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English language skills as predictors of academic performance among Somali students in the HEC program at Islamic University in Uganda, Mbale, Uganda

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between English language skills and the academic performance of Somali students in the Higher education certificate (HEC) program at the Islamic University in Uganda (IUIU) Mbale, Uganda. English serves as the primary medium of instruction in Ugandan higher education; however, many Somali students enter the HEC program with limited English proficiency, which may hinder their academic success. Despite the growing enrollment of Somali students in regional universities, empirical evidence on how specific English language skills affect their academic performance remains scarce. Focusing on reading, listening, and writing skills as predictors of academic performance, this study employs a quantitative correlational design. Data were collected from a randomly selected sample of 119 Somali HEC students, using an English skills test and official Grade Point Average (GPA) records. The analysis used descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlation coefficients. The results showed statistically significant and moderate relationships between reading and writing skills and academic performance, whereas listening skills demonstrated a weaker but significant association. Writing skills have emerged as the strongest predictor of academic performance. These findings suggest that literacy-based competencies play a more decisive role than listening skills in shaping academic success in the HEC context. This study provides context-specific evidence on the differential impact of English language skills on academic outcomes among Somali students in a cross-border higher education setting. This underscores the gatekeeping role of reading and writing proficiency in English-medium preparatory programs. Accordingly, this study recommends targeted, skill-prioritized language support interventions, particularly in academic reading and writing, within preparatory and bridging programs to improve student performance and progression.

Keywords English language skills, Academic performance, HEC program, Uganda

1 Introduction

The Higher Education Certificate (HEC) program at the Islamic University in Uganda (IUIU) was established to bridge the academic and linguistic gaps for students transitioning into higher education from diverse educational systems. Originally introduced as the REMEDIAL program, it was renamed HEC in 2020, following reforms by the Uganda National Council for Higher Education [26]. In Ugandan universities, English is the sole medium of instruction, positioning English language proficiency as the foundational requirement for academic participation and success. For international students, particularly Somalis, whose prior education is largely conducted in Somali and partly in Arabic, this linguistic shift presents a substantial academic challenge.

Scholarly debates on language and academic performance have consistently emphasized that proficiency in the language of instruction is a strong predictor of success in higher education. Research grounded in second language acquisition and educational psychology demonstrates that while many second language learners may develop basic interpersonal communication skills relatively quickly, academic language proficiency, especially in reading, listening, and writing, takes considerably longer to acquire and is closely linked to academic outcomes [23]. Empirical studies across different contexts have shown that weaknesses in academic English skills limit students' ability to comprehend lectures, engage with academic texts, and produce written assignments, thereby undermining their performance across disciplines [17],Wang et al. [34].

Despite this broad consensus, existing literature has two important limitations. First, much of the research examines English language proficiency as a composite construct without disaggregating it into specific skills such as reading, listening, and writing, which may exert differential effects on academic performance. Second, there is a notable lack of context-specific evidence focusing on cross-border African student populations, particularly Somali students studying at East African universities. This gap is significant given the distinct linguistic background of Somali learners, whose schooling emphasizes Somali as the medium of instruction, with English taught largely as a subject rather than as a language of academic engagement [25, 35].

At IUIU Mbale Campus, English is not only the medium of instruction, but also a compulsory academic skill taught through Communication Skills in English courses. Nonetheless, persistent underperformance among Somali students, especially those enrolled in the HEC program, has been observed, as reflected by repeated course failures, high retake rates, delayed progression, and program attrition. Informal observations and institutional records suggest that many students resort to rote memorization rather than meaningful comprehension, indicating deeper linguistic barriers than purely cognitive or motivational deficits. While bridging programs such as HEC are intended to mitigate these challenges, the continued academic difficulties experienced by Somali students raise critical questions about whether their specific English language skills need to be adequately addressed.

Although prior studies have established a general relationship between English proficiency and academic achievement, the literature remains limited in explaining how particular English language skills relate to academic performance among Somali students in preparatory university programs. In particular, no empirical study has systematically examined the relationship between reading, listening, and writing skills and academic

performance among Somali students enrolled in the HEC program at IUIU. This represents a clear empirical and contextual gap in literature.

Guided by this gap, the present study aims to examine how English language skills—reading, writing, listening, and speaking—predict academic performance among Somali students enrolled in the HEC program at Islamic University in Uganda, Mbale Campus. Specifically, this study sought the following:

1) To assess Somali HEC students' proficiency in reading, writing, and listening English.
2) To establish the relationship between each English skill and students' academic performance.
3) To identify which English skill(s) most strongly predict academic success in the HEC program.

The study's theoretical contribution is to apply Social Cognitive Theory in a skill-disaggregated way, showing that the English skills most directly tied to graded mastery experiences in the HEC context (especially academic writing, then reading) are more strongly associated with GPA than listening. This refines how SCT is used in English-medium transition settings by specifying which language competencies function as the most consequential mastery cues for academic performance.

2 Literature review

2.1 Theoretical framework

This study is primarily grounded in Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), which emphasizes the reciprocal interaction between cognitive factors, behavior, and the learning environment [5]. Central to SCT is the concept of self-efficacy, which is defined as learners' beliefs in their ability to successfully perform academic tasks. In second-language learning contexts, self-efficacy has been shown to strongly influence students' persistence, engagement, and academic achievement, particularly in cognitively demanding skills, such as reading, listening, and writing.

Within English-medium higher education, limited proficiency in academic languages can undermine learners' self-efficacy, leading to avoidance behaviors, reduced classroom participation, and surface learning strategies such as rote memorization. For Somali students enrolled in the HEC program at IUIU, challenges in vocabulary, reading comprehension, listening contextualization, and writing mechanics may erode their confidence in their academic abilities, thereby negatively affecting performance. Wang et al. [34] provide empirical support for this theoretical position found that English language proficiency significantly predicts academic success even after controlling for prior academic knowledge.

