





Navigating linguistic shifts: Challenges and opportunities at teacher training colleges and model schools in Rwanda

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Abstract—This study explores the shift from French to English as the dominant language of instruction in schools across Rwanda, focusing on one Teacher Training College and two Model Schools in Gisagara district. The research methodology employed a qualitative approach with a case study design and a constructivist paradigm. Participants included four primary school teachers, two Teacher Training College tutors, and two district-level education officials. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews to understand stakeholders' experiences with this language transition in education. The teachers had varied years of experience, ranging from 5 to 20 years, and represented rural schools. Interviews examined the impacts of the policy change on teaching practices, classroom dynamics, availability of resources, and perceptions of support received. Education officials provided insights into the rationale for the shift at the national level and efforts to facilitate local implementation. Interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis in NVivo. The findings indicate that the shift to English was primarily driven by national policy changes to improve English proficiency to align with regional economic integration goals. However, this transition presented pedagogical challenges for some teachers who were accustomed to French as the primary language of instruction. Additionally, students from rural areas, with less exposure to English outside of school, struggled more with adaptation than their urban peers. Overall, the study provides contextualised insights into the difficulties experienced during language transitions in education and highlights the importance of targeted support structures for effective policy implementation, especially in under-resourced areas. The results have implications for managing linguistic reforms equitably, ensuring that all students have the necessary resources and support to succeed in a changing educational landscape.

Keywords: Inclusive education policies, Learners with special learning needs, Model schools, Teacher training colleges

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I. INTRODUCTION

LANGUAGE is critical in education, serving as the medium through which knowledge is imparted and received. In multilingual societies like Rwanda, language policy in education has substantial implications for teachers and learners. Over the years, Rwanda's language policy has undergone significant shifts, the most notable being the transition from French to English as the primary medium of instruction in schools. This shift began in 2008 and was motivated by Rwanda's desire to align itself with the East African Community (EAC) and the Anglophone world, enhancing its global competitiveness and fostering national unity. While the language shift was intended to create new opportunities for Rwanda on the global stage, it has presented significant challenges, particularly for teachers in rural areas like Gisagara District. Many teachers in these regions were trained in French and have limited proficiency in English, yet they are now expected to teach in English. This abrupt transition has posed pedagogical challenges, affecting both teaching and learning. Teachers in Gisagara are navigating these changes with varying degrees of success, and their experiences provide valuable insights into the broader implications of Rwanda's language policy. Understanding these experiences is essential for evaluating the effectiveness of the language shift and identifying the support structures necessary to ensure a smooth transition.

The shift from French to English as the medium of instruction in Rwandan schools was implemented rapidly and with limited preparation for teachers, particularly in TTCs and the model schools.

Teachers who were trained in French are now required to teach in English, often without adequate proficiency or resources. This has led to several pedagogical challenges, including difficulties explaining complex concepts, managing classroom interactions, and accessing appropriate teaching materials. Moreover, while the language shift was intended to open new opportunities, many teachers in TTCs and the model schools feel unprepared to take advantage of these opportunities due to the lack of training and support. As a result, the quality of education in these areas may be compromised. This study investigates the pedagogical challenges teachers face in TTCs and the model schools as they implement Rwanda's language shift from French to English. It aims to explore teachers' perspectives on the opportunities created by the shift and identify the support and resources necessary for a successful transition. By focusing on teachers' experiences in TTCs and the model schools, this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of the practical implications of Rwanda's language policy, particularly in underserved areas. The next chapter provides a detailed literature review of the study.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Globally, many countries have experienced language shifts in education, driven by colonial legacies, globalisation, political changes, or economic considerations. In post-colonial settings, educational language policies are often influenced by the languages of former colonial powers, such as French, English, or Portuguese (Dascomb, 2019). These languages often retain significant prestige and are viewed as gateways to global participation, particularly in commerce, science,

and technology. English has become increasingly dominant as the medium of instruction worldwide due to its perceived global utility (Pennycook, 2017). In many countries, such as those in Africa and Asia, language shifts in education often mirror political transitions, with former colonial languages being replaced or supplemented by English to improve global competitiveness and access to higher education (Salomone & Salomone, 2022).

