

*Full length Paper*

# **Factors for secondary school students' failure in English Language subject: Focus on the use of English for communication within school environment**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study investigates how the use of English language for communication within the school environment contributes to secondary school students' failure in the English language subject in Tanga City Council, Tanzania. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 45 students and 7 English teachers across three selected secondary schools. The findings reveal limited use of English in informal and non-instructional settings, such as during breaks and peer conversations, despite moderate use during formal occasions like assemblies. The results suggest that the lack of consistent exposure to English communication impedes language development, confidence, and proficiency among students. The study recommends practical interventions such as English language clubs, school-wide policies promoting English usage, and enhanced teacher modeling to cultivate an English-speaking culture in schools.

**Key words:** English language proficiency, language exposure, language of communication, school environment.

## **INTRODUCTION**

English is both a core subject and the official medium of instruction in Tanzanian secondary schools. Despite its central role in the education system, students' performance in English has remained consistently deprived over the years. According to the National Examination Council of Tanzania (NECTA), the failure rate in English stood at 33.5% in 2018, 34% in 2019, and above 30% in subsequent years (NECTA, 2018–2022). These figures suggest that the challenge extends beyond classroom teaching and may be linked to broader factors within the school environment, including the practical use of English for day-to-day communication.

Several studies have investigated the causes of poor English performance, often focusing on curriculum

quality, teacher qualifications, and instructional methods (Fadhili, 2020; Keenja et al., 2022). However, increasing attention has been drawn to the influence of school communication culture on language acquisition and performance. Literature indicates that exposure to a language in both formal and informal settings strengthens learners' competence, confidence, and fluency (Busse, 2017; Mosha, 2014). In the Tanzanian context, Kiswahili often dominates communication in schools, limiting students' opportunities to use English meaningfully outside the classroom. This disconnect between instructional language and daily interactions may contribute to poor language proficiency and academic underachievement in English.

While the role of school language use has been acknowledged in theory, there is limited empirical evidence specifically examining how English is used for communication within secondary schools in Tanzania, particularly in non-classroom contexts such as assemblies, peer interactions, and informal discussions. Existing studies tend to overlook the frequency and quality of English usage in such spaces and how these practices shape learners' language development and academic outcomes.

This study addressed this gap by exploring how English was used for communication in selected secondary schools in Tanga City Council and the extent to which these practices influenced students' proficiency and performance. The investigation focused on both formal and informal uses of English within the school environment. It was expected that the findings on the use of the English language for communication in schools would contribute to a broader understanding of the relationship between school language practices and academic outcomes and offer insights that can inform education policy, teacher training, and school management practices aimed at improving English language competence among secondary school students in Tanzania.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A growing body of literature highlights the persistent challenges secondary school students face in acquiring English language proficiency. One of the major issues identified is the neglect of oral communication skills. Abdala and Vuzo (2024) emphasized that Tanzanian classrooms often prioritize written assessments over spoken English, resulting in limited student fluency and confidence. This observation is consistent with IDEH (2021), which revealed that limited opportunities to use English outside formal lessons, combined with the dominance of Kiswahili, create psychological barriers such as fear of making mistakes or facing ridicule—barriers that hinder students' willingness to communicate in English.

The dominance of Kiswahili in informal school settings is another recurring theme in the literature. Keenja et al. (2022) observed that the habitual use of Kiswahili among students and even teachers, especially during breaks or non-academic activities, reduces students' exposure to English, which is crucial for developing communicative competence. Saad and Usman (2014), examining similar dynamics in Nigeria, noted that the strong presence of mother tongue in school environments, coupled with inadequate instructional resources, severely constrains students' ability to acquire and use English effectively.

While these studies clearly demonstrate the language barrier posed by mother tongue dominance, few delve into how school policies or teacher modeling could mitigate this issue, a gap that warrants further exploration.

Linguistic challenges such as poor vocabulary and weak grammar foundations are also widely reported. Anwari (2019), in a study of Afghan public schools, attributed students' underperformance in English to limited practical usage and a lack of skilled English teachers. Likewise, Moshia (2014) found that Tanzanian students struggle with English due to insufficient support systems, particularly outside the classroom, where structured language exposure is minimal. These studies emphasize the critical role of consistent practice and exposure, though they offer limited intervention-based evidence, leaving questions about what specific strategies might be most effective.

