

Article

Students' Perceptions of English and Reported Factors Shaping English Language Learning in Higher Education: Evidence from Butembo, Democratic Republic of the Congo

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Abstract: English is increasingly important for participation in higher education, scientific communication, mobility, and professional development, yet students in predominantly Franco-phone settings often have limited opportunities to use it beyond the classroom. This study examined how non-English-major students in Butembo, eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, perceive English and which pedagogical, institutional, environmental, and psychological conditions they report as shaping their learning. A quantitatively dominant mixed-methods cross-sectional survey was conducted with 125 students drawn from ten higher education institutions. Closed-ended items were summarized using frequencies, percentages, and unweighted Wilson 95% confidence intervals, while open-ended responses were grouped thematically. English was widely valued: 120 of 125 respondents (96.0%; 95% CI: 91.0%-98.3%) considered it important for academic, professional, and international purposes. Speaking was the most frequently identified difficult skill (68; 54.4%; 95% CI: 45.7%-62.9%), while only 49 respondents (39.2%; 95% CI: 31.1%-48.0%) reported regular access to English speakers outside class. Fear of speaking was the most frequently selected principal obstacle (36; 28.8%; 95% CI: 21.6%-37.3%), followed by limited vocabulary and difficulty understanding English-only lessons (26; 20.8% each). In addition, 78 students (62.4%) reported that they understood English-only lessons only sometimes or generally did not understand them. The results indicate that high perceived value coexists with restricted exposure, persistent oral difficulty, and affective barriers. The proposed framework therefore treats learning conditions as context for self-efficacy, anxiety, motivation, participation, and practice, without inferring causality from the cross-sectional design. Practical priorities are communicative pedagogy, low-stakes speaking practice, teacher development, and expanded access to low-cost digital and community-based English-use opportunities.

Citation: Ngelengele, K. J. Students' Perceptions of English and Reported Factors Shaping English Language Learning in Higher Education: Evidence from Butembo, Democratic Republic of the Congo. *Etincelle*. 2026, Vol. 26, no. 2. <https://doi.org/10.61532/rime262173>

Reçu: 12 Juin 2026

Accepté: 20 Août 2026

Publié: 14 Septembre 2026

Note de l'éditeur: Ishango-uac reste neutre en ce qui concerne les revendications juridictionnelles dans les cartes géographiques publiées et les affiliations institutionnelles des auteurs.



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Keywords: English as a foreign language; student perceptions; Francophone Africa; speaking anxiety; self-efficacy.

1. Introduction

English now functions as a major language of transnational scholarship, higher education, technology, and professional exchange. Its global role is not simply a matter of native-speaker ownership; it is sustained by multilingual users who employ English as a lingua franca across academic, scientific, and professional settings (Crystal, 2003; Jenkins, 2015). In academic publishing in particular, English provides access to a large share of internationally visible research and can affect scholars' ability to participate in wider knowledge networks (Hyland, 2016). For university students, English proficiency can therefore represent both an academic resource and a form of professional capital.

That global value, however, does not translate automatically into equitable learning opportunities. In multilingual and resource-constrained higher education systems, students may recognize the importance of English while having relatively little exposure to it, limited access to appropriate materials, and few occasions to use it for meaningful communication. Research in African higher education shows that attitudes toward English are shaped by language policy, schooling histories, identity, classroom conditions, and the linguistic ecology surrounding the university (Ngidi & Mncwango, 2022; O'Shea, 2025). Recent work in Francophone African settings similarly points to the importance of classroom practices, interaction opportunities, learner effort, and the wider Francophone environment in shaping beliefs about learning English (Koné, 2024; Sokeng Piewo, 2025).

These issues are especially relevant in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where higher education is predominantly Francophone but graduates increasingly encounter English in research, digital technologies, international mobility, and employment-oriented settings. Evidence from Congolese higher education has highlighted the broader importance of academic competencies and university-level employability strategies for graduate outcomes (Mpia et al., 2023). The cited study did not test English proficiency directly, but it underscores why universities need to consider the competencies that enable graduates to participate in wider academic and professional networks.

Butembo, a major educational and commercial centre in North Kivu, provides a useful setting for examining this issue. Students operate in a multilingual environment in which French, Kiswahili, Kinande, and other local languages are more immediately available than English in everyday interaction. English is generally taught as a foreign language and, for students outside English departments, often occupies a relatively small part of the curriculum. In this context, difficulties attributed to the language itself may also reflect accumulated experiences of limited practice, instructional choices, anxiety, and restricted access to learning resources.