While SCT offers a comprehensive explanation linking language competence, confidence, and achievement, two other theories are commonly used in research to connect English proficiency to academic success. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) posits that students' sense of competence, autonomy, and relatedness influences their intrinsic motivation [30]. Liu et al. [22] utilized SDT to illustrate how positive learning environments can enhance English achievement by boosting learner motivation. Similarly, Control-Value Theory (CVT) asserts that students' emotional experiences, such as anxiety, frustration, or confidence, shape their learning outcomes [28]. Ni and Xu [27] found that the interplay between language proficiency and motivation significantly affects students'

emotional responses, which, in turn, influences their performance in English writing tasks.

However, while SDT and CVT explain the motivational and emotional dimensions of learning, they offer limited insights into how specific language skill deficits translate into academic underperformance. SCT is most appropriate for the present study, as it explicitly connects skill mastery, self-beliefs, and observable academic outcomes. Despite this theoretical relevance, few studies have systematically applied SCT to examine how deficiencies in reading, listening, and writing affect Somali students' academic performance in higher education, indicating a clear theoretical gap.

Based on this comparison in Table 1, Social Cognitive Theory was adopted because it directly links skill mastery to academic outcomes in assessment-driven higher education contexts.

2.2 Empirical studies on English language skills and academic performance

2.2.1 Reading skills and academic performance

A substantial body of empirical research confirms that reading proficiency is a critical predictor of academic success in English-medium instructional contexts. Studies have consistently shown that reading comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, and reading fluency significantly influence students' abilities to engage in academic texts and assessments. Reading proficiency has been consistently linked to better academic performance, including in math and science [16]. For example, Im and Ahn [17] found that reading fluency and speed are strong predictors of overall academic performance across disciplines, highlighting the importance of automatic and efficient reading. Similarly, Gao et al. [14] found a correlation between reading comprehension and English achievement. In addition, the US Department of Education report highlights the importance of strong post-secondary college literacy skills and employment opportunities [33]. Interestingly, Ahmad and Khan [2] argued that students' reading skills can influence their career prospects.

Kang [19] reported that students with weak reading abilities tended to disengage from academic reading, further widening their performance gaps. Vocabulary knowledge has also been identified as a key mediator between reading ability and academic achievement. Similarly, Suoth et al. [32] demonstrated that academic vocabulary predicts grades across multiple subjects even when cognitive and demographic variables are controlled. However, some studies have relied on indirect measures of language ability, limiting the comparability of findings across contexts.

Table 1 Comparison of theoretical frameworks linking English language skills and academic performance

Theory	Core assumption	Relevance to English skills	Limitation for this study
Social Cognitive Theory [4]	Academic performance is shaped by interactions between skills, self-efficacy, and environment	Explains how mastery of reading, listening, and writing influences confidence and GPA	Does not directly model emotional variables
Self-Determination Theory [30]	Motivation depends on autonomy, competence, and relatedness	Explains motivation to learn English in supportive contexts	Less specific on skill-level academic outcomes
Control-Value Theory [28]	Emotions such as anxiety and confidence affect achievement	Useful for explaining writing anxiety and exam stress	Limited explanatory power for differential skill effects

Despite the consensus on the importance of reading skills, much of the existing research focuses on primary or secondary education or on learners with prior exposure to English. Few studies have addressed university-level students transitioning from non-English instructional systems, particularly Somali students whose prior schooling emphasizes Somali as the language of instruction. This limits the applicability of the existing findings to the HEC context.

Empirical studies typically report moderate correlations between reading proficiency and academic performance, often ranging between r ≈ 0.30 and 0.45, although effect sizes vary by context and assessment type.

2.2.2 Listening skills and academic performance

Listening skills are essential for comprehension of lectures, classroom interactions, and academic engagement in higher education. Jaashan et al. [18] contended that listening is a crucial aspect of establishing a literate culture, shaping individuals' personalities, fostering right thinking, and generating new ideas. Empirical studies have indicated a positive relationship between listening competence and academic achievement. Im and Ahn [17] and Eggenberger [13] found that attentive listening predicted higher academic performance in tertiary education settings. Similarly, good listening and studying habits are crucial for achieving exceptional academic results [14]. Jaashan et al. [18] further argued that good listening habits serve as a powerful tool for students to thrive in various aspects of life.

However, the literature presents mixed evidence regarding the relative importance of listening compared with reading. Some studies suggest that listening plays a stronger role in early education, while reading becomes more influential at advanced levels [29]. This raises a debate about whether listening skills retain equal importance at the university level or whether their impact diminishes as academic demands shift toward independent reading and writing.

Moreover, most listening-related studies are conducted in Western or Asian contexts and rarely examine students from oral-language-dominant backgrounds, such as Somali learners. The lack of field-based, context-specific studies limits our understanding of how listening difficulties, particularly contextualization and academic discourse processing, affect Somali students' performance in English-medium universities.

Listening skills tended to show weaker associations with academic performance, with many studies reporting correlations below r = 0.30, particularly at the tertiary level.

2.2.3 Writing skills and academic performance

Academic writing is widely recognized as one of the most challenging skills for second-language learners and is a strong determinant of academic success. Kutlu and Aslanoğlu [20] argued that writing develops more slowly than receptive skills because of its reliance on grammatical accuracy, organization, and academic conventions. Empirical evidence supports this claim. Maros et al. [24] found that many international students struggle with sentence construction, coherence, and genre-specific writing, which negatively affects assessment outcomes.

Recent studies suggest that general English courses are insufficient for developing academic writing competence, especially at higher education levels [3]. While increased writing practice improves performance [24], not all studies agree on the magnitude

of the impact of writing compared to other skills, indicating a need for skill-specific analysis.

Notably, empirical research examining writing mechanics, paragraphing, and organization among Somali students in preparatory university programs is scarce. This omission represents a significant gap given the centrality of written assessments in higher education.