Motivation has also been recognized as a key determinant of English language performance. Busse (2017) argued that students' willingness to learn and use English is shaped not only by instructional methods but also by the perceived value of English in broader social and global contexts. Msigala (2019) similarly noted that the absence of real-life communication opportunities within schools undermines both academic performance and motivation. These studies underscore the importance of fostering a supportive and communicative school culture, although they stop short of examining the structural or administrative changes necessary to institutionalize such cultures.

## THEORETICAL REVIEW

### Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning

This study is grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Learning, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction and cultural context in cognitive and language development. Two core constructs of this theory, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding, are particularly relevant to the challenges identified in the use of English for communication within secondary school environments.

According to Vygotsky (1978), the ZPD represents the range between what a learner can achieve independently and what they can accomplish with the guidance of a more knowledgeable other. In educational contexts, this "more knowledgeable other" is often a teacher or a peer who models and supports learning through structured interaction. For language acquisition, this implies that learners must be exposed to guided communication opportunities that stretch their current abilities. However,

the findings of this study revealed that students often lack these opportunities, particularly in informal school settings where Kiswahili dominates and English is rarely practiced. This absence of English-speaking peer interaction and inadequate teacher scaffolding limits students' progression within their ZPD.

Scaffolding, a related concept, involves the support and feedback provided by teachers to help students gradually internalize new skills. In the context of second language learning, scaffolding includes modeling correct language use, encouraging practice, correcting errors, and creating safe environments for learners to experiment with language. The study identified a lack of consistent teacher modeling and reinforcement of English use, which weakens the scaffolding process necessary for language development. As Donato (2020) and Mitchell and Myles (2023) argue, effective second language learning is deeply tied to such mediated, interactive learning environments.

Moreover, Swain, Kinnear, and Steinman (2019) and Lantolf and Thorne (2021) highlight the role of collaborative dialogue as a central mechanism through which learners co-construct meaning and improve linguistic competence. These insights align with the study's findings that students' communicative confidence and fluency are hampered by the lack of socially rich English-speaking environments in schools.

Furthermore, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory supports the interpretation that students' limited English proficiency is not merely a product of individual weaknesses but is deeply influenced by the social and institutional contexts in which learning occurs. The theory underscores the importance of creating school environments that offer rich, scaffolded interaction in English to support learners' progression from dependence to linguistic independence.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

A mixed-methods design was employed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of English language usage in secondary schools. The study was conducted in three purposively selected secondary schools within Tanga City Council, comprising both public and private institutions. These schools were selected based on their accessibility, willingness to participate, and representation of diverse educational settings, ensuring variation in teaching environments, student demographics, and communication practices.

The sample included 45 students (15 from each school), selected using stratified random sampling to ensure representation from Form III and Form IV students, who had significant exposure to the English

language. This sample size was informed by Creswell (2014) and related studies, which highlight the suitability of moderate sample sizes for in-depth descriptive studies that aim to capture diverse experiences while maintaining manageability. In addition, seven English language teachers were purposively selected due to their direct role in delivering English instruction and their capacity to offer reflective insights into students' language use and institutional practices.

The study utilized two main instruments: questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Questionnaires comprised closed-ended questions, enabling the collection of quantifiable data. The tool was pilot-tested with students and teachers from a school not included in the main sample to ensure clarity and reliability. Following the pilot, necessary revisions were made, and the internal consistency of the instrument was confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.78. Semi-structured interview guides were developed and validated by two experts in language education to ensure alignment with the study objectives and appropriateness for the target respondents.

Quantitative data collected from the questionnaires were analyzed using SPSS Version 25, focusing on descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages to identify trends in students' use of English in various school contexts. Interview transcripts were subjected to qualitative analysis using a thematic analysis method. To facilitate this, NVivo software was used for organizing, coding, and categorizing textual data. Thematic coding was conducted inductively, allowing key themes to emerge from the data, and was validated through peer review to ensure credibility and consistency. This analytical process enabled the identification of recurring patterns related to English language use, challenges, and the influence of school culture, ultimately enriching the interpretation of the quantitative findings and offering a holistic understanding of the research problem.