Students' perceptions of English are treated here as context-sensitive appraisals rather than fixed dispositions that necessarily precede instruction. Repeated classroom and out-of-class experiences can plausibly reinforce or modify confidence, perceived difficulty, motivation, and willingness to participate. Because all measures were collected cross-sectionally, the study examines co-occurring patterns among classroom experience, exposure, affect, and perceived difficulty; it does not establish the temporal order or causal direction of those relationships.

1.1. Study aim and research questions

The study aimed to describe students' perceptions of English and to identify the pedagogical, institutional, environmental, and psychological conditions that they report as facilitating or constraining English learning in higher education in Butembo. It addresses four research questions:

- RQ1. How do non-English-major students in Butembo perceive the importance and difficulty of learning English?
- RQ2. Which classroom practices and language skills are most salient in students' reported English-learning experiences?
- RQ3. What institutional, environmental, and psychological barriers do students report?
- RQ4. What practical improvements do students identify as priorities for English teaching and learning in their institutions?

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. English learning in multilingual and Francophone higher education

The spread of English has created new opportunities for international communication while also intensifying debates about linguistic inequality, identity, and access. In multilingual universities, English may provide access to scientific literature and transnational networks, but it may also create additional learning demands for students whose schooling has taken place largely through another language. Studies of African higher education show that students can simultaneously value English and experience it as a barrier to participation or epistemic access when institutional language practices do not match their linguistic repertoires (Ngidi & Mncwango, 2022; O'Shea, 2025).

In Francophone sub-Saharan Africa, the problem is not reducible to a simple opposition between French and English. Learners move between local languages, national or regional lingua francas, French, and English, often with very unequal opportunities to practise each language. Koné (2024), working with university EFL learners in Mali, found that teacher practices, interactive speaking opportunities, learner effort, and the Francophone environment all shaped beliefs about English learning. Likewise, studies in Cameroon have documented the interaction of motivation, anxiety, classroom experience, and multilingual background among students learning English in predominantly Francophone settings (Céleste & Nsirim, 2024; Sokeng Piewo, 2025). These findings support a contextual approach in which learner perceptions are understood in relation to the environments in which learning occurs.

2.2. Perceptions, self-efficacy, motivation, and anxiety

Bandura's (1997) concept of self-efficacy is particularly useful for interpreting language-learning perceptions. Students who believe that they can successfully perform a learning task are more likely to persist, seek practice, and recover from setbacks. Self-efficacy does not operate in isolation: it develops through prior performance, feedback, observation of peers, and emotional experience. In a recent study of university students in Somalia, expectations and classroom experience were associated with self-efficacy, which in turn was strongly associated with attitudes toward English learning (Mohamud et al., 2026). Although that study was conducted in an English-medium context and cannot be transferred mechanically to Butembo, it illustrates the plausible mechanism linking classroom experience, confidence, and attitudes.

Anxiety is another recurrent factor. Krashen's (1982) affective-filter hypothesis proposed that fear, tension, and low confidence can impede effective engagement with language input. Later empirical evidence has consistently associated second-language anxiety with poorer achievement. A meta-analysis covering 97 reports and 19,933 learners found a moderate negative relationship between language anxiety and achievement (Teimouri et al., 2019). Studies in multilingual African and Francophone settings similarly identify communication anxiety and fear of negative evaluation as barriers to participation (AL-Qadri et al., 2023; Céleste & Nsirim, 2024). The implication is not that anxiety alone explains learning difficulty, but that it can interact with limited practice and negative classroom experiences in ways that discourage speaking.

A complementary perspective comes from positive psychology and motivational research, which emphasizes that language learning is supported not only by reducing anxiety but also by fostering enjoyment, confidence, agency, and meaningful goals (Dewaele et al., 2019). Studies of EFL learners also show that self-efficacy is associated with the strategies students adopt to manage their learning (Shirzad et al., 2022). This makes student perceptions analytically important: they are not merely opinions about a course but may influence how students approach opportunities to practice.

