

ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL CONTEXTS: THE CHALLENGE BURUNDI IS FACING FOR GLOBAL INTEGRATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper assesses general foreign language proficiency acquired in higher education and maps it onto the communicative skills needed in international professional contexts. More specifically, the paper explores the overall proficiency of students who have English as their major at the University of Burundi. As a semi-longitudinal study, it also identifies the order in which English language skills and components are mastered. Furthermore, this study examines how these students view the linguistic challenges for Burundi's integration into the East African Community and defines students' potential role in meeting these challenges. The data were collected by administering a proficiency measure, the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and a questionnaire to students in all four years of the English programme. The results indicated that (i) their proficiency was appreciably low, with most graduating students at the intermediate level; (ii) the skills/components were mastered in the order of grammar, reading comprehension and vocabulary, and finally, listening; and (iii) English majors were well aware of both the linguistic challenges to be met as well as their role in the country's regional integration into the East African Community. Based on these findings (which are underscored by the lecturers), the study discusses suggestions for redefining teaching/learning objectives and outcomes in the hope of enhancing graduates' general language proficiency and the professional roles of future generations of English majors.

KEYWORDS: language proficiency, testing proficiency, language skills, English as an international language

1 INTRODUCTION

Burundi, like many other African countries, is multilingual, with four languages—Kirundi, Kiswahili, French, and English—spoken to varying degrees. Kirundi and French are used as official languages; Kirundi, the native language, is spoken nationwide in daily communication by

different communities; French is the language of education, administration and politics; and belongs to the formal domains. Kiswahili, the lingua franca of the region, is spoken predominantly along Lake Tanganyika and in Bujumbura. English is a foreign language and has only recently, in 2007, been introduced from the first grade of primary school onwards, together with the other three languages used in the country, in an effort to facilitate the country's regional integration into the East African Community (EAC). In contrast with the other member countries of the EAC, i.e., Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda, where English is an official language and the language of education, in Burundi, English is a foreign language. This could be accounted for by Burundi's historical ties with Belgium (as a consequence of which French is still being used as the main language of communication, administration and education). Despite international trends, there is overall limited contact with English through, for instance, the internet, film, newspapers or music. Consequently, exposure to English is limited for English majors (students taking English as a major at the university) for whom it is the medium of instruction.

Since Burundi has joined the EAC, where English is the working language (i.e., all the official meetings are held in this language, which is also the language of the EAC administration), competent users of English for professional purposes have become crucial. With EAC membership came a free job market where Burundian graduates have to compete, not only with Ugandans, Tanzanians and Kenyans (all historically Anglophones) but also with Rwandans who have had an English–French bilingual educational policy in place since 2000. Given this new situation, Burundi, the only francophone country in the EAC community, aims to meet the regional linguistic and communicative challenges through a gradual change in the status of English from a foreign to an international working language.

This need surpasses the regional context and becomes even more pressing given that English is used world-wide as the language of communication and has been conceptualised as an international language, i.e., English as an International Language (EIL) (see Jenkins, 2000; Marlina, 2014, 2017; McKay, 2003; Crystal, 2003; Seidlhofer, 2011; Seidlhofer et al., 2006). This conceptualisation has followed from the functions and roles of English in all aspects of society (Marlina, 2014, 2017). Kirkpatrick (2010), describing the rapid spread of English in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, observed that “major reasons for this increasing attention to English are that English is seen as the international language on the one hand, and as the major language of knowledge creation and dissemination and modernization on the other” (Kirkpatrick, 2010: 1). For the same reasons, English has also spread rapidly through China over the past decades with “many millions of people avidly learning the language” (Bolton, 2017: v). Education, business, tourism and media are the domains where English has “evident currency” (Bolton, 2017: vi). Another “major factor that has significantly contributed to the internationalisation of the status of English is the changing demographic background of its users” (Marlina, 2017: 174).

This change in the demographic backgrounds of English users paved the way for teaching English within this new paradigm. In China, for example, calls to teach English within an EIL paradigm are becoming a classroom reality (Marlina, 2017). Pedagogical guidelines include the following (Marlina, 2017: 175):

- (1) Ensure that the English taught in Chinese classrooms reflects the actual use of English in Chinese societies;
- (2) raise awareness of WE [World Englishes];
- (3) promote linguistic ownership;
- (4) incorporate Chinese cultural norms and values into language teaching;
- (5) value students' L1;
- (6) employ more multilingual English teachers from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds whom students can look up to as role models.