In Europe, language shifts in education have also been influenced by globalisation and political integration. For instance, in countries like the Netherlands, Germany, and Scandinavia, universities have increasingly adopted English as the medium of instruction for higher education to attract international students and align with global academic standards (Wächter & Maiworm, 2014). This shift towards English in European higher education has sparked debates about preserving national languages and cultural identity and concerns about linguistic inequalities between native and non-native English speakers (Phillipson, 2015). In Eastern European countries, such as Hungary and Poland, adopting English in higher education has been a strategic move to enhance international collaboration and access to global job markets. However, it has introduced challenges in terms of English proficiency among students and faculty (Hultgren, 2014).

In Asia, countries like South Korea, China, and Malaysia have also experienced significant language shifts in education, primarily driven by the desire to integrate into the global economy. In South Korea, for example, the government has actively promoted English education, with English becoming the primary medium of instruction in many universities and even some primary and secondary schools (Kim, 2017). However, this shift has led to significant challenges, including disparities in English proficiency between urban and rural students and concerns about the erosion of the Korean language and cultural identity (Hwang & Yim, 2019). Similarly, in Malaysia, the government's move to adopt English as the medium of instruction for science and mathematics in schools in 2003 aimed to improve students' global competitiveness. Still, it was later reversed in 2012 due to widespread opposition and concerns about students' poor performance in English (Gill, 2013).

The issue of language education in Africa is particularly complex due to the continent's linguistic diversity. Countries such as South Africa, Kenya, and Tanzania have grappled with the challenges of shifting from one medium of instruction to another. In South Africa, the post-apartheid government introduced policies promoting multilingualism, yet English remains the dominant language of instruction in most schools, particularly at higher levels of education (Plüddemann, 2018). This has led to debates about the marginalisation of indigenous languages and the role of language in reinforcing existing social inequalities (Makoni & Pennycook, 2005). In Tanzania, the transition from Swahili to English in secondary education has presented significant challenges, including inadequate teacher proficiency in English and a shortage of teaching materials (Keenja et al., 2021). Similarly, in Kenya, using English as the medium of instruction has created barriers for students who are more comfortable speaking indigenous languages, such as Kikuyu, Luo, or Swahili (Lisanza & Ndungo, 2024).

These global experiences offer valuable insights into the Rwandan case, where the shift from French to English as the medium of instruction has posed similar challenges. Rwanda's language shift was driven largely by political and economic considerations, including the desire to align with the East African Community (EAC) and the Anglophone world after the 1994 genocide (Rosendal & Amini Ngabonziza, 2023). However, as in other African and Asian countries, the rapid transition has been accompanied by significant pedagogical challenges, particularly in rural areas where teachers and students often have limited proficiency in English (Kagwesage, 2013). Additionally, the sudden shift has highlighted the scarcity of English-language teaching resources and professional development opportunities for teachers, exacerbating existing inequalities between urban and rural schools (McGinn, 2017).

Rwanda's language policy has undergone several significant transformations over the past few decades, reflecting the country's complex colonial history and evolving political and economic aspirations. Before the 1994 genocide, French served as the dominant language of instruction in Rwandan schools, a legacy inherited from Belgium's colonial administration (Rwigema, 2025). French was the language of instruction and the medium for government affairs and higher education. This linguistic alignment with the Francophone world was further solidified by Rwanda's membership in La Francophonie, an organisation of French-speaking nations (Kagwesage, 2013). However, the 1994 genocide and the subsequent influx of Tutsi refugees from Anglophone countries such as Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya catalysed a shift in Rwanda's linguistic landscape. Many of these returnees, having been educated in English-speaking environments, preferred English, creating a linguistic divide between the French-speaking elite and the new English-speaking political class post-genocide (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010).

