



## Limitations to the implementation of English language communicative skills teaching in rural Ugandan schools: a case study of Karamoja

Beatrice Namusiginyi,<sup>1</sup>  Sigrid Ørevik<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Department of languages, College of Education, Makerere University, Uganda

<sup>2</sup>Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Humanities, University of Bergen, Norway

Corresponding author, email: [namusigs@gmail.com](mailto:namusigs@gmail.com)

### Abstract

Communicative skills teaching in English language has been widely recognized as an approach conducive to developing students' competence in academic as well as everyday use of English. However, its implementation in rural primary schools faces numerous challenges. This study was conducted in a remote area in Uganda to establish the limitations to the successful teaching of communicative skills in such a context. Using a qualitative approach combining interviews, document analysis and lesson observation, the study revealed limitations related to syllabus disconnect, inadequate teaching resources, cultural barriers, pedagogical practices, Mother-tongue policy and classroom environment. The findings in this study have implications for stakeholders in language teaching, teacher education and education policy in Uganda. It highlights the need to provide ongoing professional training to equip teachers of English language with innovative teaching approaches tailored to the learning conditions of learners in hard-to-reach areas.

**Keywords:** English language teaching, Communicative skills teaching, Karamoja

### Introduction

Developing effective and versatile communicative skills is regarded essential to education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With English having evolved as “the global default lingua franca” (Mauranen, 2017, p. 7), the ability to communicate in this language has equally become a prerequisite in African education contexts. In East Africa for instance, unlike Kenya and Tanzania where English is used as an official language alongside Kiswahili, Uganda still maintains English language as an official language in formal settings. Therefore, competence in English language communicative skills is not only influential in determining learning outcomes but also has a competitive international advantage for youth seeking to pursue a career relevant beyond the local community. Since the 1970s, the communicative view of language teaching and learning has become increasingly widespread. Instead of a primary focus on structural aspects of the language, curricula now to a greater extent emphasize the promotion of effective

communication in a variety of contexts (Butler, 2011). However, teaching practices have not necessarily reflected these ideals (Butler, 2011; Kramersch, 2014). For example, in the rural regions such as Karamoja, where education is not highly prioritized due to cultural or economic constraints, high-quality English language education cannot be taken for granted, even if, in some cases, importance is assigned to the promotion of communicative skills in national curricula. Although the Government of Uganda in partnership with education stakeholders has invested resources to intervene through the integrated model of formal and informal learning, capacity building in classroom pedagogy, provision of instructional resources in the rural community schools, classroom implementation of contextually relevant teaching of English language skills has been largely unsuccessful (Datzberger, 2022; Kyeyune, 2011; Manyire, 2011; Shira, 2020; UNICEF Report, 2021). While the studies show improvements in this area, not much research interest has been demonstrated regarding the actual impact of these interventions, taking into account that the success of an intervention is

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measured by the improvement of learning processes.

To improve conditions for communicative English teaching, the first step is to identify limitations in current practices. The present article reports from the initial phase of an action research study conducted in two primary schools in Karamoja, a hard-to-reach region in Uganda. Based on interviews with teachers of English and head teachers, classroom observations and analysis of education documents, the present study identifies limitations to the implementation of communicative skills teaching of English in two transition classes of students aged eleven or older. The study was guided by the following research question:

*What contextual limitations affect the implementation of communicative skills teaching in the primary school transition class in rural Uganda?*

### ***The context of Karamoja***

The government of Uganda implemented universal primary education to increase access to quality and sustainable education as reflected in the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (United Nations, 2015). However, the practical implementation of quality instruction remains uncertain for many teachers working in communities that maintain strong cultural values and practices, like Karamoja. Located in the northeastern part of Uganda, Karamoja is a largely pastoral community known for its rich cultural heritage and natural endowment in gold, marble, limestone, uranium and copper (Powell, 2010). Among Karamoja's unique characteristics is their pride in traditional cultural practices and pastoral lifestyle, transmitted through an informal system of education involving dance, song, storytelling in traditional ceremonies and activities. However, the strong commitment to protecting their cultural heritage from erosion makes it challenging for children to benefit from formal education and to progress through the Ugandan cycle of education.

