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Enhancing English Language Skills Among Female Science Students in Tanzania: Insights from the Special Foundation Programme

Enhancing English Language Skills Among Female Science Students in Tanzania: Insights from the Special Foundation Programme

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Abstract
This study examined the English language skills of Special Foundation Female Science Students (SFFSS) at the Open University of Tanzania (OUT). involved total of 127 SFFSS admitted into the Open University of Tanzania under the Special Foundation Programme sponsored by the HEET Project participated in this study. Sociocultural theory and the theory of Krashen's Input Hypothesis guided the research. Employing a quantitative research approach, data were collected through closed-ended questionnaires with four Likert scale levels. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS Version 23, with results presented as means and standard deviations. Findings revealed that students demonstrated confidence in their listening and speaking skills but faced difficulty in reading and writing. These results highlight the strong relationship between reading and writing skills, supporting existing theoretical frameworks. The study recommends that basic educational teachers, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education Science and Technology, strengthen English language instruction, particularly in reading and writing, to support higher-level learning. Additionally, efforts should be made to change the perception that English language proficiency is unrelated to science education. Further research is needed to assess the effectiveness of intervention strategies aimed at improving literacy among secondary science students to inform future educational practices.

Introduction
English holds a prominent and prestigious position as the universal language used for communication and instruction in many global contexts (Rabea, Almahameed, Al-Nawafleh, and Obaidi, 2018). Even in non-English speaking countries, English has become a Medium of Instruction (EMI), and many higher learning institutions globally now require prospective students to demonstrate a certain level of English competence as a condition for admission (R'boul, 2022; Achieng, 2023). As students across various disciplines seek higher education, proficiency in English has become increasingly vital (Jordan, 1997; Kennedy, 2001). As such, the students are not merely expected to "know" English, but they need to accomplish specific academic tasks utilising language skills in English (Fadel and Rajab, 2017).

To ensure effective English language instruction, it is crucial to integrate the four key skills—reading, listening, speaking, and writing—seamlessly (Sadiku, 2015). The development of any of the four skills depends on and can lead to the development of the others, ultimately causing an improvement in overall language ability (Nan, 2018). Four fundamental language skills may be further classified into two parts: Productive Skills (Active Skills), which involve speaking and writing, and Receptive Skills (Passive Skills), which include listening and reading. Figure 1 shows the relationship between the mentioned language skills.

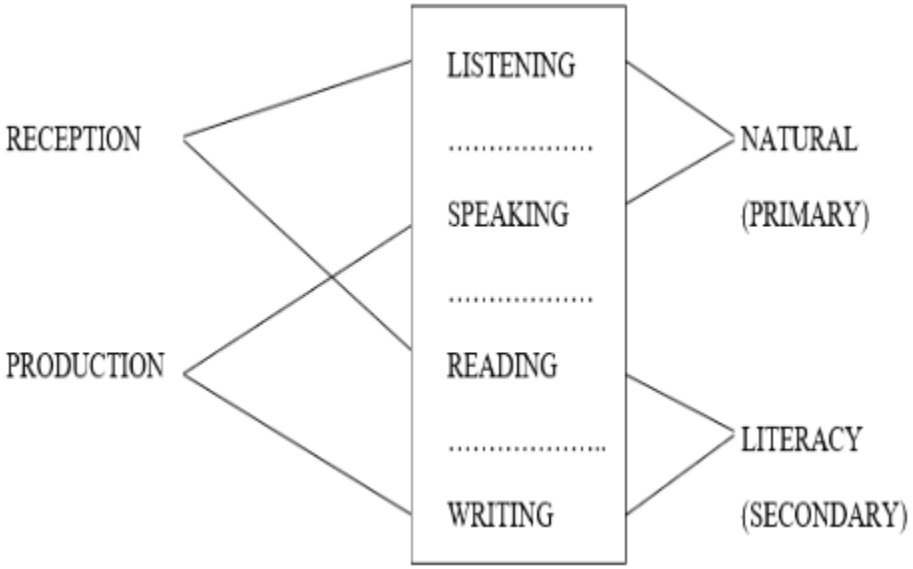

Figure 1: Language skills and inter-relationship adopted (Babalola & Ayodele, 2022)

Referring to Figure 1, speaking and writing are referred to as productive skills because they involve active engagement from the learner, who generates spoken sounds in speaking and written symbols (such as letters) in writing. In contrast, listening and reading are classified as receptive skills, as the learner is generally more passive, receiving information through auditory or visual means. Furthermore, according to Husain (2015), speaking and listening skills are considered aural–oral skills, whereas reading and writing are classified as graphic–motor skills. The present study determined the correlation between language skills in the context of the SFFSS. However, language skills in English and other languages are crucial for academic success (Babalola and Ayodele, 2022).