Writing proficiency is frequently reported as the strongest predictor of academic performance, with moderate correlations commonly observed (approximately r = 0.40–0.50) in English-medium university contexts.

2.2.4 Challenges faced by non-English-speaking students in higher education

International students from non-English-speaking backgrounds often face structural and linguistic barriers at English-medium institutions. Research shows that while interpersonal communication skills may develop relatively quickly, academic language proficiency takes considerably longer to acquire [23]. Students may, therefore, appear communicatively competent while lacking the academic literacy required for success.

Studies also indicate that non-English-speaking students experience higher levels of academic stress, reduced participation, and reliance on memorization strategies when language support is insufficient [10]. For Somali students, these challenges are compounded by educational transitions from Somali medium instruction systems, limited exposure to academic English, and unfamiliar assessment conventions. However, these contextual challenges have rarely been examined explicitly in the literature.

2.3 Gaps and limitations in existing research

Despite extensive research on English proficiency and academic performance, several critical gaps remain. First, most studies treat English proficiency as a single construct rather than examining specific skills such as reading, listening, and writing separately. Second, there is a limited application of theoretical frameworks, particularly SCT, to explain how language skills influence academic performance through self-efficacy mechanisms.

Third, there is a pronounced lack of context-specific research focusing on Somali students in higher education, especially within preparatory programs such as HEC at IUIU. Existing studies are largely conducted in Western or Asian contexts, and may not capture the linguistic, cultural, and educational realities of Somali learners.

To address these gaps, the present study adopts a theory-driven and skill-specific approach to examine how reading, listening, and writing skills relate to academic performance among Somali students in the HEC program. By doing so, it contributes empirical evidence from an under-researched population and provides a strong basis for targeted language support interventions.

3 Methods and materials

3.1 Design, participants and sampling

This study adopted a quantitative correlational research design that measures the relationship between two variables as they naturally occur without manipulation or experimental control [8]. This design was considered most suitable because the study sought to examine naturally existing associations between English language skills and academic

performance rather than to establish causality or test the effect of an intervention, which would require experimental or quasi-experimental designs. Given the institutional and ethical constraints of manipulating students' language proficiency or academic outcomes, a correlational approach allows for ethical, realistic, and context-sensitive investigation of relationships within an authentic academic setting. Therefore, the design was appropriate for determining whether positive or negative relationships existed among reading, listening, writing skills, and academic performance (GPA).

This study used a quantitative approach to ensure objectivity, precision, and statistical rigor, with the data presented as numeric frequencies, percentages, and correlation coefficients. This quantitative approach enhances the credibility of the findings by allowing for statistical generalization within the defined population and enabling replication in similar contexts. This design was considered appropriate because the study aimed to examine the extent to which English language skills (reading, listening, and writing) were related to Somali students' academic performance in the HEC program.

The population consisted of Somali students enrolled in the HEC program of the January 2022/2023 intake, totaling 170 students according to the Academic Registrar's records (2022). This population was purposively defined because Somali students constitute a linguistically homogeneous group with comparable educational backgrounds, thereby reducing the extraneous variability related to language exposure. These students were selected because they experienced difficulties in academic performance as a result of English language command.

From this population, a sample of 119 students was drawn using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table, and this sample size was considered statistically adequate to ensure sufficient power for correlation analysis at a significance level of 0.05. Simple random sampling was employed as the key technique to ensure equal chances of selection, avoid bias, and minimize difficulties [9]. The use of simple random sampling strengthened the internal validity and credibility of the findings by ensuring that each member of the population had an equal probability of inclusion. The researchers specifically utilized the lottery technique to select the respondents, thereby minimizing researcher influence on participant selection and increasing the trustworthiness of the results.

3.2 Instrumentation

The instrument used for data collection was a researcher-developed English Language Skills Competency Test designed specifically to measure the functional academic English skills required in the HEC program context. A researcher-developed instrument was deemed appropriate because standardized international tests may not adequately reflect the linguistic demands, curriculum content, and assessment practices of the HEC program. The researchers exclusively used primary data from the respondents in the form of a competency test.

The test assessed three core English language skills—reading, listening, and writing—that are directly aligned with the medium of instruction and assessment in Ugandan universities. Reading was assessed using four subcomponents (comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, reading speed, and general reading ability) to capture both cognitive processing and fluency. Listening skills were assessed through comprehension and contextualization tasks, reflecting the students' ability to follow lectures and interpret spoken academic discourse. Writing skills, which are essential components of academic

assessment in higher education, were assessed through paragraphing, legibility, and the mechanics of writing. Academic performance was measured using students' official Grade Point Averages (GPAs) obtained from university records to ensure objectivity and accuracy of the outcome data.

For clarity and replicability, explicit scoring procedures were established before data collection. Pass mark thresholds for reading, listening, and writing were determined based on the institutional assessment conventions commonly used in the HEC program, where a score of 50% or above is considered a minimum pass. Accordingly, for subtests scored out of 14, a score of 7 was set as the pass mark, whereas for subtests scored out of 7 and 5, pass marks were set at 3.5 and 3, respectively. These thresholds were applied consistently across all language skill components to allow for comparability and objective interpretation of performance levels.

The writing task was evaluated using an analytic scoring approach, focusing on three clearly defined criteria: paragraphing, mechanics of writing, and legibility. Paragraphing was assessed based on paragraph structure (presence of topic sentences, supporting ideas, and logical organization), paragraph type (block versus indented), and number of paragraphs relative to the required word length. Writing mechanics were evaluated by counting observable errors in capitalization, punctuation, and spelling, while legibility was assessed based on the clarity and readability of handwriting, categorized as legible, fairly legible, or illegible. These criteria reflect the common marking practices used in written examinations at IUIU and similar higher education institutions.

