

Factors Influencing the Learning of English Language for Academic Purposes for Foreign Students: A case of Solusi University

Stella Muchemwa

Solusi University, PO Solusi, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

E-mail: muchemwas@solusi.ac.zw

Received for publication: 25 March 2015.

Accepted for publication: 12 July 2015.

Abstract

In line with Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-economic Transformation (ZIM ASSET), the Zimbabweans in all sectors of the economy should seize every opportunity at hand. Solusi University, taking the advantage of English as an official language, has opened its doors to foreign students even from non-English speaking countries thereby bringing in revenue and raising Zimbabwe high on the map of Africa. However, the number of foreign students is still low, the assumption being that, it is due to English language handicap. This study therefore investigated the factors that influence the learning of English by foreign students. A self-drafted questionnaire was distributed to 36 foreign students at various levels of study at Solusi University. Data were analyzed by means of descriptive statistics. Findings revealed **technological factors**: Technology makes acquiring and developing the English language easy. However, English lecturers rarely used technology during lessons. **Social factors**: Lecturers in other subject areas hardly concentrate on English Language and the university community hardly helped them in English learning. **Academic Factors**: Reading and speaking in English in class has helped respondents improve their English skills. **Cultural factors**: Home culture either supports or deters foreign students in learning English Language. **Economic factors**: Students from poor non-English speaking countries can hardly manage to learn the English Language because it is expensive. The study recommended the establishment of English laboratories at responsible universities for the betterment of teaching and learning of the English language to foreign students. Again, the responsible universities should charge reasonable fees so that the foreign students can afford.

Keywords: English Language, foreign students; academic purpose

Introduction

In line with the newly launched government five year plan, Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-economic Transformation (ZIM ASSET), the Zimbabweans in all sectors of the economy are trying by all means to use opportunities at hand in order to improve their country. Solusi University, like other education institutions in Zimbabwe, uses English as an official and medium of instruction language (Chivhanga and Chimhenga 2013). Taking this advantage of English, the university has opened its doors to foreign students even from non-English speaking countries thereby bringing in revenue and raising Zimbabwe high on the map of African. Solusi University is thus playing a significant role in developing the Human Resources in terms of education not only nationally but also regionally.

This Chartered Seventh Day Adventist University get students form Mozambique, Madagascar, Malawi, South Africa, Zambia, Kenya, Angola, Lesotho, Botswana and Swaziland, though the majority are usually Zimbabwean. When the foreign students are enrolled at Solusi University, they are required to take English courses (Intensive English courses for students from

non-English speaking countries and English pre-university courses for all foreign student whose entry qualification is Ordinary Level or equivalent) prior to their intended degrees. This is done to prepare them for a university degree where English is used as a medium of instruction. This period of learning English is short for student from English speaking countries and long for those who are not. The period is therefore scheduled according to need.

Although all students who learn English as a second language have English language problems, students from non-English speaking countries have paramount English Language challenges. Although it can be argued that the English Language challenges among African citizens cannot be attributed to one factor, however, most of these factors emanate mainly from colonialism and post-colonial political and education policies. An argument by Chokwe (2011) that colonialism and apartheid were instrumental in the marginalization of blacks in South Africa is true to the rest of Africa. Colonialism resulted in linguistic division in Africa that is shown on the Linguistic Map of Africa shown below:



Linguistic Map of Africa. Source: <http://exploringafrica.matrix.msu.edu/>

Above is the Linguistic map of Africa. It shows that during colonialism, a number of European countries conquered territories in Africa which they claimed for themselves. They imposed their rule including their languages which, at independence and even to-date, remained the official language for most of these former colonies (Chivhanga and Chomhenga 2013). Thus, the indigenous African languages were given second preferences.

Former British colonies like Zambia, Zimbabwe, South Africa and Botswana are English speaking while Madagascar and Mozambique, a former French and Portuguese colony respectively are French and Portuguese speaking. This stands due to both colonial and post-colonial policies: former English speaking colonies pursued with English as the official language, the language in the education arena which the affected people are happy of (Ndamba 2008). Mutasa (2003) also argued that parents (Zimbabweans) perceive English as the answer to their children's problems and they unquestionably see English as the gateway to success socially, politically and economically. There are few exceptions to language policies, for example in Tanzania where Nyerere, introduced the Ujamaa policy (1967 to 1985) which diverted to the motherland language, Kiswahili (Evans undated).

