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Examining the Perceived Influence of English Source Culture on Students' Comprehension and Translation of English Idiomatic Expressions into Kinyarwanda

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Abstract

This exploratory study examined the perceived influence of English source culture on students' comprehension and translation of English idiomatic expressions into Kinyarwanda in a selected secondary school in Muhanga District, Rwanda. Guided by Nida's dynamic equivalence theory, the study adopted a case study design with a mixed-methods approach. All 76 upper secondary students in the Literature, French, Kiswahili and Kinyarwanda option and four English teachers were purposively selected. Data were collected through a student questionnaire containing a multiple-choice idiom task and a translation task, together with semi-structured teacher interviews, and were analysed using frequencies, percentages and thematic coding. Results show that 75.0% of students rated their comprehension of idioms as poor or very poor, although all reported having studied idioms in compulsory lessons (the extent of this instruction was not measured). Correct responses in the multiple-choice task concentrated on one idiom that appears to have a Kinyarwanda counterpart, while no student translated *under the weather* acceptably in the translation task. Literal translation (40.8%) and cultural misinterpretation (23.7%) were the most frequent dominant error types (one per student), and 80.3% of students reported perceiving that English source culture influences their understanding to a high or very high extent; students' cultural knowledge was not measured independently. Teachers' accounts were consistent with these findings, attributing difficulties to word-for-word translation, limited vocabulary, low general English proficiency and unfamiliarity with English cultural references. The study tentatively concludes that students and teachers in this school regard limited knowledge of English source culture as one obstacle, alongside limited vocabulary and general proficiency, to idiom comprehension and translation; the causal role of cultural knowledge was not tested.

Keywords: English source culture; idiomatic expressions; comprehension and translation; Kinyarwanda

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Introduction

Language is both a vehicle of communication and a repository of the beliefs, values and everyday experiences of the community that uses it (Kramsch, 1998; Sapir, 1921), a relationship that is most

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visible in idiomatic expressions, whose meanings cannot be derived from the individual words that compose them (Baker, 2018; Fernando, 1996). English idioms such as *not my cup of tea* or *the ball is in your court* draw on British tea-drinking and sporting traditions, so they are transparent to insiders but opaque to learners who do not share that cultural background. As English spread through colonial and global influence into new linguistic settings (Kachru, 1985; Phillipson, 1992), such expressions travelled without the cultural knowledge that sustains them. Rwanda illustrates this challenge: Kinyarwanda is the national language spoken by almost all Rwandans, while English became an official language in 1996 and has replaced French as the language of instruction since 2008 (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010). Consequently, learners meet English figurative language mainly through textbooks and classroom talk, and many who have reasonable control of English grammar and vocabulary still interpret idioms literally and produce unnatural or distorted Kinyarwanda renderings. According to Nida's (1964) principle of dynamic equivalence, a faithful translation must evoke in the target audience a response equivalent to that of the source audience, which presupposes an understanding of the source culture. Yet little empirical evidence shows how English source culture relates to secondary students' comprehension and translation of idioms in Rwandan classrooms, particularly in rural settings where exposure to English-speaking cultures is limited. This exploratory study therefore examined the perceived influence of English source culture on students' comprehension and translation of English idiomatic expressions into Kinyarwanda in a selected secondary school in Muhanga District, Rwanda, and describes students' performance on idiom tasks alongside teachers' accounts without independently measuring students' cultural knowledge.

Objectives

The general objective was to examine the perceived influence of English source culture on students' comprehension and translation of English idiomatic expressions into Kinyarwanda in a selected secondary school. Specifically, the study sought to:

(i) assess students' level of comprehension of English idiomatic expressions in a selected secondary school;

(ii) analyse the types of errors students in a selected secondary school make when translating English idioms into Kinyarwanda; and

(iii) determine the extent to which students and teachers perceive that cultural differences influence comprehension and translation accuracy in a selected secondary school.