The long resistance to elements related to formal learning in Karamoja has connections to the British colonial history where the English language was perceived as a colonial tool interfering with the cultural setup of their

community (Brown, Kelly & Mabagu, 2017; Datzberger, 2022). Thus, ensuring quality teaching requires rethinking the instructional strategies in this context (Datzberger, 2022; UNICEF, 2021; Brown et al., 2017). The current view within the field of English as a Lingua Franca is that English is owned by those who use it (Seidlhofer, 2009). Additionally, the notion of "correct" and "wrong" English is now an outdated view (Rose, 2018). Further development in Karamoja will depend on younger generations to connect with the outer world, using the English language to communicate and pursue their goals, and return to their communities facilitating a shift in attitudes and practices while retaining a deep respect for the culture where they were raised.

### **Related research**

#### ***Teaching approaches conducive to students' development of communicative skills***

In alignment with the socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), communicative skills teaching entails students' collaborative engagement in meaningful and impactful tasks (Richards, 2005). Proponents of communicative language teaching (CLT) argue that teaching language is an act of encouraging learners to use the target language in real life scenarios in view of their cultural and social experiences. Although scholars advancing the CLT approach differ in their views concerning the explicit teaching of linguistic structures, many specify that prioritizing communication does not mean averting attention from linguistic knowledge. For example, Christie (2016) suggests promoting spontaneous speech among learners, letting them speak "as themselves" (p. 75), emphasizing that to express themselves functionally, the learners need to acquire vocabulary frequently used in spontaneous oral interaction. In a similar vein, Savignon (1991) recommends relating work with grammatical forms to the communicative needs and experiences of the learners.

The success of communicative activities in the English classroom is to a great extent contingent on learners' motivation to communicate. Opportunities to draw on aesthetic expression, for example, have been found to inspire communication. Mattevi (2005) advocates

the use of drama in the second language classroom, arguing that it supports addressing the four skills in an active and contextualized way while encouraging collective creativity among participating learners. Several studies have found the use of songs in English language teaching a motivational way to promote listening skills, engage learners' imagination and creativity and encourage authentic communication (Kumar, Akhter, Yunus, & Shamsy, 2022; Young, 2023). Presenting a review of empirical classroom research at primary level involving songs in English as L2 education, Davis (2017) found evidence of increased vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation, motivation, and communicative skills. Moreover, motivation for English language learning, or lack thereof, may be connected to cultural identity, as recognized by Kim (2023). She proposes forming relations between tangible physical learning materials such as textbooks and "intangible resources (e.g. students' and teachers' identities, experiences, and backgrounds)" (p. 316) to create spaces and opportunities for decolonizing English teaching (Kim, 2023).

While new advances in research and curricular development certainly bring the field of language learning pedagogy forward, they do not guarantee changes in classroom practices. In some contexts, for example Uganda, a learner-centered pedagogy has been introduced in the national curriculum, conducive to the development of communicative skills in language subjects. Operationalization of such a pedagogy may nonetheless be hampered by constraints imposed in local schools and societies (Sikoyo, 2010). Traditional exam formats may also stand in the way of innovative pedagogical approaches, as students expect teaching primarily to prepare them for examinations (Young, 2023). Research on English language teaching has highlighted several limitations that impede effective communicative skills development. The studies reviewed below provide insights into the nature of these challenges.

#### ***Large classes, time constraints and limited instructional materials***

Previous studies indicate that large classes and time constraints may obstruct teaching practices promoting communicative skills. Large

student groups and limited teaching time tend to work against learners' engagement in communicative tasks such as debates (Akram & Malik, 2010; Benter, Barasa, & Omulando, 2014). Shortcomings in learning materials and teachers' competence have also impacted language learning outcomes negatively (e.g. Oluwole, 2008). Akram and Malik (2010) highlighted that planning to teach communicatively can be a complex affair for the teachers as well as having the required instructional resources to support impactful teaching and learning. Additionally, Kebede (2013) observed that school policies were a limitation or an enabler for successful teaching of communicative skills in the English language lessons in terms of providing sufficient instructional materials. Studies conducted in Ugandan primary schools (Kyeyune, 2011; Shira, 2020; Tembe, 2000) found that available teaching resources for English were inadequate in supporting communicative skills teaching and additionally, that teachers' skills to create with local resources in their contexts were lacking.

