

Rethinking English Language Pedagogy: An Exploration of the gaps in Traditional Language Teaching Methods

Haroun Yassin¹, Rebecca Nambi², Dorothy Sebbowa Kyagaba³,
Josephine Najjemba Lutaaya⁴

¹Kibuli Secondary School, Kampala, Uganda

^{2,3,4}School of Education, Makerere University

Abstract

Effective English language instruction is crucial for equipping students with the language skills needed for communication in an increasingly interconnected world. However, traditional English language teaching methods have faced criticism for their limitations in promoting communicative competence and overall English language proficiency. This qualitative study aimed to explore the efficacy of traditional English language teaching methods in secondary schools, revealing significant gaps in instructional approaches. Semi-structured interviews with six English language teachers and two officials from the National Curriculum Development Center (NCDC) provided rich insights into the limitations of Traditional Methods of Instruction (TMI). Thematic analysis revealed four major gaps: (1) inadequate integration of the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), (2) predominantly teacher-centered instruction, (3) a detrimental impact on students' English language learning experiences, and (4) failure to accommodate learners' interests. The findings suggest that traditional English language teaching methods prioritize rote memorization of English language concepts over communicative competence, leading to disengagement and limited language proficiency. This study contributes to the ongoing debate on English language teaching reform, advocating for a paradigm shift towards more effective, learner-centered and interactive approaches.

Keywords: English language pedagogy, traditional methods of instruction, language skills, teacher-centered instruction, learner interests, qualitative research.

Introduction

English language is one of the indispensable tools for global communication. English serves as the official medium of instruction for secondary schools and all education institutions in Uganda (Mpuga, 2003). Despite its importance, many secondary school students still struggle to achieve the desired English proficiency. Effective English language instruction is crucial for equipping students with the skills necessary to enhance their English language proficiency. English language instruction in Ugandan schools primarily relies on the traditional methods of Instruction (TMIs) such as Grammar Translation (GT), Audio-Lingual (AL) and the Textbook based Approach (TBA) (Broccias, 2008). However, these traditional English language teaching methods have continuously faced criticism for their limitations in

enhancing English language learning, communicative competence, and overall English language proficiency.

Research has shown that the TMIs fall short in adequately preparing learners for real-world communication in the English language as these approaches emphasize grammar rules over functional language use, promote rote memorization instead of meaningful language interaction, and they limit learner engagement (Newby, 2015, Broccias, 2008). Consequently, English language instruction often focuses on language mechanics while being disconnected from the natural demands of authentic communication, leaving learners unable to navigate everyday situations. This disconnect highlights the need for more innovative, learner-centered approaches that prioritize interactive, immersive learning experiences and practical language application that builds English language communicative competence (Broccias, 2008). Resultantly, English language instruction that focuses towards real-world communication needs, can better equip learners to succeed in an increasingly globalized world.

As a result, recent educational reforms emphasize pedagogical approaches that prioritize authentic language use and collaborative learning Tomlinson (2020). However, the persistence of TMI in many secondary schools underscores the necessity for a critical examination of existing pedagogical practices. This study, therefore, aimed at examining the limitations of the conventional approaches. Further, this research seeks to contribute to the ongoing debate on English language teaching reform and inform the development of more effective pedagogies that enhance secondary English language learning in Uganda.

Literature Review

The traditional methods of instruction that have long dominated the Ugandan context include; the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) used mainly in the 19th-20th centuries. GTM greatly emphasized translation, grammar rules, and vocabulary lists and it is criticized for neglecting spoken communication (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). The Textbook-Based Approach relies heavily on published textbooks as the primary instructional material and emphasizes a rigid adherence to textbook structure and sequence, focuses on vocabulary, grammar and reading comprehension leading to a teacher-centered instruction hence limiting flexibility and adaptability. The Textbook-Based approach is criticized for its overemphasis on grammar and vocabulary (Long, 1991), insufficient attention to learner needs and interests lack of authenticity and real-world relevance. The Communicative Language Teaching Method on the other hand was mostly used in the 1970s-1980s and prioritized functional communication, authentic materials, and student interaction, marking a shift towards more communicative approaches (Littlewood, 2017).

