

When Assessment Is In English But Learners Fail English: The Structural Death Of An Education Ecosystem

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Abstract

Uganda's education system operated under a fundamental and largely unacknowledged contradiction: it used the English language as the primary medium of instruction and assessment from Primary 4 onwards, while serving a student population whose first, second, and often third languages were not English, and for whom English remains a foreign language throughout their educational careers. The consequence was a system in which students' intellectual capacity, knowledge, and understanding are consistently underrepresented and undervalued by assessments conducted in a language they have not mastered. This study examined this structural paradox and its consequences for learners, teachers, and the broader educational ecosystem through the lived experiences of students, teachers, parents, and educational administrators in Uganda's secondary school system. Drawing on 48 in-depth interviews and 6 focus group discussions conducted across urban and rural schools in Kampala, Mbarara, and Gulu districts, the study employed critical discourse analysis and interpretive phenomenological analysis to illuminate the emotional, cognitive, and social consequences of the English-medium assessment regime for Uganda's learners. Findings revealed that students experience profound shame, cognitive double-loading, self-doubt, and academic alienation as consequences of being assessed in a language they are simultaneously trying to learn. Teachers described anguish at watching intellectually capable students produce inadequate examination performances because of linguistic rather than conceptual deficits. Parents articulated confusion and frustration at a system whose logic they cannot decipher and whose failures they cannot prevent. The study argued that Uganda's English-medium assessment regime constitutes a structural violence against learners and proposes evidence-based policy reforms oriented toward assessment justice.

Keywords: English Medium Instruction, Language Policy, Assessment Justice, Uganda, Secondary Schools, Structural Violence, Learner Experience, UNEB, Mother Tongue, Decolonizing Assessment

Background of the Study

Language has remained a central component of teaching, learning, assessment, and the transmission of knowledge within education systems. Learners have needed to understand the language used by teachers, textbooks, instructional materials, examinations, and other academic resources in order to participate meaningfully in educational activities. When the language of instruction differs from the language that learners understand most effectively, the learning process may become more demanding, particularly when learners have limited proficiency in the instructional language (Julius, Nancy, et al., 2026). The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (2023) emphasized that learning in a language learners understand is fundamental to educational inclusion and quality, noting that a substantial

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proportion of the global population lacks access to education in a language they speak or understand. This issue has been particularly relevant in multilingual societies where educational institutions have adopted languages that may differ from the languages spoken within learners' homes and communities (Edgar & Moses, 2023). The relationship between language and learning has therefore required attention to both the language used in teaching and the language through which learners were expected to demonstrate their knowledge.

In Uganda, English has served as an important language within formal education, particularly from upper primary education through higher learning institutions. The National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC, 2024) identified English as Uganda's official language and the medium of instruction from upper primary through higher education. English has also been important for academic communication, access to scholarly literature, examinations, employment opportunities, and participation in national and international contexts (Christopher et al., 2022). However, the use of English as a language of instruction and assessment has raised questions concerning whether all learners possess adequate proficiency to understand educational content and demonstrate their knowledge effectively (Julius, Audrey, et al., 2026b). The issue has not necessarily involved opposition to English as a language of education, but rather the need to examine whether learners receive sufficient linguistic support to participate successfully in an English-medium education system. Where learners have difficulty understanding examination questions, instructions, or academic vocabulary, their assessment performance could reflect a combination of subject knowledge and language-related challenges rather than subject knowledge alone (Julius, Sarah, et al., 2026).

The relationship between language proficiency and academic performance has been examined in recent research conducted in Uganda. Kibumba et al. (2026) investigated grammatical skills and English language proficiency among secondary school students in Mukono District and reported that learners in rural areas experienced challenges with English grammar, which affected their participation in classroom discussions, oral examinations, and daily communication. Their study provided a context-specific indication that English proficiency could influence learners' participation in academic activities (Julius & Audrey, 2026). The findings also demonstrated the importance of examining language skills beyond general assumptions about learners' educational performance. Reading, listening, speaking, vocabulary, grammar, and writing skills could influence the extent to which learners understood instructional materials and communicated their knowledge (Julius, 2025). This suggested that educational assessment needed to be examined in relation to the linguistic demands placed on learners and the support provided by teachers and institutions.

