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An Analysis of the Factors Affecting the Mastery of English Language Skills Among University Students

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Abstract

This study focuses on investigating the factors affecting the mastery of English language skills among university students. While plenty of quantitative studies were accessed in this systematic review, the evaluation highlighted the most significant gap as the lack of extensive purely qualitative studies on the factors affecting mastery of English language skills from the perspective of university students. Moreover, majority of university students in English as a Second Language (ESL) countries like Somalia, China, South Korea and Saudi Arabia among others still display poor mastery of basic English language abilities such as speaking, writing, listening, and reading. This is so despite efforts by many ESL countries in Africa, Asia and Europe accepting English as a national or official language for usage in educational institutions and offices. As a result, a complete assessment of studies on the factors influencing the mastery of English language skills in universities in ESL countries was required in order to shed light on the issue and discover missing links. The study also offers key insights into Somalia, a country that is investing a lot in popularizing English as an official and instruction language. The researcher looked up relevant existing literature using search engines like Semantic Scholar, Google Scholar, ProQuest, and Connected Papers. Consequently, the review's key recommendation is that, in order to get a more in-depth and thorough understanding of the situation, more substantial purely qualitative studies be widely conducted in these countries to address the issue through the judgements and experiences of students. This could help to strengthen present efforts to find a long-term solution to the English language deficit in these countries. Other interventions such as engaging more stakeholder groups, embracing English literature, international benchmarking, refresher courses for teachers and clear policies on language of instruction in universities should be adopted.

Keywords: English Language Skills, Education, Proficiency, Teaching

1. Introduction

English is the most extensively used international language, spoken by almost 1.5 billion people worldwide (Simon & Simon, 2024; Statista, 2024; Dyvik, 2024; Ethnologue, 2023). Over the years, English has spread to very many countries, becoming the most widely spoken language in the world today (Simon & Simon, 2024). A report by Ethnologue (2023) reveals that over 1.46 billion people speak English around the World, amounting to an incredible 18.07% of the global population, or almost 1 in 5 people. Therefore, more people speak English than any other language today and by 2050, the total number of English speakers is anticipated to grow to 2 billion people or more (Talbot, 2023). English has become so spread that it is taught in over 118 countries, holding immense value as a language to learn (Pareeshti, 2023; Raj, 2023; Dean, 2023; Ethnologue, 2023; Zuzhi & Gengsheng, 2022). Due to such statistics that make English an important global language, many countries have rushed to associate themselves with it, either making it an official language, a subject in school or a language of instruction. Some of these countries are in Africa such as Somalia whose association with English dates back to the British colonial days, while others are everywhere in Asia such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Indonesia, Vietnam, China and Qatar. Other ESL countries are spread all over in other continents.

Language policies in EFL countries have favoured English as a subject or language of instruction from primary up to university though it faces competition from local languages in these countries. For instance, English is the official language of instruction in universities in Somalia (MOECHE, 2017). Somali universities thus invest a lot in teaching English to students as a foundation course. Many modern universities have opened English language centres to offer full English courses to give a good background to their students before they start concentrating on their academic programs. However, several studies in the past have concluded that students still struggle to improve their English language skills (Zahra, 2024; Mohamed, 2022; Mohamed, 2018). Many continue to use Arabic for religious purposes or fall back to Somali their mother tongue. Universities too are left without option but to fall back to using Somali as a mode of instruction. This undermines the government policy on the language of instruction consequently worsening the English language problem in the country (Unicef, 2016; DCG, 2021; Altai Consulting, 2018; MOECHE, 2017). Consequently, Somalia registers miserable rankings relating to English usage. According to the EF English Proficiency Report (2023), an EFL country like Somalia is among the countries posting a very low proficiency index while the World Population Review (2024) ranks Somalia in position 8 from the bottom of the literacy table, only posting 41% literacy, yet it is important to mention that many studies have found a positive relationship between literacy and career success (Achmad, 2021; Schmeiser, 2009). Relatedly, Dodo et al (2023) found a positive relationship between English proficiency and career opportunities and growth. Such a background of English has attracted the attention of researchers from a global to the national perspective (Zahra, 2024; Achmad, 2021; Dodo et al, 2023).