Related Researches

A number of researches on poor performance by African students in English Language have been carried out in Zimbabwe, Africa and beyond. Several researchers mention that academics complained about a decline in students' writing standards (Moutlana 2007). Findings show that there are a number of contributing factors that affect English as a second language learning. Souriyavongsa, Abidinand and Mei (2013) in a research on reasons for poor performance in English by Lao university students, found students' lack of English foundation background, students lack of confidence to use English, students' lack of motivation, the curriculum which was unsupportive in helping students to improve their English proficiency and ineffective teaching as reasons for poor performance in English language.

Onyekachi (2011) made a similar study in Nigeria and realized that incompetent teachers negatively affect the learning of English Language. The study also realized that students do not even practice the habit of speaking simple and correct English. Again, most parents and teachers of other subjects (other than English) who are seen as models by students often discuss with these in wrong English, thus contributing to the students' bad English.

Other factors that cause poor performance in English, according to research, are: differences in learners' and target language cultures as found by Muhammad, (2007) quoted in Souriyavongsa, Abidinand and Mei (2013); limited higher education opportunities and unprepared students as proposed by Engstrom (2008); the aspect of English African learners as second language learners (Jacobs 2005); learner attitude and motivation (Sougari and Hovhannisyani 2013); limited resources and educationally underprepared backgrounds (Granville and Dison 2009; Bharuthram and McKenna 2006; Schwartz 2004 quoted in Chokwe 2011) as well as socio-cultural factor in Jamaica secondary school level (Moyston 2010). Normazidah and Hazita (2012); Trawiński (2005) both quoted in Souriyavongsa, Abidinand and Mei (2013) found lack of support to use English in the home environment and the community and lack of motivation for learning as well as the negative attitude towards the target language as factors.

Other researchers found feedback (Muchemwa 2014); the writing process (Lloyd 2007); modeling by teachers (Adams 2008) and conducive learning environment (Brisk and Proctor 2013) as panacea to the English language problems.

Statement of the Problem

Solusi University has opened its doors to all eligible students including foreign students; however, the number of foreign student remains low; the assumption is that, they find challenges in learning English. This research, therefore answered the following research question:

Research Question

1. Which are the factors that affect the learning of English by foreign students at Solusi University?

Sample

Thirty six foreign students from ten countries were used as the sample of the study.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

Self-made questionnaires were distributed to the respondents, by the researcher with the help of her 2014 Second Semester Linguistics class. An event data collection technique was utilized; questionnaires were distributed to respondents one Tuesday after Vespers Convocation. Linguistics Class members were at the 5 designated outlets of the convocation hall, identifying foreign students and handing them the questionnaires which they later collected the following days. Quantitative data analysis procedure was applied to the collected data and findings were written in a descriptive report accompanied by tables of findings.

Results and Discussion

The table below shows the frequency distribution of respondents according to gender, age, country of origin, year of study and form of technology that the foreign students use.

Table 1: Respondents' Ratings on personal details and use of technology (N=36)

Gender	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Male	25	69.44	69.44
Female	11	30.56	100
Age			
18-25years	22	61.11	61.11
18-33years	9	25	86.11
34 and above	5	13.89	100
Country of origin			
Mozambique	4	11.11	11.11
Madagascar	1	2.78	13.89
South Africa	10	27.78	41.67
Zambia	10	27.78	69.45
Kenya	2	5.56	75.01
Angola	3	8.33	83.34
Botswana	1	2.78	86.12
Swaziland	3	8.33	94.45
DRC	1	2.78	97.22
Lesotho	1	2.78	100
Year of study			
Intensive English	5	13.89	13.89

