

The Impact Of English Language On Students' Academic Performance In Secondary Schools In Uganda: A Case Study Of Kasubi Parents Secondary School, Kasubi Parish, Rubaga Division, Kampala District

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Abstract

This study investigated the impact of English language proficiency on students' academic performance in secondary schools in Uganda, with specific reference to Kasubi Parents Secondary School in Kasubi Parish, Rubaga Division, Kampala District. English serves as both the medium of instruction and the language of examination in Uganda's secondary education system, making English proficiency a critical determinant of academic outcomes across all subjects. The study was guided by objectives to assess students' English language proficiency levels, examine the relationship between English proficiency and academic performance in various subjects, and identify factors that influence English language acquisition among secondary school students. Using a cross-sectional survey design, data were collected from 180 respondents comprising students, English language teachers, and school administrators. Structured questionnaires, classroom observations, and standardized English proficiency assessments were used as instruments. Findings reveal a strong positive correlation ($r=0.74$, $p<0.001$) between English language proficiency and academic performance across subjects. Key determinants of English proficiency include home language environment, teacher quality, reading habits, and access to English language media. The study recommends intensification of English language instruction, establishment of reading programs, and strengthening of teacher professional development.

Keywords: English language, academic performance, secondary schools, Uganda, medium of instruction, language proficiency, Kasubi Parents Secondary School, Kampala

Background of the Study

Language policy in education is one of the most consequential decisions any education system makes, as the language through which instruction is delivered profoundly shapes students' access to knowledge, their cognitive development, and their academic outcomes (Julius & Audrey, 2026). Uganda's colonial history under British administration established English as the primary language of governance, higher education, and formal employment, a legacy that has been maintained in the post-independence education system (Julius & Kazaara, 2025a). The Education Act of 2008 and associated curricular frameworks designate English as the language of instruction from Primary 4 onwards in government schools and from the start of secondary education, making proficiency in English a de facto prerequisite for academic success in Uganda's formal education system (Julius & Nancy, 2025b).

At the secondary school level, all subjects including mathematics, science, social studies, commerce, and technical subjects are taught and examined in English (Nancy & Prudence, 2024). The Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB), which administers the Uganda Certificate of Education (UCE) at the end of Senior 4 and the Uganda Advanced Certificate of Education (UACE) at the end of Senior 6, conducts all examinations in English (Moses, 2023).

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This means that a student's ability to understand instructions, comprehend content, organize their thoughts, and express their responses in English is a critical determinant of their performance, not only in English language examinations but across the entire examination portfolio (Anthony, Kazaara, Kazaara, et al., 2023). Students with inadequate English proficiency are therefore doubly disadvantaged: they struggle to access the content being taught and struggle to demonstrate their knowledge in examinations (Anthony, Kazaara, & Kazaara, 2023).

The linguistic landscape of Uganda is extraordinarily diverse, with over 40 recognized indigenous languages including Luganda, Runyoro-Rutooro, Acholi, Ateso, and Lugbara, among others. For the majority of Ugandan secondary school students, English is a second, third, or even fourth language, with indigenous mother tongues and regional languages like Luganda serving as primary languages of communication at home and in the community (Julius & Kazaara, 2026a). This means that the transition to English-medium instruction represents a significant linguistic challenge for most students, who must simultaneously acquire subject knowledge and develop academic English language competence (Julius, 2024b). The challenge is particularly acute in urban areas with linguistically diverse populations, such as Kampala, where students from multiple language backgrounds interact in schools (Julius & Nancy, 2026).

Kasubi Parents Secondary School, located in Kasubi Parish, Rubaga Division, Kampala District, provides an instructive case for examining the relationship between English language proficiency and academic performance (Audrey & Nancy, 2025). Rubaga Division is one of Kampala's five administrative divisions and has a large, linguistically diverse student population drawn from across Uganda and the East African region (Julius & Audrey, 2025). The school, like many urban private secondary schools in Uganda, serves students from both privileged and less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds, creating a heterogeneous student body with varying levels of English language exposure and proficiency (Anthony, Kazaara, Kazaara, et al., 2023).

