects in Tanzania. This study enriches the literature by pinpoint specific factors that most significantly impact English performance. The findings provide an insight to educational policies and practices, helping to design and implement more effective strategies for improving English language

teaching and learning in Tanzanian primary schools. The rest of the paper is organized as follows; section 2 presents literature review, section 3 research methods, result and discussion are presented in section 4 and section 5 conclusion and recommendation.

# 2. Review of Related Literature

# **2.1 Theoretical literature review**

In the field of education, theoretical frameworks serve as essential tools in explaining the complex dynamics that shape student performance. Understanding the underlying factors that contribute to students' academic outcomes, particularly in language subjects such as English, requires an exploration of various theories that provide insight into both internal and external influences. This study focuses on students' low performance in English among primary schools in Dodoma City Council, and the integration of relevant theories is crucial for analysing the multifaceted nature of this issue. By employing The Input Hypothesis, socio-cultural and Constructivist theories, the study seeks to establish a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between students' learning environments, language acquisition processes, and broader societal factors that impact language proficiency. Theories such as social-cultural, constructivist and the input hypothesis offer valuable perspectives on how these factors collectively influence English language learning in Tanzanian primary schools.

**Sociocultural Theory**: This theory, developed by Lev Vygotsky, emphasizes the role of social interactions and cultural context in learning. The theory encourage the importance of relationship and interactions between children and more knowledgeable peers and adults. It can help explore how students' social environments, including family and community influences, impact their English language acquisition. For example, Msafiri& Lianyu (2022) guided by the theory explores factors leading to high dropout among girls at junior secondary school in the Mara region, Tanzania and found that early marriage, female genital mutilation, household activities, social attitude against educating girls, and low levels of education among parents lead girls to drop out of school. Using social cultural theory, Ndijuye *et al*, (2020) also investigated the status of early childhood education (ECE) in Tanzania by critically analyzing the views and beliefs of stakeholders on its status and development and revealed that while in the policy and curriculum documents ECE holds equal status with other levels of education, it holds extremely low status among education stakeholders, resulting in ill-prepared preserve ECE teachers and limited parent-school engagement.

**Constructivist Theory**: Proposed by Jean Piaget and further developed by others, this theory focuses on how learners construct their understanding and knowledge of the world through experiences. It can provide insights into how students' prior knowledge and learning experiences affect their performance in English. Mugambi (2018) concludes that Constructivism has the major purpose of enabling learners construct new knowledge through multiple representation, active engagement, collaboration and inquiry with the teacher acting as a facilitator. Shah (2019) outlines some of the ways in which constructivism has been misconstrued and ways in which constructivist

teaching has been misused and illustrate the effective use of constructivist teaching that makes them successful.

**The Input Hypothesis**: Stephen Krashen's theory suggests that language learners acquire language most effectively when they are exposed to "comprehensible input" that is slightly beyond their current level of proficiency. This theory can help examine the adequacy of English language exposure and resources in Tanzanian schools.

#### 2.2 Empirical literature review

## 2.2.1 Importance of studying English language in primary and secondary schools

English is becoming more important in both native and non-native English-speaking countries Clement & Murugavel (2018). Also, English can help you peruse and obtain more career opportunities Ilyosovna (2020). This is because, now days the job market is global, many companies need employees who can communicate with partners and client all over the world. Not only that but also, employees who speak English could become a translator, a language teacher or an English marketing professional for a global company .Learning English is an important step forward to all of your goals. Moreover, Nishanthi (2018); Ilyosovna (2020) identify six reasons why English is important. It is an international common tongue, It is a language of academia, It gives us access to a wealth of written media, online and printed It comes in handy when travelling , It is essential if you want to work in international business or commerce and the last , It is the language of Hollywood.

However, studying English in primary school is very important for students to acquire better pronunciation and fluency (Cahyati & Madya, 2018). It is because, primary school students have more time to learn the foreign language instruction. If they have a lot of practice to pronounce words in English better fluency will be reached. Another importance is to achieve confidence. Self-confidence is one of the keys to motivate students to learn.