#### ***Learner language barrier and low proficiency levels***

Several studies have attributed learners' low engagement in communicative activities to insufficient skills levels in the English language (Saiful, Yuliar, Mutiara, & Titin, 2020; Wayong'o, 2015). In a separate study, Xiaoting, Yiqian, and Wei (2022) connected the limitations to students' inability to understand target language instruction, low level of motivation and disengagement in communicative tasks requiring multiple skills, unsatisfactory performances in form-focused teaching, and classroom disciplinary issues. The four factors according to this study limit the use of methods such as spontaneous role play, listening to English speech and writing for personal expression. A review of methods used to teach communicative skills by Omar et al. (2020) revealed that learners' lack of motivation and confidence was a limitation for participating in spontaneous conversation. Mourssi and Mohammed (2014) reported lower motivation of learners to engage with the English language due to the influence of their mother tongue. These findings support Lee's (2006) proposed reconceptualization of communicative

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competence as a prerequisite for interaction in ESL classrooms as well as a goal of instruction.

### ***Teacher perceptions and practices in communicative skills teaching***

According to Ssentanda (2014), the mother tongue policy of primary schools in Uganda was an impediment to the teaching of communicative skills in English, preventing teachers from building a foundation in the English language that would enable learners to communicate successfully. Other studies have highlighted that teachers' lack of training in teaching communicative skills limits their ability to engage learners in a variety of activities. For example, Kyeyune (2003) observed that teachers' focus was on building vocabulary and on literal level comprehension aiming at preparing learners for academic tasks. Ssentanda (2014) found that teachers were not equipped with the appropriate strategies for transitional teaching. A study in Oman by Mourssi and Mohammed (2014) equally revealed that teachers had challenges designing authentic materials for communicative teaching. Similarly, Shira (2020) found that teachers used traditional methods such as rote learning instead of activities conducive to developing learners' communicative skills. Altogether, the literature reviewed above underscores the importance of exploring factors that hinder teachers from implementing communicative language teaching in order to bring about improvements.

### **Theoretical foundations: Sociocultural learning theory and communicative competence**

Positioned within the Constructivist philosophical perspective, this study was guided by the Sociocultural theory of learning (Vygotsky, 1978). The Sociocultural theory describes the role of collaboration, contextualization and language in facilitating a successful process of language acquisition (Panhwar & Ansari, 2016). Through collaboration, the teaching/learning process becomes a central activity where learners interact with each other to perform and accomplish tasks with guidance from the teacher. Alkhudiry (2022) points out the benefit of enhancing collaboration through engaging learners in tasks, concepts and instructional materials that make sense to them. Similarly, the principle of contextualization posits

that cultural awareness is a factor paramount to providing teaching that is relevant to learners within their cultural experiences, while language is highlighted as a tool that connects all the strands in the teaching/learning process.

The concept of communicative competence is coherent with sociocultural theory, representing a holistic view of language learning that encompasses sociocultural features (Hymes, 1972). In language learning, collaboration among students is realized through expression, interpretation and negotiation of meaning (Savignon, 1991). Halliday (1978) introduced the notion of meaning potential in language, connecting the successful deployment of linguistic forms closely to contextual aspects of communication. This was coherent with Hymes' view of communicative competence as conveying and understanding meanings effectively. Famously, Hymes (1972) stated that "there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless" (p. 278), accentuating the social aspects of language use.

In developing communicative skills, the syllabus for the transition class encourages the integration of mother tongue communication in English language teaching (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2010). Communicative skills developed through a learner's use of their mother tongue will strengthen their skills development also as they learn an additional language (Baker, 2011; Cummins, 2001). For example, in the process of learning an additional language, the learner can often transfer acquired literacy skills from their mother tongue, such as structuring a narrative (Cummins, 2001, p. 4), and such skills can be activated in communicative language teaching. Learners' translanguaging, that is, using both their first language and the additional language when working on curricular topics, may help their literacy development and deepen their understanding of subject matter (Baker, 2011). Notably, the outcome of communicative activities depends on factors connected both to learners' and teachers' contributions. As articulated by Savignon (1991), "in second language acquisition, identification and motivation interact with opportunities and contexts of language use to influence the development of competence" (p. 270). Thus, taking a communicative perspective of

language learning informed by sociocultural theory, the present study aimed to identify limitations to the implementation of communicative skills teaching of English in Karamoja.