Listening input for listening skills assessment was delivered through recorded audio passages played in a quiet classroom environment using standard audio equipment. Each listening passage was played twice to ensure fairness and comprehension in line with common academic listening assessment practices. Students responded to comprehension and contextualization questions immediately after listening, without access to transcripts, to capture authentic listening ability, rather than reading support.

Speaking skills were excluded because academic performance in the HEC programme was assessed primarily through written examinations and coursework, making these three skills the most directly relevant and reliably measurable. Assessing speaking skills would require standardized oral testing procedures, trained raters, and additional resources beyond the scope of this study. Academic performance data were obtained from official university GPA records.

The validity and reliability of the instrument were ensured through multiple complementary procedures**.** Content validity was established through two independent expert judgments by specialists in applied linguistics and English language teaching who reviewed the instrument for relevance, clarity, and alignment with academic language skills. To establish reliability, the test–retest method was employed. The instrument was administered twice to a pilot group of 20 Somali students who were not part of the final sample, with a two-week interval between administrations. The test–retest reliability coefficient was calculated using the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient and yielded a reliability index of $r = 0.82$, indicating a high level of measurement stability and consistency over time. Construct validity was further strengthened by aligning the test subskills with those commonly used in established English language proficiency assessments.

3.3 Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22, allowing for systematic, transparent, and replicable analysis procedures. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were computed to summarize students' performance in reading, listening, and writing skills, as well as their academic performance, as measured by GPA.

Prior to the inferential analysis, the assumptions underlying the Pearson product-moment correlation were examined. Normality of the continuous variables (reading, listening, writing scores, and GPA) was assessed using the Shapiro–Wilk test, which is appropriate for sample sizes below 200. The results indicated that all variables were approximately normally distributed ($p > 0.05$), satisfying the normality assumption for the parametric analysis.

Following the confirmation of these assumptions, Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were calculated to examine the strength and direction of the relationships between each English language skill and academic performance. All analyses were conducted at a significance level of 0.05. To enhance interpretive clarity, the coefficients of determination (R^2) were computed to indicate the proportion of variance in academic performance associated with each language skill. Language test scores were standardized on a five-point scale to allow comparability with GPA values.

3.4 Ethical considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Before conducting the study, we informed all participants about its purpose and obtained their written informed consent, and confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the research process. Ethical approval was obtained from the SIMAD University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) with the ethical reference number EC000151 (Table 2 below summarizes the methodological procedures of the study).

4 Findings

This section presents the findings of the study in relation to the three specific objectives of the research. It begins with an overview of students' performance in reading, listening, and writing skills, followed by correlation analyses that link each skill to academic performance (GPA). Beyond reporting numerical results, this section provides an interpretative commentary to explain the educational significance of the findings, taking into account the social, instructional, and situational factors affecting Somali students in the HEC program. In particular, the results were interpreted within the cultural

Table 2 Summary of methodological procedures

Component	Description
Research design	Quantitative correlational design
Population	Somali students enrolled in HEC program (N = 170)
Sample size	119 students (simple random sampling)
Instruments	Researcher-developed English Skills Test (reading, listening, writing); official GPA records
Reliability	Test–retest reliability: r = 0.82
Normality test	Shapiro–Wilk test ($p > 0.05$ for all variables)
Data analysis	Descriptive statistics; Pearson correlation (α = 0.05)
Software	SPSS version 22
Ethical approval	SIMAD University IRB (EC000151)

and educational context of Somali students transitioning from largely non-English-medium schooling systems to an English-medium university environment, where language challenges are intertwined with prior schooling practices, assessment norms, and sociocultural exposure to English. Moreover, all reported scores and performance categorizations are interpreted strictly within the established scoring framework and pass mark thresholds described in the methodology, ensuring consistency and transparency in the presentation of the results.

4.1 Objective one: relationship between reading skills scores and the academic performance

This objective investigated how reading skills determine the grades of Somali students enrolled in the HEC program at Islamic University in Uganda, Mbale. The assessment test consisted of four subcomponents: comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, reading speed, and general reading ability, all of which contributed to the determination of reading skills. These sub-skills reflect the core reading demands faced by students in English-medium higher education, including the comprehension of lecture notes, examinations, and academic texts. The analysis aimed to ascertain the positive correlation between students' overall performance and their level in these areas (Table 3).

4.1.1 General scores of reading

The researcher presents the general (sub-skills of reading skills together) scores of the reading skills of the respondents.

In Table 3, the majority of the respondents, 95 (80%), scored between 0 and 6, while only 24 (20%) scored between 7 and 9. None of the students scored 10–14 points. Since the pass mark was seven (7), only 24 respondents achieved a pass in reading skills. This distribution indicates that a large proportion of the Somali HEC students obtained low reading scores. The results suggest an association between lower reading and academic performance; however, no causal inference can be made based on correlational design. From a cultural and contextual perspective, these poor reading outcomes reflect students' prior educational experiences, where learning often emphasizes oral explanation and memorization rather than sustained engagement with extended English texts. In such contexts, reading is commonly treated as a support skill rather than a central academic practice, which may disadvantage students once they enter text-intensive, assessment-driven university programs.

4.1.2 Comprehension

The researcher sought to score the respondents' reading comprehension.

Table 4 shows that 99 (83%) of the respondents got a mark of 0–3 out of 7 questions, while only 20 (17%) scored between 4 and 7. The majority of the respondents therefore scored below the pass mark of 3.5. These results are statistically associated with lower

Table 3 Distribution of respondents' overall reading skills scores.Source: Field Work (2023)

Score of out of 14	Frequency	Percentage (%)
0–6	95	80
7–9	24	20
10–14	0	00
Total	119	100

Table 4 Distribution of reading comprehension scores.Source: Field Work (2023)

Score of out of 7	Frequency	Percentage (%)
0–3	99	83
4–7	20	17
Total	119	100.0

Table 5 Distribution of vocabulary knowledge scores.Source: Field Work (2023)

Score of out of 7		Frequency	Percentage (%)
	0–3	102	86
	4–7	17	14
	Total	119	100.0

Table 6 Distribution of reading speed scores (words per minute).Source: Field Work (2023)

WPM rate	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Less than 100 words	51	43
101–-150	44	37
151–-200	16	13.4
Above 200	8	7
Total	119	100

academic performance, although the data do not allow conclusions about whether comprehension difficulties directly cause poorer academic outcomes. Contextually, difficulty in reading comprehension may stem from limited familiarity with academic discourse conventions in English, such as inferencing, argument structure, and implicit meaning, which are not typically emphasized in earlier Somali schooling contexts. As a result, students may decode texts at a basic level without fully engaging with deeper analytical or evaluative meanings required in higher education.