The traditional methods of English language instruction are widely criticized for their limitations in promoting communicative competence, cultural awareness, and learner engagement (Hinkel, 2017; Littlewood, 2017; Kramsch, 2018). Research has consistently shown that these approaches are characterized by a rigid focus on grammar rules, promote rote memorization, and teacher-centered instruction, failing to address the complex needs of language learners (Ellis, 2019; Tomlinson, 2020). Lamb (2017) further argues that teacher-centered instruction, which dominates the traditional English language teaching, limits learner autonomy and agency. Additionally, these methods neglect the importance of learner centered instruction, which fosters critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration (Atkinson, 2020). Furthermore, the conventional pedagogy of English language forces students to demonstrate knowledge and content mastery via tests that prioritize rote learning over meaningful comprehension (Teemant, 2020).

In addition, the TMIs do not give equal attention to the four language skills, neglecting the interconnected

nature of listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Graddol, 2019). This fragmented approach hinders the learners' ability to develop holistic language proficiency. Studies have emphasized the need for integrated language skills instruction to promote authentic language use (Widdowson, 2020). In most conventional classrooms, learners of English are asked to repeat and recite content in groups, making it difficult for a teacher to hear an individual student's voice. Group repetition can make it difficult for the teacher to monitor individual students (Ellis, 2019). Even more damaging, it makes a student fail to hear his own voice, a one-on-one speaking is extremely limited. These methods give prominence to linguistic accuracy over communicative effectiveness, leading to a disconnect between language instruction and real-world communication demands (Widdowson, 2020).

Drawing from the related literature reviewed, the need to rethink the English language pedagogy is clear. The persistent gaps in the traditional methods of instruction underscore the need for pedagogical innovation and reform (Wedell, 2020; Tomlinson, 2020). Researchers are advocating for student-centered, task-based, and technology-enhanced instruction to address the gaps in traditional methods (Littlewood, 2017). To address the gaps in the traditional methods of instruction, educators must prioritize learner autonomy, agency, and motivation (Benson, 2011). This requires embracing flexible, adaptive approaches that accommodate diverse learner needs and learning styles (Nunan, 2017). By moving beyond traditional methods, English language teaching can become more effective, engaging, and inclusive.

Methodology

Grounded in the interpretivist paradigm which emphasizes understanding social reality through participants' subjective experiences and interpretations (Creswell, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), this research study adopted a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research allows in-depth insight into underexplored phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This study employed semi-structured interviews to explore the perspectives of English language teachers on the gaps in the traditional methods of instruction in English. Semi-structured interviews prioritize participants' perspectives, ensuring their voices are heard and valued (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), providing context-specific information, helping researchers grasp the intricacies of participants' experiences (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The study aimed to gather in-depth insights into the experiences and opinions of teachers, shedding light on the limitations of these conventional approaches.

Participants

Six English language teachers from different secondary schools participated in this study. The participants were purposefully selected based on their expertise and experience in teaching English language (Patton, 2002). Notably, four of the teacher participants held a Master's degree in English Language Teaching (ELT) or a related field, with an average teaching experience of twenty-two years. This long teaching experience of the respondents was key to this study because it translated into the teachers having used several methods of instruction in teaching English language, especially, the traditional methods of instruction which the study set out to explore (Denscombe, 2007). Their high qualifications and extensive experience ensured that their insights were informed and valuable.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather data. The interviews lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and were audio-recorded. An interview protocol was developed to guide the conversation,

ensuring that key topics were explored. The protocol included open-ended questions which focused on: the teachers' experiences with using traditional methods of instruction, how the methods enhance the teaching of the four language skills, and their general impact on the students' learning of English language. Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed to identify patterns and themes and to analyze the interview data.

Results

The analyzed data revealed four themes to describe the gaps in the traditional methods of instruction and these include: imbalanced focus on the Language Skills, teacher-centered instruction, ineffective language learning outcomes, and disregard for learners' interests. The findings presented below is largely from interviews with the teachers of English who participated in this study.