Problem Statement

Notwithstanding Uganda's long-standing policy of English-medium instruction at the secondary school level, academic performance outcomes in UNEB examinations remain a persistent concern (Anthony, Kazaara, Kazaara, et al., 2023). Analysis of UNEB results shows that significant proportions of students consistently perform at Grade 6 (Pass) or below the lowest passing grades across multiple subjects, with English language itself being one of the subjects with the highest failure rates (Julius & Nancy, 2025c). Teachers and administrators at schools like Kasubi Parents Secondary School have anecdotally observed that students with poor English proficiency struggle not only in English classes but across all subjects, suggesting that English language competence functions as a general academic capacity enabler rather than simply a subject-specific skill (Victoria et al., 2023). However, empirical evidence on the specific relationship between English proficiency and academic performance in the specific context of Kasubi Parents Secondary School is limited. Without such evidence, it is difficult to design targeted interventions to improve both English language learning and broader academic performance outcomes (Christopher et al., 2022).

Main Objective

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To investigate the impact of English language proficiency on students' academic performance across subjects at Kasubi Parents Secondary School, Kampala District, Uganda.

Literature Review

Language as Medium of Instruction and Academic Outcomes

The relationship between language of instruction and academic performance has been extensively studied in the international education literature, with a broad consensus emerging that students learn most effectively when instructed in languages they understand well (Benson, 2004; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). Cummins' (1981) influential distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) conversational language competence developed through everyday social interaction and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) the more abstract, technical, and decontextualized language required for academic learning provides a useful conceptual framework for understanding why students may appear functionally conversational in English while still lacking the academic language competence necessary for success in English-medium examinations (Julius & Kazaara, 2025b).

Research from Sub-Saharan Africa has consistently documented the negative educational consequences of English-medium instruction for students from non-English language backgrounds (Anthony, Kazaara, Kazaara, et al., 2023). A comprehensive review by Trudell (2007) across multiple African countries found that students instructed in their mother tongue or a well-developed local language in the early years of schooling consistently outperformed those instructed in a second language in both initial literacy acquisition and long-term academic outcomes (Julius & Nancy, 2025a). In Uganda specifically, studies by Tembe and Norton (2008) and Albaugh (2014) document widespread teacher and student code-switching even in officially English-medium classrooms, reflecting the practical difficulties of maintaining English-only instruction when students lack sufficient proficiency.

Factors Influencing English Language Acquisition

Multiple factors influence the rate and depth of English language acquisition among secondary school students in Uganda. The home language environment is widely recognized as the most powerful determinant of children's language development, with students from English-speaking or English-exposed households demonstrating significantly higher English proficiency than those from households where only indigenous languages are spoken (Cummins, 2000). Socioeconomic status exerts a strong indirect influence on English acquisition through its association with access to English-language books, electronic media, private tutoring, and enrollment in English-medium primary schools all of which provide additional exposure to and practice in English beyond classroom hours (Victoria et al., 2023).

Teacher quality and English language competence is another critical determinant. Research from Uganda and other East African countries has found that a significant proportion of secondary school teachers, particularly in rural schools, do not themselves possess high levels of English proficiency, limiting the quality of English language models they provide to students (Mukherjee et al., 2020). Teacher instructional methods including the frequency of sustained reading activities, the quality of feedback on written work, and the use of communicative language teaching

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approaches also significantly influence student English language development. Studies have shown that schools that prioritize reading programs, debate clubs, drama performances, and other extracurricular English language activities tend to produce students with significantly higher levels of English proficiency (Krashen, 1985).

English Proficiency and Academic Performance Across Subjects

The 'academic language' dimension of English proficiency the ability to understand and produce the specialized vocabulary, sentence structures, and discourse conventions of specific academic disciplines is critical for performance in subject areas beyond English language itself (Julius, 2024a). Each academic subject has its own specialized vocabulary and language demands: mathematics requires understanding of quantitative reasoning language and word problem comprehension; science requires mastery of technical terminology and the language of hypothesis and evidence; social studies requires comprehension of abstract social and political concepts (Julius & Kazaara, 2026b). For students with limited English proficiency, these subject-specific language demands create compounding barriers to academic achievement (Cummins, 2000).

