

**Perceptions of International Students from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds regarding English Intensive Language Course. A Case of Francophone West African Students Studying at Kigali Independent University-ULK (Rwanda)**

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**Abstract**

This research explores the perceptions of international students from Francophone West Africa at Kigali Independent University ULK-Rwanda regarding intensive English language course they are imparted before their enrollment in their school programmes. English mastery is one of core tools that students can use to perform well in all their subjects and enhance their communication at or outside the university. Researchers conducted the study between April and June 2024, and used a qualitative approach with 30 in-depth interviews with female and male students. The latter originated from the Francophone West Africa and registered either at the Centre for Languages CELA or in ULK Schools. The interviewees' ages varied between 22 and 35. The researchers used semi-structured individual interviews and the thematic analysis allowed them to identify major themes from the respondents' verbatim. Results indicate that these students had no basics of English language proficiency before they enrolled as ULK students, and hence started learning English course intensively. Most of them acknowledged their aptitude in the language had upgraded because they could express themselves confidently, and could then apply new grammatical rules and vocabulary words. Thus, they admitted key language development since they completed their intensive English language. The changes mostly focused on real contexts where they had to use this language in tangible life circumstances. In addition, results confirm that students' enhanced English language level contributed a lot to the understanding of other subjects they had to learn at university. Ultimately, English is a medium of instruction at ULK whose influence remains indubitable as it allows them to study comfortably their content subjects in their individual departments. Interviewees recommended having more classes of English and extending their learning period. Using equipment that is more appropriate could effectively boost their listening skill. Equally, such environment could allow them to adjust to the academic language requirements easily.

***Keywords:** perceptions, international students, Francophone West Africa, ULK, Rwanda, English Language, intensive course, enroll, school programme*

## **1. Introduction**

Education is key to human empowerment, and English is one of the languages used for that purpose in Rwanda although some people in some countries still disregard it. Many domains promote the learning of the language of Shakespeare, including in education. Three decades ago, people believed that teaching English was a politically neutral endeavor. Learning a language has become a beneficial asset that blesses those who master it, by promoting both education and influencing the economy (Richards, 2022).

In the past, English was a property of the English-speaking world, especially Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States of America, but the Maori speakers have special expertise in language teaching (Eduard, 2024). English is the medium to convey a rich and advanced culture through international art, an idea that, however, has evolved over time. Nowadays, various motivations for learning English have emerged, making it gain fame globally, mostly in international commerce, communication, media and popular culture, and trade. This infers that English is no longer limited to the English-speaking world; instead, it has changed into a global product that is presented in a global language (Hamayan, 2023).

In fact, English is now central to the global language system (Sawir, 2015) because it acts as a basic lingua franca by strengthening its mastery through a self-reinforcing process. It has emerged as the primary language of communication in various fields, including academia, administration, education, business, politics and science. In addition, it has become the most dominant language in globalized advertising and popular culture, cementing its position at the forefront of the international linguistic landscape (Čalovková, 2019). In the context of education, however, international students from colleges in non-English speaking countries may have comprehension difficulties regarding lectures and interactions with their professors due to lack of English proficiency. (Martirosyan et al., 2015)

Kigali Independent University ULK has been receiving huge numbers of international students from 32 African countries, as well as those from outside the continent, with or without English language background. Congruent with Martirosyan et al. (2015), it usually takes longer for international students to meet academic standards in a second language than to acquire interpersonal communication skills essential for day-to-day conversation on campus and in classroom activities. International students with non-English speaking backgrounds studying abroad in countries where English is the medium of education might take even longer to attain academic skills in the second language. In other words, their limited language skills might be one of the determinants directly or indirectly influencing their academic achievement (Daller & Phelan, 2013).

To this background, the students who study at ULK must join the university existing Centre for Languages (CELA) to help them meet their expectations regarding the language and overcome any barriers. The centre receives students' demands from French as well as English speaking countries, who wish to learn or improve their English language skills. Specifically, the centre teaches English as a foreign language to those students, through courses included in the university curriculum (ULK annual report, 2017). Accordingly, this research seeks to explore the effect such programme has on the academic performance of these international students originating from non-speaking countries, particularly French speaking West African countries.