English, as a global language of communication, has gained significance in numerous fields, including science (Bekele, 2022). According to Qamariah and Yuliani (2024), science students often face challenges in learning because this field embodies technical terminology and complex concepts. Understanding scientific terms in English and expressing physics concepts requires strong language proficiency. The challenge is even more significant for students with different language backgrounds or insufficient exposure to English from an early age. For them, preparing oral presentations and communicating directly with other scientists in English is significantly more challenging than it is for native English speakers (Drubin and Kellogg, 2012).

The above challenges have motivated the **researcher** to investigate the perspectives of female science students on English language skills while studying at the Open University of Tanzania under a special foundation program sponsored by the HEET project, which is part of the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology in Tanzania.

The study examined the perspectives of female science students on the use of English language skills among SFFSS at the Open University of Tanzania (OUT). Specifically, the study intended to Assess the proficiency levels of English language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—among SFFSS enrolled in the Foundation Programme at the Open University of Tanzania, funded by the HEET Project. Also, the study examines the correlation between students' self-perceived English language proficiency and their actual performance in language assessments within the SFFSS at the Open University of Tanzania.

The scholarship primarily supports female students from geographically disadvantaged areas, students with disability and those from low-income families supported by TASAF or other organisations. Studies indicate that children from lower SES homes show lower levels of language skills (Hoff and Ribot,2015). This reason also attracted the researcher to work with SFFSS. Moreover, the scholarship covers tuition fees, non-tuition fees, meal and accommodation costs, learning materials, tablets, stationery, health insurance, and return fares during residential training.

Theories underpinning the study

This study is informed by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (2012) and Krashen's (1981) theory. Vygotsky's theory emphasises that an individual's learning is deeply connected to cultural, institutional, and historical contexts. It comprises four core tenets: 1) Learning precedes development, 2) Language is the primary tool of thought, 3) Mediation is central to learning, and 4) Social interaction is fundamental to learning and development. These principles are highly relevant to the study of English language skills. They can be applied to the learning environment and can affect everything from curriculum outcomes to teaching methods and social interactions. Vygotsky's theory is particularly suited for this research as it illustrates how the development of English language skills and knowledge is shaped and intertwined through social and cognitive processes. In this context, Vygotsky's theory helps to frame how female science students acquire and enhance their English language skills within their educational setting, reflecting the interaction between their social experiences and cognitive development.

Krashen's (1981) theory emphasises the role of comprehensible input in language acquisition. This theory suggests that exposure to meaningful language input enhances proficiency, and effective language interactions improve language acquisition. Krashen's theory aligns with this study by explaining how English exposure and interactions impact the English language proficiency of female science students. It helps explain how these students acquire and refine their language skills in relation to their educational environment and language exposure, aligning with the principles of both cognitive development and language acquisition theories.

Empirical literature

Babalola and Ayodele (2022) emphasise that without strong language skills, students struggle to grasp lessons and actively participate in class. Similarly, Qamariah and Yuliani (2024) highlight specific challenges faced by science students, particularly in physics, when using English. Technical vocabulary is often challenging to comprehend, and differences in sentence structure between English and students' native languages can make long or complicated sentences harder to process.

Pronunciation and intonation also significantly impact both lecture comprehension and peer communication. Writing essays and reporting in English presents another challenge, as students struggle with clarity and correctness. Additionally, cultural differences can impede understanding, particularly with humour, idioms, and social conventions. Moreover, listening and speaking skills are critical for academic success, especially in medical education (Al-Fadly, 2004). However, inadequate instructional focus and curriculum deficiencies hinder students' ability to develop strong listening skills (Khasawneh, 2021).

Soruc, Altay, Curle, and Yuksel (2021) also found that electronic engineering students experienced significantly different levels of language-related challenges in each of the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Other studies which found that language skills affect students' academics in higher education in different contexts include: Hong Kong (Evans and Morrison, 2011), Japan (Aizawa and McKinley, 2020; Aizawa et al., 2020; Rose and McKinley, 2018), Brazil (Martínez, 2016), the Netherlands (Wilkinson, 2013) and Turkey (Kamaşak, Sahan, and Rose, 2021; Soruç & Griffiths, 2018; Soruç, Dinler, & Griffiths, 2018). For instance, Soruç and Griffiths (2018) revealed that students have difficulties with speaking, listening, and vocabulary. Regarding the information, it can be concluded that English language proficiency is a global issue across languages. A study conducted by Macaro and Akincioglu (2018) revealed that Turkish students did not report significant challenges when studying through the English Medium of Instruction. Unlike the findings presented previously, Nadesan and Shah (2020) found that students in secondary schools are facing difficulties with speaking English. The studied speaking sub-skills include anxiousness, lack of confidence, shyness, and fear of making mistakes while speaking.

