ISSN 2348-3156 (Print)
International Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research ISSN 2348-3164 (online)
Vol. 14, Issue 4, pp: (98-103), Month: October - December 2026, Available at: www.researchpublish.com

ENGLISH LANGUAGE USE PRACTICES IN SCHOOL HOSTELS AND STUDENTS' ENGLISH LANGUAGE PERFORMANCE IN WARD PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN RURAL TANZANIA

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23364979

Published Date: 14-October-2026

Abstract: **This study focused on the extent of use of English language in school hostels and its link with the students' English language performance, in ward public secondary schools in rural Tanzania. The motivation for the study was the realisation that the medium of instruction in secondary school is English, but students in the rural schools might have limited exposure to practicing the English language outside of school. School hostels offer a social setting in which children meet with other children and may have the chance to practise the language again. The study was guided by Bandura's Social Learning Theory which highlights how people learn through observation, imitation, interaction, modelling and reinforcement. Mixed method with convergent design was used. Structured questionnaires were used to gather quantitative data and semi-structured interviews were used to gather qualitative data. Frequencies, percentages, and means were used for quantitative data analysis and themes were used for qualitative data analysis. The key findings indicated that the English language use in the hostel had an impact on students' vocabulary acquisition, confidence and speaking practice, interaction with peers, and English language performance. But English was not always used when students were interacting in the hostel, as they often used Kiswahili, and fear of making mistakes restricted participation. The study found that the school hostel can be used as an informal learning environment to complement the learning of English in the classroom, provided that the use of English is always promoted and assisted. The study suggested that school administration should increase the frequency of English debates, group discussions, student speeches, and student peer learning activities to encourage students to use English, and that the supervisors of the school hostels should give them supportive guidance and encouragement to enhance students' confidence in using English and improve students' ability to use English.**

Keywords: **English language use practices, school hostels, English language performance, rural secondary schools, Social Learning Theory, Tanzania.**

1. INTRODUCTION

English language is of key importance in Tanzanian secondary education since it is the medium of instruction. Due to this reason, students require adequate English competence, both in order to perform well in English language subject and to be able to understand and participate in learning of other secondary subjects. However, many students at public secondary schools encounter difficulties when acquiring English language proficiency. The problem may be even more difficult in rural areas where students may not have chances to practice English outside classroom sessions.

The hostel environment is one of the important contexts where students' chances to practice English may be expanded, but it has been relatively less researched. Unlike traditional classroom settings, school hostels keep students together for extended periods of time outside of formal teaching sessions. Students interact with their peers, participate in discussions and preparation activities. All this makes the hostel environment an opportunity to interact and learn. As was found out in the dissertation, which served as a basis for the present manuscript, limited opportunities to practice English outside the classroom are an important contextual aspect in Mlimba District Council where Kiswahili language, as well as Ndamba and Pogoro languages dominate in everyday communication.

The importance of interaction for language development is consistent with Vygotsky's Social Interaction Theory. According to the theory, learning is a result of social interaction and communication with other people. Since in hostels students have to meet their peers and teachers regularly, it makes hostels social learning environments. For this reason, English language use practices have been treated in the dissertation as one of the aspects of hostel management and its influence on students' English language performance.

Prior research has often found the link between regular exposure to the target language along with chances for meaningful communication and the improvement in language development. Lightbown and Spada (2021) emphasize the importance of exposure and meaningful communication chances in second language acquisition. Adamson (2024) also mentions the importance of participation and communication in English medium educational contexts. In Tanzania, Yohana and Mwila (2022) found that structured English learning and practice activities contribute to English language proficiency, whereas Tian and Jiang (2021) stressed the importance of peer interaction and use of English in communicative activities.

Still, most of the existing literature tends to focus on classroom language learning or the general school contexts. Little attention has been given to English language use in school hostels in case of rural ward public secondary schools in Tanzania. The dissertation has considered it to be an important contextual gap and has pointed out that there is not enough empirical evidence that can explain the influence of particular hostel management practices on students' English language performance in Mlimba District Council. Therefore, the study sought to examine What English language use practices are commonly employed by students in school hostels in ward public secondary schools in rural Tanzania?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Social Learning Theory as proposed by Bandura (1977) guided this study. According to it, individual behaviour is learned by observing, imitating, interacting with others and being rewarded and corrected. When it comes to school hostels, the theory explains how students learned and practised English by interacting with their peers, teachers and fellow students on a regular basis. They did this by observing how other students speak English, imitating their behaviour, receiving reinforcement through various forms of encouragement and correction for their successful usage of English. Thus, students' frequent interactions with the English language through conversations in the hostels, discussions and peer learning events increase their chances of learning and improving their English performance.