### **Research Objectives**

Researchers conducted this research at ULK, one of the most prestigious private universities in Rwanda, between April and June 2024 with students from West Africa whose language background is French. The research aims to investigate the impact of ULK's intensive courses in English language on these students' academic journey. Therefore, it provides insights for administrators who wish to promote international students from non-English backgrounds' academic success. The study strives to respond to the following research objectives:

- 1) To investigate the students' experiences regarding their journey in learning English intensively as a foreign language through related intensive courses; and
- 2) To ascertain the impact of English language learning on their academic learning process.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Theoretical Framework**

The theory of social constructivism informed this research. Lev Vygotsky introduced the theory in 1968 asserting that language and culture are fundamental frameworks through which humans communicate, comprehend and experience reality (Rachid,2022) Vygotsky posits that language and culture play crucial roles in both human intellectual development and the way people perceive the world. In this theory, learners acquire concepts through language, interpret, and understand them through experiences and interactions within a specific cultural context (Akpan et al., 2020)

### **2.2 Empirical Literature**

#### **2.2.1 English Language in Rwandan Education**

Rwanda got its independence from Belgium, a French-speaking kingdom, in 1962. Thus, the country had inherited the Belgian education system using French language. The advent of the new government in 1995 had brought a new politically driven vision of revamping the then-existing structure of education through language change. Sibomana (2020) explicates how adopting English language as a medium of education in Rwanda set a new era for the entire education structure countrywide. Accordingly, all Rwandan schools, from primary to tertiary levels shifted gradually from the colonial master's language to a different one despite the myriads of challenges that followed the revolution. Pierre & Andala (2023) confers how the change of education books, the training of teachers in all sectors of education, rewriting educational teaching documents, the

preparation of learners belonged to the long list. In a word, this alteration in educational language implied a deep modification of Rwandan education structure.

Today, Rwanda has fully implemented the use of English as a foreign language and the language of instruction, which is now attracting both local and international students of all genders, either already speaking English or not. Such language magnetism, congruent with (Komba & Stephen, 2015), understands how students without English background need special training in the local education language to allow them adapt well to their academic journey. These students need intensive courses, along with other language courses they take in their respective schools, so that they can perform academically with satisfaction. This has been the strategy of all tertiary educational institutions countrywide, and ULK is no exception. This institution has better understood how English as language of learning has a strong impact on its students' academic development. Similarly, Aizawa et al. (2023) contend that countries that prioritise removing barriers to multilingualism and English competence have seen increased student enrollment and academic achievement. Graham (1987), as cited in Azkiyah et al. (2023) emphasized that language aptitude remains critical for incoming students, especially in the context of international students studying in English-speaking countries. Besides, Martirosyan et al. (2015) have qualitatively examined the impact of English language expertise and multilingualism on the learning process of international students enrolled in four-year universities in the United States. The study showed several evidences among students who reported that English language has helped them a lot to navigate other courses.

### **2.2.2. Intensive English Course and Language development**

The ability to communicate effectively in English has is a way to admit one has developed their language. This is a crucial factor for both employment opportunities and pursuance of advanced studies. Consequently, the teaching of English language has the goal of developing the learners' language skills, which has become a significant focus for educators, universities and governments (Loi & Hong, 2023).

Furthermore, intensive English courses remain an important step that can foster the development of students' Basic Interpersonal Communications Skill (BICS), as well as their Cognitive

Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) (Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006). For the same reason, the effectiveness of intensive courses in English can facilitate learning process in a variety of academic disciplines, especially in a foreign language in a shorter period. In other words, learning can motivate students to do better in other courses and in evaluations. This is because, in line with Rebecca (2014), intensive courses embolden students to relate to practical basic interpersonal communication skills and cognitive academic language development as well.

