

The acquisition of English as a second language in Rwanda: challenges and promises

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Abstract

The use of English in daily communication in Rwanda is very limited and the proficiency in English by many of those who claim the ability to use it has been questioned. This situation is in spite of a relatively long history of English as a school subject and a medium of instruction in Rwanda. Building on the factors which are believed to affect second language (L2) acquisition and learning, this article explores constraints, challenges, possibilities and promises regarding the acquisition of English in the Rwandan sociolinguistic context. The article suggests that while the teaching of English has been improved and several factors appear to increase Rwandan people's motivation to learn English, the context is not yet favourable to the attainment of communicative competence in this language. In fact, given the limited use of English in daily communication, the opportunities for learners to receive and produce enough input and output respectively are still very limited.

Key words: *English, second language acquisition, proficiency, input, output, motivation*

Introduction

Wardhaugh (2002) notes that a big number of people around the world speak more than one language. In fact, as Heugh (2013) notes, with around 6,000 languages spoken in the world nowadays and a bit less than 200 countries, most people live in countries where multiple languages are used on a daily basis. Such a situation, according to Wardhaugh (2002), makes bi/multilingualism a rule rather than an exception in many parts of the world. Based on the time and process of acquiring/learning the different languages spoken by one speaker, these are classified into two categories: first language(s) also known as mother tongue(s) and second language(s)¹. Richards, Platt and Platt (1992) define a mother tongue as the language that a person acquires in early childhood, because it is spoken in the family and/or it is the language of the country where he or she is living. As for a second language, it refers to any language learned after one's first language, no matter how many others have been learned (Fasold and Connor-Linton, 2006; Bylund & Oostendorp, 2013). In Rwanda, Kinyarwanda is one and only mother tongue for more than 99% of the population while all other languages (mainly English, French and Kiswahili) are virtually acquired as second/foreign languages by Rwandans through formal education.

While English has been taught as a school subject since the 1960s (Sibomana, 2010) and used as medium of instruction for about 20 years² and many efforts were made to enhance its acquisition and use in Rwanda, proficiency in English by many educated people in Rwanda has been found wanting (Sibomana, 2010; Kagwesage, 2012; Pearson, 2013; Uwubuntu, 2013). As a result, the English language hardly finds its way in Rwandans' daily communication.

¹These two categories of language are variously referred to as mother tongue or home language on the one hand and additional or foreign language on the other. In this article, the terms mother tongue and second language will be used.

²After 1994, English was made a medium of instruction alongside French at secondary and tertiary education in Rwanda depending on schools. In 2008, English was made the only medium of instruction from Grade 4 through to university.

This article explores the challenges and promises in the acquisition of English as a second/additional language in Rwanda based on contextual factors that are believed to affect second language acquisition (SLA). It investigates how these factors facilitate or hinder the acquisition of English in the context of Rwanda. The data on the Rwandan context was collected by reviewing available literature and findings of research that has been done in the areas of sociolinguistics and language education in Rwanda.

Literature Review

Gömlüksiz (2001) defines second language acquisition as a process in which an individual becomes able to use one or more language different from his first language in a natural setting or through classroom instruction. Lightbown and Spada (2001) and Bylund and Oostendorp (2013) indicate that contrarily to first language acquisition, the success of second language learners varies greatly. According to several language scholars (e.g. Krashen, 1981; Lightbown and Spada, 2001; Stefanson, 2013; Yule, 2014), this variation is due to the factors that are believed to affect second language acquisition: personality characteristics, intelligence, aptitude, motivation, attitudes, aptitude, age, input and output and affective filter (Krashen, 1981; Lightbown and Spada, 2001; Du, 2009). Bylund and Oostendorp (2013) divide these factors into two categories: (i) those that are related to psychological and cognitive mechanisms that underlie our ability to learn languages and (ii) those that are related to the circumstances under which learning takes place. Given that the former (personality characteristics, intelligence and aptitude) do not depend on the context where the acquisition takes place, they are not the focus of this article.