**Methods**

The study constituted the initial phase of an action research design, more specifically, the situation analysis (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). The principle of participatory action research was adopted, which posits that contextual diagnosis of the phenomenon is a critical step in negotiating a possible remedy in educational research (Kemmis & Mc Taggart, 1988; Crotty, 1998; Flick 2018; McNiff, 2016). The principle of in-depth encounter with a study phenomenon in qualitative studies (Creswell, 2014) guided our approach to data collection and analysis.

**Data collection**

*Sampling strategy and participants*

**Table 1: Demographic Data of Participants**

Participant	Gender	Teaching qualification	English language teaching	Subject specialization	School type experience	Administrative experience
Tr1	Male	Certificate	8 yrs	-	Rural	-
Tr2	Female	Certificate	3 yrs	-	Rural	-
Tr3	Male	Certificate	3 yrs	-	Rural/urban	-
Tr4	Female	Certificate	2 yrs	-	Rural	-
Tr5	Female	Certificate	4 yrs	-	Rural	-
Tr6	Female	Certificate	5 yrs	-	Rural/urban	-
HT1	Female	Degree	10 yrs	-	Rural	22 yrs
HT2	Female	Degree	5 yrs	-	Rural/urban	2 yrs

All the teacher participants were qualified to teach in a primary school cycle in Uganda and had an experience of teaching English in a rural setting. However, it transpired that none of the teachers had specialized training to teach English language, which we found interesting.

*Interviews*

The duration of interviews varied from 18 to 30 minutes. Data recording of the interviews was carried out using an audio recorder. Recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the sound files were deleted upon transcription.

The study intended to obtain data reflecting views and practices of individuals directly involved in curriculum implementation of English. Semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann, 2014) were therefore conducted with eight participants purposively sampled to increase our understanding of the limitations in communicative skills instruction. This group included six teachers of English in six districts located in the Karamoja sub-region and two heads of schools. Participant sampling across six districts was done to avoid the risk of generalizing possible district-specific limitations of implementing communicative skills teaching. While the teachers were recruited due to their role as implementers of the curriculum as per the Education Act of 2008 (Ugandan Ministry of Education, 2019), the heads of schools were recruited due to their role as overseers of curriculum implementation. Participants' demographic data are listed in Table 1, stating their gender, qualifications and professional experience.

*Document materials*

To get deeper into establishing the limitations, essential documents were selected for analysis. The document materials included: The National English language syllabus for the transition class, which prescribes topics to teach for each week of the school year; English language textbooks recommended and approved by the Ministry of Education; teachers' lesson plans for the lessons observed, and learners' workbooks in the two schools. The analysis of the documents was conducted to get an impression of any opportunities and gaps that either contributed or

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limited the implementation of communicative language teaching in the transition class. A document schedule (Bowen, 2009) containing the components of learning goals, learning methods

and activities, instructional materials, and assessment was used to guide the analysis.

### *Lesson observation*

To gain a first-hand initial experience of the strategies teachers used to teach English and to what extent these strategies promoted the development of communicative skills, two lesson observations of 40 minutes each were carried out, following the observation protocol displayed in Table 3. In line with the action research approach (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988), two of the teacher participants agreed to have the researcher (the first author) present as a co-teacher in their lessons, observing and participating in a supporting role.

**Table 2:** *Documents Analyzed for This Study*

Document analyzed	Quantity
National English language syllabus for the transition class	1
English language textbook available and used	2
English language lesson plan	2
Learners' workbooks	12