## 2.2.2 Perception of stakeholders on students' poor performance in English subject

Octavian & Fauzan (2017) studies teachers 'perceptions on the importance of English for young learners at Elementary Schools in Lubuklinggau Timur and found that young learner's benefits from learning English early as they get better mastery of English which in turn allow them to secure jobs in the future. On the other hand, Mtallo (2015) address the paper to discuss some classroom practices in Tanzania secondary schools focusing on the use of English language as a medium of instruction and came up with the conclusion that it is still an uphill task for the Tanzania learners to achieve learning objectives through the use of English language. (Lymo & Laiser 2018) assessed teacher's perception on challenges facing the use of English as medium of instruction in Tanzanian secondary schools and noted that majority of teachers in public secondary schools face challenges in teaching using English as language of instruction. Hence language of instruction is a barrier to academic achievement to both students and teachers. (Qorro, 2006). Majority of teachers in public secondary schools stressed that incompetence in language of instruction hinders

classroom interaction between teachers and students which contributes to low academic achievement of students.

#### 2.2.3 Education System and Language Policy in Tanzania

The official languages in Tanzania are Kiswahili and English. However, in a daily practical terms, English is more considered as an academic language while Swahili language is being used in a daily communication.(Kwesi, 2003). Nonetheless, based on the academic perspectives in Tanzania, Swahili is the language of instruction mainly in government primary schools while English is considered or being taught as a single subject, unlike in private schools where the language of teaching instruction is English. It is estimated that 99.1% of school age children in Tanzania attend government or public schools while only 0.9% attend private schools (Akida & Kazuzuru, 2020); (United Republic of Tanzania, URT, 2005). In this context, it stated that the main purpose of teaching and learning English in primary school is to develop pupils' basic skills in speaking, listening, reading and writing in English (Lyimo & Laiser, 2018) From this conception and understanding, it can further be explained that when a student in public school advances to secondary school the language of instruction swiftly changes from Swahili to English except Swahili subject (MoEVT, 2008). This makes a learning process become more challenging in secondary schools since the majority of students lack a basic command of English language, neither a serious attempt is made to help them make this transition (Qorro, 2006). Furthermore, this brings a question and debate among scholars on the type of learning theory that informs the best way to teach students in a language they do not comprehend, read or speak (Adamson, 2016).

Table 1: Average marks of mock examination in each subject in Douolina Region 2021					
District	Kiswahili	English	Maths	Social study	Science
Bahi	23	18	25	28	21
Chamwino	24	19	27	29	21
Chemba	24	18	26	27	23
Dodoma urban	24	19	28	28	22
Kondoa	22	19	27	29	20
Kongwa	24	19	30	28	22
Mpwapwa	22	18	28	27	19
Region	23	19	27	28	21

2.2.4 Performance of English Language Subject in Dodoma Region

Table 1: Average marks of mock examination in each subject in Dodoma Region 2021

Source: TAMISEMI

The empirical reference is made to the performance of Mock Examination for standard seven held on June 2021; whereby the overall results indicated poor performance in English Language subject with an average of 19 compared to other subjects such as 28 Social Study, 27 Mathematics, 24 Swahili, and 22 Science (TAMISEMI, 2021). It is argued that a number of challenges hindering effective use of English language in government primary schools, as paramount and significantly contribute to even poor performance to students who enroll into secondary schools.(Mwakinyolobi, 2013)

#### 2.2.5 Performance of English Language in Dodoma City (Mock Exams)

Talking about the results of table 2, English language in Dodoma city council; in June 2021 which involved 115 schools indicated that government primary schools failed to score the minimum marks.

Registered Pupils		Score grade A – C		Score grade D&E			
Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	%	Boys	Girls	%
4722	4959	1429	1653	38	1293	4951	62
Total 9326		3082		6244			
Remarks		PASS FAII		AIL			

Table 2: Performance of English Language subject in Dodoma City council 2021(Mock Exams)

Source: City council of Dodoma

Based on the results presented in Table 2, only 38% of students passed the exam, while 62% failed to meet the minimum passing marks. According to the Regional Education Academic Officer (REAO), this overall pass rate was significantly influenced by non-government primary schools, where the use of English as the medium of instruction contributed to better outcomes.