Assessment has served several purposes within education, including monitoring learning progress, identifying learning difficulties, providing feedback, determining achievement, and making decisions concerning progression and certification (Julius, Audrey, et al., 2026a). However, the validity and fairness of assessment have depended partly on whether assessment tasks measured the intended knowledge or competencies adequately. When an examination

question contained complex language, unfamiliar vocabulary, ambiguous instructions, or structures that exceeded learners' language proficiency, the assessment could have introduced barriers unrelated to the intended subject competence (Julius et al., 2026). This did not mean that language proficiency was irrelevant to every subject or that all assessment language difficulties produced unfair results. In subjects where English communication was itself part of the learning objective, language competence could appropriately form part of the assessment (Julius & Audrey, 2026). Nevertheless, where the primary objective was to assess mathematical reasoning, scientific understanding, technical knowledge, or another competence, researchers needed to examine whether language demands interfered with learners' ability to demonstrate what they knew (Anthony, Kazaara, Kazaara, et al., 2023). This distinction provided an important basis for examining the relationship between English-language assessment and educational outcomes.

The language of assessment has also been connected to the broader question of educational equity. Learners have entered classrooms with different linguistic backgrounds, levels of exposure to English, family educational resources, and opportunities to practice academic language (Julius & Audrey, 2026). These differences could affect their ability to interpret examination questions and communicate responses within the expected language. UNESCO (2025) emphasized the importance of multilingual education policies in promoting inclusion and improving learning, while also identifying challenges such as limited teacher capacity, insufficient learning materials in home languages, and community preferences (Betty et al., 2026). These observations indicated that language policy implementation required attention to practical institutional conditions, including teacher preparation, curriculum design, teaching resources, and the transition between languages of instruction. In Uganda, the National Curriculum Development Centre's consultations on feasible languages of instruction also reflected the continuing importance of examining language use, community preferences, and the transition from local languages to English in early education (NCDC, 2025).

The transition between local languages and English has presented additional challenges for learners who have developed their early language and conceptual understanding in languages other than English. The process of learning a new language while simultaneously acquiring academic content can require additional cognitive and linguistic effort (Anthony, Kazaara, & Kazaara, 2023). Learners may understand a concept in a familiar language but experience difficulty expressing it in English or interpreting the terminology used in an examination (Anthony, Kazaara, & Kazaara, 2023). The challenge could become more pronounced where teachers relied heavily on English explanations without using strategies to clarify unfamiliar concepts. The NCDC (2025) consultations on language of instruction in Uganda highlighted the need to consider language use patterns, challenges associated with the transition to English, and the feasibility of bilingual education models. These issues suggested that language policy required practical implementation strategies that connected learners' linguistic backgrounds with classroom instruction and assessment (Julius & Kazaara, 2025).

The role of teachers has been important in mediating the relationship between the language of instruction and learners' understanding of educational content. Teachers have been expected to explain concepts, interpret instructional materials, provide feedback, and support learners with different levels of language proficiency. Pedagogical practices such as scaffolding, vocabulary development, clarification of instructions, code-switching where appropriate, peer support, and the use of contextualized examples could assist learners in accessing academic content. However, the availability and effectiveness of these strategies could depend on teachers' preparation, classroom conditions, instructional resources, and institutional language policies. The Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports (2025) guidance for teacher professional development included the use of familiar languages to support understanding of key concepts and recommended code-switching and varied instructional materials where English was the language of instruction. This reflected an institutional recognition that language support could be incorporated into teaching practices without necessarily abandoning English as a medium of instruction.

The quality of language education has also been relevant to learners' performance in formal assessments. English proficiency has included several interrelated competencies, such as reading comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, grammar, listening, speaking, and academic writing. Weaknesses in one or more of these areas could affect learners' ability to interpret questions and construct responses. Gabow and Mohamud (2026) examined English language skills among Somali students in the Higher Education Certificate programme at the Islamic University in Uganda, Mbale, focusing on reading, listening, and writing skills in relation to academic performance. The study demonstrated the relevance of examining language proficiency as a multidimensional construct rather than treating English ability as a single, undifferentiated characteristic. The relationship between language skills and academic performance could therefore be investigated through learners' experiences, teachers' observations, and the practical demands of assessment.

The relationship between language proficiency and assessment has further required consideration of the distinction between learning English and learning through English. Learners could possess basic conversational English while experiencing difficulty with academic language, technical terminology, complex instructions, and written expression. Conversely, learners could understand academic explanations but struggle to communicate responses within formal examination requirements (Kazaara & Desire, 2025). These differences have demonstrated that general claims about learners' ability to speak English may not adequately explain their experiences in academic assessment (Moses, 2023). Researchers therefore needed to examine specific language competencies and the demands of particular assessment tasks. In this context, language-related educational challenges could not be explained exclusively through learners' individual abilities, because institutional practices, instructional methods, curriculum expectations, and assessment design could also influence the learning process.