Literature Review

Idioms are fixed or semi-fixed multiword expressions whose figurative meanings are not the sum of their parts (Baker, 2018; Glucksberg, 2001), and they are anchored in the history, customs and experiences of the community from which they emerge (Fernando, 1996). In translation studies, source culture refers to the cultural setting in which a source text is produced, including its traditions, belief systems and shared knowledge, and Katan (2004) stresses that translators and learners interpret texts through their own cultural filters, which can distort meaning when the two cultures differ. In this study, *source culture* refers to the cultural contexts associated with the individual idioms

examined (for example, the tea-drinking and sporting traditions behind some of them), mainly those of British and other English-speaking communities, rather than to British culture alone; the study does not compare these cultures with one another. This view echoes the linguistic relativity tradition, which holds that language reflects and shapes the worldview of its speakers (Sapir, 1921; Whorf, 1956), and it explains why translation involves more than substituting words: it requires interpreting the culture embedded in them (Newmark, 1988). Nida's (1964) dynamic equivalence theory, the theoretical lens of this study, distinguishes formal equivalence, which preserves the form of the source text and tends to yield literal renderings, from dynamic equivalence, which prioritises naturalness and equivalent effect on the target audience. Because idioms are culturally determined and often lack exact counterparts in other languages, Baker (2018) recommends strategies such as finding an idiom of similar meaning, paraphrasing or, where necessary, omission, while Newmark (1988) adds cultural substitution and cautions that literal translation seldom conveys figurative meaning.

Empirical studies of second-language learners consistently show that idioms are difficult to understand and that cultural and conceptual familiarity matters. Irujo (1986) found that advanced learners handled idioms identical in their first and second languages best, those that were similar less well, and those that differed most poorly, with first-language transfer interfering in the process. Cooper (1999) and Liontas (2002) reported that learners confronted with unfamiliar idioms depend heavily on context and often on literal interpretation, and that contextual support does not always lead to accurate understanding. Bortfeld (2003) showed that bilinguals' idiom comprehension is shaped by familiarity and by the conceptual knowledge underlying the expression, while Boers et al. (2004) demonstrated that learners retain idioms better when they are told their origins, which supports culture-based instruction. In Rwanda, the move to English as the medium of instruction has made English figurative language part of everyday schooling while Kinyarwanda remains the language of daily life (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010). However, studies of idiom learning have mostly involved learners in other contexts, and few have examined together how knowledge of the source culture affects both comprehension and translation into Kinyarwanda in Rwandan secondary education. This study addresses that gap.

Methodology

The study was exploratory and used a case study design (Yin, 2018) with a mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018): quantitative data established the level of comprehension, the types of translation errors and the perceived extent of cultural influence, while qualitative data from interviews provided teachers' interpretations of why learners struggle. The case was a selected secondary school in Muhanga District, Southern Province, Rwanda, a rural setting in which Kinyarwanda is the home language and English the medium of instruction. The population comprised 76 upper secondary students in the Literature, French, Kiswahili and Kinyarwanda option (18 in Senior four, 34 in Senior five and 24 in Senior six), for whom English is a main subject and who regularly meet idioms in textbooks and lessons, together with the school's four English teachers. This school was selected due to its accessibility and rural setting, and the Literature, French, Kiswahili and Kinyarwanda option was included English is a main subject for these students and they study languages intensively. Because the population was small and accessible, all members were purposively included rather than sampled (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Three data sources were used. A structured questionnaire (Dörnyei, 2007) administered to students captured background information, self-rated comprehension of English idioms (very well, well, poor or very poor), a multiple-choice task on the meanings of five idioms (*kill two birds with one stone*, *spill the beans*, *hit the nail on the head*, *burn the midnight oil* and *break the ice*), a task requiring translation of five idioms (*cost an arm and a leg*, *piece of cake*, *it rains cats and dogs*, *under the weather* and *let the cat out of the bag*) into Kinyarwanda, and items on the perceived extent of English cultural influence and on strategies that would help. The multiple-choice and translation tasks used different sets of five idioms, so performance on an individual idiom cannot be compared across the two tasks; the complete items and answer options are given in Appendices A and B. Semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 2007) with the four English teachers explored students' comprehension levels, common errors, the role of culture and teaching strategies. In addition, English textbooks and teaching materials used in the school were reviewed to see how idioms are presented. All instruments were aligned with the study objectives and developed under academic supervision.

Three constructs were distinguished. *Perceived cultural influence* is the extent to which students and teachers believe that knowledge of English source culture affects idiom understanding; it was measured by a self-report item on a four-point scale (very high, high, moderate, low) and by interview questions. *Idiom comprehension* was measured by a self-rating and by the multiple-choice meaning task. *Translation performance* was measured by the acceptability and error classification of the translation task. Students' actual knowledge of English culture, their general English proficiency and their prior familiarity with each idiom were not measured separately. The study can therefore describe perceptions and performance and show how they co-occur, but it cannot demonstrate that cultural knowledge caused the observed performance; 'influence' is accordingly used in the sense of perceived influence unless stated otherwise.