The above suggestions mirror Kirkpatrick's (2010) observations regarding the status of English as a lingua franca. For more details on English as EIL (English as an International Language), ELF (English as a Lingua Franca), WE (World Englishes) and other related concepts and their teaching implications, we refer the readers to the journals *English Today*, *Journal of English as a Lingua Franca* and *World Englishes*, as well as the *Handbook of World Englishes* (Kachru, Kachru & Nelson, 2006), *English as a Lingua Franca in ASEAN: A multilingual model* (Kirkpatrick, 2010) and *Understanding English as a Lingua Franca* (Seidlhofer, 2011).

We would like to point out that the 'new' functions and roles of English have resulted in new educational strategies and from the learners' perspectives, a high motivation to learn and communicate in English. The Burundian local context is no exception to the rule. Nizonkiza (2006) notes that following the dominant position of English worldwide, the number of Burundians registering for evening classes—with people coming from all spheres, even those with a university degree—dramatically increased prior to Burundi joining the EAC.

The context, as it appears from the description above, compels Burundian students in higher education, both English majors and others, to prepare themselves for functioning in English in a globalised context. Thus, teaching and learning would have to prepare for and embrace skills and activities like listening when attending meetings as an integrated component of communication, taking and exchanging notes, writing reports, holding telephonic meetings, chairing meetings and the like. As observed by Horicubonye (personal communication), a senior lecturer at the University of Burundi, the English curriculum at the University of Burundi and other higher education institutions in Burundi do not seem to accommodate these aspects. Since Burundi aspires to become a fully qualified member of the EAC, its citizens have to be provided with the best possible foundations to interact with and contribute to the extended community, thereby facilitating a smooth regional integration. The role that graduated English majors would (have to) play would exceed local educational needs to encompass the country's regional integrational needs. To this

end, an appropriate level of language proficiency is the main linguistic prerequisite for achieving adequate communication skills.

Even though graduates from the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Burundi (Burundi's main university) traditionally serve as teachers at secondary schools and in private language centres where they teach English for General Purposes to francophone learners, they are also expected to fulfil diverse teaching responsibilities in the area of English for Specific Purposes to help with the country's regional integration (English for managerial, business and diplomacy purposes). Thus, a fundamental question worth raising is whether these graduates are mentally, socially and content-wise prepared for the diversity of tasks awaiting them after graduation. The university confers the degree of Bachelor of Arts upon students after four years of study during which their language proficiency is also evaluated. However, this is done through achievement tests aimed at assessing progress following learning objectives (cf. McNamara, 2000). Students are not assessed on their proficiency at either the entry or exit levels of their study programme. Furthermore, even the different language skills have not yet been studied or assessed in terms of progress in the course of students' proficiency development.

To our knowledge, only a few studies have examined the listening (Kaneza, 2000), speaking (Sabiyumva, 2008) or writing skills (Breyne & Wouters, 2012) of Burundian English majors. All three of the above studies were interested in the challenges that Burundian English majors face and reflected on potential solutions to the problems. These problems seem to be mainly inappropriate teaching materials, the lack of a conducive environment (especially for speaking and listening skills) and interference from Kirundi and French. To date, the only language component examined across proficiency levels is vocabulary, general (as opposed to academic) vocabulary (Nzambimana, 2015) as well as collocations, both receptive (Nizonkiza, 2011a, 2015) and productive knowledge (Nizonkiza, 2011b, 2012; Nizonkiza & Van de Poel, 2014). The studies have thoroughly investigated vocabulary in association with proficiency levels and point to the same conclusion, i.e., that vocabulary knowledge, both receptive and productive, develops in parallel with students' linguistic proficiency. While these studies alluded to proficiency, they have not tried to define 'the state of proficiency' among English majors. They were primarily interested in proving that vocabulary is an important language component and can thus be used to predict overall linguistic proficiency.

The state of English proficiency among English majors at the University of Burundi remains unexplored even though proficiency in the language is very much needed for the country's integration into the EAC community, where it is the working language. English is also the lingua franca for worldwide communication in which Burundians should take part. We believe that objectively measuring the state of proficiency in English, using a standardised test and assessing the development of the students' proficiency could give an indication of their potential for international communication positions and their potential role in assisting other Burundians

through teaching. Hence, this study closes a knowledge gap in the literature and aims to measure the proficiency levels achieved by English majors at the bachelor's degree level using a standardised test and map the results onto future communicative tasks (integrational and international communication needs). In addition, we want to investigate whether English majors are aware of their expected role(s) in the country's regional integration and the linguistic challenges which Burundians should meet before the country can claim to be fully integrated into the EAC.