### **2.2.3 Intensive English Course and Communication Skills**

Studying English can allow learners to express themselves fluently in front of others, explain their ideas smoothly, with order and clarity (Nur, 2022). Learning the language can also enhances other skills that might have been dormant in the learner, including creativity, reasoning, problem solving, just to name a few. One of the requirements of the current era is to increase the success of foreign language education, as the Ministry of Education (MoE) in Turkey has stipulated. According to Gelen and Akekmekci (2022), the Ministry admits that making changes and improvements in the curriculum can help English education become a tool for learners to augment their communication capacities. In the same vein, Nur (2022) depicts how the European Union sides with the compatibility between the implementation of intensive foreign language education in some secondary schools and the improvement of students' communicative competence.

According to Thuratham (2022), students who can communicate well in English stand to gain a great deal from doing so, not just in terms of the advancement of science but also in terms of sociopolitical communication, economics, and cultural understanding, and even in day-to-day living. As a result, all students, regardless of their area of concentration, are required to take at least one English class during their time in higher education. This demonstrates how a strong command of English language can boost students' achievement in their academic and professional endeavours (Andayani, 2022)

### **2.2.4 English and Career Opportunities**

Literature shows a straight connection between English language and job opportunities. Maros et al. (2012) has compared the faculties and the students' perceptions of an English for Academic

Purposes (EAP) and English for Professional Purposes (EPP). This highlights that the English courses students take must focus on their academic tasks as well as issues relating to job activities they need after they have graduated. Students are deeply concerned about their chances of success in life, and the courses they study are of value in opening up those prospects of success for them. This sounds a crucial element in the choice of courses as students make comparisons across courses and assess their chances for employment and the maximization of their future opportunities for a life worth living (Andayani, 2022).

Consequently, it is worthwhile to understand how students recognize where they fit into the world's economy and their scope of grabbing job opportunities, as well as the distribution of success (Adjoe, 2017). This concerns English language with business courses in particular because students did not foresee any worthwhile employment opportunities with a qualification in English. It might also reflect the exact use of such a degree because of the many questions the students' interactants pose and for which they could not provide any answer. In line with Andayani (2022), this illustrates the increase of students' fears because employers do not advertise specifically for English graduates. Despite all this, nevertheless, the student of English will have to compete in job applications in different local or international institutions.

In fact, grasping the language students' explanations and projections for the qualification they will get illustrates how their language ability fits into the demands for the job market. Adjoe (2017) and Thuratham (2022) acknowledge that such understanding can also clarify the context in which students desire to include their language experiences and qualifications. In other words, this exploratory research exposes how students feel about themselves while learning the English language, and their joy upon its completion. Similarly, Loi and Hong (2023) substantiate that students of foreign languages have their way of perceiving their identity based on their learning process experience. This depicts how this identity remains meaningful for the learners' life and the chances they can attain in job opportunities. In this fashion, language identity epitomizes the relation the learners have with their colleagues who are learning the same language in the same school.

### **3. Methodology**

This research adopted a qualitative approach with a thematic paradigm. A qualitative research approach was helpful for the researchers because it helped them to understand the respondents' perceptions regarding their learning of the English intensive course at ULK. These students were learning or had learned the English intensive course at this institution at the time of the interview. Besides, the researchers adopted thematic analysis because it allowed them to grasp their interviewees' opinions regarding their potential impetuses they had in mind as they learned the intensive course of English at ULK before any other academic activity. Researchers noted meticulously the interviewees' interpretations of the role of English intensive course in their academic journey. They grasped how compulsory the learning was for the students before they started their faculty modules. Thanks to thematic analysis, the researchers wanted also to explore how their "participants interpreted their personal experiences and the meanings they attributed to language learning" (Kelliher, 2011) at ULK. Overall, the researchers bore in mind that there was not one but multiple realities about the phenomenon under study.

The research used purposive sampling. This sampling permitted the researchers to select a sample of 30 interviewees, 15 male and 15 female students studying at ULK but from different French speaking West African countries. Researchers chose ULK because it hosts a huge number of foreign students countrywide. Nearly 2,000 international students from 32 different countries/regions flock to ULK (ULK Report, 2024). The same report points that 632 students originate from different Francophone West Africa countries alone (ULK Reports, 2024). This qualitative research selected 30 respondents purposively to inquire about their opinions regarding their English language learning. They learn English at the university's Centre for Languages<sup>1</sup> (CELA), a very active and well-equipped Centre for with highly experienced local and international facilitators in languages training. The centre trains the students in the intensive course of English along other languages, for a four months period before registering in faculties.