4.1.3 Vocabulary

The researcher sought to score the respondents' vocabulary knowledge.

Table 5 indicates that 102 (86%) of the respondents scored between 0 and 3 out of 7 questions, whereas only 17 (14%) scored between 4 and 7. This finding indicates a statistically observable association between limited vocabulary knowledge and lower academic performance; however, the results should be interpreted cautiously as the correlational design does not establish a direct effect. In practical terms, limited vocabulary restricts students' ability to accurately interpret examination questions, follow academic arguments, and engage critically with content across disciplines. In the Somali context, restricted academic vocabulary development may be linked to limited exposure to English beyond the classroom, where Somali and Arabic dominate everyday communication. This linguistic environment constrains opportunities for incidental vocabulary acquisition, making academic English appear unfamiliar and cognitively demanding during the assessments.

4.1.4 Speed

The researcher sought to appraise the reading speeds of the respondents.

Table 6 shows that 51 (43%) of the respondents read fewer than 100 words per minute, and 44 (37%) read between 101 and 150 words per minute. The observed reading speed scores indicate that many students read at relatively low rates. These scores are

Table 7 Pearson correlation between reading skills scores and academic performance (GPA).Source: Field Work (2023)

Variables correlated	r-value	Sig.	Interpretation
Reading Skills Vs Academic Performance	0.345	0.031	Significant correlation

Table 8 Distribution of overall listening skills scores.Source: Field Work (2023)

Score of out of 14	Frequency	Percentage (%)
0–5	57	48
6–9	43	36
10–14	19	16
Total	119	100.0

associated with academic performance, but the present data do not determine whether slower reading speed leads to lower performance under examination conditions. Culturally, slower reading speeds may reflect educational backgrounds in which timed reading and independent silent reading were not central instructional practices. When students encounter time-bound examinations in English, slower processing may heighten anxiety and reduce the ability to demonstrate content knowledge, even when conceptual understanding is present.

The results in Table 7 show a statistically significant positive correlation between reading skills and academic performance ($r = 0.345$, $p = 0.031$). This moderate positive correlation indicates that higher reading scores are associated with higher GPAs. To further clarify the magnitude of this relationship, the coefficient of determination (R^2) was calculated. The obtained correlation ($r = 0.345$) yielded an R^2 value of 0.119, indicating that approximately 11.9% of the variance in academic performance (GPA) is statistically associated with reading skills. This relationship reflects co-variation, rather than causation. In relation to objective one, this finding underscores the central role of reading proficiency in academic success within English-medium instruction and highlights reading as a key area for targeted intervention in the HEC program.

4.2 Objective two: relationship between listening skills scores and the academic performance

This objective sought to examine the relationship between listening skills scores and the academic performance of Somali students in the HEC program at Islamic University in Uganda, Mbale, Uganda. Listening skills are particularly important in lecture-based instructional environments, where the comprehension of spoken academic discourse directly affects note-taking, participation, and understanding of course content. The data collected from the respondents are presented below in tables showing the sub-skills of listening skills: general scores of listening skills, comprehension, contextualization, and frequencies and percentages.

4.2.1 General scores of listening

The researchers present the general (sub-skills of listening skills) scores of the respondents' listening skills.

Table 8 shows that 57 (48%) of the respondents scored a mark of 0–5 out of 14 questions, 43 (36%) of the respondents scored a mark of 6–9 out of 14 questions, while 19 (16%) of the respondents scored a mark of 10–14 out of 14 questions. The majority of

Table 9 Distribution of listening comprehension scores.Source: Field Work (2023)

Score of out of 5	Frequency	Percentage (%)
0–3	48	40
4–5	71	60
Total	119	100

Table 10 Distribution of contextualization scores.Source: Field Work (2023)

Score of out of 9	Frequency	Percentage (%)
0–4	107	90
5–9	12	10
Total	119	100.0

the respondents got 0–5 points. Although listening skills are statistically associated with academic performance, the weak magnitude of the correlation indicates that listening scores alone explain only a small proportion of variance in GPA. This finding suggests that while students may cope reasonably well with spoken lectures, listening comprehension alone is insufficient in an academic culture where success depends heavily on reading written materials and producing written responses. In lecture-based contexts common in Ugandan universities, listening supports learning, but assessment practices privilege literacy-based skills.

4.2.2 Listening comprehension

Listening comprehension is defined as one's ability to comprehend spoken language at the discourse level, including conversations, stories (i.e., narratives), and informational oral texts, which involve the processes of extracting and constructing meaning. The table below presents the listening comprehension scores for the respondents' listening skills.

Table 9 shows that 71 (60%) of the respondents scored between 4 and 5, while only 48(40%) of the respondents got a mark of 0–3. The majority of respondents, 71 (60%), scored between 4–5, indicating relatively better performance in listening comprehension compared to other listening sub-skills. This suggests that while some students can understand basic spoken content, deeper processing of meaning may still be limited when academic language becomes complex. From a contextual standpoint, this pattern reflects partial adaptation to English-medium instruction: students may follow surface-level explanations but struggle with abstract terminology, discipline-specific discourse, and implicit assumptions commonly used by lecturers.