Pre-University	3	8.33	22.22
1 st Year	5	13.89	36.11
2 nd year	8	22.22	58.33
3 rd year	10	27.78	86.11
4 th Year	5	13.89	100
Form of technology used			
Using non	2	5.56	5.56
Computer only	4	11.11	16.67
Cellphone only	8	22.22	38.89
Tablet only	3	8.33	47.22
Cellphone, Tablet and Computer	9	25	72.22
Cellphone and Tablet	1	2.78	75.00
Cellphone and Computer	9	25	100

Personal information provided by the respondents show that more males (69.44%) than female participated in the study. This is also an indicator that more male foreign students than their female counterparts come to Solusi University in particular and foreign universities in general (a probability sampling method was used to obtain a sample of respondents). The 18-25 Age Group (61.11) constituted the majority of the respondents while only 5% of the respondents were from the 34 years and above Age Group. It can be concluded that more young foreign students come to Solusi University for their studies.

Most foreign students come from South Africa and Zambia (both with 27.78%) while the least number of foreign students come from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Madagascar, Lesotho and Botswana each with only one respondent. The table also shows that third year students comprised the highest number of respondents 10/36. More so, foreign students use technology to access information; only 5.56% said that they had no access to technology. The majority mainly used cellphones and computers for data collection and only a few used tablets.

The second section of the questionnaire used the Likert Scale as elaborated below.

Table 2: Evaluation and scoring of the questionnaire

Scale	Responses	Mean Interval	Verbal Interpretation
5	Strongly Agree	4.51-5.00	Very much
4	Agree	3.51-4.50	Much
3	Neutral	2.51-3.49	Not sure
2	Disagree	1.51-2.49	No
1	Strongly Disagree	1.00-1.49	Not at all

In response to technology, most respondents agreed that they use technology (91.67%) which was a homogeneous response. They also agreed that it has helped them improve their English Language. On the use of technology by lecturers, respondents gave heterogeneous responses with 14 respondents remaining neutral an indicator that the English lecturers rarely used technology during lesson delivery. This negative contribution by teachers was also realized by Onyekachi (2011) in Nigeria when he found that incompetent teachers negatively affect the learning of English Language. Limited resources were also seen by (Granville and Dison 2009; Bharuthram and McKenna 2006; Schwartz 2004 quoted in Chokwe 2011) as handicaps in learning and teaching of

English Language. The table also shows that the majority of the respondents agreed that technology is essential in language learning; they will continue using it since it makes acquiring and developing English Language easy.

Table 3: Technology Related Factors (N=36)

Q.N	Variable	SA	A	N	DA	SDA
6	I use technology for various activities	19	14	3	0	0
7	Technology has helped me improve my English Language	13	15	7	1	0
8	My lecturers were using technology during English lectures	2	9	14	6	5
9	Technology is essential in improving English language skills, for example, in pronunciation and writing	15	14	6	1	0
10	I will continue using technology as a way of improving my English language	16	10	7	3	0
11	Technology makes acquiring and developing English language easy	15	13	7	1	0

Table 4: Academic Related Factors

Q.N	Variable	SA	A	N	DA	SDA
12	My high school\secondary school prepared me for university level content wise	17	11	5	2	1
13	My high school\secondary school prepared me for university level in terms of English language	16	9	7	1	3
14	My lecturers teach me English	10	11	7	4	4
15	Intensive English courses and/or Introduction to English Language has helped me improve my English skills	10	15	7	3	1
16	I enjoy reading English articles during my spare time	15	13	4	4	0
17	Reading helps me improve my English Language skills	23	10	3	0	0
18	Feedback from my academic writings helps me improve my English Language skills	15	15	4	2	0
19	I am good at writing assignments in English	13	17	4	1	1
20	I speak English in class	21	9	4	2	0

Table 5: Social Related Factors (N=36)

Q.N	Variable	SA	A	N	DA	SDA
21	I speak English with peers	12	23	1	0	0
22	I learn English from other English speakers	14	12	8	2	0
23	My positive attitude to other helps me in learning English Language	11	17	6	2	0
24	Learning English Language has helped me to associate with many people from different countries	27	9	0	0	0
25	My university community helped me learn the English Language	5	11	13	4	3
26	My parents encouraged me to learn the English Language	21	12	1	1	0
27	I learnt English Language through games with my peers	3	10	11	8	4

On education related factors, there were generally homogeneous responses. Respondents said that secondary school\high school prepared them for university and English courses as well as English activities have helped them improve their English language. Again, 23 respondents strongly agreed that reading help them improve language skills against 10 who strongly agreed that their lecturers teach them English. This shows that some lecturers just concentrate on the content rather than the language aspects even when teaching foreigners.