Imbalanced Focus on Language Skills

The findings of this study were based on the question that sought to explore the gaps in the traditional methods of instruction in the teaching of English language. One notable gap in traditional English language teaching methods is their inability to adequately address all the four language skills. Specifically, reading and writing receive disproportionate emphasis, while speaking and listening are often neglected. Pronunciation instruction, in particular, is greatly ignored, which results in a critical gap in language development. This imbalance hinders learners' ability to communicate effectively, as speaking and listening skills are essential for authentic language use. By neglecting these skills, the traditional methods fail to provide learners with a well-rounded English language learning experience. For instance, two of the participants said the following when asked about the skills they focus on:

Focus is on reading, writing and to some extent listening. We don't get chance to test listening and pronunciation of some words becomes a problem. Emphasis is much on reading and writing. (Teacher J)

I could say fifty fifty. Because if we look at the four skills of English language, and then two are attended to and two are not attended to. Even the one which is attended to, look again at the process. We talked about writing, every time we go to teach, we give activities for writing, but even this writing, how much are we testing of this writing skill? (Teacher H)

Currently we put a lot of emphasis on reading and writing and the other two skills (speaking and listening) have been neglected. (Teacher S)

What is notable from the above responses given by the teachers reveal a critical perspective on the TMI employed in English language teaching. Teacher H's statement, "I could say fifty fifty" suggests a sense of uncertainty, implying that while some language skills are being addressed, others are being neglected. The other teacher's observation that "two are attended to and two are not attended to" clearly highlights the imbalance in the TMI's focus on the four language skills. Furthermore, the teacher's comment on the limited assessment of writing skills, despite being taught, stresses the limited scope of the TMI's coverage. The remarks from the other teachers reinforce this argument, with one noting the lack of opportunities to test the listening resulting into problems with pronunciation, while Teacher S explicitly notes that the speaking and listening skills have been neglected.

Teacher-Centered Instruction

Traditional methods in English language instruction were further found to be predominantly teacher-centered, perpetuating several interconnected gaps. Specifically, the "I know it all" stance adopted by teachers restricts learner autonomy and agency. Additionally, limited teacher-learner interaction hinders

meaningful dialogue and feedback. The reliance on textbooks further exacerbates this issue, as they often fail to provide opportunities for learner engagement and participation in the English language learning. Moreover, the one-size-fits-all approach inherent in the traditional methods of instruction neglects individual learners' needs. Subsequently, this results in limited attention to unique individual language learning needs and support for diverse learning styles. Some of the teachers noted the following:

For the teacher-learner interaction, I think here the teachers talk more compared to the learners which is also sometimes not good because, these are the learners, they are the ones to learn. (Teacher M)

Basically, and without contradiction, I have been using traditional methods. The conventional method has always been; get a text book, go to class, talk, give them an exercise, assess them, get feedback, sometimes feedback is not given, and that is all. (Teacher C)

Largely, it has been teacher centered because that is what is in line with the instruction materials. You find that the books which were supplied for teachers to use give almost no room for learner centered. So, in this situation you find that teachers have no option but to follow the instruction materials. (Teacher S)

The above comments from the respondents reveal a critical gap of teacher-learner interaction in the teaching of English language, stemming from TMI that position the teacher as an authority figure, feared and overly respected by students. All the teachers agree on the fact that they are largely teacher centered in their instruction and this creates a gap between the teacher and learners, eventually limiting students' willingness to engage actively in the learning process. Teacher C and Teacher S however argue that instructional materials lead them to use teacher-centered methods. Subsequently, the constant use of textbooks like 'Practical English', 'English in Use', 'Integrated English' – all in the old curriculum and; 'Active English', 'Baroque English Language and Literature' among others in the NLSC also emerged as another sub theme among the TMI the teachers used in teaching English language. The teachers said that different schools dictate the books to be used and they simply follow suit. On another note Teacher H said that:

It is important to have both teacher and learner centeredness in equal measure. There are things that students can't learn by themselves for instance grammar. A teacher needs to give guidelines and the students explore. Grammar which is the core of language, learner's centeredness may not be applicable.

Teacher H's balanced perspective on teacher-learner centeredness highlights the complex dynamics of English language learning, acknowledging that certain aspects, like grammar, require teacher guidance, since grammar rules can be intricate, making them difficult for students to understand and apply correctly without guidance. His view points to the need for a blended approach, where teacher-centered instruction provides the necessary scaffolding, while learner-centered exploration fosters autonomy.

Ineffective Language Learning Outcomes

Furthermore, the findings from the analyzed data indicated that the traditional English language instruction methods had a detrimental impact on English language learning, leading to numerous related gaps. Notably, these methods often result in inadequacies in English language learning outcomes by promoting passive and rote learning rather than meaningful engagement. Furthermore, the teachers' own language deficiencies can be inadvertently transmitted to learners, thereby compromising language accuracy on their part. Additionally, it was noted that traditional methods of instruction in English language stifle creativity, fail to provide timely feedback, and lack adequate materials for teaching speaking skills,

particularly phonetics and pronunciation. This limitation hinders learners' ability to develop effective communication skills in English language.