Methods

Participants

The present study involved SFFSS under the Special Foundation Programme of the Open University of Tanzania, which was sponsored by the HEET project. Table 1 describes the participants' characteristics, including the distribution of students from the mainland of Tanzania and Zanzibar, their age, level of education before admission to the Open University of Tanzania, and the status of the science subject combination among the students.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the participants

Variable	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Region	Iringa	7	6.1
	Kagera	4	3.5
	Songwe	2	1.5
	Zanzibar	34	29.6
	Dar es Salaam	26	22.6
	Arusha	2	1.7
	Ruvuma	2	1.7
	Mtwara	1	0.9
	Mbeya	4	3.5
	Rukwa	1	0.9
	Mwanza	9	7.8
	Tabora	1	0.9
	Singida	2	1.7
	Katavi	1	0.9
	Coast	4	3.5
	Tanga	2	1.7
	Simiyu	1	0.9
	Shinyanga	2	1.7
	Kigoma	1	0.9
	Morogoro	3	2.6
	Kilimanjaro	1	0.9
	Mara	1	0.9
	Manyara	2	1.7
	Njombe	2	1.7
Total		**115**	**100**
Level of education -before being admitted at OUT	Form Six	94	81.7
	Diploma	21	18.3
Total		**115**	**100**
Science Subject Combination	CBG	54	47.0
	PGM	5	4.3
	PCB	36	31.3
	EGM	2	1.7
	PCM	13	113
	MCE	1	0.9
	EPM	1	0.9
	CBM	1	0.9
	PEM	1	0.9
	CBM	1	0.9
Total		**115**	**100**

Source: Researcher (2023)

Regarding Table 1, SFFSS participants came from 24 regions; the majority of the students were from Dar es Salaam (26, 22.6%) and Zanzibar (34, 29.6%). This implies that the information on the project was primarily collected in the two locations rather than in other regions. Moreover, the majority of the female students, 94 (81.7%), had completed six levels of education. The table shows the different science subject combinations that the students studied. The long form of the abbreviation of the combinations includes Chemistry, Biology, and Geography (CBG); Physics, Geography, and Mathematics (PGM; Physics, Biology, and Chemistry (PCB); Economics, Geography, and Mathematics (EGM); Physics, Chemistry, and Mathematics (PCM); Mathematics, Chemistry, and Economics (MCE); Economics, Physics, and Mathematics (EPM); Chemistry, Biology, and Mathematics (EBM);

Physics, Economics, and Mathematics (EPM) and the last combination is Chemistry, Biology and Mathematics (CBM) . from the mentioned subject combinations, most of the students were under CBG 54 (47%) and PCB 36(31.3%).

The present study was conducted at the Open University of Tanzania. This institution operates under an Open and Distance learning model, where physical interaction between a facilitator and a student is minimal. The present study purposefully recruited researchers to work with SFFSS from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds. Zafar, Somro, Shahid, and Ullah (2022) show there is a strong connection between SES and students' academic performance. The number of female students admitted to the foundation in 2023/2024 was 204; however, the number who attended the intensive teaching at the Singida Centre in December 2023, when the researcher collected data, was 199. The study used sample size determination by Krejcie and Morgan (1970), in which a population of 199 is equal to 127. Therefore, a sample size of 127 was used in the present study. The study employed a quantitative approach, utilising a closed-ended questionnaire to collect data. One hundred twenty-seven questionnaires were distributed to students for completion. All questionnaires were returned; however, only 90% of the 115 questionnaires were completed clearly. The Cronbach's alpha of the four sub-skills is presented in Table 7. The questionnaire used a four-point Likert scale, where 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, and 4 = Strongly Agree. Data were analysed through SPSS version 23, and the presentation was conducted using the mean and standard deviation. Data from the Mean were interpreted using the mean score range by Nee and Yunusu (2020) "*RollRoll Dice: An Effective Method to Improve Writing Skills among Year 3 Pupils in Constructing SVOA Sentences*" Strongly Agree (4.00-3.00); Agree (2.99-2.00); Disagree (1.99-1.00) and Strongly Disagree (1.00-0,99). Further correlation was done to see the relationship between the four language skills.