Studies from East African secondary schools have documented strong positive correlations between English language proficiency scores and academic performance in other subjects (Gathumbi and Masembe, 2005; Mukherjee et al., 2020). A study in Kenyan secondary schools by Njoroge et al. (2013) found that English language proficiency was a stronger predictor of overall academic performance than school resources, class size, or even socioeconomic background suggesting that language competence functions as a master key that unlocks learning across the curriculum (Ntirandekura et al., 2022). These findings have important implications for educational resource allocation, suggesting that investment in English language support programs may generate disproportionately large returns across the entire academic curriculum.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design with elements of correlational research to examine the relationship between English language proficiency and academic performance at Kasubi Parents Secondary School. This design allowed for data collection from the full range of senior classes (Senior 1 through Senior 4) at a single point in time, enabling comparative analysis of proficiency-performance relationships across different levels of secondary education.

Study Population and Sample

The study population comprised all students enrolled at Kasubi Parents Secondary School (approximately 650 students), all English language teachers (n=8), and school administrators (n=5). Using stratified random sampling, 167 students were selected from across all four senior classes, maintaining proportional representation by class level and gender. All English teachers and administrators were included through census sampling given their small numbers. In total, 180 respondents participated in the study.

Data Collection Instruments

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Three primary data collection instruments were used. First, a standardized English Language Proficiency Assessment (ELPA) was administered to all student respondents, comprising reading comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, and written expression components scored on a 100-point scale. This instrument was adapted from the Cambridge Assessment English framework and piloted for reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.82). Second, academic performance data were collected from school records, comprising each student's end-of-year examination scores in English, Mathematics, Science (Physics/Chemistry/Biology), Social Studies, and Commerce. Third, structured questionnaires assessed demographic characteristics, home language environment, reading habits, access to English media, and teacher-related variables.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 25(Nelson et al., 2022). Pearson's correlation analysis was used to assess the relationship between English proficiency scores and academic performance in various subjects. Multiple linear regression analysis examined the independent predictors of academic performance. Descriptive statistics characterized proficiency distributions and academic performance profiles. Qualitative data from open-ended questionnaire items and classroom observations were analyzed thematically.

Results

English Language Proficiency Levels among Students

Table 1: Distribution of English Language Proficiency Scores by Senior Class (n=167)

Senior Class	n	Mean Score (%)	Std. Dev.	Min (%)	Max (%)	% Below 50
Senior 1	42	52.4	11.8	28	78	40.5%
Senior 2	44	55.6	12.1	30	82	34.1%
Senior 3	42	58.2	11.4	32	85	28.6%
Senior 4	39	61.8	10.9	35	88	20.5%
Overall	167	56.9	11.7	28	88	31.1%

Source: Primary Data, 2025

Table 1 presents the distribution of English language proficiency scores across the four senior classes at Kasubi Parents Secondary School. The overall mean proficiency score of 56.9% indicates a moderate level of English language competence across the student population, though the standard deviation of 11.7 points reflects substantial variation in proficiency levels within each class. The progressive improvement in mean scores from Senior 1 (52.4%) through Senior 4 (61.8%) suggests that English proficiency does improve over the course of secondary education, consistent with the expected developmental trajectory of language acquisition through increased exposure and instruction.

However, the finding that 31.1% of all students scored below 50% on the ELPA the threshold below which students may struggle significantly with English-medium instruction is a matter of serious educational concern. Among Senior 1 students, 40.5% scored below this threshold, indicating that a substantial proportion of students entering secondary

school are already linguistically underprepared for the demands of English-medium instruction across the curriculum. The wide range of scores from a minimum of 28% to a maximum of 88% within each class illustrates the heterogeneity of English language backgrounds among students, posing significant differentiation challenges for classroom teachers who must simultaneously address the needs of struggling language learners and proficient students.