In short, the present study aims to map the academic curriculum and learning outcomes of the English major programme at the University of Burundi onto the new professional needs and attempts to bring the academic and professional world closer together through the study of the proficiency of English majors at different learning levels. To this end, we examined the following questions:

- (i) What is the level of proficiency of English majors at the University of Burundi?
- (ii) Is there any specific order in which the skills/components of English are mastered by English majors?
- (iii) Are English majors aware of the linguistic and communicative challenges involved in Burundi's regional integration in the East African Community (EAC)?
- (iv) How do English majors perceive the role they are expected to play in this process (regional integration)?

METHODOLOGY

Population investigated

Three hundred and sixteen Burundian English majors from the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Burundi participated in this study. They were between 18 and 26 years old and represented all four years of study ($n = 111$ in the first year, $n = 32$ in the second year, $n = 44$ in the third year and $n = 129$ in the fourth year). They spoke four languages to varying degrees: Kirundi, Kiswahili, French and English. English, a foreign language in Burundi, is the target language in which the students major and is the medium of instruction for this degree. The participants in this study were educated under the old system with a bachelor's degree to be completed in four years. The reform being implemented now is the Bologna Declaration, which is a reorganisation of Higher Education that was started in 1999, primarily in the European Union to create more transparency and comparability between institutions and study programmes. As a consequence, the BA degree was reduced to three years, comprising 180 credits. This reform has been adopted since the 2011–2012 academic year. Students from all four years were invited by their lecturers towards the end of the academic year 2009–2010 to undergo a language test voluntarily. It was explained to them that the test was intended for research purposes and that the

results would not affect their grades in any way. The dates for data collection (four different morning sessions) were announced to each class and students who had volunteered to participate, consented to be present on those dates.

The test battery: TOEFL

A published version of TOEFL (Pyle & Muñoz, 1991) was administered to participants on four different mornings. Educational Testing Service (ETS) instructions were adhered to for the test administration and correction. ETS instructions suggest administering the listening segment first, followed by grammar and then reading comprehension and vocabulary. The writing segment constitutes the last part. Unlike the ETS instructions, where marking is computerised, the test was marked manually. It was followed by a two-step analysis. First, the raw scores were converted to scaled scores following ETS instructions, in order to answer the first research question about the level of proficiency. TOEFL-scaled scores (ranging from 310 to 677) were used to allocate participants to proficiency levels. The score ranges adopted were the ones in use at Aberystwyth University (UK) and score ranges adapted from the equivalence table developed by the Vancouver Language Centre (Canada). Three main groups of proficiency levels can be further divided into ten levels¹ and are distinguished as follows:

- below 310: beginner
- 310–343: middle beginner
- 347–393: upper beginner

- 397–433: low intermediate
- 437–473: middle intermediate
- 477–510: intermediate

- 513–547: low advanced
- 550–587: middle advanced
- 590–637: upper advanced
- 640–677: upper advanced

Thereafter, the raw scores per skill/component were compared to one another before attributing students to proficiency levels and finally, each proficiency level was studied separately in order to answer the second research question about the order in which the skills/components were mastered.

¹ Information retrieved on November 29 2012, at: <http://www.aber.ac.uk/en/media/Compare-IELTS,-TOEFL-and-TOEIC.pdf>. These categories are supposed to be mutually exclusive, probably because of the formula used to convert the raw scores into scaled scores.

Questionnaire

To answer the third research question, a questionnaire (see Appendix 1) was designed and presented to a sample of students selected from the participants. We selected only 30 English majors from the final year who were on the verge of entering the job market, estimating that they would be aware of the linguistic challenges ahead. The participants were selected using the simple random sampling technique (Babbie, 1990), i.e., selecting every n^{th} subject from a random starting point. Because we wanted to select 30 participants² (cf. Bouma, 1984), which is about one-third of the participants from the 4th year (total number = 129), our sampling ratio was 37 ($129 \div 30$). This entails that from a random starting point, every 4th student was selected until we reached 30. For practical reasons, the selection process took place right after sitting for the TOEFL.

The questionnaire consisted of five questions where students had to judge statements on a five-point Likert scale and answer some open questions. It aimed to assess the English majors' awareness of the linguistic and communicative challenges Burundians face concerning the country's integration into the EAC and self-assessment of the potential role they could play in this process. The questionnaire consisted of questions that were grouped into two categories. The first category consisted of three questions which asked about the preparedness of Burundi for regional integration regarding language, the linguistic challenges to be met and the way(s) in which they could be met. The last two questions constituted the second category and aimed to gauge the participants' awareness of the role that English majors are expected to play and explicitly asked them to list areas in which they may need more training in order to effectively compete in the EAC labour market. An adapted version of the students' questionnaire (see Appendix 2) was administered to a small but representative sample of lecturers (N=4 out of a total of eight) and was aimed at gaining insight from the lecturers' perspectives, who also have ties with the work and then, comparing both groups' views. This was the only way that the outcome of this study could have a curricular and pedagogical impact.

