

The Language of Development

Mentors support Rwandan teachers in the switch from French to English.



1Mentors engaged in an English language assessment exercise.

In 2008, francophone Rwanda instituted an audacious education policy to support its development goals. Shifting from French to English, the government purported, was key to regional and global business and trade, as was joining the anglophone East African Community and the Commonwealth.

From that point, English became the language of instruction in all public schools as a matter of great importance and urgency. While some teachers, like Mukamanzi Jane Rose, studied under an anglophone system, many others

were primarily francophone. Incidentally, these teachers struggled to adapt. Teachers like Mukamanzi, who later became a school principal, helped where possible.

"I looked at those who were weak...then I got a teacher who was performing and who had experience to help those teachers," says Mukamanzi of her experience as a principal in Huye district, southern Rwanda. "It was improving."

To institutionalize such support for English, the Rwandan government, supported by USAID and partners, is rolling out a School-based Mentoring Program. Senior mentors will supervise and cascade training down to school-based mentors, who work directly with teachers at two schools each on English language and pedagogy. After nearly three years teaching English and history and two years as a principal, Mukamanzi became a school-based mentor.

She encourages teachers to talk with her in English during their brief free moments between lessons. "I told them to feel free, and any mistake they do, no one is going to laugh at them," she says. "Even some call me, greet me in English...it's going to improve."

To assist mentors in providing targeted English training, USAID supported the development of Rwanda English Proficiency Standards performance indicators and accompanying assessment tools. Some tools are for teachers' self-assessment, aiming to provoke thought and reflection on areas of confidence or for improvement. Diagnostic tools—informal language tests—help mentors in identifying teachers' actual levels. Listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, as well as grammar and vocabulary, are included. Tools are designed to identify areas for further training as well as to motivate teachers as they progress through language levels.

"After knowing the level of a teacher, is she capable of expressing herself, is she capable of hearing what I'm saying, from there you can judge where to start," says Mukamanzi.

Mentors across the country will be using these tools over the coming months as the mentor program takes shape. Mukamanzi has high hopes. "If this mentoring system continues," she says, "in five, six years, Rwanda is going to be at the same level as other countries who use English as the language of instruction."