Findings

This part presents the findings on learners' perspectives on their proficiency in four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. It also presents the correlation between the perceived and actual language skills.

Table 2: Learners' perspectives on listening skills in the English language

S/N	Sub skills on learners' perspectives on listening skills in the English language in learning science subject	N	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
1.	Listening materials are related to the study materials	115	3.28	.710
2.	I carefully follow the instructions provided by the facilitator in English	115	3.28	.710
3.	By paying close attention, I can make connections to what is taught	115	3.38	.73
4.	I comprehend listening materials	115	3.26	.77
5.	The proficiency of the facilitators in English affects my listening ability	115	3.17	.79
	OVERALL MEAN	**115**	**3.28**	**.49**

Source: Researcher (2023)

Table 2 presents learners' perspectives on listening skills, highlighting their self-reported competencies across various sub-skills. The data reveal that all the listening sub-skills were rated relatively high, with means ranging from M = 3.17 to M = 3.28. It is suggested that learners have a generally positive view of their listening abilities. Specifically, the overall mean score for all listening sub-skills combined is M = 3.28, SD = 0.49, indicating a strong level of agreement among the respondents regarding their listening skills. The high mean scores across these sub-skills underscore

that learners perceive themselves as quite adept at listening. The consistency in these ratings implies a robust self-assessment of their capacity to comprehend and process auditory information effectively. It is particularly significant as it reflects an alignment with the expectations of instructional environments, where listening plays a crucial role in understanding and following complex directions. This competence is essential in a scientific, educational context where a precise and accurate understanding of instructions can significantly impact learning outcomes and performance.

Table 3: Learners' perspectives on speaking skills in the English language

S/N	**Sub skills on learners' perspectives on listening skills in the English language in learning science subject**	**N**	**Mean (M)**	**Standard Deviation (SD)**
1.	I feel shy to ask questions in class because of my low English language proficiency	115	3.30	.928
2.	I am able to express my thoughts verbally in English	115	3.25	.74
3.	I am able to construct correct sentences in English	115	3.50	.66
4.	I am able to synthesise English language terms	115	3.40	.73
5.	I can pronounce in English words clearly	115	3.34	.74
	OVERALL MEAN	**115**	**3.36**	**.45**

Source: Researcher (2023)

The students in Table 3 showed a strong level of agreement across all speaking sub-skills, similar to their responses about listening skills. The overall average score for speaking skills was M = 3.36, SD = 0.45. This means that, overall, female students are more confident in their English-speaking abilities than male students. Among the different speaking sub-skills, students rated their ability to "construct correct sentences in English" the highest, with an average score of M = 3.50 and a standard deviation of SD = 0.66. They also rated their ability to "synthesise English language terms" highly, with an average score of M = 3.40, SD = 0.73. These high scores in specific areas indicate that the students excel in understanding and applying English terms related to their science subjects. They feel confident in both forming grammatically correct sentences and in handling scientific vocabulary. This indicates that they are well-prepared to use English effectively in their science studies and discussions.

Table 4: Learners' perspectives on Reading skills in the English language

S/N	**Sub skills on learners' perspectives on Reading skills in English language and science**	**N**	**Mean (M)**	**Standard Deviation (SD)**
1.	I read and understood the study materials written in English	115	2.62	1.03
2.	I read and summarise science study materials written in the English language	115	2.70	1.02
3.	I understand the meanings of the science terminologies written in the English language	115	2.62	.98
4.	Easy-to-read English sentences	115	2.56	1.03
5.	I can Pronounce words in English clearly	115	2.68	.94
	OVERALL MEAN	**115**	**2.64**	**.91**

Source: Researcher (2023)

Table 4 displays the mean scores for various reading sub-skills among female science students. The overall average score for these reading sub-skills is M = 2.64, SD = 0.91, indicating a moderate level of agreement on the items. The highest level of agreement was observed with the statement: "I read and summarise science study materials written in English." This suggests that female science students are relatively comfortable with their ability to read and summarise scientific texts in English. The findings suggest that reading skills are not a significant challenge for these students when it comes to science-

related subjects. Despite this, it is noteworthy that their reading skills scored lower compared to their speaking and listening skills, indicating that students feel more confident and capable in these areas compared to reading.