Nida's (1964) distinction between formal and dynamic equivalence was used to build the scoring criteria, not only to interpret the results. A translation was judged acceptable when it conveyed the figurative meaning of the idiom in natural Kinyarwanda, whether through a Kinyarwanda idiom or a paraphrase, because this evokes a response in Kinyarwanda readers comparable to that of English readers (dynamic equivalence). Responses that reproduced the English words and structure without conveying the figurative meaning were classed as literal translation (formal equivalence without equivalent effect).

Each student's translations were judged against explicit criteria (Table 1). Because an idiom can be translated acceptably in more than one way, a response was accepted if it conveyed the intended meaning even when it differed from the reference rendering. Where a response showed features of more than one error type, it was assigned the single category that, in the assessor's judgement, most affected the conveyance of meaning (the dominant error), so that the categories are mutually exclusive

Percentages in Tables 4 to 6 are percentages of the 76 students, not of the 380 possible translations (five items for each of 76 students). Each of these tables sums to 76, so each student contributes one entry per table. A student who made several types of error is counted once, under the dominant error, so the figures show how many students were characterised by each error type, not how many incorrect translations of each type were produced.

Table 1. Scoring categories for the translation task and their relation to Nida's (1964) equivalence

Category	Operational definition	Relation to Nida (1964)
Acceptable	Conveys the figurative meaning in natural Kinyarwanda, by an equivalent idiom or a paraphrase.	Dynamic equivalence: equivalent effect on the Kinyarwanda reader.
Literal translation	Reproduces the words and structure of the idiom item by item; figurative meaning not conveyed.	Formal equivalence without equivalent effect: form kept, effect lost.
Cultural misinterpretation	Meaning misread because the culture-specific image or practice behind the idiom is not recognised, or is replaced by a Kinyarwanda image with a different meaning.	Failure to recover the source-culture reference on which equivalent effect depends.
Semantic error	Plausible but inexact or partly wrong meaning; neither literal nor culturally misread.	Partial loss of meaning; equivalent effect not achieved.
Omission	No translation, or the key element of the idiom is left out.	No equivalence attempted.
Distortion	Rendering that changes the meaning or is unnatural or unintelligible in Kinyarwanda.	Distorted effect; unnatural target text.

Data were collected in person at the school. Students completed the questionnaire after being informed of the purpose of the study and assured that participation was voluntary and that their responses would remain confidential and be used only for research; teachers who were interviewed are not identified in this report. Completed questionnaires were checked for completeness, coded and tabulated, and the quantitative data were summarised using frequencies and percentages. Translation responses were classified as acceptable or according to the type of error made (literal translation, cultural misinterpretation, semantic error, omission and distortion) using the criteria in Table 1. Interview responses were coded and grouped into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and then compared with the questionnaire results to triangulate the findings. Triangulation here means comparing the direction of the teachers' accounts with the questionnaire patterns (Table 7); it is not independent verification, and the themes were used to interpret specific student errors.

Related to ethical consideration, students were told that participation was voluntary and that their responses would remain confidential, and the teachers are not identified.

Results

Respondents' profile

Table 2 presents the profile of the 76 student respondents. Females form the majority (59.2%), most students are aged 15–20 years (90.8%), and the largest group is in Senior five (44.7%). All respondents (100%) report that they have studied English idioms as part of compulsory lessons. The extent and nature of this instruction were not measured. The four English teachers each have more than five years of teaching experience; two teach at Ordinary Level and two at Advanced Level.

Table 2. Profile of student respondents (n = 76)

Characteristic	Category	f	%
Sex	Female	45	59.2
	Male	31	40.8
Age	15–20 years	69	90.8
	20–25 years	6	7.9
	Above 25 years	1	1.3
Class	Senior four	18	23.7
	Senior five	34	44.7
	Senior six	24	31.6

Note. f = frequency. Percentages are based on n = 76 for each characteristic.

Comprehension of English idiomatic expressions

Table 3 shows that, although all students report having studied idioms, 75.0% rate their own comprehension as poor (32.9%) or very poor (42.1%), while only 25.0% rate it as well (11.8%) or very well (13.2%).

Table 3. Students' self-rated comprehension of English idioms (n = 76)

Level of comprehension	f	%
Very well	10	13.2
Well	9	11.8
Poor	25	32.9
Very poor	32	42.1
Total	**76**	**100.0**

Note. f = frequency.