They (TMIs) have created some good learners and they have also created some passive learners. They created good ones who have been at the fore front and bad ones who have not been assessed.
(Teacher C)

According to Teacher C, the TMIs create what he calls “the bad ones” and adds that such learners are not assessed. Given the nature of English language passive learners miss out on the interactive nature of the language by not practicing some skills such as the speaking skill where the subtopics such as ‘dialogue’ are taught as Teacher H points out:

For instance, we teach dialogue...where we have production, but the production is very limited. And because of that, and only with the goal of exams, it means that whatever we learn in the classroom remains in the classroom. (Teacher H)

Teacher C on the other had argued that:

I would also say there is an issue of delayed feedback given the fact that the teacher operates in an environment which is so busy. Although it is true that my lessons could be 24 lessons a week or even 18, it may not always be true because 18 is a quantity. They could be 18 lessons of 600 students I meet a week. There will be no possibility of me marking all of them and take back feedback. The learners never get feedback.

Delayed feedback, coupled with the teacher's heavy workload further intensifies this issue, denying learners the timely and needed guidance and support necessary for effective English language learning. The key argument is that, learning a language requires continuous interaction and feedback from the expert peer in order for the learners to practice with the different skills. However, the teaching load and large classes seem to make it difficult for the teachers to achieve the desired outcome because despite the fact that English is a core and compulsory subject teachers are still expected to carry the same amount load like for other subjects yet they have more lessons on the timetable.

Disregard for Learners' Interests

The traditional English language teaching methods were also found to neglect learners' interests, leading to a significant disconnect in the learning process. Consequently, the learners' enthusiasm and engagement diminish because instruction fails to resonate with their individual needs and passions. The methods also stifle curiosity, discouraging learners from exploring and discovering new English language concepts. Notably, the teachers' rigid adherence to traditional methods can result in monotonous instruction, leading to a lack of diversity and flexibility. By ignoring learners' interests, traditional methods undermine motivation, creativity, and overall English language learning effectiveness.

If you don't put learners' interests into consideration and you do it the traditional way, you use a passage (reading comprehension) from practical English book 3 and slap it on the learners. First of all, those passages don't have experiences that are related to these learners in Uganda. This will automatically kill their interest. (Teacher C)

The teacher's observation points to another major flaw in the TMI in relation to resource materials, which can lead to a mismatch between the learning content and learners' everyday experiences. By using materials that are detached from learners' environmental and known contexts, the TMI reduce their interest and engagement. The teacher's example of using passages from a textbook that lack the local experiences and relevance highlights this view, showing how such materials can fail to resonate with learners in the Ugandan context. Key to note in this argument is that, not considering learners' interests and contexts

when selecting resource materials, the TMIs create a wide gap by alienating learners and stifling their motivation in the learning of English language as further noted below.

We kill the creativity because now, like for instance say in the reading skills, because the teacher thinks that he or she is the one who knows the pronunciation, intonation and all the things that are connected with the reading skills, the learner now just sits and listens. Most cases you will find monotony. You are the one who is doing all these things. I have seen situations when you find that students are attending to other things because you are reading and they are doing other things.
(Teacher S)

In view of the teacher's observation above, he highlights a profound gap of the TMI; the stifling of learners' creativity arguing that it leads to monotony and a consequent decline in interest. By dominating the learning process, teacher ultimately suppresses the learners' active participation, relegating them to passive recipients of information. This method disregards the importance of learners' creative engagement and autonomy in learning, while promoting a monotonous and teacher-centered environment. The example of the teacher taking the lead in reading instruction illustrates this point. The learners are denied opportunities for self-expression and exploration, and they end up disengaged from the lesson.

Discussion and Conclusion

The examined findings in this study highlighted significant gaps in the traditional methods of English language teaching. Specifically, the writing and reading skills are given prominence over the listening and speaking skills. This finding aligns with Tomlinson, (2020) who argues that reading and writing receive disproportionate emphasis, while speaking and listening skills are neglected. This imbalance hinders learners' ability to communicate effectively, underscoring the need for holistic language instruction. In view of this, Ellis (2019) argues that "a balanced approach to language teaching is essential for developing learners' communicative competence" (p. 12). To address this gap, educators should adopt innovative approaches that integrate all the four language skills, providing learners with a well-rounded English language learning experience.