2.3. Pedagogy, interaction, exposure, and resources

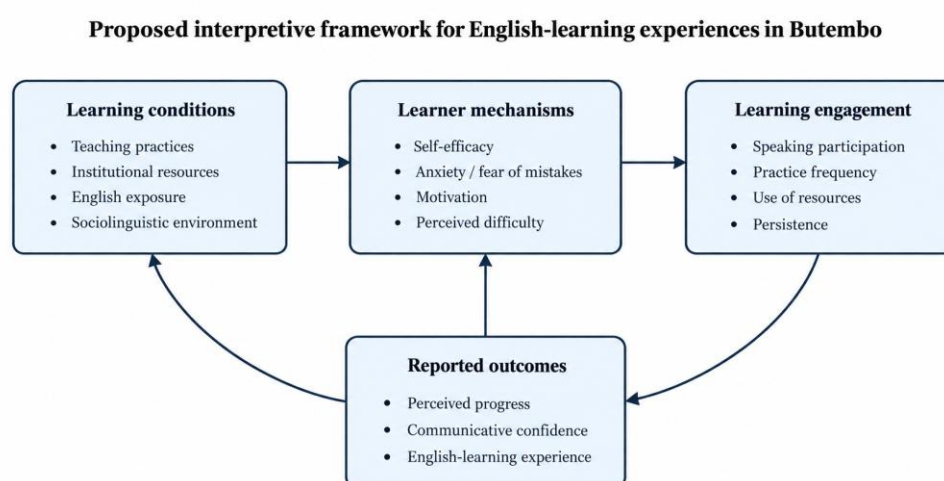
Communicative language teaching is grounded in the principle that learners develop communicative competence by using language for meaningful purposes rather than only studying grammatical forms (Richards, 2006; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Pair work, discussions, role plays, problem-solving tasks, presentations, and other interaction-rich activities can increase the amount of language students produce. These practices do not make explicit grammar teaching unnecessary; rather, they place form within a broader communicative purpose.

Exposure beyond scheduled lessons is equally important. Krashen's (1982) input-oriented account emphasizes meaningful, comprehensible exposure, while sociolinguistic approaches stress the opportunities and constraints created by the surrounding language environment (Spolsky, 2004). In settings where English is rarely used in daily life, institutions may need to create the opportunities that the wider environment does not naturally provide. These can include conversation clubs, peer-speaking groups, debate societies, guided media use, low-bandwidth digital resources, and task-based assignments that require students to listen to or produce English outside class.

Learning materials shape what teachers and students can do. Textbooks, dictionaries, audio resources, mobile applications, learning platforms, and access to authentic texts can support independent practice (Tomlinson, 2011). However, the educational value of technology depends on access, pedagogy, and continuity. In a setting such as Butembo, resource recommendations should therefore prioritize low-cost, offline-capable, and mobile-friendly options rather than assume uninterrupted broadband or well-equipped language laboratories.

2.4. Proposed interpretive framework

The literature suggests a sequence that is useful for interpreting the Butembo data: learning conditions (teaching practices, resources, exposure, and the sociolinguistic environment) are likely to influence learner mechanisms such as self-efficacy, anxiety, motivation, and perceived difficulty; these mechanisms can influence participation and practice; and repeated experiences of participation can then reinforce or modify subsequent perceptions. Figure 1 summarizes this logic. It is deliberately presented as an interpretive framework rather than a tested causal model because the present study did not collect longitudinal data or estimate a structural model.



Note. Arrows represent hypothesized relationships suggested by theory and participants' reports. The cross-sectional design does not establish causal effects.

Figure 1. Proposed interpretive framework for English-learning experiences in Butembo

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

The study used a quantitatively dominant, cross-sectional mixed-methods survey with an embedded qualitative component. Closed-ended questionnaire items generated descriptive quantitative data, while open-ended items allowed students to explain difficulties and propose improvements in their own words. This design is appropriate when numerical patterns and participant explanations are needed within the same data-collection exercise (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The qualitative component is treated as complementary rather than as an independent qualitative study.

3.2. Study setting

The study was conducted in Butembo City, North Kivu Province, eastern DRC, at approximately 0°08' N, 29°17' E and around 1,800 m elevation. Butembo is an important commercial and educational centre with multiple universities and higher institutes serving the city and surrounding territories. Its higher-education environment is predominantly Francophone and multilingual, with French, Kiswahili, Kinande, and other local languages more available in daily interaction than English. This linguistic ecology is directly relevant to the study because opportunities for routine English use outside formal classes are limited.