**Table 3:** *Classroom Observation Protocol*

Aspects of lesson observation	Communicative skills aspect looked out for
<b>Topic</b>	Alignment to communicative goals
<b>Content</b>	Relevance to learners' experience, language level
<b>Learning objectives</b>	Relevance to communicative competence, fluency and skills development
<b>Instructional materials</b>	Variety and relevance
<b>Teaching methods</b>	Effective fostering of communicative skills
<b>Assessment activities</b>	Alignment with communicative objectives focusing on fluency and language use
<b>Language skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening)</b>	Integration and relevance to natural communication
<b>Linguistic aspects (vocabulary, grammar, structure)</b>	Integration of vocabulary, grammar, structure to language communication
<b>Technology tools</b>	Integration of digital tools to increase engagement and comprehension
<b>Participation: voluntary/ involuntary</b>	Levels of learner motivation
<b>Levels of engagement</b>	Quality and frequency of peer interaction, effectiveness in building communicative practice, teacher support and encouragement
<b>Learner-learner</b>	
<b>Teacher-learner</b>	
<b>Others</b>	General observations: classroom environment

The observation protocol focused on aspects of communicative skills teaching. Data from the classroom observation was collected in the form of written notes.

### *Data analysis procedure*

The study was sequential (Lichtman, 2013; Creswell, 2014) in the sense that themes identified through the analysis of data from the interviews formed the basis for the document

analysis and, subsequently, the protocol used for the classroom observation.

Data from the interviews was recorded, transcribed and coded. The principles of inductive thematic analysis (Lichtman, 2013; Creswell, 2014) were applied to group the codes into patterns which formed the basis of themes established from the interview data. These themes were: curriculum disconnect, inadequate teaching resources, culturally instituted challenges, pedagogical

limitations and the mother tongue language policy. These themes were included in the protocol that guided the document analysis and lesson observation. During the classroom observation, one new theme was added, namely, classroom environment.

This procedure was coherently followed to ensure that the data collected reflected the contextual limitations of teaching communicative skills within the context of the transition class in Karamoja.

### **Research quality**

Research quality was achieved through triangulating data from the interviews, document analysis, and lesson observations (Creswell 2014; Patton, 2015). This increased our opportunities to establish the limitations from multiple viewpoints, experiences and insights in the context of primary education in Karamoja (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2015; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Ethical considerations**

This study was conducted in high regard of the ethical requirements of participatory action research design. At the beginning of this study, informed consent, confidentiality and voluntary participation were ensured. All participating teachers and school administrators were informed about the purpose of the study, and their written and verbal consent was obtained before the process of data collection. Additionally, anonymity of the participants was observed by using pseudonyms such as Tr1, Tr2, etc., throughout the presentation of the study findings. Furthermore, voluntary participation was maintained to have only those participants who found interest in the study.

## **Findings**

### **Major limitations to communicative skills teaching**

In this section, we present the findings of the study. The findings in this study are presented thematically backed by verbatim excerpts and a table to simplify the presentation.

### **Results from analysis of the interviews**

The analysis of the data from the documents and classroom observations is presented according to identified themes in Table 4.

The following paragraphs will elaborate further on the themes identified through the data analysis.

#### ***Syllabus disconnect***

Interview data indicated that the disconnect of the syllabus from the contextual realities in Karamoja was a significant impediment to the teaching of communicative skills. All the participants observed that although the syllabus has recommendations for learner-centered teaching, the implementation of methods such as role play, dramatization, and report writing is impractical since learners do not have the required English language proficiency to engage in those activities.

Tr1 observed that

*.... for us at primary, there's a syllabus like when you are scheming and lesson planning, as government schools, they recommend teachers to use what is in the syllabus. But in most times, the English in those textbooks is very hard for learners here because from P.1 [Primary 1] to P.3 they use the local language, so you find a child comes to P.4 without knowing any English, it is a big challenge.*

Here it is evident that by relying on the recommended textbook, teachers fail to adapt teaching to the students' zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978), taking into account the students' lack of previously acquired communicative skills in the English language. Furthermore, implicit in the syllabus structure of the topics and recommended textbook is the assumption that all learners progress at the same level. However, this was viewed by the participants as unrealistic in the context of Karamoja where learners not only have limited opportunity to use English in communication but also have totally different experiences and future aspirations.