Table 5: Learners' Perspectives on Writing skills in the English language

S/N	Sub skills on learners' perspectives on writing skills in English language and science	N	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
1.	Writing in English is a major problem for me	115	2.07	.88
2.	I am Proficient in composing assignments in the English language	115	2.27	.95
3.	I can articulate coherent concepts in written English language	115	2.33	.96
4.	I can employ an adequate vocabulary in writing using the English language	115	2.33	.95
5.	I am capable of writing with grammatical accuracy	115	2.40	.95
	OVERALL MEAN	**115**	**2.28**	**.80**

Source: Researcher (2023)

Table 5 presents the findings on writing sub-skills among the students studying science. The data indicate that all the writing sub-skills were agreed upon by the students, with an overall mean score of M = 2.28 and a standard deviation of SD = 0.80. This overall moderate level of agreement suggests that while the students acknowledge the importance of various writing sub-skills, there is room for improvement in their writing proficiency. The relatively low mean score suggests potential challenges or gaps in the students' writing abilities, which may impact their effectiveness in communicating complex scientific concepts and ideas. The standard deviation further suggests variability in the students' responses, indicating that some may struggle more with writing sub-skills than others.

Table 6: Correlation, Mean, and standard deviations of the language skills

	Language Skills	1	2	3	4
1.	Listening Skills				
2.	Speaking Skills	.275**			
3.	Reading Skills	.202*	-.036		
4.	Writing Skills	.186*	-.063	.763**	
	M	3.28	3.36	2.64	2.28
	SD	.49	.45	.91	.80
	Cronbach's alpha	.84	.71	.94	.90

Note. * p< .05 ** p < .01 Pearson correlations were calculated between all language skills

Source: Researcher (2023)

Table 6 illustrates the relationships between various language skills. The correlation analysis reveals a weak but statistically significant positive relationship between speaking skills and learning skills, with a correlation coefficient of **r = 0.275**, **p < 0.01**. The findings suggest that while there is a positive association between speaking and learning skills, the strength of this relationship is relatively modest. Additionally, the analysis reveals weak, positive relationships that are statistically significant at the **p < 0.05** level between reading and listening skills (r = 0.202) and between writing and listening skills (r = 0.186). It is indicated that as proficiency in one of these skills increases, there is a tendency for the other skill to improve, though the strength of these relationships is weak.

Furthermore, the table highlights a stronger positive relationship between writing and reading skills, with a correlation coefficient of **r = .763**. This suggests a strong positive correlation between writing

and reading skills. While there are positive correlations among all language skills studied, the strength of these relationships varies, with writing and reading skills showing the most robust connection.

Discussion

In this study, foundation female science students placed significant value on their listening and speaking skills, which is consistent with the findings of Al-Fadly (2004). The findings present a contrast to those of Qamariah and Yuliani (2024), who reported that students, especially those less familiar with the language, experience substantial difficulties with effective listening during lectures and seminars. This discrepancy highlights a potential variation in the challenges faced by students depending on their familiarity with the language and the instructional context. Furthermore, Khasawneh (2021) identified that students struggle with listening skills, particularly in linking sentences, and attributed these difficulties to teachers' insufficient emphasis on this skill and the lack of a targeted curriculum. This perspective underscores the importance of both teachers' focus and curriculum development in addressing listening challenges. In addition, this study contrasts with other research that has shown students encountering difficulties across all four language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—regardless of the context or language (Evans and Morrison, 2011; Aizawa and McKinley, 2020; Aizawa et al., 2020; Rose and McKinley, 2018; Martínez, 2016; Wilkinson, 2013; Kamaşak, Sahan, and Rose, 2021; Soruç and Griffiths, 2018; Soruç, Dinler, and Griffiths, 2018). This divergence suggests that the challenges observed in this study may not be as pervasive or uniform as those documented in broader research. Additionally, our study revealed a significant correlation between reading and writing skills, and the findings concur with Babalola and Ayodele (2022), unlike other language skills. This finding suggests that improvements or challenges in one area are closely linked to those in the other, indicating that addressing reading and writing skills together may be beneficial for enhancing overall language proficiency.

Conclusion

For foundation female science students, the high regard for listening and speaking skills, coupled with the strong correlation between reading and writing, highlights the critical need for a comprehensive and balanced approach to language education. Listening and speaking skills are crucial for academic and professional success. Additionally, the observed interrelation between reading and writing skills further underscores the importance of not treating these skills in isolation. Furthermore, based on the theories used, students' success in higher education depends on input in language skills, such as reading and writing skills, as well as social interaction to enhance listening and speaking skills.

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