RESULTS

Proficiency of English majors at the University of Burundi

The first research question pursued in this study was the level of proficiency of English majors at the University of Burundi. Using the scaled TOEFL scores described in the previous section, participants were allocated to proficiency levels. The distribution of participants in proficiency levels is presented in Table 1 with means and standard deviations³.

² Bouma (1984) suggests a minimum of 30 participants in a study for valid statistics tests.

³ Only one student achieved the middle-advanced level, and the mean and standard deviations are not applicable.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics by TOEFL proficiency level grouping for Burundian English majors

Level	Mean	Maximum	Minimum	N	SD
Middle advanced	557	-	-	1	-
Low advanced	532	513	547	9	13.01
Intermediate	490	477	510	15	9.34
Middle intermediate	454	437	473	57	11.96
Low intermediate	415	397	433	75	10.76
Upper beginner	371	347	393	106	14.91
Middle beginner	324	310	343	53	13.53

As seen in Table 1, the participants in this study could be roughly assigned to seven different proficiency levels: middle advanced, low advanced, intermediate, middle intermediate, low intermediate, upper beginner and middle beginner. A one-way ANOVA test (two-tailed), measuring the statistical significance of mean differences of three groups or more (Pallant, 2007) was conducted. Overall, the results were indeed found to be statistically significant ($F(3, 287) = 556.43, p = .000 [< .05]$). It is important to note that the proficiency levels with less than 30 students in them, i.e., middle advanced ($N = 1$), low advanced ($N = 9$) and intermediate ($N = 15$) were excluded from the statistical tests, as recommended by Bouma (1984).

To determine which groups truly performed differently, the Scheffe post hoc test—a multiple comparisons test—was carried out. This test was intended to complement the one-way ANOVA by showing where significant differences had occurred. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Post hoc comparisons of mean scores across proficiency levels

Dependent Variable	(I) Proficiency level	(J) Proficiency level	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
TOEFL	Middle beginner	Upper beginner	-60.322*	2.708	.000
		Low intermediate	-101.882*	3.134	.000
		Middle intermediate	-155.310*	4.343	.000
	Upper beginner	Middle beginner	60.322*	2.708	.000
		Low intermediate	-41.559*	3.411	.000
		Middle intermediate	-94.988*	4.547	.000

	Low intermediate	Middle beginner	101.882*	3.134	.000
		Upper beginner	41.559*	3.411	.000
		Middle intermediate	-53.429*	4.813	.000
	Middle intermediate	Middle beginner	155.310*	4.343	.000
		Upper beginner	94.988*	4.547	.000
		Low intermediate	53.429*	4.813	.000

The results presented in Table 2 (cf. the last column where the significance (Sig.) is .000 for the difference between every two groups) show that all the groups performed differently and can, therefore, be considered as representing different levels of proficiency.

Based on the above scores, we can state that English proficiency among Burundian learners of English is appreciably low (irrespective of their year of enrollment), with only very few students reaching the advanced level. Most graduating students are at the intermediate level; with only one student achieving a middle-advanced level while nine are at a low-advanced level (i.e., roughly three per cent, which is 10 out of 316 students) have achieved a low-to-middle advanced level of proficiency in English). This finding answers the first research question and defines the state of proficiency of English majors at the University of Burundi.

Order in which the skills/components are mastered

The second research question investigates whether English majors perform differently across the different skills/language components and whether they perform better or worse on a particular skill. This question was answered by comparing the scores obtained for the different skills and components (with means for all groups together and each group separately).

Table 3: Average scores per skill/component for Burundian English Majors out of 67

Skills/Components	All groups together	Middle intermediate	Low intermediate	Upper beginner	Middle beginner
Grammar	43	54.40	48.21	44.81	36.74
Reading and Vocabulary	41	52.04	45.63	42.59	36.03
Listening	37	45.64	42.23	36.24	32.75

The results presented in Table 3 show that the skills/components are mastered in the order of grammar, reading comprehension and vocabulary, and listening. The scores per skill were

compared by running repeated measures of ANOVA to test whether or not the differences were statistically significant, which is the case with a Sig. of .000 (for all groups together and separately). Since repeated measures of ANOVA do not show where the differences lie⁴, the analysis was taken a step further and Bonferroni post hoc comparisons were made (see Table 4).