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**Table 4:** *Condensed overview of codes and themes*

Themes	Codes from interviews	Codes from documents	Codes from lesson observation
<b>Syllabus disconnect</b>	High-level language in recommended textbooks, culturally irrelevant content, rigid structure, impractical activities. Teachers lacked training in implementation of the new syllabus	Overemphasis on grammar and vocabulary, level beyond that of the learners in this context. Rigid structure, prescribing topics and exercises in detail. Limited focus on speaking and listening. Suggested communicative exercises mainly teacher centered	Lack of contextualization, irrelevance to communicative competence goals
<b>Inadequate teaching resources</b>	Lack of available aids, high cost of realia, limited digital integration	Recommendation of textbooks only, limited reference to audio-visual aids, no recommendation of digital resources	Use of textbooks only. Limited use of digital tools, lack of diverse instructional materials
<b>Cultural limitations</b>	Irrelevant content in the recommended textbooks, progression not aligned with learners' cultural routines and practices	Urban-centric content, lack of cultural relevance	Role-play and reading materials lack context relevance
<b>Pedagogical limitations</b>	Lack of training to teach communicative skills, limited skills of improvisation, creativity, limited specialized training. Low motivation due to students' language difficulty and lack of interest	Lesson plans and students' workbooks: focus on grammar and vocabulary, not communication	Limited contextualization skills: content, instructional materials, activities, methods. Limited integration of language aspects and skills. Limited peer interaction, low engagement in tasks
<b>Mother tongue policy</b>	View of mother tongue use as interference, not a facilitator of English language learning	Bilingual approach recommended (syllabus). No such recommendation in the textbooks	Low degree of bilingual approach. Teachers uncertain due to unfamiliarity with the local language
<b>Classroom environment</b>	-	-	Traditional seating arrangement limits interactivity

Tr2 pointed out that

*.... you know when the government and the curriculum developers are designing the curriculum, they are designing it fitting a certain category of learners, and now it is assumed to be okay for every learner, the interest of the child in Kampala does not fit the child in Karamoja, so*

*meaning that absolutely, the curriculum does not address the demand of the other child in Karamoja.*

Even though diversity in learners' ability and competence is a universal challenge for teachers, the discrepancy between learning conditions implied in national curricula and

realities in schools may be particularly strongly felt in hard-to-reach areas such as Karamoja. Arguably, awareness of the differences in the learning expectations manifested in different cultural contexts provides a direction with which to influence the National syllabus in this case.

The syllabus emphasizes communicative skills teaching through methods such as roleplay, debate and creative writing. However, Tr3 and Tr5's lesson plans as well as the learners' workbooks reflected a gap, maintaining a focus on grammar and vocabulary practice through repetitive drills. This practice deviates from communicative teaching principles where the aspects of language are embedded within a communicative task (Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1972; Savignon, 1991), such as using conventional phrases to signal disagreement in a discussion or using appropriate vocabulary in a role play related to buying and selling. As Widdowson (1978) argues, if the teacher aims at supporting learners' development of communicative competence, they should "avoid treating the different skills and abilities that constitute competence in isolation from each other" (p. 144) and instead opt for an integrated approach.

### ***Inadequate instructional materials***

The study also established that inadequate instructional materials coupled with the underutilization of textbooks and other resources were a limitation to communicative skills teaching. The participants reported that they relied on textbooks approved by the Uganda national curriculum development center (UNCDC). However, the availability of these books was inadequate to match the number of students. Additionally, acquiring relevant materials was costly, while materials required to make realia equally attracted a price in Karamoja.

*Haaa, in Karamoja here the instructional materials are few, even those given by government and NGOs, it is even hard to get the local materials to make teaching materials unlike other places that I have taught outside Karamoja. You end up only using the boxes [empty containers] and the manillas. Like for example you want to use a local material to show a cup, example using millet,*

*using simsim so that they see something real, but you find it is hard and very expensive for us this side. So, you end up only using what is provided by the school. (Tr2)*

The two lesson plans analyzed indicated two textbooks that the teachers referred to: *Fountain English Book 4* (Mmanga & Kagwa, 2019) and *St. Bernard's English Book 4* (Kasozi & Namyalo, 2018). These were mainly printed books, and no audio-visual and locally developed teaching materials were available. Moreover, Tr3 had four *Fountain* textbooks shared among 9 students while Tr5 had five for 45 students. Dependence on only text material limited the variety and quality that comes with integrating audio and visual resources to increase opportunities for reading, writing, speaking and listening practice.