Motivation for and attitudes to language learning

Motivation is defined as “the extent to which the individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity” (Gardner, 1985, p. 10). While research has not established whether motivation is a result or a cause of success in L2 acquisition (Lightbown and Spada, 2001; Yule, 2014), there is no doubt that motivation plays an important role in achieving second language proficiency and competence (Stefanson, 2013). Du (2009) goes as far as suggesting that without it even gifted individuals may not be successful in the long run, no matter how good the curricula and the teacher are. I suggest that it is mainly because second language acquisition is a predominantly conscious activity and, therefore, requires efforts to be successful. According to Pandey (2005), motivation creates and sustains intentions and goal-seeking acts and determines the extent of the learner's active involvement.

Gardner (1985) identifies two types of motivation: integrative and instrumental motivation. Integrative motivation refers to language learning for personal growth and cultural enrichment and, according to Lightbown and Spada (2001), has to do with favorable interests in and attitudes towards the target language community. Instrumental motivation, on the other hand, refers to learning a language for more immediate practical goals such as passing some

examinations, going overseas to study, getting a job or being promoted (Du, 2009). In the words of Bylund and Oostendorp (2013), instrumental motivation is utilitarian or functional while integrative motivation relates to affective or emotional values. Gardner suggests that, generally, integratively oriented individuals tend to be more highly motivated than individuals with other orientations. However, I suggest that the two types of motivation are not mutually exclusive; they may both be available to different extents. In other words, a learner can have more integrative than instrumental motivation and vice versa.

Motivation and attitude go hand in hand in second language acquisition because they influence each other and, according to Gardner (1985), determine the extent to which individuals will actively involve themselves in learning the language. For instance, Pandey (2005) suggests that motivation determines attitudes towards learning while, on the other hand, the attitudes that one has towards the target language influences the extent to which they are motivated to learn the language (Gardner, 1985; Lightbown and Spada, 2001). Attitude, which Du (2009) defines as the way learners think and feel about what they are learning, is believed to affect commitment to and progress in learning and class participation all of which are associated with successful SLA (Du, 2009).

Age and language acquisition

With reference to the role of age, Erik Lennenberg formulated a hypothesis known as *Critical Period Hypothesis* which holds that “if a person learns a language before the end of a specific time window, or a so-called critical period, then that person will end up with *native-like* command of the language” (Bylund&Oostendorp, 2013, p. 252). In other words, as Noam Chomsky suggests, there is a period in the human development (Critical Period) when the brain is predisposed for success in language learning, which period is believed to end around puberty or even earlier (Bylund and Oostendorp, 2013; Yule, 2014). According to this view, Lightbown and Spada (2001, p. 60) note, “language learning that occurs after this period is less successful because it is not based on innate biological structures believed to contribute to first language acquisition or to second language acquisition in early childhood.” This suggests that older learners rely on general learning abilities, which are not as successful for language learning as the innate and language specific ones. However, Lightbown and Spada (2001) indicate that it is difficult to compare children and adult language learners because, in addition to biological differences, the language learning conditions are often very different. For instance, young learners have more time to devote to language learning in informal settings, have low affective filter, their imperfect efforts are praised, etc. while these are not available for adults.

It should be noted that the Critical Period Hypothesis has been challenged by some empirical studies. These report some older learners being more efficient than young learners, and some learners who started learning a language at the primary school not doing better in the long run than those who started at around adolescence (Lightbown and Spada, 2001). Others suggest that there is not only one critical period but multiple critical periods for the different linguistic domains (Bylund and Oostendorp, 2013). Albeit these findings, several scholars in the area of

language acquisition (e.g. Collier, 1987; Gömleksiz, 2001; Lightbown&Spada, 2001; Singleton, 2001; Bylund and Oostendorp, 2013; Yule, 2014) confirm that the earlier one learns a second language, the better he or she masters it.