Table 4: Post hoc comparisons of means per skills/components in all groups together/ separately

Skills /Components	Sig.				
	Groups together	Middle intermediate	Low intermediate	Upper beginner	Middle beginner
Grammar vs. Reading and Vocabulary	.001	.235	.012	.018	.848
Grammar vs. Listening	.000	.004	.000	.000	.000
Reading and Vocabulary vs. Listening	.000	.000	.002	.000	.000

As presented in Table 4, the differences in performance between every two skills/components are statistically significant—all groups together and each level separately—except at middle intermediate and middle beginner. These findings answer the second research question about how the English majors performed in the different skills/components, which is an appreciably good performance for grammar and decreasing skills in reading and vocabulary, and listening—with the latter being the most poorly-mastered skill.

Linguistic challenges to Burundi’s integration into the EAC

The third research question that the present study purports to answer is whether English majors are aware of the linguistic and communicative challenges to Burundi’s regional integration, whether they are aware of their (expected) role in the process and how well prepared they feel to fulfil that role. The questionnaire addressing these topics straddles the linguistic/communicative needs analysis and learners' self-assessment of communicative and linguistic proficiency for the context discussed. It is worth noting that for purposes of triangulation (cf. Section 2.3), the questions were presented both to the target audience, i.e., students (N = 30) and future stakeholders in the integrational process and their lecturers (N = 4), all actively engaged in the process of regional integration.

⁴ ANOVA shows that, overall, the difference between skills/components is statistically significant but does not give details of which two skills/components differ significantly.

Respondents were first asked about the preparedness (past and present) and the opportunities (present and future) of Burundi in the EAC. They all disagreed that *Burundi's regional integration in the EAC has been well prepared as far as English is concerned*; 47% of the participants strongly disagreed while 53% disagreed. Similarly, most of the respondents disagreed with the second statement that *Given Burundians' general proficiency in English, Burundi has the same opportunities as the other members of the EAC*, with 43% strongly disagreeing and 47% disagreeing (only 10% or three respondents evaluated the opportunities for Burundi as positive).

The topic of the linguistic challenges to be met by Burundi is covered by one statement and two supplementary questions. The statement *Burundi has to meet some linguistic challenges before a regional integration in the EAC can be achieved* was responded to in an overwhelmingly positive way, with 54% of the respondents strongly agreeing and 38% agreeing (only one person disagreed and one was undecided). This indicates that students are aware that there are linguistic challenges to a full regional integration of Burundi in the EAC, which they were asked to outline in two corollary questions focusing on an inventory of the challenges and how to meet them. In summary, respondents agreed that Burundians have not mastered basic language proficiency (i.e., speaking, listening, writing, reading and pronunciation). It is worth noting that all the suggestions made by at least two students (about six per cent) were considered for inclusion but concerning the lecturers, who had expert viewpoints on the subject matter, every suggestion they made was included. Moreover, according to the respondents, language training for specific purposes is entirely lacking in commercial, political and administrative contexts as well as for sociocultural and intercultural communication. Their recommendations for meeting these challenges are far-reaching and include training qualified teachers, both in general language proficiency and for specific purposes, and developing appropriate content as well as the methodology (general and specific) for which they suggest that the country should seek external support. Furthermore, they maintain that the lack of a favourable interactional environment/pedagogical climate and opportunities to practise need to be addressed. Concrete examples given are diverse and contain, among others, establishing and encouraging English clubs in secondary schools and changing the language policy by, for instance, granting English the status of an official language in Burundi and a medium of instruction⁵.

Like the students, the lecturers agreed that Burundi's regional integration was not well-prepared regarding language and that consequently, the country does not have the same opportunities as other members of the EAC. The main argument they advanced was that no adaptations to the way of teaching English were introduced before joining the EAC, as illustrated by one of the lecturers commenting on the first statement:

⁵ It should be noted that the data were collected before English was granted the status of official language in Burundi, which occurred in 2014. This status is yet to be implemented since the languages are currently still being used the same way they were before this new measure.

I disagree [with this statement] because the way we have been teaching English has not changed. The purpose of teaching English was not for integrative motives that is why the way of teaching should first change to meet these objectives.