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<sup>1</sup> CELA is an acronym for Centre for Languages. ULK has had this centre since its inception. The centre has been training students in different languages, English, French, Kiswahili, etc. in order to respond to both the market and Rwandan government demands regarding the need for learning a language for communication or education.



Interviewees' ages varied between 22 and 35. Researchers collected primary data through semi-structured individual interviews encompassing transcribed interviews, and an inductive approach inspired them as they used open-code to engage with the data. Furthermore the codes helped the researchers to discover the complexity of the data because interpretation and analysis of information do not happen via mechanical coding. To put it differently, the process considers the context in which research occurs, other texts or related theoretical concepts (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013). Researchers clustered codes into categories, and so came up with detecting the themes. This has also allowed the researchers to apply thematic analysis during the scrutiny process. In compliance with ethical considerations (Flick, 2007), implying researchers sought an ethical clearance from ULK. In addition, researchers negotiated the participants to sign voluntarily a consent form after they had explained them the objective of the research. Researchers clarified there was no fiduciary gain for participation and that anyone would quit anytime should they wish so. The research topic was not sensitive, which motivated the participants to allow the researchers to record their verbatim and use them along their real identity names. Therefore, interviewee's name will occur before his/her verbatim followed by the ULK and the year the researchers conducted the interview.

#### **4. Results**

The thematic analysis technique was used in this study to categorize the results of the interviews into significant themes. The four themes: Poor English language before students joined intensive English course, Students' English language competence along with intensive course, Students' English language aptitude after intensive course and Students' English language in connection with other subject.

##### **4.1 Poor English Language before Students joined Intensive English Course**

Most interviewees shared how their level of English proficiency was insignificant or very low when they first came to ULK. Congruent with Yang, (2018) students may have a low level in the education language, but later acquire some notions that they can improve through effective

practice. Such incentive depicts how learners can move from the level of poor language to advanced language skills. Similarly, interviewees Oceane and Yusuf /ULK/2024, respectively, put it in this way,

*Before starting the intensive course, my English proficiency was basic I had trouble making a simple sentence even with irregular verbs it was complicated. I could not speak well a simple sentence in English and I have difficulty listening this language.*

*My level of English before I got involved in the intensive course was quite low. I could only present myself, but I couldn't make a correct sentence nor hold a conversation. I had even a small number of vocabularies in English but now it's fine.*

#### **4.2 Students' English language competence along with intensive course**

This theme emerged from the question that sought to understand whether the interviewees witnessed improvement in their English language proficiency since they had started their intensive course. Most interviewees admitted that they felt their English language proficiency had improved because they could express themselves confidently, had learned, and can now apply new grammatical rules and vocabulary words. Hidayati, (2017) substantiates that language learners can attest their learning process has improved when they can understand their target language and communicate through it. Most interviewees also shared the views of Ali and Amour/ULK/2024, as they asserted that

*Since I started the intensive course, my English proficiency is improving notably. I feel more confident to communicate and discuss in-group work with my classmates in various situations and I can follow the videos in English. I can still make mistakes but I am also certain my vocabulary words are expanding.*

*Now you see; that is perfect. My speaking, writing, reading and listening are improving. I can write an essay on different topics and I can present orally any work done. I understand well what our tutor says. I feel an evolution as I can chat live or answer a phone call. I am now very comfortable with English speakers like South Sudanese and Rwandans because of group discussions my trainers offer us in classroom.*

#### **4.3 Students' English language aptitude after intensive course**

This theme emerged from the different opinions the interviewees shared when answering the question about key changes they had noticed since they completed their intensive English

language. The changes mostly focused on real contexts where they had to use English language in tangible life circumstances. To Sibomana, (2014) the best way to ascertain a learner has mastered a language is to use naturally in the community with different people who can understand it. Interviewees Jonas/ULK/2024 and Leila/ULK/2024 respectively confirmed,

*Yes, since completing the intensive English language course, I have noticed significant improvements in my language proficiency in real-life situations. I feel more confident and capable when communicating in English in various settings, such as social gatherings, and everyday conversations. My aptitude has enabled me to express myself more fluently and understand others better, leading to enhanced overall communication skills. At the shop or market I can bargain some prices, ask something to someone on the street.*