Language Input/output

Bylund and Oostendorp (2013) define language input as the target language material available to the learner while Yule (2014) defines the output as the language the learner produces. In order for the input to be beneficial to the language learner, Yule suggests that it needs to be comprehensible. With reference to output, Yule considers the opportunity to produce comprehensible output in meaningful interaction as an important element in the L2 learner's development of L2 ability. This suggests that for them to be successful, L2 learners need to be in contexts where they can use the target language naturally and spontaneously. I suggest that informal settings or 'the street' in the words of Lightbown and Spada (2001) rather than formal ones (the classroom) may do better in this regard notably because the latter may be prescriptive and thus limiting. This is in spite of efforts to establish natural-like settings in language classrooms through different tasks and activities (Yule, 2014). In addition, the limited time that learners spend in the classroom may not be enough for them to achieve communicative competence in all its aspects: grammatical, socio-linguistic and strategic types of competence (Canale and Swain, 1980; Richards, 2006; Scheckle, 2009; Belchamber, 2010; Andrewes, 2011; Illés, 2012; Yule, 2014). In addition to insufficient input/output, Yule(2014) identifies an 'acquisition barrier of quite a different kind', which is part of Krashen' input Hypotheses (Du, 2009) and affects the reception of input and the production of output (Krashen, 1981; Du, 2009). This barrier is affective filter.

The effects of affective filter

Affective filter refers to a feeling of unwillingness or embarrassment in attempting to speak the target language (Yule, 2014). High affective filter limits the input taken into learners' language acquisition device (Krashen, 1981) thus working as a barrier to acquisition (Du, 2009). Krashen's main view points on affective filter are as follows: a high affective filter can block input from reaching Language Acquisition Device, a lowered affective filter allows the input to 'strike deeper' and be acquired and the affective filter is responsible for individual variation in SLA. Therefore, as Yule (2014) argues, high affective filter may override whatever physical and cognitive abilities that learners have. According to Du (2009), lack of motivation, confidence and being concerned with failure are some causes of high affective filter. Du suggests that "the filter is down when the acquirer is not anxious and is trying to become a member of the group speaking" (p. 162). I suggest that while the factors which affect affective filter can vary from person to person, the acquisition context also has a role in increasing and/or decreasing these. For instance, if one is acquiring the language in contexts such as that of Rwanda where accuracy is emphasized over fluency, and where mistakes are used to judge the speaker³, the latter may refrain from speaking the language. In such a case, the affective filter may rise thus reducing his or her

³Retrieved from http://www.newtimes.co.rw/news/views/article_print.php?15670&a=18432&week=3&icon=Print, on 12 September 2014.

output. Thus it is important that the factors that increase affective filter are avoided or minimized in the learning process and context.

Factors affecting the acquisition of English in Rwanda

English is one of the three official languages in Rwanda, the others being Kinyarwanda, which is also a national language, and French. English is taught as a school subject from nursery to tertiary education and is used as a medium of instruction from Grade 4 onwards. This language is also used on all public and private radio and television stations and in printed media and is the only language used by the *New Times*, the only Rwandan daily printed newspaper in English. It is also a lingua franca between Rwanda and other member countries in the East African Community and the Commonwealth that Rwanda has recently joined. This situation gives an impression that English is used in daily communication in Rwanda and, therefore, that a considerable number of Rwandans can speak it. However, this is not necessarily true. In fact, only 7% of the population can read and write as shown by the 4th Population and Housing Census in Rwanda (National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda - NISR, 2014). However, the National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda notes that this information was self-reported and was “not verified through a literacy test or similar means” (p. 43), which suggests that the percentage may be even lower. I suggest that the analysis of the Rwandan sociolinguistic and language education context factors, which is the focus of the next section, can provide some elements pointing to the reasons for this limited use of English in the Rwandan community.

Age and the acquisition of English in Rwanda

As has been pointed out previously, English is a foreign language in Rwanda; this implies that it is acquired almost only in formal and non-formal schooling/learning. Before 1994, English was taught as a school subject only at high school, starting from Senior Two (Grade 8). This suggests that learners used to start learning this language roughly at the age of 16 which, according to the Critical Period Hypothesis, is not a very conducive age for second language acquisition (Yule, 2014; Lightbown and Spada, 2001). At that time, this language was taught for two periods a week for all learners and for six periods for the learners whose major subjects were languages. It should be noted that at that time, the only place learners could ‘use’ English was in the classroom which, according to Lightbown and Spada (2001), is not enough for the acquisition of all language aspects. In addition to that, English was taught in less than ideal circumstances, including lack of qualified teachers and teaching/learning aids (Sibomana, 2010). That is why many people who were educated in this system have recently joined non-formal English teaching centres in order to acquire proficiency in English, which they need so much today (Kwibuka, 2013). Starting from 1995, English has been taught as a major subject from nursery to high school while university students take a compulsory course in communication in English. Therefore, today’s Rwandan children start learning English during their Critical Period, which may increase their level of success. However, age itself is not enough for this success; the other factors also need to be catered for and more supportive for the acquisition of this international language.