The situation in Somalia is not different from many other countries using English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Many university students in these countries continue to demonstrate low proficiencies in the basic English skills – writing, reading, listening and speaking

(Mukhtarkhanova, et al., 2024; Sadewi, Muhardika & Mahendra, 2024; Chand, 2021). This is despite the fact that many of them are exposed to English right away from primary school to university (Mukhtarkhanova, et al., 2024; Ali, 2020; Mohamed, 2018; Zahra, 2024). In a desperate attempt to fix this English language gap, universities initiate various programs including English courses to equip students with the necessary language skills. That notwithstanding, majority of the students at these universities continue to struggle to participate in academics due to the language barrier. They find difficulty using English learning resources such as text books, websites, videos and podcasts. Therefore, they continue to perform poorly in examinations, tests and assessments that are set and answered in English. Such students quickly switch back to their local languages for easy participation and understanding. However, as they do so, it worsens the situation as they end up in a vicious cycle of their language problem (Zahra, 2024). Such a cycle could be attributed to cultural, social, political, environmental and individual factors that need to be studied further in all contexts. Such trends continue to undermine efforts to make English a language of instruction in universities, affect academic performance and participation, and have a long-term impact on career growth of students (Zahra, 2024; Abdishakur, 2020; Abakunda, Kule, Ugwu, Turyamureeba & Kamaami, 2023).

English is widely taught in schools and is the language of instruction at many universities and a working language of many workplaces in many EFL countries (Ibrahim, 2022; Ahmed, 2022). Therefore, the poor English language skills of most university students in these countries should worry all stakeholders in their education. There is also sufficient evidence of the global importance of English to university students (Pareeshti, 2023; Raj, 2023; Dean, 2023; Talbot, 2023). English serves as the primary language of instruction in many universities worldwide. By possessing a strong command of English, students can fully engage in lectures, actively participate in discussions, and comprehend complex academic materials. English is not only extremely important for academic pursuits but also for future career prospects. In today's globalized job market, employers value candidates who possess strong communication skills and can effectively interact with colleagues, clients, and stakeholders from diverse backgrounds. For aspiring researchers, a strong command of English is indispensable. The majority of scientific papers, journals, and conferences are conducted in English. Proficiency in the language enables students to conduct literature reviews, comprehend cutting-edge research, and contribute to scholarly discussions. It also facilitates the publication of research findings in reputable international journals, widening the scope of their work and increasing their academic visibility. English proficiency ensures that students can access the vast array of educational resources available, ranging from research papers and textbooks to online databases and scholarly journals. It enables them to contribute to classroom discussions, collaborate with peers, and fully comprehend course content, enhancing their overall learning experience. A high level of English proficiency allows graduates to pursue job opportunities globally, broaden their career options, and compete in an increasingly interconnected world (Pareeshti, 2023; Talbot, 2023).

Consequently, investigating factors affecting mastery of English language skills among university students is necessary. The findings could contribute to already existing literature and efforts to address the poor English language skills among university students. As a result,

this could pave a clear career path for the students. Findings of the study are also necessary to empower universities in EFL countries to make a significant contribution to English language development.

2. Theoretical Framework

The Sociocultural Learning Theory developed by Leo Vygotsky in the 20th century was used in the study (McLeod, 2024, Vygotsky, 1978). According to this view, language emerges as a direct result of a culture's symbols and tools. Individuals can learn language through a number of social events, contexts, communication, and processes that all lead to language acquisition (McLeod, 2024; Vygotsky, 1978). The Sociocultural Learning Theory also considers how learners are influenced by their peers and how social situations affect their ability to acquire knowledge. As a result, instructors who incorporate the Sociocultural Learning Theory into their instructional design might become more aware of how learners can directly help one another, as well as how cultural norms can influence a learner's learning behavior. Several scholars investigating language development have employed the theory and found it useful in understanding how cultural, environmental, personal, and classroom aspects influence foreign language learning (McLeod, 2024; Ozfidan, Machtmes, & Demir, 2014; Nguyen, 2019). The theory's propositions, such as communicative and peer-to-peer language acquisition, apply to contemporary EFL teaching and learning. All of this promotes linguistic contact, which translates into language learning. Vygotsky thought that language evolved from social interactions for communication goals. As a result, the theory is useful in understanding the factors that influence language development in students studying English as a foreign language, as the majority of them rely on it for communicative and social activities. The theory proved useful in examining cultural, contextual, classroom, motivational, and instructional aspects that influence English language proficiency. The theory was also useful in making practical recommendations for designing efficient learning settings..