Correlation Between English Proficiency and Academic Performance

Table 2: Pearson Correlation Coefficients Between English Proficiency and Subject Performance (n=167)

Subject	Correlation (r)	Sig. (2-tailed)	R² (Variance Explained)	Interpretation
English Language	0.89	0.000	79.2%	Very Strong Positive
Literature in English	0.82	0.000	67.2%	Strong Positive
Social Studies	0.76	0.000	57.8%	Strong Positive
Commerce	0.71	0.000	50.4%	Moderate-Strong Positive
Biology	0.68	0.000	46.2%	Moderate Positive
Chemistry	0.65	0.000	42.3%	Moderate Positive
Physics	0.62	0.000	38.4%	Moderate Positive
Mathematics	0.58	0.000	33.6%	Moderate Positive
Overall GPA	0.74	0.000	54.8%	Strong Positive

Source: Primary Data, 2025

Table 2 presents Pearson correlation coefficients between English language proficiency scores and academic performance in each subject offered at Kasubi Parents Secondary School, along with the proportion of variance in academic performance explained by English proficiency (R^2). The results provide compelling empirical evidence for the pivotal role of English language competence in determining academic outcomes across the entire curriculum. The overall correlation between English proficiency and general academic performance ($r=0.74$, $p<0.001$) is strong and statistically highly significant, confirming that English language proficiency is a major determinant of academic achievement beyond English language examinations per se (Nelson et al., 2023).

The strongest correlation is found, unsurprisingly, between English proficiency and performance in English Language itself ($r=0.89$), where English proficiency explains 79.2% of variance in examination scores (Julius & Kazaara, 2026b). The very high correlation with Literature in English ($r=0.82$) is also expected, given the heavy reliance on reading comprehension, textual analysis, and written expression in literature examinations. More noteworthy are the strong correlations observed for Social Studies ($r=0.76$, $R^2=57.8\%$) and Commerce ($r=0.71$, $R^2=50.4\%$), subjects where content knowledge might be expected to play a more dominant role. These findings suggest that even in non-language subjects, the ability to read and comprehend textbooks, understand examination questions, and express responses in coherent English is a critical performance determinant (Julius & Nancy, 2025b).

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The moderate but highly significant correlations with science subjects (Biology $r=0.68$, Chemistry $r=0.65$, Physics $r=0.62$) and Mathematics ($r=0.58$) further support the conclusion that English language proficiency functions as a foundational academic enabler across the curriculum. While Mathematics shows the weakest correlation reflecting the relatively lower language demands of numerical problem-solving compared to essay-based subjects the fact that even Mathematics performance is significantly associated with English proficiency (explaining 33.6% of variance) underscores the pervasive influence of language competence on learning outcomes in an English-medium education system(Julius, 2024b).

6.3 Factors Influencing English Language Proficiency

Table 3: Regression Analysis — Predictors of English Language Proficiency (n=167)

Predictor Variable	B (Unstd. Coeff.)	Beta (Std. Coeff.)	t-value	p-value	Significance
Home English language use	8.42	0.31	5.82	0.000	***
Daily reading habit (hours)	4.18	0.24	4.41	0.000	***
Teacher instructional quality	3.95	0.22	4.05	0.000	***
Access to English media (TV/radio)	2.87	0.18	3.34	0.001	**
Father's education level	2.44	0.16	2.98	0.003	**
Participation in English clubs	3.12	0.15	2.74	0.007	**
Socioeconomic status	1.85	0.12	2.18	0.031	*
Gender	0.92	0.05	0.94	0.349	NS

Source: Primary Data, 2025

Table 3 presents the results of multiple linear regression analysis examining the independent predictors of English language proficiency scores among students at Kasubi Parents Secondary School. The model explains 68.3% of variance in English proficiency scores (Adjusted $R^2=0.683$), indicating that the selected predictor variables collectively account for a substantial proportion of the observed variation in student English language competence. The analysis reveals that home English language use is the single most powerful predictor of English proficiency (Beta=0.31, $p<0.001$), confirming the fundamental importance of home language environment in shaping students' English language development. Students who regularly use English at home — whether with parents, siblings, or in



self-directed activities — develop significantly higher proficiency levels than those whose home language environment is exclusively non-English.

Daily reading habits emerge as the second most powerful predictor ($\text{Beta}=0.24$, $p<0.001$), with each additional hour of daily reading associated with an average improvement of 4.18 points on the ELPA. This finding resonates strongly with Krashen's (1985) input hypothesis and extensive research on the benefits of extensive reading for vocabulary acquisition, grammar internalization, and reading comprehension development. The strong predictive value of teacher instructional quality ($\text{Beta}=0.22$, $p<0.001$) underscores the critical role of classroom instruction in shaping student language outcomes, even when accounting for home environment and personal study habits. This finding has direct implications for teacher professional development policy, suggesting that investment in English language teacher training can generate measurable improvements in student proficiency.