Motivation for and attitudes to learning English in Rwanda

There are several reasons that motivate people in Rwanda (especially those that are educated and/or involved in business) to learn English. Globally, English is becoming a lingua franca and is associated with several advantages: education, power, prestige, decent jobs and many other advantages (Bhatt, 2001; Nunan, 2003; Altbach, 2004; Seidlhofer, 2005; Guilherme, 2007). In Rwanda, English is the only medium of instruction from Grade 4 onwards and has been portrayed as the only medium of instruction in the country (Sibomana, 2014). English also links Rwanda to the East African countries with which it does most of its trade and the Rwandan Government encourages its public servants to learn it (Government of Rwanda, 2008, Kwibuka, 2013). Some adults actually regret not having managed to achieve proficiency in English when they were still at school and are determined to do all it takes to give it to their children (Tabaro, 2013; Kwibuka, 2013). This remorse in the face of the need for English today is another reason why more and more adults in Rwanda are investing in learning English (Kwibuka, 2013), which has increased private schools meant to offer English courses in a non-formal way⁴. Kwibuka (2013) notes that such schools are found in almost every business centre in the country.

Based on the situation described in the above paragraph, it can be argued that most of the adult people who study English in Rwanda are more instrumentally than integratively motivated to learn English. Some people, especially those who are pushed by the system to study English may not be integratively motivated at all especially when failure to achieve the required level of proficiency can have negative effects including job loss (Samuelson and Freedman, 2010). For instance, the Rwanda Education Board indicates that English proficiency tests shall be administered from 2015 and they “will impact on future teacher mobility, promotion, career development, transfer, dismissal, etc.”⁵ Such people as teachers may have negative attitudes towards English because its advent represents a threat for them. Such attitudes may decrease their success in their learning and/or push them to strive for the minimal level that is required of them. This level may not necessarily mean success in using English for daily communication especially because it is measured using written tests, which do not account for communicative competence in all its facets.

Young people, on the other hand, may be more integratively motivated because of positive attitudes that they may have towards English, as a result of the good picture that has been painted of English through such platforms as meetings, official instructions and media and everyday conversation about the importance of this language globally and nationally (Sibomana, 2014). Thus, young people in Rwanda considering that speaking English is cool (Kwibuka, 2013), may long to speak the language of the world and to be part of the global English community (Plaut, 2012).

English language Input/output in Rwanda

The amount of input and output that a second language learner takes in and produces respectively depends on how much the target language is used in the community where the acquisition takes place (Krashen, 1981; Du, 2009; Yule,

⁴Available at <http://www.britishcouncil.org/africa-rw-teaching-centre.htm>, accessed on 09 September 2014.

⁵Available at http://www.newtimes.co.rw/PDF_ads/REB%20Press%20Release.pdf, accessed on 09 September 2014).

2014). Therefore, in order to understand the amount of input and output that is available in Rwanda and its role in the acquisition of English in Rwanda, it is important to analyze the Rwandan linguistic landscape.

Rwanda is one of the few countries in the world where the whole population virtually speaks the same indigenous language: more than 99% speak Kinyarwanda (NISR, 2014). This makes this country a practically homogeneous linguistic community. However, English, French and Kiswahili are also used as foreign languages with English and French also being official languages. English and French are taught as compulsory school subjects while Kiswahili is taught as an elective subject except for the learners who are taking languages as major subjects at high school. As pointed out by Rosendal (2010), the proficiency in languages learnt formally is poor in Rwanda, and other researchers (e.g. Sibomana, 2010; Williams, 2011; USAID, 2012) have indicated that the ability to read in English is relatively low for primary, secondary and university students.