# 2.2.6 National Examination results of English Language in Primary School Living Certificate (PSLE) 2019 & 2020

Further analysis of the English Language performance in the Primary School Leaving Certificate (PSLE), as published by the National Examination Council of Tanzania (NECTA) and reported by TAMISEMI (2020), reveals a trend of poor performance. The PSLE English exam was divided into four sections: Section A featured 30 grammar questions; Section B included 6 vocabulary questions; Section C contained 4 composition questions; and Section D had 5 comprehension questions, totaling 45 questions. Performance was categorized into three levels: 60-100% as "good," 40-59% as "average," and 0-39% as "poor." As stipulated in figure 1 below.

In 2020, the overall performance in the English Language subject was deemed average, with 577,140 (57.24%) of the 1,009,534 candidates passing the exam. Candidates demonstrated average proficiency in Composition (57.7%), other forms of Grammar (51.64%), Tenses (48.32%), and Vocabulary (45.76%). However, performance was notably poor in Comprehension, with only 38.8% of candidates achieving satisfactory results (NECTA, 2020).

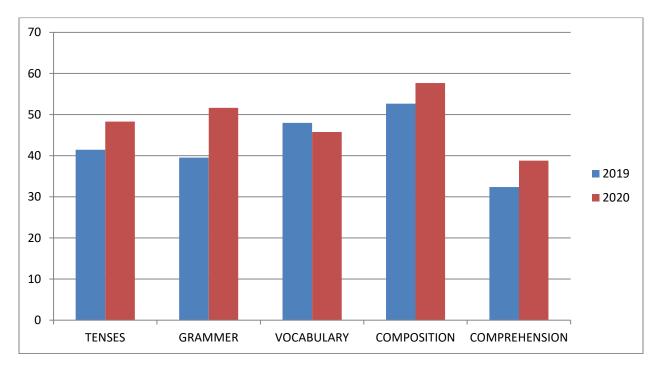


Figure 1: National Examination results of English Language (PSLE) 2019 & 2020

Source: NECTA

The diagram in figure 1 shows that, performance of comprehension which is mainly a short answers question types was poor compared to objective question types-section. This reveals poor performance in comprehension skills among students, chiefly in arranging ideas and interpreting the written information despite of being the short answers questions.

# 3. Methodology

# 3.1 Research design

This study used a descriptive survey design, which is appropriate for collecting appropriate data on the factors contributing to students' low performance in the English language. The design allows for the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data from a large sample

# 3.2 Study area

The study was conducted in Dodoma City Council, located in the central region of Tanzania. The area was selected because of its representative nature of both urban and semi-urban educational settings in Tanzania.

# **3.3 Population and Sampling**

# **3.3.1** Study population

The target population for this study comprised teachers, students, and educational administrators in government primary schools within Dodoma City Council.

# 3.3.2 Sampling Techniques

A stratified random sampling technique was used to select schools to ensure representation from different zones within the council. From each selected school, teachers and students were chosen through simple random sampling. Purposive sampling was used to select the head of schools and educational administrators.

# 3.3.3 Sample Size

The study sample involved 10 primary schools, with an estimated total sample size of 241 comprising 200 students, 40 teachers including 30 English language teachers and 10 head of schools, and 1 educational administrator.

## **3.3.4** Data collection method

Data were collected using questionnaire and in-depth interview. The questionnaire targeted English teachers and students, while the in-depth interviews were conducted with head of schools and educational administrator. Questionnaire were distributed and collected by the researchers over a period of two weeks while Interviews with head of schools and administrators were scheduled and conducted in their offices.

## 3.3.5 Validity and reliability

To ensure content validity, the instruments was reviewed by experts in educational research. A pilot study was also conducted in one school not included in the main study to refine instruments. The reliability of the questionnaires was tested using Test and Re-test method to ensure internal consistency.

## 3.3.6 Data analysis

Qualitative data from interviews were analyzed thematically. Themes were identified and coded to understand patterns and insights related to the factors affecting students' performance.

## 4. Results and Discussion

This part highlights key findings and discussion about the factors contributing to low performance of English language subject in government schools.