In 2008, the Rwandan government adopted English as the medium of instruction in all schools, replacing French. This decision was motivated by the government's desire to integrate Rwanda into the East African Community (EAC), where English is the official language, and to position the country within the global economy, where English dominates in science, technology, and international trade (McGinn, 2017). The language policy shift was comprehensive, affecting all levels of education, from primary schools to universities. Rwanda's trilingual status, with Kinyarwanda, French, and English recognised as official languages, further complicated the implementation of the English-only instruction policy. While the shift was seen as a strategic move to improve Rwanda's competitive edge in the global market, it posed significant challenges for teachers and students, many of whom had been trained and educated primarily in French (Kagwesage, 2013). Teachers struggled with the transition, as many lacked proficiencies in English and were unprepared to teach the new language (Kagwesage, 2013). Moreover, the rapid implementation of the policy left little time for the development of English-language teaching resources, further exacerbating the difficulties teachers and students face (McGinn, 2017).

The shift to English also had broader socio-political implications. Some perceived Rwanda's decision to pivot away from French toward English as a political statement, symbolising the country's desire to move away from its Francophone colonial past and, indirectly, its strained relations with France following the genocide (Kimonyo, 2019). France had been accused of supporting the Hutu regime responsible for the genocide, and the language shift was seen as part of Rwanda's efforts to realign itself geopolitically with Anglophone countries and the global economy (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010). However, despite the potential economic and political advantages, the rapid and comprehensive nature of the language shift has led to educational challenges, including teacher training deficiencies, inadequate learning materials, and disparities between urban and rural schools, where access to English-language resources is even more limited (McGinn, 2017). This has led to significant pedagogical challenges, particularly in rural areas like the Gisagara district, where access to English-language resources and professional development opportunities is limited. The following chapter will explain the research design, data collection methods, and tools.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study explores teachers' experiences in the Gisagara district as they navigate the language shift from French to English. Specifically, the study seeks to 1) explore the specific difficulties teachers face in TTCs and model schools due to the shift from French to English; 2) capture teachers' views on the new opportunities for teaching and learning brought by the language shift, and 3) identify the necessary support and resources required for a successful transition to English. This paper aims to investigate this problem by addressing three key questions in Rwanda: What pedagogical challenges do teachers in Gisagara District

encounter in implementing Rwanda's language shift, what opportunities do they see arising from this change, and how effectively are they implementing the language policy?

IV. METHODS

Research approach

This study adopted a qualitative research approach. This approach was suitable because it allows for an in-depth understanding of the complexities of the shift from French to English. Qualitative research has gained prominence in education and social sciences, offering insights into human behaviour and experiences that quantitative methods may overlook (Aryal, 2024). It provides rich, detailed descriptions of teachers' challenges and opportunities in their teaching practices.

Research paradigm

Moreover, the study was informed by the constructivist paradigm. Constructivism has emerged as a crucial approach in modern education, emphasising active knowledge construction by learners based on their experiences (Chand, 2025). Constructivism views reality as constructed by individuals through their experiences, interactions, and perceptions. This paradigm is often associated with qualitative research methods, as it seeks to understand the complexities of human experience and how individuals construct their realities. Constructivism views knowledge as socially constructed and context-dependent, making it ideal for exploring complex phenomena like the challenges and opportunities teachers encounter during language transition. This theory, rooted in the work of Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner, promotes student-centred learning and positions teachers as guides (Chand, 2025). Therefore, constructivism allows for a nuanced understanding of teachers' lived experiences within the specific socio-cultural context of Gisagara District.

Research design

This study adopted a survey research design. Survey design involving interviews is a research approach where data is collected through direct conversations with participants. Survey research design is crucial for obtaining accurate and valuable information to address research questions (Alderman & Salem, 2010). This method allows for in-depth insights and a nuanced understanding of respondents' thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Semi-structured interviews were used, which enabled the researchers to gather rich and detailed data that might not be captured through other methods.

Participants

The sample consisted of 4 primary school teachers (2 from each model school A and B), two teacher training college tutors, and 2 district education officers. This resulted in a total of 8 participants. The researcher used a purposive sampling technique to select research participants. Gender balance was also factored into the selection of research participants. Although the sample size is small, it was deemed sufficient for achieving an in-depth understanding within the context of a qualitative study, where the focus is on detailed exploration rather than generalisation (Creswell, 2014).