3.3. Participants, target population, and sampling

The target population comprised students enrolled in non-English-major programmes in which English was taught as a supporting or general-education course rather than as the principal field of study. A total of 125 students participated across ten higher education institutions: UCG, UAC, UOR, ULPGL, UNIC/FAB, IBTP, ISTM-Butembo, ISCA, ISPT Muhangi, and ISAM. Institution was used as the sampling stratum, with proportional random selection specified within strata. However, the sampling record does not include the total eligible population, per-institution population denominators, the allocation of the 125 completed cases across institutions, or the exact randomization procedure. The achieved sample is therefore analysed as unweighted, and population-representative estimates are not claimed.

3.4. Research instrument

Data were collected with a researcher-developed structured questionnaire organized into three sections: (1) participant background information, including class level; (2) perceptions of English and learning experiences; and (3) pedagogical, institutional, environmental, and psychological conditions reported as facilitating or constraining English learning. Response formats included dichotomous and categorical closed-ended items together with open-ended prompts. Closed-ended items covered the perceived importance of English, teaching approaches, opportunities to speak, difficult language skills, exposure outside class, comprehension, learning resources, and principal obstacles. Open-ended prompts invited students to describe their experiences and recommend improvements.

The analysis treats each closed-ended item as a stand-alone descriptive indicator rather than as part of a validated multi-item psychometric scale; no composite anxiety, self-efficacy, motivation, or teaching-quality score was calculated. Consequently, internal-consistency coefficients are not reported. No separate pilot test or formal content-validity study was documented. Measurement claims are therefore restricted to the observed item-level response distributions, while broader constructs such as anxiety and self-efficacy are used as theoretical lenses in the interpretation rather than as directly validated latent variables.

3.5. Data collection and ethical procedures

Academic authorization was obtained from the participating institutions before questionnaire administration. The researcher administered the questionnaires directly to students and explained the purpose of the study before distribution. Participation was voluntary. Questionnaire administration and completion extended over approximately one month, and completed questionnaires were retrieved immediately after completion. The achieved dataset contains 125 completed questionnaires; a denominator for all students approached was not retained, so a formal response rate cannot be calculated. Exact calendar dates, a formal ethics-committee approval or exemption reference, and additional anonymity/confidentiality procedures were not documented and are therefore not inferred.

3.6. Data analysis

Closed-ended responses were summarized using counts and percentages. Unweighted Wilson 95% confidence intervals were calculated for selected binomial proportions to show descriptive precision around the achieved sample. Because per-institution population counts, stratum-specific sample allocations, and survey weights were unavailable, these intervals are not survey-adjusted population estimates. No inferential association or causal model was estimated: the available analysis is based on aggregate item totals, and the study did not include an objective English-proficiency outcome or respondent-level cross-tabulations required for multivariable modelling.

Open-ended responses were analysed through a pragmatic, data-driven thematic grouping. Responses with similar meaning were organized into recurring categories concerning pedagogy, learning resources, exposure, speaking opportunities, affective barriers, and recommended improvements. The qualitative material was used to explain and contextualize the quantitative distributions rather than to estimate theme prevalence. Because the qualitative archive does not preserve the number of usable open-ended responses by prompt, a respondent-by-theme coding matrix, or verbatim excerpts, qualitative themes are reported without frequencies or quotations (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021).

4. Results

4.1. Perceived value of English

Students expressed a strong instrumental and academic valuation of English. Of the 125 respondents, 120 (96.0%; descriptive 95% CI: 91.0%-98.3%) considered English important for academic study, professional development, and international communication. Only five respondents (4.0%) did not. This high level of perceived value is important because it suggests that the learning difficulties reported elsewhere in the survey should not be interpreted simply as indifference toward the language.

4.2. Classroom practices and difficult language skills

Eighty-five students (68.0%; 95% CI: 59.4%-75.5%) reported that teachers used interactive methods at least occasionally, whereas 40 (32.0%) described instruction as largely non-interactive. When respondents identified the approach encountered most often, 44 (35.2%; 95% CI: 27.4%-43.9%) selected communicative methods, 38 (30.4%; 95% CI: 23.0%-38.9%) grammar-translation, 22 (17.6%; 95% CI: 11.9%-25.2%) lecture-based teaching, and 21 (16.8%; 95% CI: 11.3%-24.3%) could not identify the approach. The distribution indicates methodological coexistence rather than a complete transition from teacher-centred to communicative pedagogy.