English language use practices outside classroom have attracted more and more attention since regular exposure and opportunities for communication may contribute to students' language development. In school environments, students are offered an opportunity to interact with their peers and practice English through conversations, discussions, academic activities and other social interactions. Such practices can increase students' confidence and their ability to use English language in communication, especially when learners are encouraged to use English regularly (Msimbe & Mwila, 2023).

In Tanzania, Abdala (2024) found that teaching and learning materials and classroom practices influence English language learning in secondary schools. The study emphasized the importance of offering learners the opportunity to actively engage with English language. In similar way, Ndunguru et al. (2025), in rural public secondary schools in Mbinga District, have found that active and practical approach to teaching English supports English communication skills of students. These findings show that offering students the opportunity to actively use English language, rather than just learning in classroom, can help to improve language performance.

Use of English in social interactions can influence confidence and willingness of students to communicate. Abdala (2025) reported that use of Kiswahili in English language teaching and learning is associated with problems in development of English language speaking skills of students. It suggests that regular opportunities for English use are important for improving communication skills. Similarly, Tsang and Lam (2025) found that engagement of learners with English language outside classroom provides additional exposure to the language and is associated with language proficiency. These findings can support the examination of informal learning environments where students regularly interact and use English.

School hostels can be an important informal learning environment since students spend a lot of time interacting with their peers in non-classroom environment. Through interactions in hostel conversations, peer discussions, group studies and other daily activities, students can observe, imitate and use English language. Such interactions are consistent with Social Learning Theory that emphasizes learning through observation, modeling, imitation, interaction and reinforcement (Bandura, 1977). However, use of English language in school hostels can vary from school to school depending on the rules, peer practices, confidence of students and encouragement provided by teachers and school administrators.

Despite the above mentioned research, there is not enough empirical research devoted to investigation of English language use practices in school hostels and students' English language performance, especially in ward public secondary schools in rural Tanzania. Most of the prior studies have mainly focused on classroom teaching strategies, instructional materials, competency-based teaching and use of Kiswahili in English language learning (Msimbe & Mwila, 2023; Abdala, 2024; Ndunguru et al., 2025). Thus, there is a knowledge and empirical gap regarding how English language practices in school hostels influence students' English language performance in rural ward public secondary schools.

Therefore, the present study focuses on investigating the relationship between English language use practices in school hostels and students' English language performance in rural ward public secondary schools in Tanzania. The study intends to extend the knowledge by examining the hostel as an informal social environment where students can have additional opportunities to observe, practice and use English language beyond classroom environment.

Previous studies mostly explore English language learning in classrooms, while the current study explores English language use in school hostels and its effect on students' performance. This makes the current study a clearly justified research gap.

3. METHODOLOGY

Mixed methods approach with a convergent design was used in order to investigate the relationship between English language use practices in school hostels and students' English language performance. The study was conducted in five purposively selected ward public secondary schools with hostels in Mlimba District Council, Morogoro region. The sample of the study consisted of 283 respondents that included 267 students, five English language teachers, five hostel teachers/wardens, five Heads of Schools and one District Education Officer. Students were selected using simple random sampling technique, whereas other participants were purposively selected. Quantitative data was collected using structured Likert-scale questionnaire, while qualitative data was collected using semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data was analysed using frequencies, percentages and means, whereas qualitative data was analysed using thematic approach.