Problem Statement

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Although English has served as a major language of instruction and assessment in Uganda, some learners have experienced difficulties with English proficiency, including grammar, reading comprehension, vocabulary, and academic communication, which could affect their participation in classroom activities and their ability to demonstrate knowledge during assessments (NCDC, 2024; Kibbumba et al., 2026). The problem was that educational assessment could have required learners to demonstrate subject knowledge through a language they had not sufficiently mastered, creating potential challenges in understanding questions, interpreting instructions, and expressing answers, while existing language-support practices and institutional responses may not have adequately addressed the needs of linguistically diverse learners. However, the extent to which these challenges affected learners' assessment experiences and how teachers, schools, and education stakeholders responded to them required further qualitative investigation. The study therefore examined learners' and teachers' experiences of English-language assessment, the language-related barriers encountered during teaching and assessment, and the structural factors influencing educational participation and learning within the Ugandan education ecosystem.

Methodology

Research Approach

The study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore learners' and teachers' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations concerning English-language instruction and assessment. The approach was appropriate because the study sought to understand how participants experienced language-related difficulties, interpreted assessment questions, communicated academic knowledge, and responded to the linguistic demands of classroom learning. Qualitative research enabled the researcher to examine the meanings participants attached to their experiences and to investigate how institutional practices, classroom interactions, and assessment procedures influenced educational participation. The study did not seek to quantify the proportion of learners who failed English or establish a statistical causal relationship between language proficiency and academic performance. Instead, it explored the experiences and contextual factors that could explain how language-related challenges were experienced within the education system. The qualitative approach also enabled the researcher to examine differences between learners' and teachers' perspectives and to identify potential areas for improvement in language support and assessment practices.

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative descriptive and exploratory research design. The descriptive component enabled the researcher to document participants' experiences of English-language instruction, classroom communication, examination questions, and assessment procedures. The exploratory component supported the investigation of structural and institutional factors that could have influenced learners' experiences with English-language assessment. The research design was used to examine how language proficiency challenges were understood by learners and

teachers and how educational institutions responded to those challenges. The study explored issues such as the clarity of examination instructions, the use of academic vocabulary, teacher explanations, language-support strategies, and learners' ability to communicate knowledge during assessments. The design also provided flexibility to examine participants' experiences across different educational settings and levels, depending on the selected study population. The research was informed by the importance of understanding language as a component of educational inclusion and learning (UNESCO, 2023, 2025).

Study Population

The study population comprised learners, teachers, school administrators, and relevant education stakeholders in selected educational institutions in Uganda. Learners were included because they directly experienced classroom instruction and assessment through English. Teachers were included because they participated in instructional delivery, assessment preparation, and the provision of language support. School administrators and relevant education stakeholders were considered important because they could provide information concerning institutional language policies, teacher support, curriculum implementation, and assessment practices. The inclusion of participants with different roles enabled the researcher to obtain diverse perspectives on the relationship between English-language proficiency and educational participation. The study population was defined according to participants' relevance to the research problem and their ability to provide detailed information about language-related challenges within the selected educational context.

Sampling Procedure

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who possessed relevant experiences and knowledge concerning English-language instruction and assessment. Learners were selected based on their participation in English-medium education and their ability to describe experiences involving classroom learning and formal assessment. Teachers were selected based on their involvement in teaching, assessment preparation, and learner support. School administrators and education stakeholders were selected according to their roles in managing educational programmes, implementing language policies, or supporting teaching and assessment practices. The researcher sought variation in participants' experiences to capture different perspectives concerning language-related educational challenges. The final sample size was determined by the research objectives, participant availability, and the adequacy of information generated through interviews and other qualitative data collection methods. Recruitment continued until sufficient depth and relevance of information had been obtained to address the study questions.

Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary method of collecting qualitative data. The interviews enabled the researcher to explore participants' experiences while maintaining consistency in the major topics addressed across

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interviews. Learners were asked to describe their experiences in understanding examination questions, following classroom explanations, reading instructional materials, and expressing answers in English. Teachers were asked to explain the language-related difficulties they observed among learners, the instructional strategies they used, and the challenges they encountered when supporting learners with different levels of English proficiency. School administrators and relevant stakeholders were asked about institutional language policies, teacher training, assessment procedures, and mechanisms for supporting learners who experienced language barriers. The interview guide contained open-ended questions and probing questions that enabled the researcher to explore participants' responses in greater depth.