Although 98 respondents (78.4%; 95% CI: 70.4%-84.7%) reported being encouraged to speak English during lessons, speaking remained the most frequently identified difficult skill: 68 students (54.4%; 95% CI: 45.7%-62.9%) selected speaking, compared with 26 (20.8%; 95% CI: 14.6%-28.7%) listening, 20 (16.0%; 95% CI: 10.6%-23.4%)

writing, and 11 (8.8%; 95% CI: 5.0%-15.1%) reading. At the aggregate level, the proportion reporting encouragement to speak exceeded the proportion identifying speaking as the most difficult skill by 24.0 percentage points. Because respondent-level cross-tabulations were unavailable, this difference should not be interpreted as an individual-level association.

Table 1. *Selected quantitative indicators.*

Selected indicator	n	%	Descriptive 95% CI
English is important	120	96.0	91.0-98.3
Interactive methods used at least occasionally	85	68.0	59.4-75.5
Teacher encourages English speaking	98	78.4	70.4-84.7
Speaking identified as most difficult skill	68	54.4	45.7-62.9
Regular access to English speakers outside class	49	39.2	31.1-48.0
Local environment does not sufficiently support English	70	56.0	47.2-64.4
Fear of speaking identified as principal obstacle	36	28.8	21.6-37.3

Note: CIs are unweighted Wilson intervals calculated from $n = 125$ and are reported for descriptive precision only.

4.3. Environmental and institutional conditions

Opportunities to use English outside the classroom were limited for many respondents. Only 49 students (39.2%; 95% CI: 31.1%-48.0%) reported having people around them who regularly spoke English, whereas 76 (60.8%; 95% CI: 52.0%-68.9%) reported little or no such opportunity. Similarly, 70 students (56.0%; 95% CI: 47.2%-64.4%) considered the sociolinguistic environment of Butembo insufficiently supportive of English learning, compared with 55 (44.0%; 95% CI: 35.6%-52.8%) who held a more positive view.

Open-ended responses identified constrained or uneven access to textbooks, bilingual dictionaries, audio-visual materials, libraries, digital learning resources, and structured spaces for independent practice. Suggested responses included English clubs, conversation groups, debate activities, wider use of digital media, and improved access to learning materials. These themes converge with the quantitative finding that 60.8% of respondents lacked regular access to English speakers outside class.

4.4. Psychological barriers and comprehension

The most frequently selected principal obstacle was fear of speaking English (36 respondents; 28.8%; 95% CI: 21.6%-37.3%). Limited vocabulary and difficulty understanding lessons delivered entirely in English were each selected by 26 students (20.8%; 95% CI: 14.6%-28.7%). Poor teaching methods and lack of practice were each selected by 13 students (10.4%; 95% CI: 6.2%-17.0%), while 11 (8.8%; 95% CI: 5.0%-15.1%) selected limited learning materials. These responses represent the principal obstacle selected by each respondent; they should not be read as mutually exclusive causal mechanisms.

Table 2. *Principal obstacles reported by respondents.*

Reported principal obstacle	n	%	Descriptive 95% CI
Fear of speaking English	36	28.8	21.6-37.3
Limited vocabulary	26	20.8	14.6-28.7
Difficulty understanding English-only lessons	26	20.8	14.6-28.7
Poor teaching methods	13	10.4	6.2-17.0
Lack of practice	13	10.4	6.2-17.0
Limited learning materials	11	8.8	5.0-15.1

Comprehension of lessons taught entirely in English was uneven. Forty-seven students (37.6%; 95% CI: 29.6%-46.3%) reported that they generally understood such lessons, 60 (48.0%; 95% CI: 39.4%-56.7%) said they understood them only sometimes, and 18 (14.4%; 95% CI: 9.3%-21.6%) reported that they generally did not. Taken together, 78 respondents (62.4%; 95% CI: 53.7%-70.4%) did not report consistently understanding English-only lessons. This distinction matters because greater exposure is educationally useful only when instructional language, scaffolding, task design, and feedback keep the input sufficiently comprehensible for learners to participate.

4.5. Priorities emerging from open-ended responses

Students' recommendations converged around five practical priorities: earlier and more sustained exposure to English; more speaking and interaction during lessons; English clubs or other extracurricular practice spaces; better access to dictionaries, books, audio-visual content, and digital resources; and teaching approaches that reduce fear of mistakes while providing corrective feedback. Because a respondent-by-theme coding matrix was not retained, these themes are presented as unranked qualitative priorities rather than frequency-ordered findings.