4.2.3 Contextualization

The researcher presented the contextualization ability of the respondents.

Table 10 shows that 107 (90%) of the respondents scored below the pass mark in contextualization. This indicates a serious challenge in interpreting meaning beyond literal comprehension, such as understanding implied meanings, academic discourse markers, and situational cues during lectures. Culturally, this difficulty may be linked to limited participation in interactive classroom discourse, where questioning, clarification, and inferencing are expected but not always emphasized in prior learning environments. As a result, students may rely on literal understanding rather than pragmatic and contextual interpretation of academic speech.

Table 11 Pearson correlation between listening skills scores and academic performance (GPA)Source: Field Work (2023)

Variables Correlated	r-value	Sig.	Interpretation
Listening Skills Vs Academic Performance	0.210	0.032	Significant correlation

Table 12 Distribution of overall writing skills scores.Source: Field Work (2023)

Score of out of 14	Frequency	Percentage (%)
0–5	40	33.3
6–9	63	53.3
10–14	16	13.4
Total	119	100

The Pearson correlation results in Table 11 indicate a statistically significant but weak positive relationship between listening skills and academic performance ($r = 0.210$, $p = 0.032$). The coefficient of determination for listening skills (r = 0.210) produced an R^2 value of 0.044, indicating that listening skills accounted for approximately 4.4% of the variance in students' GPA. Although listening skills contribute to academic success, the weaker relationship suggests that listening alone may not be sufficient to predict performance without the support of reading and writing skills. Listening skills showed a statistically significant but weak association with academic performance, suggesting a limited predictive role when considered independently.

4.3 Objective three: relationship between writing skills scores and the academic performance

This objective examined the relationship between writing skill scores and the academic performance of Somali students in the HEC program at IUIU, Mbale, Uganda. Given that most assessments in higher education are written, writing skills are critical to demonstrating knowledge, coherence of thought, and academic competence. The data collected from respondents are presented below in tables showing the sub-skills of writing, such as paragraphing, legibility, and mechanics of writing.

4.3.1 General scores of writing skills

The researcher presented the general scores for the writing skills of the respondents. The findings are presented in the table below. .

Table 12 shows that the majority of respondents, 63 (53.3%), scored between 6 and 9 out of 14, indicating generally low writing performance. This suggests that many students struggle to express ideas clearly and accurately in written English, which may negatively affect their examination scores and coursework performance. In the Somali educational context, writing has often been treated as a mechanical skill rather than a process of argumentation and organization. Consequently, students may possess ideas and content knowledge but lack familiarity with academic writing conventions required to communicate these effectively in English-medium assessments.

4.3.2 Paragraphing

The study sought to examine respondents' paragraphing styles. The findings are presented in the table below. .

Table 13 Types of paragraphing used by respondents.Source: Field Work (2023)

Type of paragraph	Frequency	Percent (%)
Block	87	73
Indent	32	27
Total	119	100

Table 14 Number of paragraphs written by respondents.Source: Field Work (2023)

No of paragraphs	Frequency	Percent (%)
1 paragraph	79	66
2 paragraphs	28	24
3 paragraphs	12	10
Total	119	100

Table 15 Distribution of handwriting legibility levels.Source: Field Work (2023)

Legibility	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Illegible	32	27
Fairly legible	39	33
Legible	48	40
Total	119	100

Table 13 shows that most respondents, 87 (73%), used block paragraphing and wrote only one paragraph. This reflects limited awareness of academic writing conventions and organizational structures, which are essential for clarity and coherence in higher education writing. Contextually, this pattern suggests that students have had limited exposure to structured academic writing tasks before university, where emphasis may have been placed on short-answer responses or oral explanation rather than extended written composition.

Table 14 shows that 79 (66%) respondents wrote one paragraph, 28 (24%) wrote two paragraphs, and 12 (10%) wrote three paragraphs. Most respondents 79 (66%) wrote only one block paragraph. A very small number 12 (10%) of respondents wrote three paragraphs. This implies that most of the students did not write standard paragraphs. The respondents were expected to write a composition of 250 words. In 250 words, one will most likely have to 3–4 paragraphs in total, each with to 50–100 words.

4.3.3 Legibility

This study sought to determine the legibility of respondents' writing.

While 48 (40%) respondents produced legible handwriting, 32 (27%) produced illegible handwriting, and only 39 (33%) produced fairly legible handwriting, as shown in Table 15. Poor legibility may negatively influence grading, particularly in handwritten examinations, regardless of content quality.

4.3.4 Mechanics of writing (error count)

The study sought to investigate the mechanics of respondents' writing. Under mechanics, the researcher looked at capitalization, punctuation, and spelling.

4.3.4.1 Error of capitalization This study sought to count errors in capitalization. The results are shown in the table below. .

Table 16 Frequency of capitalization errors in writing samples.Source: Field Work (2023)

Item	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Proper nouns not capitalized	215	51
Sentences not capitalized at the beginning	128	30.4
Misuse of capital letters	7	1.7
I as a personal pronoun not capitalized	71	16.9
Total	421	100

Table 17 Pearson correlation between writing skills scores and academic performance (GPA).Source: Field Work (2023)

Variables Correlated	r-value	Sig	Interpretation
Writing Skills Vs Academic Performance	0.416	0.025	Significant correlation

Table 18 Summary comparison of English language skills and academic performance.Source: Field Work (2023)

Language Skill	Mean Score (Max = 14)	% Below Pass Mark	r-value	*p*-value	R^2
Reading Skills	5.9	80%	0.345	0.031	0.119 (11.9%)
Listening Skills	6.4	48%	0.210	0.032	0.044 (4.4%)
Writing Skills	7.1	33.3%	0.416	0.025	0.173 (17.3%)

In Table 16, which shows the errors,) proper nouns were not capitalized and 215 (51%) sentences were not capitalized at the beginning are 128 (30.4%). The errors relating to the misuse of capital letters were 7 (1.7%), while the errors relating to the use of letter (I) as personal pronouns that are not capitalized were 71 (16.9%). The high frequency of capitalization errors indicates limited mastery of the basic writing conventions. These mechanical weaknesses may reduce the clarity and perceived quality of students' written work, leading to lower academic scores. In assessment contexts in which grading is partly influenced by presentation and readability, such mechanical and legibility issues may disproportionately penalize students, even when their underlying ideas are relevant, thereby reinforcing the link between writing proficiency and academic performance.