Research setting

The study was conducted in the Gisagara district in the Southern Province of Rwanda. Gisagara is a rural district significantly affected by the language policy shift, particularly because many teachers were trained in French and now must teach English. The district was chosen for its representativeness of rural schools in Rwanda, which are often faced with Unique challenges regarding resource availability and teacher training compared to urban areas. The target population for this study consisted of Primary school teachers, Teacher training college tutors, and District education officers in Gisagara District. These groups were selected because they are directly involved in implementing the language policy and could provide valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities associated with the shift from French to English.

Data collection tools

This study collected data through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are a valuable qualitative research method,

offering flexibility and depth in data collection across various fields. They allow researchers to focus on specific topics while exploring emerging ideas (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). This method allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, challenges, and perceptions of the language shift.

Data analysis

Interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis in NVivo. The following steps were followed during the analysis: data transcription, familiarisation with data, coding, theme development, reviewing and defining, and interpreting themes. Data collected from interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were a priority throughout the study to ensure the protection of participants' rights and well-being. The following ethical guidelines were adhered to. All participants were provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks. Participants were assured that their responses would be kept confidential, and their identities would remain anonymous in the final report. Pseudonyms were used for all participants to protect their privacy. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Participants were informed they could withdraw from the study without facing any negative consequences. Approval from relevant authorities was required to ensure the research complied with local policies and regulations. Care was taken to ensure that participants were not exposed to any harm or distress during the interviews and focus group discussions. Sensitive topics were cautiously approached, and participants were encouraged to share only what they were comfortable discussing. The next chapter will present the findings of the study, organised around the key themes identified during data analysis.

V. RESULTS

Biographic data of the participants

Table 1: Biographic data of the participants

Name	Gender	Age	Experience	Position	Description
Primary A					
Participant A	Male	35	11 years	Senior Teacher	Teacher is responsible for teaching foundational skills to young children.
Participant B	Female	29	5 years	Teacher	Teacher is responsible for teaching foundational skills to young children.
Primary B					
Participant C	Female	46	17 years	Senior Teacher	Teacher is responsible for teaching foundational skills to young children.
Participant D	Male	57	20 years	Teacher	Teacher is responsible for teaching foundational skills to young children.
Teacher Training College					
Participant E	Female	54	19 years	Senior Teacher	Instructor training future teachers in pedagogical skills.
Participant F	Male	32	7 years	Teacher	Instructor training future teachers in pedagogical skills.
District Education Officer					
Participant G	Male	55	12 years	District Officer	Official overseeing educational

Name	Gender	Age	Experience	Position	Description
Participant H	Female	46	8 years	District Officer	standards and policies. Official educational standards and policies. overseeing

Teachers’ pedagogical challenges faced in implementing the language shift from French to English.

Teachers from various educational levels reported that the transition from French to English was abrupt and disorienting.

“The transition was quite abrupt. Many teachers, including myself, were accustomed to teaching in French, and switching to English was overwhelming.” (Teacher A),

Another participant echoed this frustration:

“I found the shift challenging, especially since I was trained in French. It felt like starting over.” (Teacher B),

“One of the biggest challenges has been the limited English proficiency among teachers and students, which affects communication and comprehension. Adapting lesson plans and materials from French to English has been difficult, particularly since many resources are still available only in French” (Teacher C)

In addition, specific subjects posed additional challenges:

“Mathematics and science subjects are particularly tough because the technical vocabulary is often complex and not easily translatable” (Teacher D).

“We had a few workshops, but they were quite basic and did not adequately prepare us for the challenges we faced in the classroom” (Teacher A).

One primary school teacher (teacher C) stated, *“Students often struggle with vocabulary, which impacts their overall understanding of the lessons”*.