5. Discussion

5.1. High perceived value does not remove learning barriers

The most striking result is the coexistence of very high perceived value and persistent difficulty. Ninety-six percent of respondents considered English important, yet students still reported problems with speaking, comprehension, vocabulary, exposure, and confidence. This distinction matters conceptually. A positive evaluation of English as useful is not the same as self-efficacy - the belief that one can perform the tasks needed to learn and use the language. Bandura's (1997) framework helps explain how students can strongly value a goal while doubting their capacity to achieve it.

The finding is consistent with evidence that attitudes toward English are shaped by expectations, classroom experience, identity, and self-efficacy rather than by a single motivational variable (Mohamud et al., 2026; O'Shea, 2025). In the Butembo sample, 96.0% valued English, yet 54.4% identified speaking as their greatest skill difficulty, 60.8% lacked regular access to English speakers outside class, and 28.8% selected fear of speaking as their principal obstacle. This configuration is compatible with an experiential pathway in which restricted practice and low-confidence speaking situations reinforce perceived difficulty. Because these measures were collected concurrently and are available here as aggregate totals, temporal direction and individual-level mediation cannot be inferred.

5.2. Speaking is the main bottleneck because practice and affect interact

Speaking was identified as the most difficult skill by 54.4% of respondents even though 78.4% reported that teachers encouraged them to speak, a 24.0-percentage-point difference at the aggregate level. The two indicators capture different features of learning: encouragement reflects an instructional prompt, whereas oral development depends on repeated opportunities to produce language, task difficulty, feedback, and psychological safety. The available data do not show how these two responses overlap within individuals, but the pattern supports moving beyond verbal encouragement toward structured, frequent, low-stakes speaking practice.

The prominence of fear of speaking is also consistent with the wider literature on language anxiety. Teimouri et al. (2019) demonstrated a robust negative relationship between second-language anxiety and achievement across a large body of studies, while research in Algeria and Cameroon has shown that communication anxiety remains salient in multilingual and Francophone university contexts (AL-Qadri et al., 2023; Céleste & Nsirim, 2024). The practical implication is that speaking practice should be structured to generate repeated low-stakes success: pair rehearsal before plenary

speaking, small-group tasks, peer feedback, short presentations, recorded voice assignments, and progressive increases in task difficulty.

5.3. The sociolinguistic environment places more responsibility on institutions

The environmental constraint was substantial: 60.8% of respondents reported little or no regular access to English speakers outside class, and 56.0% considered the local environment insufficiently supportive of English learning. This pattern is comparable to Koné's (2024) observation that the Francophone environment and limited interactive speaking opportunities shape EFL learners' beliefs in Mali. In Butembo, institutions therefore function not only as sites of formal instruction but also as potential creators of the English-use opportunities that the surrounding linguistic environment provides less frequently.

The students' own recommendations point in that direction. English clubs, peer conversation groups, debate activities, guided media use, and mobile learning can create recurring opportunities for listening and speaking without requiring a fully equipped language laboratory. This is especially relevant in resource-constrained institutions. The key design principle is regularity: short, frequent practice is likely to be more useful than occasional high-intensity events that do not become part of students' routines.

5.4. Academic and professional relevance in the Congolese context

The 96.0% valuation of English should be interpreted as perceived academic and professional relevance rather than as evidence that English independently improves employment outcomes. Congolese employability research emphasizes that graduate outcomes reflect combinations of academic competencies, contextual conditions, and university strategies (Mpia et al., 2023). Although that study did not estimate an English-language effect, the present respondents' strong valuation supports treating English as one component of broader readiness for research, technology-mediated learning, international mobility, and cross-border professional communication.

5.5. Contribution of the interpretive framework

The empirical pattern supports a systems-oriented interpretation rather than a single-factor explanation. In the same sample, limited regular exposure outside class (60.8%), an environment perceived as insufficiently supportive (56.0%), speaking difficulty (54.4%), inconsistent comprehension of English-only lessons (62.4%), and fear of speaking as the leading principal obstacle (28.8%) co-occurred with very high perceived value of English (96.0%). Figure 1 organizes these domains into a reciprocal interpretive framework in which learning conditions may shape confidence, anxiety, motivation, participation, and practice, while repeated successful or unsuccessful experiences may in turn modify perceptions. The figure is conceptual and does not represent a statistically estimated causal model.