No.	Category of factor	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Multilingual classes	115	48
2	Weak English language background	155	64
3	Incompetent English Language teachers	95	39
4	Limited resources	110	46
5	Crowded classes	75	31
6	Overreliance on Swahili language than English	68	28
7	Shortage of English language teachers	90	37
8	Lack of parent support and interest	85	35

# 4.1 Multilingual classes

Multilingual classes are simply an act of speaking various native languages (Malone, 2007). The study found that the use of mother tongue was a significant factor contributing to poor English language performance among pupils in public primary schools. The respondents revealed that most of pupils among the visited schools communicate either in Swahili or in other local languages with their peers, teachers, parents, and the community. This study concur

However, the Swahili was noted as the primary language of communication in schools located in the center of Dodoma city, while the Gogo "Kigogo" language was prevalent in peripheral or outside the city. Nevertheless, one of the English language teacher from peripheral school cemented that;

"...five years ago, about 95% of children in this area were Gogo tribe...that makes it even more difficult to frequently use English language since the majority predominantly use Gogo language in classrooms especially in the absence of their teachers...that is equally to say this tendency hinders their ability to practice English for communication purposes.

Furthermore, it was revealed that among other things local languages affect the pronunciation of English words and eventually the students struggle to learn and practice as required. The respondents added that, students from the interior face challenges in learning Swahili language (which is their second language) and even more worse to practice English as their third language. For this reason, students are expected to face difficulties when learning a language that they do not use regularly (Hayes, 2012).

#### 4.2 Weak English background

A limited English background was identified as the primary challenge, with students showing low reading abilities. This is attributed by inadequate exposure to the English language in schools, where they rely solely on one book or manual recommended by the Ministry of Education.

The study concur with the study by (Rany, 2018) that, the majority of students lack of English background and confidence to use the language because they afraid and feeling shame if they make mistake. However, the study by (Hashemi, 2011) viewed that the prevalent environment within their families encourages the use of vernacular languages, further restricting their English proficiency. Consequently, their vocabulary is limited, making it difficult for them to comprehend sentences spoken in English by teachers.

#### **4.3 Incompetent English language teachers**

During interview discussion with the Head Teachers and English Language Teachers from the study area; have confirmed that many teachers lack proficiency in the language, making it challenging for them to effectively teach English. As a result, teaching the language to students has become a difficult task for them to deliver.

"...we lacked the necessary competence to teach English language...During our time at colleges, Swahili was primarily used as the language of instruction, this makes it difficult to instruct students in English...How can you effectively teach a language in which you are not competent?" (Teachers at one of the Focus Group Discussion, FGDs).

In addition, teachers merely use English language for their daily interactions, leading to a lack of fluency. In interviews and group discussions, the majority of teachers and head teachers admitted that they rarely speak English in their personal lives or for official purposes. They believe that this hinders the growth of the language, resulting in limited vocabularies and difficult in pronouncing English words. Teachers added that, they were not well trained at college on how to effectively pronounce words, that brings even more confusions and frustrations to the body of teachings;

"..."At the secondary school level and in teachers' colleges, we did not learn phonology. As a result, we simply imitated the way our teachers pronounced words...so if they pronounced them incorrectly, then we are teaching our pupils the wrong pronunciation."

The study found that some teachers struggled with pronouncing specific words accurately, indicating a lack of proficiency. This trend could potentially hinder students from acquiring the language effectively. The results concur with the studies by Kwesi (2003). Additionally, teachers' reliance on outdated teaching methodologies may lead to a lack of confidence and a negative attitude on language instruction.

#### **4.4 Limited Resources**

The study revealed that a shortage of teaching and learning materials is another factor contributing to English language poor performance in government primary schools. The respondents reported that there is a lack of books, neither in classroom nor in library including other materials such as posters and the relevant publications. The shortage of teaching and learning resources were identified as a significant learning obstacle, since the students do not have access to copies of the necessary books both in classroom and for private studies.