3. Methodology

The researcher employed different search engines such as Semantic Scholar, Google Scholar, ProQuest, and Connected Papers to look for literature on prior studies, journal articles, and dissertations on factors influencing English language proficiency. Using different search engines improved recall and increased coverage of the topic hence helping the researcher get a better understanding of the topic and maximize available data. ProQuest gave the researcher user friendly experience, clean interface and response design and allowed easily sorting documents by their publication dates, number of items per page and excluding duplicate documents. Connected Papers allowed switching between graph and list views making it easy to sort articles by citations, references and similarity to the original paper. Google Scholar helped the researcher identify highly cited literature, check metrics and easily save articles. Lastly, Semantic Scholar's highly influential citations feature helped in identifying articles that had a significant impact on other publications. The key term parameters "factors influencing English language mastery" were representative of the search undertaken. Initially, 57 papers were obtained; however, following screening, 36 articles were used in this work. In arriving at the 36 articles, many articles older than nine years were dropped, while those that were not from

ESL countries or not strictly conforming to the key words of the search phrase were all dropped.

4. Results

4.1 Factors Affecting the Mastery of English Language Skills among University Students

The researcher acknowledges that there are many studies from a global perspective that have delved into the issue of poor English language skills among university students. Most of these have studied English proficiency in relation to one or two factors affecting it. Most of the studies were quantitative hence the need of a qualitative study to tackle the problem from a students' perspective. Studies also limited stakeholder engagement yet stakeholders such as parents and government could have an influence on student learning outcomes. The already existing literature therefore served as a basis for conclusions and recommendations.

4.1.1 The Literature Factor

Bazimaziki (2019) did a qualitative study on university students' perceptions of using literary genres to enhance language proficiency among university students in Rwanda with a view that Language and Literature are taught to equip students with not only communication skills like listening, reading, writing and speaking but also ethical values, critical thinking and analytical skills. The study found out that despite efforts to teach English, proficiency issues were still rampant across the key skills. At tertiary level, crosscutting courses such as English for Academic Purposes and English for Specific Purposes had been emphasised but were not enough for students to be well equipped with enough communication skills in English. However, it was found that most of the students who had been exposed to Literary genres underwent increase of language proficiency at various level each in the four language skills namely listening, speaking, writing and reading. Therefore, Literature was used to enhance language communication skills, critical thinking and creativity in language learning as they expose learners to contexts that can enable them to use language in describing various things and situations, hence developing their communication competences.

The view is supported by many other researchers (Padmavat, 2022; Chen, 2022). Chen (2022) asserts that adopting the teaching method that focuses on the development of communicative competence in English Language and Literature is helpful to students in China and enhances their comprehensive English skill. The study by Bazimaziki (2019) offers insightful information about how literary genres help Rwandan university students improve their language skills. The study skillfully illustrates the many advantages of incorporating literature into language instruction, including enhanced creativity, critical thinking, and communication abilities. However, its scope is restricted to Rwanda which would limit how broadly its conclusions can be applied in other situations. Furthermore, although acknowledging that proficiency problems persist despite the availability of English

classes, the study does not go into great detail about the particular difficulties or impediments that make these courses less effective. It is important to note that a significant study gap exists about the transfer of these findings to other EFL countries, such as Somalia, despite the fact that Bazimaziki (2019) and other studies (Chen, 2022; Padmavat, 2022) highlight the positive effects of literature on English language proficiency.

Specifically, there is a lack of studies exploring how the integration of literary genres into English language foundation programs can address proficiency challenges in Somali universities, where literature is not typically included in the foundation curriculum (Mohamed, 2022). Future research could investigate the potential benefits and practical implementation of incorporating literary genres into English language teaching in Somalia and other EFL countries that do not teach Literature in language foundation programs at universities, providing a comparative analysis with the Rwandan context.

4.1.2 Extensive Reading Activities

Salamuddin, Nazriani & Yunsnita (2022) used a quantitative approach to explore the factors affecting Indonesian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' reading skill through extensive reading activities. While the study acknowledged that extensive reading in EFL context improved English language skills, and language sub-skills such as vocabulary mastery, reading speed rate, the results showed that Indonesian EFL students find the difficulties to improve reading skill. Students also believed that Extensive Reading (ER) activities would help them improve their English skill levels. Therefore, the absence of ER activities created a gap in language teaching and skills development.

The view that reading activities enhance English language skills is supported by many researchers in Ethiopia (Wendaferew & Berlie, 2024; Mulatu & Regassa, 2022; Raqqad, Ismail & Raqqad, 2019), in Indonesia (Alfifah, 2021; Rintaningrum, 2019) and in Uzbekistan (Sapaeva & Xujaniyazova, 2019). However, these studies focused on only the reading skill, leaving the other three skills redundant. This makes a comprehensive study of all the skills needed.