Performance on the two idiom tasks is uneven. In the multiple-choice task (Table 4), correct responses concentrate on *kill two birds with one stone* (75.0%), whereas the other four idioms account for between 3.9% and 9.2% each. In the translation task (Table 5), acceptable Kinyarwanda translations are most frequent for *it rains cats and dogs* (39.5%) and *let the cat out of the bag* (34.2%), followed by *piece of cake* (14.5%) and *cost an arm and a leg* (11.8%); no student produces an acceptable translation of *under the weather.* Percentages are of the 76 students.

Table 4. Correct responses in the multiple-choice idiom task (n = 76)

Idiom	Meaning	f	%
kill two birds with one stone	Do two things at once	57	75.0
spill the beans	Reveal a secret	7	9.2
hit the nail on the head	Be exactly right	5	6.6
burn the midnight oil	Work late at night	4	5.3
break the ice	Start a conversation	3	3.9
Total		**76**	**100.0**

Note. f = frequency. Percentages are of the 76 students.

Table 5. Acceptable Kinyarwanda translations in the translation task (n = 76)

Idiom	Acceptable Kinyarwanda translation	f	%
it rains cats and dogs	*Imvura igwa ari nyinshi cyane*	30	39.5
let the cat out of the bag	*Kumena ibanga*	26	34.2
piece of cake	*Ikintu cyoroshye cyane*	11	14.5
cost an arm and a leg	*Ikintu gihenze cyane*	9	11.8
under the weather	*Kumva utameze neza cyangwa urwaye*	0	0.0
Total		**76**	**100.0**

Note. f = frequency. Translation items are listed in Appendix B. Renderings shown are examples of acceptable translations; Percentages are of the 76 students.

Translation errors

Table 6 shows that literal translation is the most frequent dominant error (40.8% of students), followed by cultural misinterpretation (23.7%), semantic errors (14.5%), omission (11.8%) and distortion (9.2%). Because each student is counted once, under the dominant error category, the figures show how many students were characterised by each error type, not how many incorrect translations of each type were produced.

Table 6. Dominant type of translation error per student (n = 76)

Type of error	f	%
Literal translation	31	40.8
Cultural misinterpretation	18	23.7
Semantic errors	11	14.5
Omission	9	11.8
Distortion	7	9.2
Total	**76**	**100.0**

Note. f = frequency. Each student is assigned one dominant error category; percentages are of the 76 students, not of the 380 possible translations.

Perceived influence of English source culture

All students (100%) believe that English source culture affects how idioms are understood. As Figure 1 shows, 64.5% say the influence is very high, 15.8% high, 14.5% moderate and 5.3% low, so that 80.3% report a high or very high influence. Asked what would help them most, students mention studying English cultures (39.5%), more idiom exercises (14.5%), improving vocabulary (13.2%), visual aids (11.8%), and deeper teacher explanations and more examples (10.5% each). These figures describe students' perceptions; they are not a measure of the effect of cultural knowledge on students' performance on the idiom tasks.

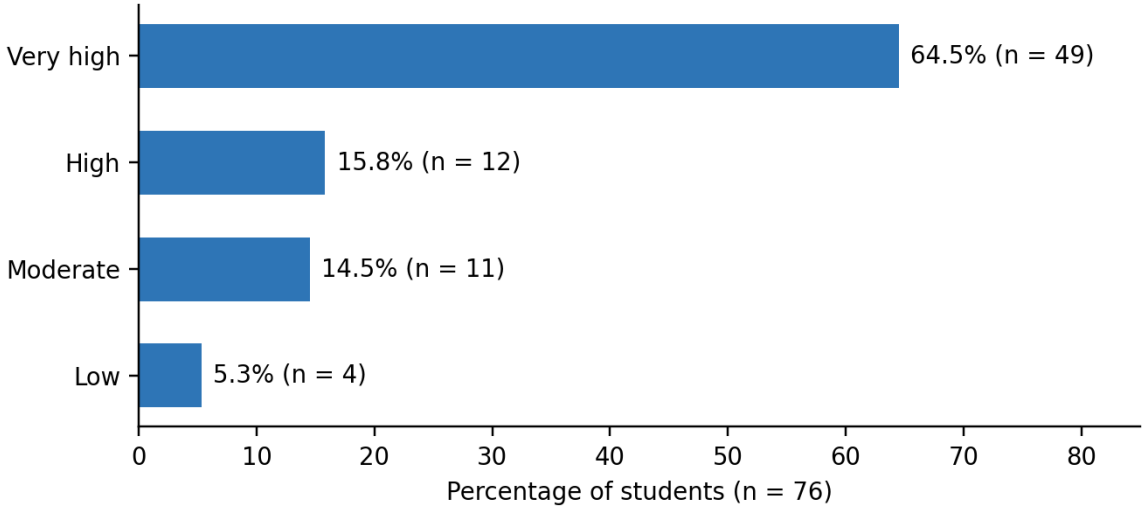


Figure 1. Extent to which students perceive that English source culture influences students' understanding of idioms (n = 76)