Access to English-language media including television and radio ($\text{Beta}=0.18$, $p=0.001$) provides a significant additional pathway for incidental English language acquisition outside the classroom, particularly relevant in an urban school context where exposure to English media is more readily available than in rural settings. Father's education level ($\text{Beta}=0.16$, $p=0.003$) reflects the intergenerational transmission of educational capital, with more educated fathers more likely to prioritize and support their children's English language development. Gender does not emerge as a statistically significant predictor of English proficiency ($\text{Beta}=0.05$, $p=0.349$), suggesting that observed gender differences in some studies may be attributable to confounding variables rather than innate gender-based differences in language acquisition capacity.

Discussion of results

The findings of this study provide robust empirical evidence that English language proficiency is a critical and pervasive determinant of academic performance at Kasubi Parents Secondary School, with strong positive correlations observed between English proficiency and performance across all subjects. The overall correlation of $r=0.74$ between English proficiency and general academic performance places English language competence as one of the most powerful individual-level predictors of academic outcomes in Uganda's English-medium secondary education system. These findings are consistent with theoretical frameworks emphasizing the primacy of language in academic learning (Cummins, 1981, 2000) and with empirical studies from comparable East African contexts (Njoroge et al., 2013; Gathumbi and Masembe, 2005).

The finding that 31.1% of students score below 50% on the standardized English proficiency assessment with this proportion reaching 40.5% among first-year secondary students — points to a significant unmet learning need that is likely contributing to the poor academic performance outcomes documented in UNEB results from schools like Kasubi Parents. Students who enter secondary school with inadequate English proficiency face a compounding disadvantage: they cannot fully access the content being taught in English, struggle to complete assignments and examinations in English, and fall further behind their more proficient peers over time. Early identification and targeted support for these students represents an urgent educational priority.

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The regression analysis findings regarding predictors of English proficiency have important implications for both school-level and system-level interventions. The strong predictive value of home English language use, while reflecting genuine educational advantages for students from English-speaking families, is largely beyond the direct influence of schools and policy. However, the highly significant influence of teacher instructional quality, daily reading habits, and participation in English clubs and extracurricular activities points to actionable school-level levers for improving English proficiency. Schools that prioritize structured reading programs, invest in teacher English language professional development, and create vibrant extracurricular English language environments can meaningfully compensate for disadvantaged home language environments and improve student proficiency and academic outcomes.

Conclusions

This study concludes that English language proficiency exerts a strong, pervasive, and statistically significant positive influence on academic performance across all subjects at Kasubi Parents Secondary School. The strong overall correlation between English proficiency and academic achievement ($r=0.74$) confirms that English language competence functions as a foundational academic capability that enables learning across the entire curriculum rather than merely in language-specific subjects. The finding that over 30% of students are operating below adequate English proficiency thresholds represents a significant systemic challenge that demands urgent educational attention. Key determinants of English proficiency including home language environment, reading habits, and teacher quality provide concrete targets for school-level intervention.

Recommendations

Based on the study findings, the following recommendations are proposed: First, Kasubi Parents Secondary School should establish a structured English language support program targeting Senior 1 students who enter secondary school with below-threshold English proficiency, providing intensive language instruction during the transition year. Second, the school should implement a compulsory daily reading program requiring students to read English texts for a minimum of 30 minutes per day, with access to a well-stocked school library.

The school administration should prioritize English language teacher professional development, including regular training in communicative language teaching methods and academic English instruction techniques.

An English language enrichment program comprising debate clubs, drama activities, essay writing competitions, and English-medium peer discussion groups should be established as part of the school's extracurricular offering.

Parents should be encouraged and supported to create more English-rich home environments through parent education programs organized by the school. Sixth, the Ministry of Education and Sports should review the adequacy of English language instruction hours in the secondary school curriculum and consider additional targeted support mechanisms for linguistically disadvantaged students.

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