Validity of the instruments was assured using expert review, alignment of the instruments with the objectives of the study and pilot testing of the questionnaire. Reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha, which produced the coefficient of 0.750 for the five English language practice items, which exceeds the accepted threshold of 0.70. Ethical principles were respected throughout the research by obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, anonymity and voluntary participation, getting research permission from relevant authorities and using the information only for academic purpose.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Quantitative Results on English Language Use Practices

Table 1 shows students' responses about English language use practices in hostels, in general

Table 1: English Language Use Practices in Hostels (n = 267)

No.	Statement	SA (%)	A (%)	U (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Mean
1	Students are encouraged to speak English in the hostel.	45 (16.9)	68(25.5)	17 (6.4)	76(28.5)	61(22.8)	3.15
2	English is commonly used during discussions in the hostel.	28 (10.5)	96(36.0)	21 (7.9)	68(25.5)	54(20.2)	3.09
3	Speaking English in the hostel improves confidence	116(43.4)	83(31.1)	11 (4.1)	33(12.4)	24 (9.0)	2.12
4	Using English regularly helps improve academic performance.	152(56.9)	74(27.7)	7 (2.6)	24 (9.0)	10 (3.7)	1.75
5	Hostel rules promote the use of English among students	43 (16.1)	98(36.7)	21 (7.9)	59(22.1)	46(17.2)	2.88

Source: Field Data (2026).

Generally, the results indicate that there exists a clear discrepancy between what students value regarding English practice and what happens in terms of institutional push and actual use in hostels

On the institutional encouragement, only 42.4% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that students were encouraged to speak English in the hostel environment, compared to 51.3% who disagreed or strongly disagreed. The mean score of 3.15 shows a relatively low level of agreement

Similarly, 46.5% of the respondents agreed that English language use was common during hostel discussions, but 45.7% disagreed and 7.9% undecided. The mean score of 3.09 indicates that English language came up during discussions to some extent, although not common or continuously practised

In contrast, the students had relatively high recognition of both personal and academic benefits of speaking English in the hostels. Overall, 74.5% agreed that speaking English in the hostel increased their confidence level, compared to only 21.4% disagreeing with this opinion. Mean score of 2.12, therefore, indicates a high level of agreement

The most distinct item is associated with academic improvements following the regular use of the English language. Specifically, 84.6% agreed that regular use of English language contributes to academic success, whereas only 12.7% disagreed. Expectedly, the mean score of 1.75 became the lowest and highest level of agreement among the five indicators

Finally, 52.8% of the students agreed that hostel rules encouraged English language use by students, while 39.3% disagreed and 7.9% undecided. The moderate mean score of 2.88 indicates the existence of some institutional encouragement, although inconsistently or not fully realized

Qualitative Results

The qualitative data identified two main themes rather clearly

Theme 1: Regular English Communication Increases Fluency and Confidence

The interviewees mentioned that regular English communication in hostels provides students with opportunities to practice speaking and listening outside the usual classroom hours. They emphasized that continuous interaction allows learners to get acquainted with English and gradually gain their confidence

The English language teachers claimed that students communicated in English and participated in debates. Moreover, it is important to note that the interview data indicate that continuous exposure provides learners with various opportunities to practice vocabulary, pronunciation and sentence construction in the natural setting

The Heads of Schools stated that students living in hostels get additional opportunities for oral communication, since they have an opportunity to interact with peers outside the classroom hours. In other words, the above mentioned accounts confirm the findings obtained in the quantitative research, since students valued the English language practice in the hostels highly

Theme 2: Co-curricular Activities Improve Speaking Skill

The second theme relates to the contribution of co-curricular activities to the practice of the English language. Specifically, the participants identified debates, morning speeches, group discussions and presentations as activities which create organized opportunities for the English practice. Such activities were seen as helpful in building speaking confidence and practicing the English language outside the formal lessons

The District Education Officer emphasized the importance of the development of these activities, since they allow students to practice language for communication purposes. However, the participants still mentioned that the effectiveness of English practice depended on the continuous encouragement, supervision and willingness to participate in the process.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Results

Thus, the quantitative and qualitative information are complementary to each other. Quantitatively, students highly appreciated the fact that the English language use in the hostels increased their confidence level and contributed to the academic success. But, qualitatively, the actual encouragement and English use in the daily interactions of the hostel members seemed quite limited. The participants mentioned such activities as communication, debates, morning speeches and group discussions as opportunities to support English practice

Thus, the results reveal the practice opportunity gap, since students seem to recognize the importance of English practice, although it is not always encouraged and practiced in the hostel environment. Integrating all the findings above, it becomes clear that the hostel can serve as the extended English language learning environment, if regular conversations and structured activities in the language are encouraged deliberately

5. DISCUSSION

The results indicate that students value English language practice greatly, however, they face comparatively few opportunities to practice the English language in the specific context of the hostel interactions. This aspect is critical, since language learning relies on its usage, rather than on the observation of English as a formal lesson.