Teachers' views

The teacher interviews are consistent with these results. Four themes were identified (Table 7); each is linked below to the student data it helps to interpret. One teacher describes students' comprehension as low because their general level of English is low, and the other three report that students tend to translate idioms word for word, for example *kick the bucket* and *piece of cake*, so that familiar words fail to yield the real meaning. This theme matches the dominance of literal translation among the students (Table 6). All four teachers agree that idioms are figurative and culturally loaded and therefore cannot be translated directly, and one adds that limited English vocabulary is a further obstacle. They cite *break the ice*, which students render as *kumena urubura* (literally, "to break ice") instead of expressing the idea of starting a conversation or putting people at ease, and they note misinterpretations and the use of inappropriate Kinyarwanda idioms. This example corresponds to the literal-translation category in Table 1: the form of the idiom is reproduced but the intended effect is lost. Teachers state that English source culture affects students greatly because many idioms originate in English-speaking contexts and some English words have no equivalent in Kinyarwanda culture (a perception rather than a measured effect; teachers also named low general proficiency and limited vocabulary as obstacles). The strategies they use or recommend include teaching idioms through examples and storytelling, giving Kinyarwanda equivalents where possible, and encouraging extensive reading and independent exercises.

Table 7. Themes from the teacher interviews and their relation to the student results (n = 4 teachers)

Theme	Teachers	Link to student data
Word-for-word translation	3 of 4	Literal translation is the most frequent dominant error (Table 6); e.g. *break the ice* rendered as *kumena urubura*.
Idioms are figurative and culturally loaded and cannot be translated directly	4 of 4	Cultural misinterpretation (Table 6); 80.3% of students perceive a high or very high cultural influence.
Low general English proficiency and limited vocabulary	1 of 4 for each point	Alternative or interacting explanation for low self-rated comprehension (Table 3) and for the absence of acceptable translations of *under the weather* (Table 5).
Teaching strategies (examples and storytelling, Kinyarwanda equivalents, extensive reading)	-	Students' requests to study English cultures and for more examples (Figure 1 text).

Note. Counts are numbers of teachers who raised the theme in interview.

Discussion of Results in Light of the Literature

The finding that 75.0% of students rate their comprehension of idioms as poor or very poor, even though all have studied them, is consistent with evidence that idioms remain difficult for second-language learners after formal instruction (Cooper, 1999; Liontas, 2002), and teachers' accounts of low comprehension are consistent with the self-ratings. One possible explanation, which the present data cannot test, is that Rwandan secondary students meet English mainly in the classroom while Kinyarwanda dominates daily life (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010), leaving few opportunities to acquire the cultural knowledge that makes idioms meaningful (Kramsch, 1998). Other explanations may interact with this one: teachers also identified low general English proficiency and limited vocabulary, and the study did not separately measure proficiency, exposure to English-speaking contexts or familiarity with each idiom.

The uneven performance on the tasks is compatible with the possibility that the availability of a familiar counterpart matters, but the data do not establish this. The concentration of correct responses on *kill two birds with one stone* (75.0%), which has a close Kinyarwanda counterpart (*gutera ibuye rimwe ukica inyoni ebyiri*), is in line with Irujo's (1986) finding that idioms shared by the first and second languages are the easiest to handle. However, this multiple-choice result alone cannot show that the counterpart explains the higher performance: the idiom may simply be more widely taught or encountered, or more transparent in meaning, and students' familiarity with the Kinyarwanda equivalent was not tested. By contrast, no student translated *under the weather*, an opaque expression whose meaning cannot be inferred from its words (Baker, 2018), acceptably. This is consistent with comprehension breaking down when no familiar anchor exists, in line with Bortfeld's (2003) finding that familiarity and underlying conceptual knowledge shape idiom comprehension, but it does not by itself show a lack of cultural knowledge: the difficulty could equally reflect unfamiliarity with this particular idiom, limited vocabulary or the design of the task.