Therefore, it is not surprising to find that all research that has been conducted on the use of English in Rwanda in different spheres of life (e.g. Sibomana, 2006; Sibomana, 2010; Laviolette, 2012; Pearson, 2014) has one common finding: the proficiency in English and the use of this language in daily communication by many Rwandans (including the educated ones) are very limited. For instance, in a research that I conducted at Kigali Institute of Education on the sociolinguistic status of English in 2006, I found that the use of this language was confined to classroom settings and to academic senate meetings while Kinyarwanda dominated all other settings, including Board meetings (Sibomana, 2006). In another research on the experiences of postgraduate Rwandan students with the use of English, I found that these had very limited knowledge of English and did not use it in their daily communication, though these occupied various government official positions (Sibomana, 2010). In a study by Pearson (2014), none of the Rwandan teachers (from both rural and urban schools) reported to have sufficient skills to teach in English. Nzitabakuze (2012) and Uwambayinema (2013), who explored teachers' experiences with the use of English, also came up with the same findings while Laviolette (2012) noted inability to communicate in English by some public servants. This situation suggests that people who are studying English in Rwanda are exposed to a very limited input and, therefore, their output may also be very limited.

Acquiring English in Rwanda: a discussion

From the above description of the Rwandan context in relation to the acquisition of English, it appears that some conditions are in favor of the acquisition while others are not. For instance, there are a lot of initiatives from the Government, other Organizations (such as the British Council) and private investors to offer courses in English in villages as remote as Ruhuru, in Nyaruguru district (Kwibuka, 2013). McCrummen (2008) also notes that local English-language schools are filling up with students and it is common to find taxi drivers with French-English dictionaries in their glove compartments. In addition, the teaching of English as a school subject in formal education (from the pre-school to the university levels) has been reinforced and children start learning this language during their language

critical period. As has been mentioned previously, there are several factors that increase motivation for the people who study English, which are centred mainly on the instrumental advantages associated with this language: education, job, business and travelling opportunities (McCrummen, 2008; Kwibuka, 2013).

However, the teaching of English in what Lightbown and Spada (2001) call 'traditional instructional environments' as is the case in Rwanda may not lead to the attainment of the kind of proficiency that is required for one to take part in everyday communication using English. This is because, as these scholars go on to argue, "the focus is on the language itself [vocabulary and grammar] rather than on the information which is carried by the language" (p. 92) or, in other words, accuracy rather than fluency.⁶ In addition, it has been noted that the classroom is almost the only setting where learners are exposed to English and teachers are almost the only model and source of input for learners (Banegas, 2009). As has been mentioned previously, these teachers themselves are not proficient users of this language (McGreal, 2009; Nzitabakuze, 2012; Uwambayinema, 2013; Pearson, 2014). This may be why some studies have suggested that people who studied English in Rwanda do better in grammar than in oral language use in context (Sibomana, 2010). Indeed, Bylund and Oostendorp (2013) suggest that learners who are only exposed to foreign language in class often learn greater grammatical knowledge than naturalistic learners.

Given the aforementioned limited use of English in Rwanda, the opportunities for these learners to produce output, which Yule (2014) describes as one of the difficult things to provide in second language classes, are very limited. As a response to the challenge raised in the above paragraph, language education scholars (e.g. Canale and Swain, 1980; Howatt, 1984; Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Scheckle, 2009; Andrewes, 2011; Illés, 2012) suggest the adoption of communicative approaches. However, these have been found difficult to implement in foreign language contexts like Rwanda, where learners and teachers' knowledge of the target language is limited (Scheckle, 2009), suggesting that classroom communication in English is very limited especially at the primary level (Williams, 2004; Williams et al, 2004; Williams, 2011; USAID, 2012). However, even in ideal circumstances, classroom alone is not enough but has to be complemented by informal settings or 'the street' (Lightbown & Spada, 2001).

Another factor which is likely to limit the amount of input and output for the learners of English in Rwanda is the fear of being judged, which may increase the level of affective filter for many. As Du (2009) put it, when second language learners feel that they are not able to make the proper social impression, the fear of negative evaluation occurs. According to this scholar, this fear "was found to be a strong source of language anxiety" (p. 163). For instance, one Rwandan soccer player who also happened to be a high school leaver ran away from journalists who wanted to interview him after he had been 'the man of the match'; he simply told them, "me I don't know English". Some of the people who commented on this incident wondered how one can fail to answer journalists' questions in simple English after studying the language as a school subject for more than ten years and using it as a medium of instruction for

⁶Retrieved from http://www.newtimes.co.rw/news/views/article_print.php?15670&a=18432&week=3&icon=Print, on 12 September 2014.