4.1.3 Instructional Technologies and Techniques

In a study by Aduwa-Ogiegbaen and Iyamu (2006) on the factors responsible for the poor quality of the teaching of English as a second language in public secondary schools in Nigeria, it was found out that English language teachers do not frequently use modern instructional technologies and variety of teaching techniques in their English language lessons. It was also found that students learn under harsh environment, which is often rowdy, congested and noisy. These factors were found responsible for the poor English language skills among students (Scott, Alison, Lorena & Okhee, 2022; Reiser, Novak, McGill & Penuel, 2021). However, the study by Aduwa-Ogiegbaen and Iyamu (2006) was carried out in Nigeria among secondary school students. If a similar study is done in other EFL countries, it could produce different results due to the different contexts.

4.1.4 Curriculum Factors

A pilot study that evaluated the implementation of the English language curriculum of the Nigeria Certificate in Education at a College of Education in Ogun State, Nigeria revealed that critical challenges that undermined efforts to equip college students with English skills (Tom-Lawyer, 2014). Accordingly, the teaching resources were found to be inadequate, the modes of teaching not wholly appropriate and the school technologically deficient. Furthermore, the negative attitudes of the students limited learning outcomes. Most importantly, the ineffective implementation of the English language curriculum was responsible for the poor performance of Nigerian students in external English examinations. Much as the study identified concern from the side of parents, educational stakeholders and the government, no stakeholder engagement attempts are visible in the study. Going forward, it could be important to ensure representation of all key stakeholder groups. Stakeholders such as parents, government, and the civil society are important in ensuring success of curricula (Kostadinova, 2012; Nevenglosky, Cale & Sunddip, 2019; Çayak & Karsantik, 2020). It is thus important to critically look at their specific role in helping university students master English language skills. There is also need to study effective teacher training programs, comprehensively evaluating the implementation of the English language curriculum in different contexts.

Tayyab, Imran and Arif (2023) studied the linguistic, psycholinguistic, and sociolinguistic factors hindering English speaking skills among Pakistani university students in applied linguistics. The study highlighted major difficulties as inadequate course design, and teacher proficiency on the implementation stage. However, the study only focused on the speaking skill, ignoring listening, reading and writing. It is worth noting that these skills are complementary, making the need to study all the four major skills vital. It is also important to conduct comparative analyses with EFL learners in other countries. Additionally, incorporating direct student perspectives would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and potential solutions for improving English speaking proficiency.

4.1.5 Cultural Factors

Other related studies on factors affecting English language proficiency among students studying in foreign countries shade light on critical issues such as slow adjustment to foreign culture (social, academic, and psychological), language barrier, different education systems, the influence of L1 (bilingualism) and unfamiliarity to resources in host environments that affect acquisition of language skills (Ahmed, 2021; Ali, 2020; Aderi et al, 2013; Rienties, 2012; Gebhard, 2012; Mesidor & Sly, 2016; Bulhan, 2020; Akua-Sakyiwah, 2016). However, it is important to note that these researchers study local students in foreign environments yet factors such as cultural influence could be different if students studied from their home countries. Therefore, it is important to study the factors affecting English language proficiency among students studying in their home countries. Relatedly, there is need to compare and contrast cultural influences on language acquisition between students in foreign environments and those in their home countries,

and explore context-specific challenges faced by students learning English in their home countries.

4.1.6 Other Factors

Many other factors affect the mastery of English skills among university students. For instance, a study by Irakoze and Sikubwabo (2024) reveals that qualified teachers, quality learning materials, supportive environments, early language acquisition, and strong pre-university foundations meaningfully help students to master English skills. However, this does not explain why some learners still fail to master the language even when they are exposed to such factors. Therefore, incorporating more student perspectives would enrich findings. There is also need to study the possibility and impact of comprehensive language programs and authentic English materials in improving students' proficiency.