As far as opportunities are concerned, the lecturers were convinced that Burundi is disadvantaged and provided the following reasons to support their position: (i) many professional Burundians speak either their native language Kirundi or the official language French; (ii) they do not (fluently and accurately) speak/master the community's working language and, therefore, lag behind other members; (iii) getting a job in the EAC's governing bodies requires a good command of English which Burundians just do not have and (iv) job interviews and tests for any job in the EAC are organised in English, which automatically excludes many Burundians from applying.

Lecturers considered the following as the main linguistic challenges that Burundians face: (i) a lack of mastery of basic proficiency skills, especially listening and speaking, which prevents many Burundians from holding a conversation/discussion in English; (ii) a lack of training in English for specific purposes, for people from all sectors (economics, engineering, law, medicine, sciences, etc.); (iii) a lack of resources, namely the financial, human and material resources necessary to teach efficiently and (iv) a lack of experts and external support for conducting a needs analysis to find out what is more appropriate for each of the different sectors involved.

To meet these challenges, lecturers suggested reviewing the linguistic component of the Burundi Educational Policy in terms of language teaching from nursery school to university. Not only the curriculum but particularly the teaching programmes should be adapted and tailored to present-day local, regional and global needs. The status of the languages spoken and taught in Burundi should also be addressed, where the lecturers proposed that the government adopt English as a working language. This automatically requires the recruitment and training of sufficient and qualified English teachers. Even though the educational policy issue, training more qualified professionals and the curriculum development aspect are common concerns for both students and lecturers, the lecturers suggested a radical and fundamental redevelopment of the programme in all the layers of the educational system.

Lecturers, in particular, suggested setting up two training programmes that could be beneficial in the transition phase: an intensive and ongoing capacity-building programme in English communication skills. The target audience would be two-fold and principally aimed at civil servants who would be supported for two to four years to overcome their limitations when communicating in English in regional and/or international contexts. The second programme would be intended for all first-year university students and be remedial, academic and professional. This would allow students to take subjects in English (medium-taught and possibly by international experts), and thus be better prepared for regional and/or international professional contexts which,

in turn, would facilitate exchange programmes, the mobility of human capital and joint research. However, it is worth noting that the lecturers did not mention the negative effect of the present environment as not being conducive when it comes to practising English, a factor that is a predominant concern for the students (all of whom pointed to that as one of the most serious challenges).

Perceived regional professional role of English majors

At the beginning of this paper, we claimed that Burundian English majors, who mainly join the workforce as teachers and translators could make an important contribution to the process of regional integration. This was investigated in the second part of the questionnaire with the statement *Graduates from the Department of English Language and Literature will play an important role in helping Burundians and Burundi become fully integrated in the EAC*. Almost all the students agreed with this statement, with 64% and 30% strongly agreeing and agreeing, respectively. This score was supported overall by the lecturers' responses. However, two of the four lecturers had some reservations about this contribution because currently, students are not being trained for integrative purposes and hence, cannot take on that responsibility. Therefore, they claim that the academic curriculum for English must be reformed altogether and has to become more communicative/performance competence-oriented to meet the needs of English as an international language.

This echoes the students' reflections that they need more training to successfully compete in the EAC (63% of them strongly agreed while 27% agreed). Elaborating on the fifth and last statement: *As a university graduate, I will need more training in English in order to be able to compete with graduates from the EAC on the EAC job market*, students list increased training needs in: (i) all the basic skills/components, i.e., listening, pronunciation, speaking, writing, reading, doing research; (ii) English for specific purposes; (iii) translation and interpreting; (iv) journalism; (v) communication skills, i.e., cross-cultural and business communication and (vi) entrepreneurial skills and marketing.

All the lecturers supported the idea that students needed more training and their suggestions for increased qualitative output in terms of students' overall linguistic proficiency echoed the students'. The only addition was that they claimed that students needed more training in (i) domain-specific vocabulary and (ii) computer literacy.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study explored Burundian English majors' level of proficiency in English as a foreign language and their levels of mastery in the different skills/components across a four-year academic programme which was linked to the participants' awareness of the linguistic challenges with EAC integration and their potential role in this process as qualified professionals. The researchers used

a proficiency measure (TOEFL) and a questionnaire administered to English majors of the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Burundi to gain insights into the issues around these challenges. A slightly adapted version of the questionnaire was presented to a small but representative group of lecturers as well.

As far as the level of proficiency is concerned (first research question), the results show that participants can be assigned to seven proficiency levels. Only ten students (out of a total of 316, which is barely three per cent) reached the advanced level, indicating that the proficiency level achieved by the students in general and the graduating students in particular, was low. This finding empirically supports Sabiyumva's (2008) observation that graduates struggle to convey their messages in oral communication. This is a serious limitation and at the same time, a threefold challenge for graduates who have to either (i) compete in a growing and increasingly international job market; (ii) teach Burundians in such a way that they can help the country and its citizens achieve regional integration in the EAC or (iii) fulfil international academic requirements when applying to study abroad for master's and doctorate degrees.