Moreover, only 42.4% of the respondents agreed that they were encouraged to speak English in hostels. This result reveals the potential of the hostel as an extended language-learning environment which has not been exploited fully. This finding fits the contextual problem formulated in the dissertation, since Kiswahili and other local languages prevail in conversations outside the classroom.

Furthermore, this outcome confirms the opinion of Lightbown and Spada (2021) that meaningful exposure and communication are essential in the process of second language acquisition. Similarly, Adamson (2024) claims that participation and communication in the English-medium educational context promote learning. This argument in this study is transferred to the hostel environment, since the students themselves recognize the importance of communication, although do not get any institutional encouragement to use the English language.

The limited English language use during discussions is also relevant. While 46.5% of the respondents agreed that English language was commonly used in the discussions, 45.7% disagreed with this statement. This almost equal position shows that the opportunities for English discussion vary from person to person. It means the inconsistent exposure to the language and, accordingly, its practice. This result is similar to the discussion conducted by Tian and Jiang (2021), who emphasize the importance of peer-interaction and communication in the process of second language development.

An outstanding result of this research is the fact that 74.5% of the students agreed that speaking English in the hostel increases their confidence. This finding is confirmed qualitatively, since the participants talked about the importance of communication and co-curricular activities in order to overcome fear and gain confidence in speaking English. In addition, the finding fits Social Interaction Theory according to which communication provides moments for the development of language skills through interactions with other people.

The most pronounced result obtained in this research is that 84.6% of the students agreed that the regular English language use improves academic performance. It means that the students understand the academic benefits of English proficiency. In the context of secondary schools in Tanzania, the English language is critical since it is needed for gaining access to academic material and participating in secondary education. In this regard, the above-mentioned finding emphasizes the importance of English practice beyond formal English lessons.

However, the results reveal the mismatch between the appreciation of the importance of English practice and its consistent use. From the perspective of the qualitative findings, the students can switch to Kiswahili in case of the informal conversations. Thus, it reveals the influence of the social context, peer relations and hostel management in particular on the language use habits.

The finding concerning hostel rules is also moderate and relevant. Although 52.8% of the respondents agreed that hostel rules encouraged the use of the English language, 39.3% disagreed with this statement. It indicates the existence of some institutional support for the English practice, but this support may be inconsistent. It means that rules alone may be ineffective without the communicative activities such as debates, group discussions, speeches and other kinds of discussions.

Overall, the above mentioned findings confirm Vygotsky's Social Interaction Theory. The hostel can become a social learning environment which allows developing English through communication, peer interactions and participation in the process. However, the study reveals that the value of the interaction depends on deliberate management. It means that the hostel should deliberately encourage and support English practice.

6. CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that English language use in school hostels has the potential to support the English language development and academic success of the students. The students recognized the value of English language practice and its benefits for improving confidence and academic performance. However, the findings revealed the existence of a noticeable gap between the students' recognition of these benefits and opportunities for consistent English language communication in the hostel environment.

The study concludes that English language practice in the school hostels is not consistently encouraged and practiced. Although some students mentioned that the discussions and rules in hostels encourage the English language use, a significant proportion of students indicated the lack of such encouragement and inconsistent English language use. On the other hand, the qualitative findings showed that the communication, debates, speeches, group discussions and presentations provided the valuable opportunities for the students to develop fluency, confidence, vocabulary, pronunciation and sentence construction.

Overall, the school hostels can become the important informal English language learning environments in case of the deliberate encouragement and support of English language practice. In this regard, the effective use of the hostel environment requires the consistent encouragement, supervision and co-curricular activities which provide students with the consistent opportunities to communicate in English. Strengthening these practices can help to bridge the gap between the students' recognition of the value of the English language and the opportunities to practice it and, therefore, improve English language performance in rural ward public secondary schools.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

The school administrators should deliberately encourage the English language use in school hostels by establishing consistent English-speaking activities such as debates, group discussions, speeches and peer conversations supported by the consistent encouragement and supervision of teachers and hostel wardens. It will give students more opportunities to practice English outside the classroom and improve their confidence, fluency and academic performance

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