A TTC tutor (E) noted, *“I notice that many students are hesitant to ask questions in English, which prevents them from clarifying their doubts.”*

A primary school teacher (teacher B) stated, *“More comprehensive training programs and resources would greatly help. Continuous workshops focusing on practical teaching strategies are essential.”* Tutor F from the TTC remarked, *“I think creating a mentoring system where experienced English teachers can support those struggling would be beneficial.”*

One primary teacher remarked, *“I was initially excited about the shift, but I worried about how my students would cope”* (Teacher A).

Teacher B explained, *“Incorporating group discussions has made a difference. It allows students to practice their English in a supportive environment.”* bout how my students would cope.”

One TTC tutor (E) stated,

“We received some training, but it focused more on grammar than on effective teaching strategies.”

Another TTC tutor (E) noted,

“More comprehensive training programs focusing on practical teaching strategies would be beneficial.”

District official G noted, *“The transition to English is vital for integrating our students into the global economy.”* However, they also recognised teachers’ challenges, particularly regarding resource availability and training. *“We are working to provide more support, but it is a gradual process,”* the official stated. As teacher A from a primary school commented, *“While the workshops were helpful, they did not give us the hands-on experience we needed”*.

Teachers’ perspectives regarding the opportunities that arise from the language shift from French to English in teaching and learning

Teacher A from primary school expressed optimism, emphasising that the shift enhances students’ access to global knowledge. *“Teaching in English opens up countless resources and opportunities for our students to compete internationally”*.

Similarly, Teacher B added, *“English gives students an advantage because it is the language of science, technology, and business. By mastering it early, they are better prepared for future careers”*.

Teacher C noted that the shift has improved students’ ability to access high-quality learning materials, most of which are available in English. *“Many textbooks and academic resources are written in English, so this shift allows us to teach more up-to-date information”*. Teacher D highlighted that

“our students can now engage with international examinations and scholarship opportunities that require English proficiency. This language shift prepares them to compete globally”.

Primary school teacher A noted,

“We are using more visual aids and interactive methods in our classrooms to help children grasp English effectively,” indicating a focus on engaging learners through tangible resources.

Similarly, TTC tutor F expressed,

“Group discussions and peer teaching have allowed students to practice their English in a supportive environment.” Also, the language shift has necessitated significant changes in teaching methodologies.

A primary school teacher (teacher B) stated, *“I have had to simplify my teaching methods and rely more on visual aids, as many students struggle with English.”*

Primary school teacher (teacher B) mentioned, *“The resources provided are limited. I often must rely on my creativity to fill in the gaps.”*

Support structures are needed to determine the effectiveness of implementing the language policy shift from French to English as the medium of instruction.

Several strategies have been implemented to address teachers’ preparedness to transition from French to English as Rwanda’s primary instruction medium. The 2015 National Teacher Training Workshop and the 2018 English Language Proficiency Workshop provided teachers with essential strategies for effective language instruction, emphasising interactive teaching methodologies (Rwanda Education Board, 2018).

Mentorship programs have been established to enhance teachers’ preparedness further, pairing experienced teachers with less experienced colleagues to foster guidance and support. Recently, a group of 154 Zimbabwean teachers was deployed to Rwanda on a government-to-government initiative to help improve English proficiency and mentor the local teachers to ensure a smooth linguistic transition. These teachers were spread across all higher tertiary boards, ranging from Teacher training colleges, Polytechnics, and Universities in the country.

From the perspective of the District Office, officials acknowledge the challenges but point to ongoing efforts to strengthen capacity.

Official G commented, *“We have been working on providing more training opportunities for teachers, but the shift takes time, and it is a process”*.

In addition, Official H highlighted the need for more governmental support, stating, *“We need additional resources and consistent monitoring to ensure the policy is being effectively implemented across all schools”*.