On the EAC job market, a good command of English is a requirement but very few English majors reached the advanced level. This is supported by the reservations of some lecturers about the conceivable role English majors could play in the integration of Burundi into the EAC. The students themselves believed that they needed more training in basic skills as well as English for specific purposes. If graduates from the Department of English Language and Literature do not live up to the standards, the assumption is that the level of proficiency would be even lower in other university faculties. To overcome this, the lecturers suggested developing a proficiency course for all first-year students which should take the participants to a level that would enable them, for instance, to follow lectures in English where applicable. However, a one-year course may not take students to this expected level and we suggest developing modules based on a placement test to be presented to all the students involved to provide more suitable remedial training. To this end, South African universities like North-West University could be used as an example where the Test of Academic Literacy Levels is used to inform the placement of first-year students⁶.

With respect to the mastery of skills and components (second research question), it could be said that an integrated skills approach is badly needed to make language users effective communicators. Since grammar was the best-mastered component, analytic and reproductive learning presently seem to be the outcomes. Reading comprehension and vocabulary were the second-best components mastered and the less important components in general proficiency but at too low a

⁶ All first-year students at North-West University must write the Test of Academic Literacy Levels (TALL) to establish their level of academic literacy. Information retrieved on July 09 2017 at: <http://humanities.nwu.ac.za/languages/academic-literacy>

level to generate effective vocational communication for the purposes stated above. Listening skills (receptive component) lag behind (note that two groups—middle intermediate and middle beginner—did not show any statistically significant differences between performance on grammar, reading and vocabulary). These outcomes are in line with the Burundian teaching approach, which is grammar-centred (Nizonkiza, 2011a). Furthermore, the students engage with English as a foreign language since they do not typically encounter a natural environment in which contact with the language is a given. Thus, expanding the learners' vocabulary and developing their listening skills requires almost decontextualised efforts. The lecturers' observations that students do not master the basic skills, in particular, speaking and listening, underscore both the empirical findings and the students' self-assessments, which are causes for concern.

The third and fourth research questions addressed the linguistic challenges of Burundi's regional integration and the expected and potential role to be played by English majors, respectively. Students and lecturers alike stated that concerning language, Burundi had not properly prepared for its regional integration, which put the country in a disadvantaged position as far as opportunities in the EAC are concerned. Furthermore, the students were aware of the linguistic challenges to be met and knew that they, as English majors, might play an important role in the process. The lack of proficiency at the skills level, a lack of training in English for specific purposes and the lack of teaching and training resources are the major challenges ahead, as identified by the respondents. All stakeholders suggested remedial strategies of which the most prominent were training more and better-qualified teachers, focusing on teaching English for specific purposes, seeking external professional support and especially, adapting the language education policy as a whole. While the lecturers' responses supported the students' responses regarding the challenges and the way they should be responded to, they proved to be more elaborate. Not only did the lecturers outline the challenges, but they also reflected on their causes and were more detailed about the reasons why the country is in an awkward position regarding its integration into the EAC. These results, especially the suggestions to completely redesign the programme, support previous observations elsewhere (see Marlina, 2014, 2017 for a perspective on China and Kirkpatrick, 2010 for insights into the ASEAN countries). New functions and roles entail changes in conceptualisation, teaching and language policies.

In sum, the present study has shown that (i) English majors at the University of Burundi do not reach a high enough proficiency level to allow them to compete both at regional and international levels; (ii) students across the four-year programme perform significantly differently in the skills/components which seem to be mastered from grammar over reading comprehension and vocabulary to listening; and (iii) English majors are aware of their proficiency deficiencies leading to both the linguistic challenges to be met and their potential professional role—mainly teaching, translating and interpreting services—in the process of Burundi's regional integration into the EAC. The self-assessment and perception study underscores the objective data measurements (i and ii) and the findings are corroborated by the lecturers' assessment.

The results help answer the research questions that guided this study, but also give rise to the following questions worth considering in follow-up studies:

1. The proficiency level of the students is low; a follow-up study may investigate in-depth why this is the case and thereby suggest remedial strategies;
2. Some lecturers were reserved regarding the role English majors will play in the integration process arguing that English is not taught for integrative purposes. We concur with their objection and believe that a needs analysis based on a thorough assessment of the curriculum in place could be a fruitful area for further research as well as mapping it onto the communicative needs to support integration.
3. The present study involved English majors, it would be interesting to extend the study to students from other faculties and institutes to test the assumption that their performance is more likely to be worse than that of English majors.
4. A similar study could be extended to high school learners (and even earlier educational stages) since a language programme should ideally be redesigned to align with the new functions and roles of English.