In addition to the abovementioned shortage of materials in Karamoja schools the lesson observation also revealed that the few available textbooks were under-utilized. For example, the textbook *Fountain* contained roleplay activities, discussions and creative writing activities which could have been used for promoting communicative skills. Through activities developing basic vocabulary and language structures the learners were enabled to identify new words and write sentences, but opportunities to use that vocabulary and language structures in genuine communication were missed.

An implication of these findings is that teaching in resource-scarce contexts requires training teachers in resource improvisation skills and in maximum utilization of available resources. For example, local materials and manillas could be used creatively to make teaching aids that are both affordable and relevant. Christie (2016) suggests that successful communicative skills teaching is facilitated by a variety of teaching materials that may increase opportunities for students to meaningfully interact in the form of debate, roleplay, discussion and writing. Likewise, Widdowson (1978) stresses that incorporating real-life texts, audio-visual and interactive resources such as news articles, audio-recording and simulations respectively not only promotes the integration of language aspects and skills but also

increases student engagement, contextualization and real-life language use. Where digital media and costly teaching materials are unavailable, resources such as songs, stories and roleplay reflecting students' own experiences can be drawn upon (Kim, 2023). In the present study, relying on the textbooks to teach grammatical aspects and structures of English limited opportunities for students to engage in language use, exploring the use of these aspects in communication.

### **Cultural limitations**

Findings further showed that the adherence to the already established cultural practices in the Karamojong community in some cases represented a hindrance to language learning. Participants observed that the cold attitude towards English, which was perceived as an outsider's language, was a barrier to consistently engaging learners in the learning activities. Often, learners would deliberately withdraw from communicative activities to contend that it was not familiar to their experiences. It was also observed that consistent engagement of students in communicative learning was complicated by the cultural ceremonies and the seasons in Karamoja. Participants' responses indicated that perfection of communicative skills activities such as debates required continuous practice, yet in their context, activities like looking for pasture and water for the livestock took a significant toll on supporting students in building such skills.

Tr1 shared an experience:

*Of course, now the other part of it is the negative attitude, you find them having no interest in learning English, they find it not useful to learn English, it is the language of the westerners, the "musungu", so engaging them in role play, those dramas even the grammar and structure activities becomes hard. HT1 in School A specified some of the cultural activities keeping students away from school:*

*...At times when there are cultural activities in the community, the turn up of learners will be very low. And then like this season is like garden season, the children have to scare the birds in the gardens, so you find that there are few*

*learners, so the teachers cannot conduct a debate whether in the morning or even in the afternoon. This is one of the problems compared to the schools I have been heading...*

This was further elaborated by HT2 in School B:

*...during the dry season, these people move very far with their children looking for pasture for their animals, so when the rain comes, they come back. Now the children are again engaged in the gardens. The time when there is no food is when you see them coming to school, so it challenges the teachers to help these children in developing the skills that are required to participate in drama for example...*

These experiences indicated that cultural demands on the students hindered consistent practice of communicative skills. As shown from the participants' responses, besides the students' limited exposure to using English language, the lack of cultural relevance of the textbook content to the students' daily experiences was a demotivating factor. Aware of the role of the cultural context in determining the success of any teaching of communicative skills, Vygotsky (1978) posits that learners develop language skills within their zones of proximal development, and that learning occurs within a social and cultural context. Therefore, for successful teaching of English communicative skills, the structure of teaching, choice of instructional materials, learning activities for instance, should be tailored to the students' cultural backgrounds and experiences. In this way, teachers and learners can "decolonize" English language learning materials (Kim, 2023) heightening the relevance of them for primary school learners in Karamoja.

The assumption that the syllabus should apply to all learners, disadvantages students from contexts such as Karamoja from acquiring English language skills essential to global communication. Culturally responsive methods of teaching create a healthy teaching and learning environment where each player may feel the value of the intended learning outcomes (Lee, 2006). As opposed to sticking to the foreign content in the UNDCDC textbooks, flexibility in choosing the topics as well as drawing on stories from the learners'

experiences to teach the structural aspects of English would potentially increase learners' motivation to practice communicative skills.