A TTC tutor (F) was hopeful that the government’s continued investment in teacher training would help bridge these gaps over time: *“It is a long-term plan. We expect that with ongoing support, more teachers will become comfortable with teaching in English, and the benefits will be fully realised”*. Another TTC tutor (E) notes, *“Integrating English into everyday lessons not only engages students but also builds their confidence in speaking the language.”* A district officer (Officer G) acknowledged that efforts are being made such that *“the commitment shown by teachers is fostering an environment where students can thrive in learning English.”* in addition the Officer H remarked, *“We prioritise training that fosters practical communication skills which align with the government’s vision. An ongoing English Proficiency test has been introduced in all TTCs across the country to monitor English proficiency progression. The test aims to cover the core skills in English, which entail speaking, reading, writing and writing assessed by REB officials.”*

VI. DISCUSSION

The study findings indicated that teachers across various educational levels reported that the transition from French to English was abrupt and disorienting. Their sentiments reflect a broader concern among teachers, especially those trained in French, who feel unprepared for the shift. These experiences align with the findings of Muvunyi (2022), who argues that sudden transitions in the language of instruction can disrupt teaching practices and undermine teachers’ confidence. Therefore, the analysis of these statements suggests that teachers were inadequately

prepared to switch from French to English in both teaching and learning processes. The abrupt transition posed significant challenges for teachers, particularly those trained and accustomed to teaching in French. Both primary teachers and TTC tutors expressed feeling overwhelmed and unprepared, highlighting a gap in the support provided during this shift.

The training to enhance teachers' English instruction skills has been implemented, however, many teachers found these sessions lacking practical application, reflecting a disconnect between policy goals and classroom realities. Consequently, teachers called for more comprehensive training programmes and a mentoring system to support those less confident in the transition, exposing a critical gap that the initial workshops did not address. This emphasises the need for more gradual and well-supported transitions to ensure teachers are adequately prepared to adapt to new instructional languages. From the perspective of district officials, the language shift is seen as an important step towards improving educational outcomes in Rwanda.

Additionally, teachers faced complex challenges due to the shift from French to English in Rwanda. Primary teachers reported significant difficulties with this transition, while tutors at teacher training colleges emphasised the need for improved preparatory programmes. District officials recognised ongoing efforts to support teachers, highlighting the urgency of providing comprehensive training and sufficient resources to ensure a successful switch. Both teachers acknowledge that, although the language shift presents short-term challenges, it offers long-term advantages for students in a globalised world where English skills are vital. Engaging students at the primary level prepares them for future opportunities, aligning with Rwandan policy goals for this transition. Thus, teachers have adopted various teaching strategies to address the challenges of the language shift, including innovative methods and bilingual resources. Their proactive strategies, supported by research from Palamar et al. (2024), lay a strong foundation for successfully implementing the language policy shift and improving communication skills within their community. They also use interactive and student-centred approaches to facilitate the transition from French to English, aligning with established language acquisition theories (Richards, 2015; Vygotsky, 1978). Despite these efforts, obstacles remain in providing adequate training, especially for rural teachers (Nyundo, 2020). Ongoing investment in teacher development and the distribution of resources is crucial for overcoming these barriers.

Mentorship programs have been introduced to improve teachers' preparedness, pairing experienced teachers with less experienced colleagues for guidance and support. Additionally, a recent initiative involves deploying 154 Zimbabwean teachers to Rwanda to enhance English proficiency and mentor local teachers across higher education institutions. Peer learning networks also foster collaboration among teachers, enabling them to share best practices and resources. The proactive response from teachers in Gisagara District reflects their dedication to effectively managing this transition, employing strategies grounded in established language acquisition theories and demonstrating resilience in promoting improved educational outcomes.

VII. CONCLUSION

The shift from French to English as the primary language of instruction in Rwanda signifies a major educational reform that promises to significantly enhance students' global competitiveness. Although there are notable challenges concerning teacher readiness and the availability of resources, the proactive measures undertaken by teachers and the supportive initiatives established by the government offer a promising direction for progress. The concerted efforts to improve English language proficiency and modify teaching practices are essential for equipping Rwandan students with the necessary language skills, critical thinking capabilities, and problem-solving competencies to succeed in a more interconnected global environment. Ongoing investment in professional development, resource distribution, and collaboration among teachers will be vital for fully

realising the advantages of this language policy transition. As the educational framework continues to evolve, nurturing a culture of adaptability and innovation will be imperative for achieving the long-term objectives of Rwanda's educational system.

VIII. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest in this study.

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