This study, although semi-longitudinal, still has to be put into perspective. The needs analysis component could have benefited from a larger number of participants and neither writing nor speaking skills were measured—all of which are limitations of this study. Moreover, we measured proficiency in isolation (in a testing situation) and did not observe or evaluate authentic professional communication (an ethnographic approach), which is another limitation. Instead, we measured the proficiency components which form the basis of professional communication and enriched the findings with qualitative data assessing teaching and learning needs as the first steps towards curricular improvement.

Despite the limitations outlined above, we believe that the results of the present study may contribute towards helping policy- and decision-makers, in collaboration with language practitioners and teachers, empower their citizens, especially professionals, to communicate in a multilingual localised and global world. This study is particularly relevant from an educational perspective since the University of Burundi is in the process of changing programmes at the bachelor's degree level up to master's degrees, inspired by international examples (based on the Bologna Declaration), with the new master's programme introduced in 2017. Within an applied linguistic framework, the study (as a first) determined Burundian English majors' proficiency by measuring it across the entire programme in a standardised manner as well as determining the level of mastery that could be attributed to the different skills/components and in particular, identifying the students' weakest skill. By so doing, this study lays the foundations for developing programmes tailored to the students' and country's needs. The strategies resulting from triangulating the students' and teachers' identified challenges are particularly insightful. In sum, the results of this study could help outline a framework for capacity building, learning and teaching, intended to help Burundians become more proficient and communicate more effectively

in English, and thus be able to become full-fledged members of the regional and international community.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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APPENDIX 1: STUDENTS' QUESTIONNAIRE ON LANGUAGE REQUIREMENTS FOR BEING A MEMBER OF THE EAC

Five years ago (1 July 2007) Burundi became a member of the East African Community (EAC). We would like to know how you feel about this regional integration in relation to the country's preparedness as far as English, the main working language of the community, is concerned.

Please underline your choice and comment when you feel like it.

1. Burundi's regional integration in the EAC has been well prepared as far as English is concerned.
Strongly disagree Disagree Neither agree nor disagree Agree Strongly agree

2. Given the Burundians' general proficiency in English, Burundi has the same opportunities as the other members of the EAC.
Strongly disagree Disagree Neither agree nor disagree Agree Strongly agree
Please explain your choice.

3. Burundi has to meet some linguistic challenges before [a] regional integration in the EAC can be achieved.
Strongly disagree Disagree Neither agree nor disagree Agree Strongly agree
Please comment:

If you strongly agree or agree in 3 above, answer the following:

a. What according to you are the linguistic challenges that Burundians face?

b. How should these challenges be met?

4. Graduates from the Department of English Language and Literature will play an important role in helping Burundians and Burundi become fully integrated in[to] the EAC.
Strongly disagree Disagree Neither agree nor disagree Agree Strongly agree

5. As a university graduate, I will need more training in English in order to be able to compete with graduates from the EAC on (*sic*) the EAC job market.
Strongly disagree Disagree Neither agree nor disagree Agree Strongly agree

If you strongly agree or agree in 5 above, answer the following:

I will be able to compete at a regional level if I get more training in English in the following aspects:

Thank you very much for your contribution!

APPENDIX 2: LECTURERS' QUESTIONNAIRE ON LANGUAGE REQUIREMENTS FOR BEING A MEMBER OF THE EAC

Five years ago (1 July 2007) Burundi became a member of the East African Community (EAC). We would like to know how you feel about this regional integration in relation to the country's preparedness as far as English, the main working language of the community, is concerned.

Please underline your choice and comment when you feel like it.

1. Burundi's regional integration in the EAC has been well prepared as far as English is concerned.
Strongly disagree Disagree Neither agree nor disagree Agree Strongly agree

2. Given the Burundians' general proficiency in English, Burundi has the same opportunities as the other members of the EAC.
Strongly disagree Disagree Neither agree nor disagree Agree Strongly agree
Please explain your choice:

3. Burundi has to meet some linguistic challenges before [a] regional integration in the EAC can be achieved.
Strongly disagree Disagree Neither agree nor disagree Agree Strongly agree
Please comment:

If you strongly agree or agree in 3 above, answer the following:

a. What according to you are the linguistic challenges that Burundians face?