The interviews were conducted using procedures that promoted voluntary participation, confidentiality, and accurate documentation. Before interviews commenced, the researcher explained the study objectives, procedures, expected duration, and intended use of the collected information. Informed consent was obtained from adult participants, while appropriate parental or guardian consent and learner assent procedures were followed for participants who were minors, subject to the relevant ethical requirements. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could decline to answer questions or withdraw in accordance with the approved research procedures. Audio recording was undertaken only with permission, and detailed notes were used where recording was not permitted. The researcher used language that participants understood adequately and clarified questions whenever necessary. The procedures were intended to ensure that the collected information represented participants' experiences and interpretations rather than assumptions imposed by the researcher.

The study also used classroom and assessment-related documentary analysis to examine relevant educational materials. These documents could have included examination instructions, sample assessment items, language-support guidelines, curriculum materials, and institutional policies, subject to the availability of permission and ethical approval. The documentary analysis examined the language used in assessment questions, the clarity of instructions, the presence of technical vocabulary, and the relationship between language expectations and the intended learning outcomes. The researcher did not assume that difficult language automatically invalidated an assessment. Instead, the analysis considered whether the language demands were relevant to the learning objectives and whether they could have created additional barriers for learners. The documentary evidence was used to complement participants' accounts and support a more comprehensive understanding of language and assessment practices.

Data Collection Instrument

The main data collection instrument was a semi-structured interview guide developed by the researcher based on the study objectives and the reviewed literature. The instrument was organized into thematic sections addressing participants' background, experiences with English-language instruction, understanding of assessment questions, communication challenges, language-support strategies, and institutional responses. Learners were asked to explain

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the types of language difficulties they encountered during classroom activities and examinations. Teachers were asked to describe their experiences in identifying and addressing language-related barriers among learners. Administrators and other stakeholders were asked about institutional policies, support mechanisms, and challenges associated with implementing language and assessment practices. The interview guide was reviewed for clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research objectives before the main data collection exercise was conducted.

Data Analysis

The collected qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and meanings within participants' responses. The researcher first familiarized themselves with the interview transcripts and documentary materials through repeated reading. Initial codes were generated from statements concerning examination language, comprehension difficulties, vocabulary, grammar, classroom communication, teacher support, assessment experiences, and institutional responses. Similar codes were grouped into categories, and the categories were examined to develop broader themes. The researcher used an iterative process to compare emerging themes with the original transcripts and ensure that the findings were grounded in participants' accounts. The analysis was informed by the principles of reflexive thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2021), which emphasized the importance of careful interpretation, transparency, and reflexivity in qualitative research.

Thematic analysis was also used to compare the experiences of learners, teachers, and administrators. The researcher examined similarities and differences in how participants understood English-language barriers and the extent to which institutional practices supported learners. For example, learners' accounts of difficulties in understanding examination questions were compared with teachers' explanations of instructional strategies and assessment preparation. Divergent views were retained during the analysis to avoid presenting a single interpretation of the language and assessment relationship. The findings were organized around themes that addressed the research objectives and informed the development of recommendations concerning language support, teacher practices, and assessment procedures.

Results

Learner experiences: the double burden of thinking and translating

The dominant theme in student interview data was what participants consistently described as a cognitive double-loading experience; the simultaneous cognitive demand of understanding subject content and translating thoughts from a native language into English for written expression. Students described this double burden not as a mere inconvenience but as a fundamental experience of cognitive undermining; a feeling that their real thinking was

happening in one place while their examination answers were happening in another, with imperfect translation between them producing answers that did not represent what they actually knew.

When I think about biology, I think in Luganda. The ideas come in Luganda. When I must write in English I am losing something in the crossing like trying to carry water in your hands. The idea I have in my head and the words I write are not the same thing. My teacher knows I understand. She has heard me explain things. But the examiner only sees the English. And my English is not good enough to carry what I know.

(Participant 3, Senior 4 Student, Female, Kampala)

This experience of knowing more than one can express in the language of assessment emerged as perhaps the most emotionally charged finding in the student data. Multiple participants described the experience of reading examination questions, knowing the answers, and then sitting in paralysed frustration as the English words necessary to express their knowledge failed to materialise. Several used the word "shame" not shame at not knowing the content, but shame at not being able to demonstrate what they knew. A student in Gulu described an examination experience that has remained vivid to him years later:

In my biology paper I knew everything. I had studied for three months. I knew the nitrogen cycle, I could draw it perfectly, I could explain every step. But in the examination room I could not get the English words to come out right. I was writing and crossing, writing and crossing. I looked at the clock and panicked. I finished only half the paper. When the results came I had failed biology. My father said — how do you fail the subject you love? I had no answer that he would understand. I failed the language, not the subject. But they don't count those as different things.