Respondents agreed that they speak English with peers (97.4%). This is so because of the diversity of students' vernaculars at the university, They therefore use the common language, English, for them to understand each other. Again 100% respondents agreed that learning English Language has helped them associate with many people from different countries. English is therefore a tool of socialization. The respondents also indicated that English speakers and positive attitude to others have helped them to improve their English skills. However, the university community hardly helped them; this could have referred to those outside the student board whom they rarely communicate to. This finding tallies that by Normazidah and Hazita (2012); Trawiński (2005) both quoted in Souriyavongsa, Abidinand and Mei (2013) who found lack of community support in learning English Language as a problem to English learners.

Table 6: Culture Related Factors (N=36)

Q.N	Variable	SA	A	N	DA	SDA
28	My home culture affected the way I learnt the English Language	11	13	4	6	2
29	My positive intercultural perceptions helped me in the learning of the English Language	9	15	9	3	0
30	My belief in "a helping God" encouraged me in the learning of the English Language	20	9	5	2	0
31	My home customs influenced me to learn the English Language	13	8	9	5	1
32	My country philosophy encourages the learning of the English Language	22	8	4	2	0
33	My home culture respect the English Language	17	12	5	1	1
34	Tradition affects the way in which the English Language is learnt	15	17	3	1	0
35	Symbols and meaning influences the way in which one learns the English Language	4	10	11	7	4
36	Behavior of individuals influences the learning of the English Language	10	19	5	2	0

Table 7: Economic Related Factors (N=36)

Q.N	Variable	SA	A	N	DA	SDA
37	Learning English Language is expensive	9	8	7	6	6
38	One's financial status affects one's capacity to learn the English language	7	10	5	6	8
39	Students with poor parent have hardships in learning the English language	7	6	6	5	12
40	Students from poor non-English speaking countries hardly learn the English Language	12	6	8	7	3

Table 6 shows how culture affects foreign students in learning English Language. Similarly, Souriyavongsa, Abidinand and Mei (2013) in a research in Malaysia also found that students' lack of English foundation background (English culture) caused poor performance in English Language. As shown by the table above, many respondents said that English language is valued very much by the respondents' countries and they encourage citizens to learn it. The majority of the respondents agreed that their home culture affect the way they learn English. The fact that 80.6% agreed that "My belief in a helping God" encouraged me in the learning of the English Language showed that learning English is a real task.

Table 7 generally shows that learning of English is economically affected. Although only about half of the respondents agreed that one's financial status affects one's capacity to learn the English language and students with poor parent have hardships in learning the English language, 72% of the respondents agreed that students from poor non-English speaking countries hardly learn the English Language . This shows that learning English in foreign universities is expensive.

Conclusion

Finding revealed:

Technological factors: The findings showed that foreign students mainly use cellphones and computers for data collection which they agreed,has helped them improve their English Language and they will continue using it since it makes acquiring and developing English Language easy. Respondents also indicated that English lecturers rarely used technology during lesson delivery which made the lessons difficult.

Social factors: Findings also revealed that lecturers in others subjects (other than English) just concentrate on the content rather than the language aspects when teaching foreign students. The respondents also indicated that English speakers and positive attitude to others have helped them improve their English skills. However, they complained that university community hardly helped them; this could have referred to those outside the student board whom they rarely communicate to.

Cultural factors: Home cultures either supports or deters foreign students in learning English Language.

Academic Factors: Reading and speaking in English in class has helped students in improving their English skills.

Economic factors: The study also showed that students from poor non-English speaking countries can hardly manage to learn the English Language; learning English, especially in a foreign country, has proved to be expensive.