Ethical approval was secured from the Tanga City Council Education Office, and all necessary permissions were obtained from school administrations. Informed consent was sought from all participating teachers, while parental consent and student assent were obtained for those under the age of 18. Participation was entirely voluntary, with strict adherence to ethical principles, including confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

## RESULTS

This section presents the quantitative data collected from students alongside qualitative data obtained from both

teachers and students to complement the quantitative findings. The quantitative data focused on students' use of English within the school communication environment, while the qualitative data provide in-depth insights into the factors contributing to secondary school students' failure in the English language subject.

### **Quantitative findings for student use of English in school communication**

Effective English communication in schools is vital for students' language development and academic achievement. This section examines the frequency and contexts in which secondary school students use English during daily school interactions (Tables 1 and 2).

The findings reveal that only 8 out of 45 students reported always speaking English with their friends, indicating that English is not commonly used in peer conversations. Most students sometimes or rarely spoke English with friends, and a few never did. In contrast, English was more consistently used during school assemblies, with 20 students stating that English was always spoken in this formal setting. However, outside the classroom, only 5 students consistently used English, while the majority used it sometimes or rarely, and some never used it at all. However, the data indicates that English is commonly used during formal settings like assemblies, where 20 students confirmed it is always spoken and 15 said it is sometimes used. This quantitative trend is consistent with qualitative responses, where students and teachers described English as mostly confined to official school functions rather than everyday peer interactions.

### **Frequency of English use encouraged by teachers**

Students were asked whether their English teacher allows or encourages them to communicate with one another in English during English lessons. The responses were categorized into four frequency levels: Always, Sometimes, Never, and Once per Month. The responses are as shown in the following table.

Table 2 presents the numerical breakdown of students' responses regarding how frequently their English language teachers allow them to communicate in English during class. This data is represented in Figure 1, which illustrates the same frequency categories, 'Always', 'Sometimes', 'Never', and 'Once per Month' allowing for a more immediate and comparative understanding of response distribution.

The findings reveal that English language teachers vary in how often they encourage students to communicate in

English during class. A majority of students (53.33%) reported that their teachers *sometimes* allow them to speak English with one another, while 40% said they are *always* encouraged to do so. Only a small fraction of students noted that they are *never* (4.44%) or *once per month* (2.22%) given such opportunities. This suggests that, although most teachers provide some level of support for English use in class, the frequency is inconsistent. The dominance of the "sometimes" response over "always" implies that regular student interaction in English is not yet a standard classroom practice.

The data further imply that while communicative approaches are present, they are not universally or consistently applied. To address this, it is recommended that schools promote a more consistent emphasis on peer-to-peer English communication across all English classes. This could be achieved through professional development focused on communicative teaching methods, as well as classroom activities that foster natural English use. Additionally, regular monitoring and feedback systems should be implemented to support teachers in creating an immersive English language environment. By taking these steps, schools can ensure that students benefit more fully from opportunities to practice and develop their language proficiency.

### **Qualitative findings on factors contributing to secondary school students' failure in English**

Thematic analysis, supported by NVivo software, was used to analyze qualitative data from students and teachers. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis framework, which involved familiarization with the data, coding, identifying the themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. This method allowed for an iterative and reflexive examination of patterns and meanings within the participants' narratives. Key themes identified include fear and lack of confidence, Kiswahili dominance, limited vocabulary and grammar skills, and low motivation. These themes were cross-validated with quantitative findings (Table 1.0) to enhance credibility.

#### **Fear of making mistakes and lack of confidence**

Many students reported that fear of making mistakes and being mocked by peers significantly hinders their willingness to use English in informal conversations. This fear creates a barrier that reduces opportunities for practicing the language and building fluency. This aligns