"...there are few English language books for my pupils...a school at the centre of the district having a ratio of one book to six pupils is really a problem...teachers have no option rather than grouping six to seven pupils just for a single book..." (Said Head teacher)

"... look! I have only twenty books for a class of 120 standard four pupils with no teacher's guide... how do I manage to teach three to four classes in such circumstances? What I do is just teach a class using methods that does not necessarily require all pupils to read a book at a time but one pupil can read for the class..." (Interview with English language teacher)

#### 4.5 Crowded Classes

The findings indicated that classrooms are excessively crowded, making it difficult to implement some teaching techniques that involve grouping students. The teachers expressed frustration, noting that despite psychologists' recommendations to incorporate group activities, it is even harder to implement. Nonetheless, they pointed out that even when students are divided into groups, individual participation is limited due to the large group sizes, giving the room for a few pupils in discussion. As a result, teachers are often compelled to opt for class discussions instead of group discussions. The overcrowded classrooms hinder teacher's ability to properly assign, grade and assess students' exercises;

"...the classrooms are overcrowded in such a way that you cannot find spaces to go through the class...really the mood changes when I think of going in a class that does not give a room for demonstrations..." (Said, a teacher during the interview)

It is clear evidence that having only two English language teachers for a school with over a thousand pupils is a significant obstacle in learning. The majority of schools in the study area had

an average of 73 pupils per classroom (beyond the recommended of 40 to 45 per classroom) and some had an average of up to 200 students per classroom, with only 7 teachers and hardly 80 desks; this would imply that some students sit on the floor and could not comprehend the lessons properly.

#### 4.6 Overreliance on Swahili language than English language

Following the fact that Swahili is a language of instructions and mainly used as a medium of instruction in primary government schools, it comes with no surprise as to why the staff, parents, schools and departmental meetings are held in Swahili. Indeed these tendencies slow down the use of English language even among the students, neither find it important to put much efforts. This is true and consistent with Siedentop & Yinger (2006) who demonstrated that, any language grow when it is used regularly. In contrary it would be difficult to achieve the intended objectives, since English is just taught as a single subject in government primary school.

## 4.7 Shortage of English Language Teachers

It is challenging to find an adequate number of teachers, mainly English language teachers due to the fact that some schools are located in a far rural areas, with few or no accommodation plus other reliable social services. It is in this reality that a lot of teachers would switch back in urban area or in private schools, leaving students in the hand of less qualified English teachers. This too impacts the overall teaching curriculum due to few number of teachers in relation to huge number of students. The shortage was also revealed in the study area and one of the respondent argued that;

"...we are very few here at school...a school with one thousand and three (1003) pupils having only seven (7) teachers is really a problem... we are only two teachers teaching English language, yet I have other subjects to teach. In such a situation you cannot teach effectively..." (Interview with English language teacher)

However, the REAOs and DEAOs offices had different views. They clarified that there is no such an official claim regarding the shortage of teachers. They added that, poor English language use is direct linked with negligence among teachers to follow the curriculum and teaching methodologies or approaches. This would implies that there is no proper coordination on reporting line.

## 4.8 Lack of parents support and interest

The lack of parents or guardians support of children' studies is one of the alarming issues affecting their performance. It is in this assertion that due to poor academic background among parents, the majority have no interest or understanding on how homework is done, neither follow up the pupils' academic progress at schools. Altogether are considered as a single biggest English learning threat. The study concur with the study by (Mtalo ,2015) that lack of knowledgeable peers and guardian in the living environment hinder language learning included English language.

## 5. Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to pinpoint the factors Contributing to Students' Low Performance in English Language Subject in Government Primary Schools, the study indicate that students still have many factors to support them such as weak English language background, multilingual classes, limited resources and shortage of English language teachers as the leading factor. However, the objective of teaching English language in primary schools is to ensure that students have a solid foundation in communication skills; allowing them to easily navigate the subjects in secondary schools where English is used as the medium of instruction.

#### 6. Recommendations

- i. Ward Education Officer (WEO) and head teachers need to report the correct and most useful data about the number of English language teachers per school, availability of teaching and learning resources like books, its deficits and the quantities needed; this would effectively enable the government to equally allocate these resources.
- ii. English language teachers should be given training regularly to enable them to prepare students who have ability to speak fluent English language.
- iii. Students should be motivated to acquire confidence wherever they make mistake in language classroom to in courage them in language learning.
- iv. Students should be encourage to practice English language to native speaker both inside and outside the classroom.
- v. The curriculum designer should think about learners and society needs in language learning when they plan to design curriculum.

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