*Yes, I've detected many changes in all four-language skills and this has enabled me to live in an English-speaking environment. Many changes were noticed especially my pronunciation of the English language. That has also helped me to communicate with other foreigners who do not speak my vernacular language. Sincerely, this course has is helping me a lot, as now I can express my ideas and understand what the people around me are talking about. I can't doubt about my academic performance are now interesting.*

#### **4.4 Students' enhanced English language level in portion performance of other subject**

The above theme is the outcome to responses of the interviewees regarding the question that aimed to understand if the interviewees had observed improvements in their performance in other courses due to enhanced language skills. Ewie, (2015) highlighted how English as medium of education, is a booster for students' performance in all other subjects they take in their departments. Similarly, interviewee Zitelsia /ULK/2024 admitted

*Yes, I have noticed improvements in my performance in other courses as my enhanced language skills have allowed me to better understand course material, participate actively in discussions. The improvement is notably as by now, I can join a group work during the assessments, do my assignments by myself without translating some thing or giving good answers during the assignment from my point of view.*

## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1 Poor English Language Proficiency before Students joined Intensive English Course**

The verbatim from mirror how they could not spell, speak nor write anything correctly in the English language before they registered for learning the intensive English language course at CELA-ULK. In other words, they could not speak nor write because their English grammar and vocabulary was almost zero. During the research interview process, they all confided, *“we are not Allah/God! No one can speak a language whose basics they have never learned, either at home or in school.”* To Alsariera, (2024) human beings speak a language by exposure, illuminating how the entire process requires the learner to have an idea of how syntax and semantics work in the focal language. In fact, these students had never exercised English where they live in Kigali or in their respective home countries. Ever since they landed in Rwanda, they reached ULK but only befriended other students they originated the same country. Such grouping could never help them community (ULK) and social (Rwanda) immersion in their new environments because they cooked, lived and walked with students from the same country, which rather favored their mother tongues, but hindered the English language. Similarly, Chomsky (2022) asserted how socialisation in a new environment can boost a learner’s language acquisition. Conversely, these students ascertained that their lecturers were very kind and motivational for them during the classroom learning process because they always encouraged them to immerse joyfully and fully into the entire development. Such in and out-class encouragement made these learners attempt their best to acquire some important new grammatical rules and vocabulary, which had helped them to complete any task their facilitators had assigned to them. Furthermore, these interviewees disclosed that *“learning the English language has equally helped in our individual emotional stability and our social immersion into the ULK community of students.”* Congruent with Quill, (2005) language learners feel frustrated to live in a societal or university community whose language they cannot speak because it hinders their communication. Consequently, a language learner can gain moral and psychological stability when learning and speaking a language that a school uses as a medium of education. This can reduce the learner’s uncertainties, as he/she is certain to effectively do practice, and work well class exercises, assignments and assessments, as well as communicating with the university community’s members.

The finding lines with Jumrah (2019) who asserted that one of the most important factors that affect learning a second or foreign language, is an opportunity to use a target language in a stable

psychological mood. The more time a learner is exposed to a target language, in formal or/and informal settings, the more the linguistic environment influences his/her second language acquisition. Moreover, Yang et al. (2006) averred that poor English language proficiency is the primary cause of the isolation of international students from instructors and local students. Studies by Martirosyan, (2005) have confirmed that not only learners' language competence and performance indirectly affects their academic achievement, but their psycho-sociocultural aspects as well.

## **5.2 Students' English language competence along with intensive course**

By scrutinizing the interviewees' ideas, we notice they emphasize improvement of proficiency regarding their learning of intensive English language course. They admit they feel more confident than before during in-class group discussions, can better understand audios and videos in English, and have expanded their vocabulary lexicons. Consequently, their skills in speaking, writing, reading, and listening have improved. They can now write essays on diverse topics, present their work orally, comprehend their trainers well, and engage in conversations with English speakers on or outside the campus, as well as when receiving calls from someone fluent in English.