**Table 1.** Student use of English in school communication.

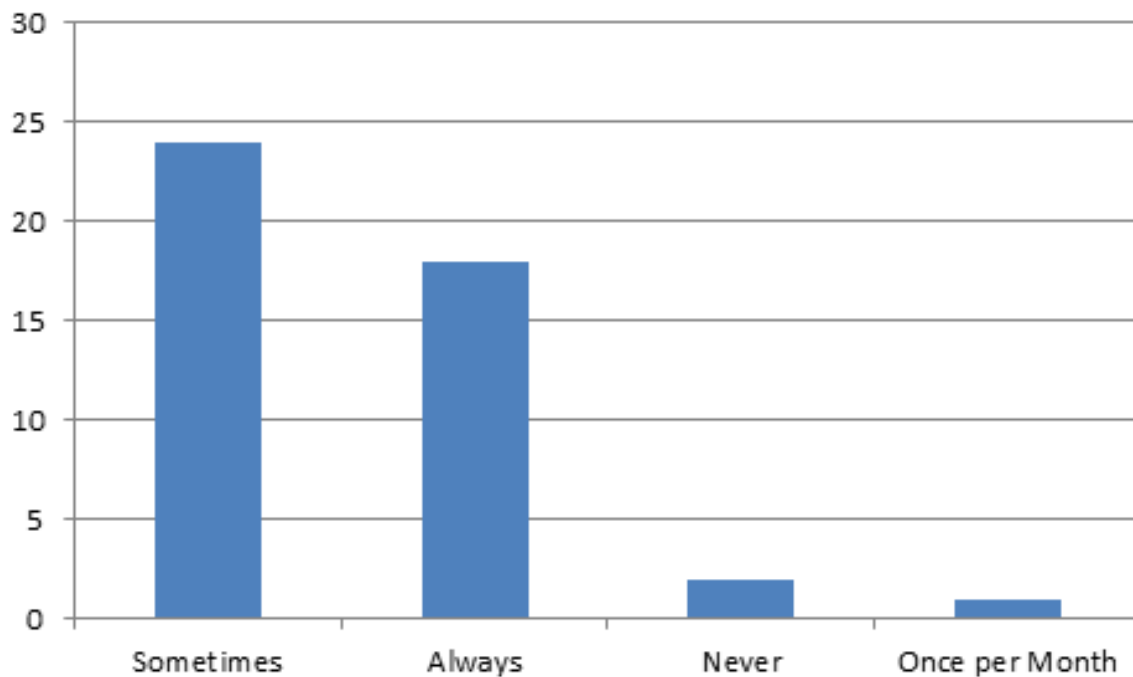
Communication Context	Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Speak English with friends	8	20	10	7
English used during assembly	20	15	7	3
Speak English outside class	5	18	15	7

Sources. Field data questionnaire, 2025.

**Table 2.** Frequency of English use encouraged by teachers.

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly agree	19	42.22
Agree	17	37.78
Disagree	7	15.56
Strongly disagree	2	4.44

Sources: Field data questionnaire, 2025.



**Figure 1.** Frequency of English use encouraged by teachers. Source: Field data questionnaire, 2025.

with the finding that only 8 students always speak English with friends, while the majorities do not (Table 1).

**One respondent stated:**

I fear to make mistakes because people laugh when I

speak wrong English. It makes me very uncomfortable, and I feel shy to talk in English even when I know some words. Sometimes, I just stay quiet around my friends because I don't want to be embarrassed (Student interview, 2025).

**Similarly, one teacher observed:**

I have noticed that many students hesitate to speak English because they are afraid their classmates will laugh at them if they say something incorrectly. This fear greatly reduces their participation and stops them from practicing, which slows their progress both inside and outside the classroom (Teacher interview, 2025).

These findings reveal how fear and low self-confidence act as significant psychological barriers to language use. Quantitative data further supports this, as high numbers under 'sometimes' and 'rarely' in Table 1 reflect students' hesitation to consistently speak English with peers.

**Inadequate exposure and dominance of Kiswahili**

The data shows that English is rarely used as a medium of communication outside formal lessons. Kiswahili remains the dominant language among both students and teachers in casual settings, which limits students' exposure to English in everyday interactions. This pattern is reflected in Table 1, where only 5 students reported always speaking English outside class, with most indicating only occasional or rare use.

**A student explained:**

Many people do not speak English language at school, especially outside the classroom. Even teachers speak Kiswahili most of the time during breaks and other informal times. Because of this, it is difficult for me to practice English or hear it spoken naturally during the school day (Student interview, 2025).

**In the same vein, one teacher remarked:**

Although English is the subject we teach, in most informal school situations, Kiswahili is the preferred language. It is easier for teachers and students to express themselves freely in Kiswahili, but this limits the students' exposure and practice of English outside lessons (Teacher interview, 2025).