The study findings showed that the teacher-centeredness of the traditional methods in English language instruction focus on memorization of the English language concepts as given by the teacher rather than understanding them. This results in the student's poor communication skills making them struggle with authentic language use, since the cultural and contextual aspects of language are overlooked. This finding is congruent with Littlewood (2017) who contends that the prevalence of teacher-centered instruction restricts learner autonomy and agency. In addition, limited teacher-learner interaction which is characteristic of the traditional methods of instruction in English language hinders English language learning. According to Krashen, (1982), he argues that teachers talking too much, denies the students a chance to use the language, as excessive teacher talk time can reduce learner participation, limit language production opportunities and focus on form rather than function. Hence, the best way to improve language ability is to provide opportunities for learners to use the language in meaningful interaction. Findings also revealed that over reliance on textbooks further exacerbates the teacher-centered instruction. This can limit the learning potential as there might be failure to engage students' interests and experiences, neglect cultural and contextual aspects of language, restrict teacher creativity and flexibility, and above all, promote a rigid focus on grammar rules rather than communication skills. This can lead to: limited language practice, disengaged learners and inadequate preparation for real-world communication. This finding resonates with Tomlinson, (2011) who argues that; "textbooks can constrain the learning process

by providing a predetermined and inflexible sequence of activities, which can stifle teacher creativity and learner autonomy. They often prioritize grammatical accuracy over communicative effectiveness." (p. 12). The analyzed findings in this study further highlight the detrimental impact of the traditional methods on English language learning. Notably, the methods were faulted for fostering passive and rote learning. This leads to superficial understanding of language concepts, poor retention and recall of learned material, and inability to apply language skills in real-life situations. In view of this argument, Ellis (2019) also opines that rote learning can lead to a focus on language form rather than meaning, which can in turn hinder language acquisition. These methods not only stifle creativity but also perpetuates a culture of passivity, where learners are denied the opportunity to engage meaningfully with the language. These factors further complicate English language learning as they reduced student engagement and motivation, and a narrowed perspective and limited understanding of English language aspects. The passivity is most likely to lead to lack of initiative and self-directed learning, and limited opportunities for peer-to-peer interaction and collaboration. Additionally, the language deficiency of some teachers can undermine the English language learning process, as teachers will struggle to provide accurate guidance or model authentic language use which will result in inaccurate language modeling and instruction, compounded with the inability to provide the desired timely feedback and correction, leading to lack of direction and guidance for improvement. Scholars who hold similar views argue that traditional teaching methods can lead to student passivity, which can result in a lack of engagement and motivation in English language learning, (Benson, 2011), a narrow focus on some language aspects can lead to the neglect of important aspects of English language (Hinkel, 2017)

The study findings also indicated that the traditional English language teaching methods often disregard learner interests, prioritizing rigid curricula over students' passions and needs. The result is that the learners' prior knowledge and experiences are neglected, leading to reduced motivation and engagement in language learning. This argument is strengthened by Atkinson (2011) who posts that traditional methods of instruction don't take into consideration the interest of the learner and that we force learners to do things they don't want to learn, the reason they lose interest. Also, Tomlinson (2020) argues that learners' interests and needs should be at the forefront of language instruction.

In addition, the traditional methods disregard individual learners' diverse backgrounds, learning styles, and abilities. This trend can inadvertently result into inequitable learning opportunities where there will be insufficient support for struggling learners, leading to Increased learner frustration and anxiety. Relatedly, Tomlinson, (2020) argues that teachers need to recognize that every learner is unique and possess different strengths, weaknesses, and learning needs and failure to recognize this fact can lead to learners feeling disconnected, disengaged, and unsuccessful.

By stifling curiosity and creativity, the traditional methods of instruction suppress the very elements that drive meaningful English language learning like lack of exploration and discovery and reduced imagination and innovation. Hence, learners are reduced to passive recipients, rather than active participants in the English language learning process. Ellis (2019) further cements this argument by asserting that traditional teaching methods limit curiosity and creativity by providing answers to questions that learners haven't asked, and advocates for need to create an environment where learners can ask questions, explore, and discover.

To bridge the gaps identified in this study, educators should prioritize approaches that integrate all the four language skills, promote learner autonomy, and address individual learner's needs. Task-based learning, project-based learning, and technology-enhanced instruction offer promising alternatives to

English language teaching. By adopting these approaches, educators can foster meaningful engagement, creativity, and effective communication skills.

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