In line with Burke (2011), through Intensive English courses trainees can enhance communication skills by demanding students to communicate clearly, frequently, and respectfully with others. By working with others, students can learn how to articulate their thoughts, opinions, and feedback. Teamwork in classroom and under a severe follow-up of the instructor remains a very helpful strategy that can allow students to master the English language skills. The same strategy can foster their active learning by asking and answering questions, which mirrors active listening.

One of the most significant benefits of intensive language courses is the extent to which students can immerse in the language (Kasim, 2015). Language learners feel compelled to learn and remember at an equally fast pace because these courses are so fast paced. In fact, language students have no choice but to become comfortable with the language because of the nature of intensive courses. The quicker learners understand the pattern, the better they can move forward and enjoy the feeling of being so fully immersed within the English language learning process.

### **5.3 Students' English language aptitude after intensive course**

The interviewees' perceptions show that students have experienced significant improvements in all four-language skills. The progress denotes the language learners have substantially enriched their ability, which can facilitate them to immerse in an English-speaking environment. This advancement highlights the transformative impact of language acquisition on daily communication and social integration.

Furthermore, learning the intensive English course has also markedly improved the interviewee's ability to express ideas and comprehend conversations. This dual enhancement is vital for both personal and academic settings. The ability to articulate thoughts clearly is essential for participating in discussions, presenting ideas, and engaging in social exchanges. Simultaneously, understanding others' speech is crucial for effective listening, which is a cornerstone of successful communication.

This results is in line with Cahyono (2002), who argued that students in intensive English courses have more opportunities to practice their speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills in a supportive and structured environment. Such a setting favors students to reinforce their knowledge, learn from their mistakes, and develop a more intuitive sense of the language. However Almudibry (2022) claimed that intensive English courses often involve a higher degree of student participation and communication practice, which is essential for developing fluency and confidence. Whether it is through role-play or simulated real-life situations, the student's chances to use English skills in a relevant way go up in longer class sessions.

### **5.4 Students' enhanced English language level in portion performance of other subject**

This interviewee's opinion confirms how she has observed notable improvements in her performance across other academic courses, directly attributable to her enhanced language skills. A better grasp of English language and medium of teaching at ULK has allowed her to participate in various class activities in all the subjects she is taking. She implies that she can now actively

participate in class discussions, engage in-group work during assessments, and independently work on assignments without needing to translate material.

These research findings connect with the study of Hakorimana and Hesbon (2023), who showed a statistical significant positive relationship between English usage in instruction and the academic performance of students in academic modules. The study demonstrated a high percentage of both teachers and students strongly agreeing that English is essential in various aspects of teaching and learning, such as speaking, reading, and writing skills. All module teachers strongly linked English usage to academic performance in other courses the university offers.

On the other hand, Martirosyan et al. (2015) discussed that academic performance in high learning institutions where English is a medium of instructions the demand for English-speaking. To this end, teachers use several strategies to encourage students to use the English language in academic settings. In fact, the process was implemented in central Louisiana University in the United States to help international students' academic success, mostly offering them an intensive course of English.

However, mastery of a language is not only about conversational ability but also about comprehending and producing academic texts. Ashkar,(2014) confirms that improved language skills can lead to better understanding of lectures, more effective note-taking and enhanced writing skills for in-class activities, assignments and exams. This correlation between language proficiency and academic success highlights the broader educational benefits that students can get by learning the English language.

## **6. Conclusions**

This research has explored the influence of intensive English language course on international students from non-English backgrounds and academic performance, with focus on Francophone West African students of ULK. Because the English language is major for students' integration in academic community, these students had to learn it as its role in their academic performance was paramount crucial. Interviewees' statements clarify that despite having their English proficiency

very low before joining the intensive course of English, these students had to ascertain their performance increased. The increase concerned the effective and practical use of the language thanks to acquired grammar, vocabulary and the four skills. Improvement helped them to work well in in-class activities, assignments and assessments, and to communicate with the university community members who can use English. In addition, results have established that students' bettered English language level boosted their understanding of other subjects' contents they were learning at university. Eventually, English is a medium of instruction at ULK, and its contribution to students' positive performance in other courses remains admirably huge.

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