6. Implications and Recommendations

At classroom level, the clearest priority is oral participation. Because 54.4% identified speaking as the most difficult skill and 28.8% selected fear of speaking as their principal obstacle, teachers should devote regular lesson time to pair rehearsal, structured discussions, role plays, information-gap activities, short presentations, and problem-solving tasks in which error is treated as part of learning. Explicit grammar and vocabulary instruction can remain, but new forms should be applied immediately in meaningful spoken or written tasks.

At programme level, the main constraint is limited exposure beyond scheduled lessons: 60.8% reported little or no regular access to English speakers outside class, and 56.0% viewed the local environment as insufficiently supportive. Weekly English clubs, conversation tables, peer-speaking partnerships, debate societies, reading circles, and

supervised low-bandwidth voice-note activities can create recurring practice without requiring expensive infrastructure. Offline audio collections and curated open educational resources are particularly appropriate where connectivity is unstable.

Teacher professional development should combine communicative task design with scaffolding for comprehension. Although 68.0% reported at least occasional use of interactive methods, 32.0% described instruction as largely non-interactive, and 62.4% did not report consistently understanding English-only lessons. Training should therefore address staged task difficulty, formative feedback, strategic use of explanation and modelling, and techniques for reducing fear of public error. Assessment should reward communicative use of English in addition to decontextualized grammar knowledge.

At institutional and policy levels, English provision should be aligned with students' academic fields and actual future uses. General English can be complemented with academic reading, presentation skills, discipline-specific vocabulary, and information-literacy tasks. Earlier exposure in the school system may be beneficial when it is sustained and well taught, but earlier introduction alone is not a substitute for trained teachers, appropriate materials, and opportunities for meaningful use (Lightbown & Spada, 2021).

7. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations delimit the conclusions. First, the study is cross-sectional and self-reported; it describes perceptions and reported learning conditions but cannot establish whether exposure, anxiety, classroom practice, or perceived difficulty preceded one another. Second, no objective language-proficiency measure was administered, so the study cannot estimate effects on English achievement. Third, most closed-ended measures are single items rather than validated multi-item scales, which limits construct-level claims about anxiety, self-efficacy, motivation, or teaching quality.

Fourth, the study record does not include the total sampling frame, institution-specific population denominators or sample allocations, a denominator for response-rate calculation, or a complete respondent profile by age, gender, year of study, discipline, and institution. These omissions limit evaluation of representativeness and preclude survey-weighted or subgroup analyses. Fifth, the qualitative component consists of open-ended questionnaire responses rather than interviews or focus groups, and the qualitative archive does not retain theme frequencies, a coding matrix, or illustrative verbatim quotations. Future studies should preserve respondent-level data, use validated multi-item measures and an objective proficiency assessment, and collect repeated observations over time to test the proposed relationships among exposure, classroom experience, self-efficacy, anxiety, participation, and performance.

8. Conclusion

Students in Butembo place very high value on English: 96.0% considered it important for academic, professional, and international purposes. That valuation, however, coexists with substantial constraints. Speaking was the most frequently identified difficult skill (54.4%), 60.8% reported little or no regular access to English speakers outside class, 62.4% did not report consistently understanding English-only lessons, and fear of speaking was the leading principal obstacle (28.8%). The evidence therefore does not support an explanation based simply on low student interest; it points instead to a learning ecology in which exposure, classroom practice, comprehension, resources, and affective experience interact.

For higher education institutions in Butembo, the findings favour targeted, low-cost changes over infrastructure-only solutions. More structured oral practice, English clubs and peer-speaking groups, mobile or offline listening resources, communicative teacher development, and better scaffolding of English-medium explanations directly

address the most frequently reported constraints. The study also establishes a concrete baseline for a stronger next phase of research using respondent-level datasets, validated scales, objective proficiency measures, documented sampling frames, and longitudinal designs capable of testing the reciprocal pathways proposed in Figure 1.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Academic authorization was obtained from the participating institutions before questionnaire administration. Students were informed of the study purpose before receiving the questionnaire, and participation was voluntary. A formal ethics-committee approval or exemption reference was not documented; no such reference is asserted in this article.

Data availability

All aggregate counts and percentages used in the analysis are reported in the article. Respondent-level data, cross-tabulations, and the qualitative coding file were not archived with the study materials available for this analysis; no public repository deposit is claimed.

Competing interests

No competing interests were reported in the study documentation.

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