In Bali, a study among students preparing for internships abroad identifies learning motivation and formal education as key factors that enhance English language skills (Mekarini, 2024). The study provides significant insights but its gaps such as the absence of longitudinal data and cultural factors need addressing to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the development of English language. Nhan (2024) explores factors affecting English speaking proficiency among English-major students at Nam Can Tho University, identifying language anxiety, teaching methods, classroom environment, exposure to English, self-confidence, and motivation as key influences. Lamphaiphanh, Sidavong and Sisombath (2024) posits that classroom temperature, noise, vocabulary knowledge, confidence, curriculum in Lao language, and early English exposure affect English speaking skills among English-major students at Souphanouvong University, Lao PDR. However, these studies (Nhan, 2024; Lamphaiphanh, Sidavong & Sisombath, 2024) focus on only speaking leaving a gap of studying writing, reading and listening. Relatedly, their small sample sizes, reliance on a single university and self-reported data limit generalizability.

The studies also lack comprehensive theoretical frameworks and do not incorporate in-depth qualitative student perspectives to provide a fuller understanding of the factors influencing English speaking proficiency. Therefore, a more comprehensive study that would seek student perspectives grounded in comprehensive theories and better samples would have more significant and enhanced results.

4.1.7 The Context of Somalia

Related studies have also been done in Somalia, an emerging country in EFL teaching. Somalia has lately concentrated on EFL teaching as part of efforts to completely switch to English as the official language. Zahra (2024) investigated the factors that contribute to the enhancement of English language skills among undergraduate students at universities in Mogadishu, Somalia and found out that English language programs significantly improved students' proficiency in speaking, listening, reading, and writing, as well as their vocabulary and grammar. Zahra (2024) acknowledges that there are various support materials such as technology that enhance learners' skills but scantily explains the

persistence of poor language skills among some students even after being exposed to the factors favouring learning. Mohamed (2018) also studied the challenges associated with teaching English in Mogadishu from a teacher's perspective and highlighted vital issues about pedagogy, the civil war and anarchy, economic and social hardships, low pay, lack of specialized training, inconsideration for professional development programs as leading to the diminishing of the worth of teaching, consequently affecting the quality of students produced. Therefore, Mohamed (2018) leaves a gap for studying the quality of students produced from the student's perspective. Whereas Mohamed (2018) highlights attitudes of teachers affecting students' learning outcomes, Mohamed (2022) posits that negative attitudes of students also limit English learning outcomes relating to skills acquisition. Abdishakur (2020) also notes challenges such as limited school resources, uncertainty, ineffective service delivery, lack of effective regulation in the education sector and coordination challenges as limiting learning outcomes and student capacities. However, Abdishakur (2020) spreads his study across the different regions of Somalia which raises concerns on the dynamics in the education sector that could vary across regions.

Therefore, regarding language outcomes and capacities, a much modest scope unique to a region or district could produce varying results. Amina and Guled (2019) highlighted social-cultural gender issues as limiting effective access to education and participation in lessons among female students in Puntland, Somalia hence limiting acquisition of English language skills. The study was done in Puntland therefore, a similar study done in other states could give different results due to the different contexts. Significant gaps still remain in the literature regarding an in-depth, qualitative exploration of the factors influencing English language proficiency from the students' perspective, despite the existing body of research. In addition, the views of key stakeholders such as government officials and parents have been largely neglected by the reviewed studies. Therefore, more wide-ranging studies incorporating stakeholder insights and qualitative student-centered analysis are necessary to uncover more crucial issues impacting English language acquisition at universities.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

It is clear that more research is required in many EFL countries, including Somalia and numerous Asian nations. This is because a review of the factors influencing mastery of English language skills among university students revealed significant gaps including limited stakeholder engagement, uneven distribution of studies across countries and regions, and lack of qualitative examinations on students. Additionally, there is an issue of persistent lack of English skills among university students despite the efforts to mitigate this problem. Many students in many EFL countries still struggle to master English skills even when they are exposed to the language from primary school. Therefore, approaching the issue from the students' perspective in a qualitative study is an important way of uncovering their own ideas about how they can be helped to overcome their language struggles. It is also important to note that some countries or regions still lack current or updated studies on factors affecting mastery of English language skills. A case in point is Somalia where studies on the issue are concentrated in Mogadishu leaving other areas unstudied. Even in Mogadishu, there is lack of a qualitative study on students.

A number of strategies and policies for improvement should be adopted by EFL countries to address the issue of low English skills among university students. The scope of studies should be expanded to include more qualitative research targeting students and underrepresented communities in order to fully comprehend the factors influencing the mastery of the English language. Future studies should also extend to underrepresented stakeholder groups such as parents, governments and the civil society. This could help to strengthen present efforts to find a long-term solution to the English language deficit in these countries. Other interventions and strategies such as embracing English literature, international benchmarking, refresher courses for teachers and clear policies on language of instruction in schools should be adopted.

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