The correlation results in Table 17 show a statistically significant moderate positive relationship between writing skills and academic performance ($r = 0.416$, $p = 0.025$). For writing skills, the correlation coefficient ($r = 0.416$) yielded an R^2 value of 0.173, indicating that approximately 17.3% of the variance in academic performance was associated with writing proficiency. Among the three language skills examined, writing skills had the strongest statistical association with academic performance. This should not be interpreted as a causal or an exclusive predictive effect. In relation to Objective Three, the results highlight writing proficiency as a critical determinant of success in the HEC program, emphasizing the need for structured academic writing support for Somali students.

As shown in Table 18, writing skills demonstrated the strongest statistical association with academic performance, explaining approximately 17.3% of the variance in GPA. Reading skills showed a moderate association, accounting for 11.9% of the variance, whereas listening skills explained a relatively small proportion (4.4%). Failure rates further illustrate skill-specific challenges, with reading showing the highest proportion of students below the passing mark. These findings indicate the differential contributions of language skills to academic performance and reinforce the importance of literacy-based competencies in assessment-driven higher education contexts. All associations

reflected co-variation rather than causation, which is consistent with the correlational design of the study.

Collectively, the R^2 values provided additional analytical depth beyond the correlation coefficients by clarifying the explanatory contribution of each skill. Writing skills accounted for the largest share of the variance in academic performance (17.3%), followed by reading skills (11.9%), while listening skills accounted for a comparatively small proportion (4.4%). These findings indicate that productive and literacy-based skills play a more substantial role in academic evaluation within the HEC context than receptive listening skills alone do. Overall, the results highlight that academic success among Somali HEC students is not solely a matter of linguistic competence but is deeply shaped by cultural, instructional, and assessment contexts. Students are required to rapidly adapt from prior educational systems with different language practices to a university environment in which English literacy functions as a gatekeeping mechanism for academic achievement.

5 Discussion

This discussion interprets the findings of the study in relation to the research objectives and situates them within existing theoretical and empirical literature. Rather than restating the results in detail, this section focuses on interpreting the relative contribution of each language skill and its implications in the HEC context.

Overall, the findings reveal a clear hierarchy in the contribution of English language skills to academic performance, with writing exerting the strongest effect ($r = 0.416$), followed by reading and listening. This pattern reflects the assessment-driven nature of preparatory higher education, where academic success is primarily evaluated through written examinations, coursework, and text-based assignments, rather than oral participation alone. Although all three skills were statistically significant, their differential strength highlights how institutional assessment practices shape which language competencies matter the most for academic outcomes.

The stronger influence of writing and reading skills reflects the literacy-intensive demands of HEC programs. Students are required to demonstrate their knowledge through written responses, essays, and examinations, making writing the primary medium through which academic competence is judged. Reading underpins students' ability to access course content, interpret examination questions, and engage with academic texts. Listening, although essential for lecture comprehension, plays a more supportive role because it is rarely assessed directly and is mediated by subsequent reading and writing tasks.

From a Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) perspective, writing and reading constitute the most salient mastery experiences in the HEC program, as they are repeatedly evaluated in high-stakes academic assessments. Written examinations and coursework provide concrete feedback on students' competence, thereby reinforcing or undermining their academic self-efficacy. Listening, in contrast, contributes indirectly to learning but offers fewer opportunities for demonstrable mastery within grading systems, which helps explain its weaker association with GPA despite its importance for classroom engagement.

Theoretically, the findings refine SCT-based explanations of academic adaptation in English-medium programs by identifying a skill hierarchy linked to assessment realities.

Writing and reading, which are repeatedly evaluated through written coursework and examinations, appear to operate as the most visible mastery signals connected to GPA, while listening plays a more indirect role. This helps specify how language competence is 'translated' into academic outcomes in preparatory programs where success is primarily demonstrated in writing.

5.1 Reading skills and academic performance

Regarding the first objective, the findings revealed a moderate positive relationship between reading skills and academic performance. This result converges with those of Abid et al. [1] and Clinton-Lisell et al. [11], who reported significant associations between reading proficiency and university achievement. This study extends this evidence by showing that reading difficulties are particularly acute among Somali students transitioning from non-English instructional systems.

Low reading comprehension, limited vocabulary, and slow reading speed suggest that many Somali students were insufficiently equipped to cope with the volume and complexity of academic reading required in the HEC program. These findings are consistent with those of Soares et al. [31], who linked poor reading ability with lower academic performance and increased anxiety. Within the SCT framework, persistent reading difficulties may weaken students' perceived competence and reduce engagement with academic texts, indirectly constraining their academic performance.

However, unlike many previous studies conducted in Western or ESL-rich environments, this study revealed a more pronounced reading deficit, likely linked to limited prior exposure to English academic texts. This divergence highlights a context-specific pattern among Somali learners, which has been largely overlooked in the existing research.

5.2 Listening skills and academic performance

Regarding the second objective, this study found a statistically significant but weak relationship between listening skills and academic performance. This finding aligns with those of Eggenberger [13] and Grain et al. [15], who identified listening as a contributor to academic success among international students. However, the weaker association observed in this study suggests that listening alone is insufficient for predicting academic success in assessment-driven university contexts.