The dominance of literal translation (40.8%) and cultural misinterpretation (23.7%) as the dominant error types among students is consistent with Newmark's (1988) warning that literal rendering rarely conveys figurative meaning and Baker's (2018) argument that idioms require strategies beyond word-

for-word substitution. The teachers' example of *break the ice* rendered as *kumena urubura* illustrates formal equivalence in Nida's (1964) sense: the form is preserved but the effect on the Kinyarwanda reader is lost. In terms of the scoring framework (Table 1), literal translations are cases of formal equivalence without equivalent effect, cultural misinterpretations are failures to recover the source-culture reference on which equivalent effect depends, and acceptable translations, whether idiomatic or paraphrased, achieve dynamic equivalence. That acceptable renderings were recorded for four of the five idioms (11.8% to 39.5% of students; Table 5), notably *it rains cats and dogs* and *let the cat out of the bag*, shows that dynamic equivalence was attainable for some idioms. Students may therefore lack both the cultural knowledge that Katan (2004) identifies as the filter through which texts are interpreted and the strategies needed to search for a functional equivalent. This interpretation is tentative: cultural knowledge, strategy use, vocabulary and general proficiency were not measured separately.

That 80.3% of students and all four teachers perceive a high or very high influence of English source culture is consistent with the linguistic relativity view that language is inseparable from the worldview of its users (Sapir, 1921; Whorf, 1956). These are perceptions: they show that students and teachers regard culture as important, but they do not demonstrate that cultural knowledge improves comprehension or translation performance. The fact that studying English cultures is the strategy students most often request (39.5%) is consistent with Boers et al. (2004), who found that learners retain idioms better when they know their origins, and with Byram's (1997) emphasis on intercultural competence in language teaching. What is new in the present study is the combination of these themes in a rural Rwandan secondary setting: Kinyarwanda equivalents may help students, as the result for *kill two birds with one stone* suggests, whereas some idioms with no known familiar counterpart, such as *under the weather*, were not translated acceptably by any student. This pattern is suggestive only, but it points to teaching that links English idioms explicitly to Kinyarwanda experience as an approach worth testing.

Conclusion, Limitations and Recommendations

Conclusion

This exploratory study examined the perceived influence of English source culture on students' comprehension and translation of English idiomatic expressions into Kinyarwanda in a selected secondary school. The findings show that students' self-rated comprehension of idioms is generally low, with 75.0% of students rating it poor or very poor; that the dominant translation error is literal rendering (40.8% of students), followed by cultural misinterpretation (23.7%); and that 80.3% of students, supported by their teachers, perceive a high or very high influence of English source culture. The study therefore concludes, tentatively, that students and teachers in this school see limited knowledge of English source culture as an important obstacle to idiom comprehension and translation, and that idioms with a familiar Kinyarwanda counterpart may be easier for students. Because cultural knowledge was not measured directly, and because low general proficiency and limited vocabulary were also reported, the study does not show that cultural unfamiliarity is the cause of the observed errors. Because the study is exploratory and a single-site case involving 76 students and four teachers, relies partly on self-reported data and did not compute reliability coefficients for its

instruments, the results should not be generalised to other schools or to secondary students across Rwanda.

Limitations

The study relied on self-ratings and perceptions, a small purposive sample from one school, a small set of idioms in each task, different idioms in the two tasks, and no independent measures of cultural knowledge, English proficiency or exposure to English-speaking contexts. These features limit the inferences that can be drawn. Future studies should pilot the instruments and report reliability and validity evidence, include independent measures of cultural knowledge and proficiency, and test the relationships statistically.

Recommendations

The following recommendations draw on the literature as well as on the present findings and are offered for consideration rather than as conclusions established by this study. Teachers should embed cultural background in idiom instruction by explaining origins, using examples and storytelling, offering Kinyarwanda equivalents where they exist, using authentic audiovisual materials such as films, songs and dialogues, and training students to look for functional rather than word-for-word equivalents (Boers et al., 2004; Byram, 1997). Students should read widely in English and record the meaning, origin and Kinyarwanda equivalent of each new idiom. School leaders should establish language clubs and organise workshops on idiomatic expressions. Curriculum developers and education authorities should include idioms and their cultural contexts in English syllabi at all levels and in teacher-education programmes. Future research should use larger and more varied samples, measure cultural knowledge and general English proficiency independently and examine their relationship with idiom comprehension and translation, compare English and Kinyarwanda idioms, and test the effect of culture-based instruction experimentally.

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