Recommendations

1. While the study has revealed that the use of technology makes the acquiring of the English Language easier, it however also exposed that English lecturers rarely used technology during lesson delivery. An English laboratory is therefore mandatory for the betterment of teaching and learning of the English language to foreign students.

2. Lecturers in others subjects (other than English) should concentrate on both the content and the language aspects when teaching foreign students.

3. The university community should be alerted of the presents of foreign students and should be encouraged to be supportive to them.

4. Since it is expensive for foreign students to learn English at a foreign university and students from poor non-English speaking countries can hardly learn the English Language, the responsible universities should charge reasonable fees so that the foreign students can afford.

References

- Adams, J. (2008). How do students learn to write in UK higher education and how does this influence my practice as a professional teacher of academic writing? pp.1-10. Available at <http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/tuesdayma/jaULLfinal0508.pdf>. Accessed on 10 February 2011.
- Brisk, M. E. and Proctor, C. P. (2013). Challenges and Supports for English Language Learners in Bilingual Programs. Available at http://ell.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/pdf/academic-papers/11-Brisk%20Bilingual%20Programs%20FINAL_0.pdf
- Chivhanga, E and Chimhenga, S. (2013). Language Planning In Zimbabwe: The Use of Indigenous Languages (Shona) As a Medium of Instruction in Primary Schools. Available at <http://www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jhss/papers/Vol12-issue5/J01255865.pdf>
- Chokwe, M. J. (2011). Academic writing in English second language contexts: perceptions and experiences of first year university students and tutors, PDF Colonial Languages. Available at <http://exploringafrica.matrix.msu.edu/>
- Engstrom, C.M. 2008. Curricular Learning Communities and Unprepared Students: How Faculty can Provide a Foundation for Success. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, No. 115, pp. 5-19.
- Evans, A.B. (Undated). Nyerere's social and economic policy in Tanzania in the 1960s and 1970s. Available at <http://africanhistory.about.com/od/tanzania/a/What-Was-Ujamaa.htm>
- Jacobs, C. 2005. On being an insider on the outside: new spaces for integrating academic literacies. *Teaching in Higher Education*, Vol.10, No.4, pp. 475-487.
- Moutlana, I.N. (2007). Challenges facing higher education: The problem of Academic Literacy, VC/Speeches/ North West University Workshop-17 September 2007, pp.1-15.
- Moyston, L. E. (2010). Poor English, poor academic performance. Available at http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/columns/Moyston--Language-teaching_7488287
- Muchemwa, S. (2014). Lecturers' written feedback: What the students expect – A case of Zimbabwe, *US-China Education Review B*, ISSN 2161-6248 December 2014, Vol. 4, No. 12, 896-906, doi: 10.1726/2161-6248/2014.12.003
- Mutasa, D. E. (2003). *The Language policy of S. A.: What do people say?* Pretoria : Unisa
- Ndamba, G.T. (2008). *Mother Tongue Usage in Learning: An Examination of Language Preferences in Zimbabwe*. Mother Tongue Usage in Learning: An Examination of Language Preferences in Zimbabwe
- Onyekachi. (2011). The poor performance of English language examinations in Nigeria. Available at <http://socyberty.com/education/the-poor-performance-of-students-in-english-language-examination-in-nigeria/>
- Sanchez, D.M. and Paulson, E.J. (2008): Critical Language Awareness and Learners in College Transitional English. *Teaching English in the two year College*, Vol.36 No: 2.pp. 164-176.
- Sougari, A. M. and Hovhannisyan, I. (2013). Delving into young learners' attitudes and motivation to learn English: comparing the Armenian and the Greek classroom. Available at <http://rpltl.eap.gr/previous-issues/volume-4-issue-1-february-2013/table-of-contents/15-areti-maria-sougari-iren-hovhannisyan>
- Souriyavongsa, T; Abidinand, M.J.Z. and Mei, L.L. (2013). Factors Causes Students Low English Language Learning: A Case Study in the National University of Laos. Available at <http://www.academia.edu>