⁷Retrieved from <http://ibyamamare.com/umukinnyi-wa-apr-fc-yahunze-mikoro-za-televiziyo-ya-super-sport-kubera-kutamenya-icyongereza/>, on 14 October 2014.

secondary education. While his level of knowledge in English may be low, the situation must have been worsened by his fear of not meeting the interviewers' and listeners' expectations and by the resultant judgment. Another example is that of teachers and lecturers from a French background who indicated that they felt uncomfortable in places where they had to use English⁸. I recall the remarks made to me by a colleague, saying that she had been worried about her proficiency in English but she was lucky that the students she was teaching 'did not know much English' and, therefore, could not judge her proficiency in the language. Such a situation, according to Du (2009), may bring such teachers/lecturers to speak little and avoid situations where there is potential evaluation. This further reduces their opportunities to hear and produce the needed input and output respectively.

It is true that the opportunities of using English in Rwanda have increased compared to the past. For instance, Kwibuka (2013) notes that most advertising billboards and posters in the most frequented places of Kigali are now in English, the business owned by people from Anglophone countries is increasing. Several churches have also introduced religious services in English. Similarly, the number of speakers of English in Rwanda has considerably increased in the last ten years (NISR, 2014). However, these opportunities cannot measure up to those needed by learners inside and outside the classroom in order to achieve communicative competence. Lightbown and Spada (2001) describe these opportunities as follows: learners need to be exposed to a wide variety of vocabulary and structures, to be surrounded by the language for many hours each day, much of which is simply 'overhead', need to encounter different people who use the target language proficiently and to participate in many different types of language events such as brief meetings, commercial transactions, arguments, etc. These are normally available on the 'streets' (Lightbown & Spada, 2001) and the Rwandan streets may not provide these. As has been pointed out, the amount of English found on the Rwandan streets (in taxis, markets, churches, stadia and shopping centers) is very limited (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010; Laviolette, 2012; Pearson, 2014). Therefore, age and motivation as factors are likely to be overridden by the lack of exposure to English because rich and massive exposure to the target language is primary in the acquisition of this (Muñoz, 2010; Bylund&Oostendorp, 2013).

Conclusion

The acquisition of English as a second language in Rwanda is still facing challenges mainly due to a very limited use of this language in everyday communication in the Rwandan community. This situation mainly results from Rwanda being a practically monolingual community of which all members share the same mother tongue: the indigenous Kinyarwanda. However, the need to be able to use this language is becoming more and more significant in this country, especially because English is becoming the language of the world and Rwanda does not want to be left behind (Kagire, 2008). This global nature of English has resulted in the reinforcement of the status of this language in the Rwandan formal and non-formal education systems and of the need for proficiency in this language by many Rwandans.

⁸Retrieved from <http://en.igihe.com/news/english-language-teachers-facing-challenges> on 14 October 2014.

Therefore, while there are challenges, there are also promises, as implied by a 62-year-old lady, Judith Bwabuhe, when addressing President Paul Kagame during a recent tour in one of the country's remotest places:

I know how to share greetings in English: 'Good morning, Good afternoon, Good evening,'" she enthusiastically recited amid applause from the entire crowd. "Your Excellency, I know how to count from one to 100 in English. I want to learn English so that I can communicate with our children in secondary schools. I will be fluently speaking English in the next six months even if I am an old woman. Slowly and slowly I will know (Kwibuka, 2013).

However, in order for these promises to be fulfilled, there is a need for research to enlighten Rwandan educationists on the language teaching approaches and methods which may work better to teach English communicatively in the Rwandan context because it appears that those that have been used so far have not been very effective. In addition, there is a need for an increase in teachers' language pedagogic knowledge and proficiency in English both in formal and informal learning centres so as to make classrooms natural-like contexts of language use where, according to Lightbown and Spada (2001, p. 57), learners "enjoy coming because the content is interesting and relevant to their age and level of ability ... the atmosphere is supportive and non-threatening." This may increase the amount of English spoken on the streets in Rwanda and speed up the materialization of the abovementioned promises.

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