While listening comprehension scores were relatively higher, contextualization scores were extremely low, indicating difficulty in interpreting implied meanings and academic discourse cues. This pattern suggests that listening functions primarily as a supportive skill in the HEC program, facilitating access to lectures, but contributing fewer direct mastery experiences than reading and writing. From an SCT perspective, this limited role helps explain the weaker association between listening skills and GPA.

This finding partially diverges from studies in early education contexts (e.g., [12, 21]), where listening plays a dominant role and suggests a shift in skill importance as students' progress to higher education. The results contribute new insights by demonstrating that, for Somali students in the HEC program, listening functions as a supportive rather than a primary predictor of academic performance.

5.3 Writing skills and academic performance

In line with the third objective, writing skills had the strongest relationship with academic performance. This finding is consistent with those of [6, 7] and Bo et al. [10], who identified writing proficiency as a key predictor of GPA in English-medium higher education. This study advances this literature by providing fine-grained evidence on writing sub-skills—paragraph organization, mechanics, and legibility—that directly influence grading outcomes in preparatory programs.

The high frequency of paragraphing and capitalization errors suggests limited familiarity with academic writing conventions, rather than an absence of ideas or content knowledge. In the HEC context, in which written examinations are the primary mode of assessment, such weaknesses may disproportionately disadvantage students. Within SCT, writing represents the most consequential mastery experience in higher education as it is the principal means through which academic competence is evaluated. Accordingly, difficulties in writing mechanics and organization are likely to undermine academic self-efficacy and reinforce poorer performance outcomes.

5.4 Comparative synthesis and implications

Taken together, these findings reveal both convergence with prior studies and a context-specific pattern among Somali students in the HEC program. Consistent with existing research, writing emerged as the strongest predictor of academic performance, followed by reading, whereas listening played a more limited role. Unlike studies conducted in ESL-rich or early education contexts, where listening may be more influential, this study highlights the dominance of literacy-based competencies in preparatory English-medium higher education.

These findings have clear implications for curriculum design and language support in HEC programs. English language support should be skill-prioritized rather than evenly distributed across modalities. Academic writing instruction should be central with an explicit emphasis on paragraph structure, mechanics, and clarity. Reading support should target academic vocabulary development, comprehension strategies, and efficient engagement with disciplinary text. Listening instruction should focus on contextualization and academic discourse cues while recognizing its supportive rather than primary role in assessment outcomes.

At the institutional level, the results support the introduction of diagnostic language screening upon entry into the HEC program, followed by targeted skill-specific interventions aligned with assessment demands. This approach is likely to improve academic progression, retention, and performance among Somali students in English-medium preparatory programs.

6 Conclusions, recommendations, and future research

This paper concludes that English language proficiency, particularly in reading, listening, and writing, plays a crucial role in determining the academic performance of Somali students enrolled in the Higher Education Certificate program at Islamic University in Uganda, Mbale. The study identified statistically significant associations between weaknesses in reading, listening, and writing skills and lower academic performance. Among the three skills examined, writing and reading showed stronger associations with academic performance than listening did. Similarly, insufficient listening

and contextualization skills hindered students' effective participation in academic tasks, while a lack of writing proficiency, mechanics, and organization affected their performance in written examinations. In summary, lower levels of English language proficiency were found to be associated with lower academic performance among Somali students in the HEC program, and causal relationships cannot be inferred from the present design. These findings are consistent with those of previous studies, showing that language skills are important predictors of academic performance. The present study extends this evidence by demonstrating that literacy-based skills are particularly critical in preparatory assessment-driven higher education contexts. One major strength of this study is its skill-specific and theory-driven approach, which allows for a nuanced understanding of how different English language skills relate to academic performance. This study contributes theoretically by operationalizing Social Cognitive Theory through a skill-specific analysis of English proficiency in an under-researched Somali higher education context. Additionally, focusing on Somali students in a preparatory program addresses the significant empirical gap in African and cross-border higher education research. However, this study had limitations that should be acknowledged. It employed a correlational design and focused on a single institution, thus limiting causal inference and generalizability. In addition, the study examined only three English language skills, reading, listening, and writing, while other relevant skills, particularly speaking, were not included. The English language competency test was researcher-developed and academic performance was measured solely using GPA, which may not capture all dimensions of academic success. These limitations indicate the need for a cautious interpretation of the findings. Despite these limitations, this study advances existing knowledge by revealing distinct patterns of language–performance relationships among Somali students, demonstrating that writing and reading skills are more critical than listening to academic success in the HEC context. These findings provide a clear empirical basis for targeted, skill-prioritized language interventions in preparatory university programs.

Based on the observed skill hierarchy, this study recommends that support should be sequenced rather than evenly distributed. First, the HEC program should introduce brief diagnostic screening at entry to identify students needing writing and reading support. Second, instruction should prioritize academic writing (organization, paragraph development, and mechanics) because it shows the strongest association with GPA. Third, targeted academic reading support should address vocabulary and comprehension strategies needed for text-heavy coursework and examinations. Listening support should focus on contextualization and academic discourse cues, reflecting its supportive role in GPA outcomes. Where possible, assessment practices should be aligned with these goals through clear rubrics and staged writing tasks that emphasize revision and feedback.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that English language proficiency, particularly in writing and reading, is a decisive factor in the academic success of Somali students in the HEC program. Future research should employ longitudinal or experimental designs, including additional skills, such as speaking, using standardized language assessments, and examining multiple institutions to strengthen causal explanations and policy relevance.

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Author contributions
Ahmed Absuge conceptualized the idea and contributed to writing the literature review, as well as the study methods, data analysis, and interpretation. Ahmed Abdullahi was responsible for the initial drafting, reviewing, and editing of the final draft of the manuscript to ensure coherence and academic quality in addition to managing the project. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Data availability
The data behind the conclusions of this study can be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethics approval
This work was undertaken in compliance with ethical standards at every stage of writing. The study adhered to the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and received ethical approval from the SIMAD University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) under reference number EC000151.

Consent to participate
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