These responses highlight the significant role of language environment in shaping students' English proficiency. The dominance of Kiswahili in informal settings reduces students' chances to hear and use English naturally, which limits their language acquisition beyond the classroom. When both teachers and students predominantly use Kiswahili during breaks and casual interactions, it sends a message that English is confined to formal lessons only. This lack of consistent exposure and practice outside class impedes the development of students' communicative competence in English and

contributes to their difficulties in mastering the language.

**Poor vocabulary and grammar knowledge**

Students frequently mentioned that their limited vocabulary and weak grasp of grammar prevented them from confidently using English. This linguistic gap reinforces their reluctance to engage in conversations, further reducing their language practice. This explains why the 'always' category remains low across all contexts in Table 1.

**One respondent was quoted saying:**

I have poor grammar and I don't know many English words. Sometimes, I want to say something in English but I cannot find the right words or I'm afraid I'll say it wrong. This makes me feel less confident, so I avoid speaking English as much as I can (Student interview, 2025).

**One teacher also noted:**

Many students struggle with vocabulary and grammar, which makes them hesitant to speak English. They often worry about making mistakes and not being understood. This lack of basic language skills discourages them from practicing in less formal settings (Teacher interview, 2025).

These statements underscore the critical impact of limited vocabulary and grammar knowledge on students' ability to communicate effectively in English. When students lack the necessary language tools, they feel insecure and are less likely to engage in conversations, which further hampers their language development. This self-perceived linguistic inadequacy not only reduces their participation in informal communication but also affects their overall academic performance.

**Lack of motivation and encouragement**

A lack of consistent motivation and encouragement from teachers and the school environment emerged as a key factor limiting students' use of English. Students expressed the need for more positive reinforcement and role modeling from their teachers. The data shows that students are more likely to use English during assemblies, a structured, teacher-led environment (20 students always, 15 sometimes), but less likely in unstructured contexts like during breaks or conversations with peers.

**One respondent was quoted saying:**

Teachers should encourage us more and speak English

all the time, not Kiswahili. When they use Kiswahili, it feels like English is only for exams or classwork, not for everyday communication. We need more support to feel confident using English with our friends (Student interview, 2025).

***One teacher emphasized this point, saying:***

It is very important for teachers to model English consistently and encourage students to use it in different situations. When teachers mostly speak Kiswahili, students think English is not useful outside class, which lowers their motivation to practice and improve (Teacher interview, 2025).

These reflections highlight the crucial role that teachers and the school environment play in motivating students to use English more actively. When teachers consistently model English usage and provide positive reinforcement, students feel more encouraged to practice the language in various contexts. Conversely, the frequent use of Kiswahili by teachers sends a message that English is only important for academic purposes, which diminishes students' motivation to develop their communication skills outside the classroom. Strengthening teacher support and fostering a culture that values English in everyday interactions are, therefore essential steps toward improving students' language proficiency and academic success.

## **DISCUSSION**

The finding that fear and low self-confidence act as barriers to English use concurs with the work of IDEH (2021), which highlighted that anxiety about making errors and peer ridicule significantly hampers students' willingness to communicate in English. This study supports those findings by revealing that students often avoid speaking English to escape embarrassment, limiting their opportunities for practice and language improvement. This underscores the need for schools to establish supportive peer environments where mistakes are normalized as part of learning. For example, introducing structured peer-pair activities and teacher-facilitated discussion groups could gradually build students' confidence.

The finding that Kiswahili dominates informal school communication and limits exposure to English concurs with the findings of Keenja et al. (2022); Saad and Usman (2014), who noted that mother tongue dominance negatively affects English language development. This study's findings are supported by observations that both teachers and students prefer Kiswahili during breaks and casual interactions, which restricts natural English

language use outside the classroom. Such an environment sends implicit messages about the restricted relevance of English, thereby undermining the development of communicative competence and limiting students' linguistic growth. To address this, schools could implement English-only zones in selected areas, such as libraries or club rooms, and encourage the formation of English clubs and debate societies. These interventions would create authentic spaces for informal practice and help students internalize the language through frequent exposure.