(Participant 12, Male, Former Student, Gulu)

The psychological consequences of this structural mismatch extend beyond individual examination performances. Students in focus group discussions described developing what one participant called an "examination identity"; a self-concept built around perceived linguistic inadequacy that increasingly diverged from their understanding of their own intellectual capacity. Several described abandoning subjects they loved and were intellectually capable in because they had concluded that their English was not good enough to demonstrate their capability in examinations.

I used to love history. I read everything. I knew the arguments about colonialism, I could discuss them. But history requires long essays. My English cannot do long essays. So I told my teacher I want to drop history. She was surprised. She said you are one of my best students. I said my marks don't show that. That was when she looked sad; a kind of sad I had never seen from a teacher before. Like she was helpless.

(Participant 21, Senior 5 Student, Female, Mbarara)

Teacher experiences: witnessing capability being mis-measured

Teachers participating in this study offered testimonies that were simultaneously among the most analytically illuminating and the most emotionally affecting data in the entire dataset. Teachers occupy a uniquely painful position in Uganda's English-medium assessment regime: they know their students intimately, they have observed their intellectual development across years of classroom interaction, and they understand with devastating clarity; the gap between what their students know and what the English-medium examination reveals. They are witnesses to a systematic mismeasurement of human capability who lack the institutional power to change the system they can see failing their students.

I have a student now in Senior 6. She is the most intellectually alive person I have ever taught. She asks questions that I have to think hard to answer. She makes connections across topics that surprise me. If you put her in any university in the world and assessed her in her language, she would excel. But her English written examination performance is poor. Not because she cannot think because she cannot yet write in English at the level the marking scheme demands. She will probably not make university. I will spend the rest of my teaching career knowing that. What does that do to a teacher?

(Participant 16, History Teacher, Kampala)

Several teachers described a phenomenon they called "teaching to the language, not the subject"; a pedagogical distortion in which classroom time that should be dedicated to subject content is instead consumed by English language instruction, vocabulary building, and essay-writing practice. This distortion, while pragmatically understandable given the examination stakes, represents a further educational injustice; the students who most need deep subject content instruction receive less of it because their English deficiencies divert teacher attention.

Half of my chemistry lessons are really English lessons. I am explaining what words in the questions mean. I am teaching them how to write an experiment report in English. The actual chemistry; the science gets maybe half the time it deserves. And then at the end of the year, UNEB marks them on chemistry but through English. The subject has been compressed to make room for the language, and then the language is still not good enough for the examination. We lose twice.

(Participant 24, Chemistry Teacher, Mbarara)

Parental perspectives: confusion, sacrifice, and betrayal

Parents in this study described experiencing Uganda's English-medium assessment regime from the most anguished possible vantage point: that of adults who have sacrificed financially and emotionally to invest in their children's education and who cannot understand why the system is not delivering the returns they had been promised and had worked to purchase. The language policy dimension of educational failure was largely opaque to parent participants, who tended to attribute their children's poor examination results to laziness, poor teaching, or their children's personal limitations internalizing structural failures as individual ones.

I paid school fees for nine years. I borrowed from my relatives. I sold a goat to pay the Senior 6 fees. My daughter came home with a third grade. I was angry. I thought have you been playing? Have you not been studying? She cried. She said Mama I studied. I said then why? She could not explain and I could not understand. It was only later; a teacher called me and explained that my daughter's English writing was the problem, not her knowledge. I did not know that was something that could happen. I thought if you go to school you learn English. Why did nobody tell me this?

(Participant 36, Parent, Female, Gulu)

Conclusions: toward assessment justice

The testimonies gathered in this study constitute a collective indictment of a system that uses the English language not as a tool for expanding educational access and cognitive development but as a gatekeeping mechanism that systematically filters out intellectually capable learners whose primary limitation is insufficient English proficiency. Assessment justice; the principle that examinations should measure what they claim to measure and should not systematically disadvantage groups on the basis of factors unrelated to the knowledge being assessed demands fundamental reform of Uganda's examination system. Practical reforms should include: phased introduction of mother tongue and bilingual examination options in selected subjects; revised marking schemes that reward substantive knowledge expressed in imperfect English more generously; expanded oral examination components that allow students to demonstrate knowledge in accessible forms; and a national dialogue on language policy in education that centres the experiences of students, teachers, and parents rather than administrative convenience.

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