The finding regarding students' limited vocabulary and grammar knowledge aligns with Mosha (2014) and Danquah et al. (2020), who identified weak language foundations as a major obstacle in students' ability to communicate effectively in English. This study confirms that inadequate language skills increase students' hesitation to speak, leading to less practice and further impeding fluency development. The self-perception of linguistic inadequacy discourages participation in informal English use, which directly impacts academic achievement. Practical solutions include implementing remedial language support sessions and encouraging the use of simple English during casual interactions, gradually scaffolding more complex structures as confidence grows.

The finding that lack of motivation and encouragement hinders English use concurs with Busse (2017), who emphasized the importance of teacher role modeling and positive reinforcement in language learning. The findings support the view that when teachers predominantly use Kiswahili, students perceive English as less relevant outside the classroom, which lowers their motivation to use and improve the language. This highlights the need for continuous teacher training to reinforce the practice of using English consistently during both lessons and informal interactions. Moreover, schools could introduce recognition systems, such as rewards for active English use, to motivate students and make the learning process more engaging.

The findings are supported by the sociocultural theory of learning developed by Lev Vygotsky in the early 20th century. This theory is directly related to the study's focus on English language failure among secondary school students due to limited use of English in communication within the school environment. Vygotsky's theory suggests that for language acquisition to occur effectively, students must be immersed in interactive, real-life communication using the target language, English in this case. The study revealed that students rarely use English informally due to fear, the dominance of Kiswahili, lack of vocabulary, and poor teacher modeling, all of which hinder social interaction in English. According to Vygotsky, without active engagement and

social use of the language within a supportive environment, learners cannot internalize English effectively. The findings illustrate the absence of scaffolding and collaborative dialogue in informal contexts, which are central to Vygotsky's framework. To operationalize scaffolding, teachers and senior students could guide less proficient learners during club activities, debates, or role plays, gradually increasing their independent use of English. This peer-assisted learning aligns with Vygotsky's emphasis on social interaction as a vehicle for cognitive development.

This study's findings point to actionable interventions that can be integrated into daily school life: establishing English clubs, organizing regular inter-class debates, training teachers to model English consistently, and creating supportive peer-learning groups to foster collaborative dialogue and scaffold language use. Such practical measures can contribute to a more immersive language environment, potentially improving students' confidence, fluency, and performance in English.

Nevertheless, this study has certain limitations. The sample was limited to a few schools in one region, which may affect the generalizability of the results. Additionally, self-reported data on language use may be subject to bias. Alternative interpretations could include the influence of factors not directly examined in this study, such as home language environments and broader sociocultural attitudes toward English. Future research should adopt longitudinal and multi-site approaches to validate and expand upon these findings.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal that secondary school students' failure in the English language subject is largely influenced by a combination of psychological, environmental, linguistic, and motivational factors. Fear of making mistakes and low self-confidence discourage students from practicing spoken English, while the dominance of Kiswahili in informal school interactions limits exposure to the language. Additionally, poor vocabulary and grammar knowledge further reduce students' ability and willingness to communicate in English, and the lack of motivation and encouragement from teachers weakens students' interest in improving their skills. These interconnected challenges highlight the need for supportive school environments, consistent use of English by teachers, and targeted strategies to build students' confidence and language competence.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, education policymakers should

revise language policies to promote consistent use of English in both formal instruction and informal school interactions such as assemblies, announcements, and extracurricular activities. Professional development programs for English teachers should focus on building students' confidence, reducing language anxiety, and using scaffolding techniques grounded in Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development. These programs should also train teachers in practical strategies like role-playing, group discussions, and constructive feedback. At the school level, administrators should foster a culture of English use by encouraging teachers and students to communicate in English throughout the school day. Establishing English clubs with structured weekly activities such as debates, storytelling, drama, and reading circles can increase students' opportunities for authentic language use. Teachers should consistently model English in daily interactions and support students in a non-judgmental environment that allows them to practice without fear of ridicule. Additionally, peer mentorship, recognition of English use (such as "English Speaker of the Week"), and visible English language signage around the school can further motivate students and reinforce vocabulary development. These efforts, if implemented in a coordinated and sustained manner, will be essential to improving English proficiency and academic outcomes in Tanzanian secondary schools.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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