Furthermore, cultural awareness in language teaching has been emphasized to maintain culturally relevant aspects of language learning contexts (Byram, 1997), recognizing that learning conditions and expectations are different across cultures. Therefore, influencing the standard syllabus to integrate such cultural aspects could be a mindful way of enriching teaching practice. Referring to the lesson of Tr5 about buying, as an example, contextualizing the topic through role-playing a traditional ceremony, discussing a market experience, describing a traditional ceremony, or writing about experiences herding livestock, could be relevant. Hymes (1972) posits that the inclusion of social and cultural factors such as being aware of values and beliefs that influence learning, contribute to the successful teaching of communicative skills. In the current study, reliance on government-given textbooks without considering such social and contextual factors not only decreased learners' motivation but also risked continuing to reinforce learners' perception of English as the "outsider's language".

### ***Pedagogical limitations***

Through the participant interviews and the two lesson observations, the study found a gap between the teachers' training, which was limited to general pedagogical education, and the reality where they were required by the curriculum to teach communicatively. Following up on the demographic data, all participants acknowledged that initial teacher training does not focus on communicative English language pedagogy. This obviously constituted a limitation in implementing communicative language teaching.

Tr5 pointed out that

*..... another thing is that even us teachers don't know how well to use these methods and also interpret the curriculum. For example, we are trained in the general methods of teaching at the college, even for upgrading you may take English as an additional subject. So, you don't know the approaches very well, now when you come to the*

*teaching environment, you find that it is difficult to use the knowledge, you end up mixing the way you teach science, S.S.T [social studies] is the way you will teach English. ...*

HT2 observed that

*concerning English language teaching, teachers are trying to teach according to the training they got. I think those who are upgrading are trying to do better with current approaches, the problem will now come with those that have not yet gone to upgrade. But of course they sometimes go for this refresher training, generally, but English is not part of these refresher trainings. So, there is still a challenge in the skills of teaching English language.*

The pedagogical gap was evident in the lesson observation, even though the topic of "Behavior" in Tr3's lesson and "Buying" in Tr5's lesson could have been modified to speak to the students' life and experiences, it was observed that the *Fountain* textbook content was presented with no regard to the students' English language proficiency level, interests, needs and experience. Besides, teachers did not use available manilla paper to develop visual instructional materials to complement the textbooks. The classroom observation further revealed low levels of interaction between the learners and the teacher and little engagement in the instruction process, which may be explained by the underuse of available materials and lack of adaptation to communicative teaching. This gap primarily concerned a lack of creativity and improvisation, which are key principles in communicative English language pedagogy (Freeman & Anderson, 2011). According to CLT principles, teacher competence in communicative skills teaching is essential for successful instruction (Nunan, 1991; Oxford, 2001; Widdowson, 1978). Without adequate specialized education, teachers are prone to resorting to less complex teaching approaches. As suggested by Richards (2001), teachers may find it easier and "logistically simpler" to teach language skills separately than to teach them all together at a time (see also Hussein, 2018). The present study emphasizes that to build a strong foundation for communicative skills, the teachers must be competent in balancing the skills

through strategies such as developing authentic instructional materials and activities that facilitate real life practice of language skills.

### ***Mother tongue policy***

The participants also attributed the limitations to communicative skills teaching to the negative influence that the mother tongue (MT) policy has on English language teaching. Out of the eight participants, five expressed that learners' resorting to the MT in early grades disadvantaged English communicative skills teaching. Additionally, participants reported a lack of pedagogical skills to effectively draw on the MT foundation skills in a way that supported language learning. The fact that most teachers were not proficient in the students' mother tongue represented yet another obstacle to engaging learners in interaction.

HT1 observed that

*... This school is composed of only one tribe, so they tend to speak their local language throughout. And then on top of that they don't have a teacher from their home, the native language teacher. These are teachers come from other districts, so the foundational skills that should be transferred to English language are poorly taught. So, children have no idea of how to hold a conversation or make a speech.*

Tr3 explained

*... from P.1 to P.3 (...) it becomes hard for this child to handle (...) two languages, they get a problem to pronounce words in English, everything in the local language is different from English, so at P.4, even if you tell them to greet in English like in the local language, they cannot, they will only cram "good morning sir" because they are trained to read in the local language.*

As previously stated, Cummins (2001) and Baker (2011) argue that the bilingual approach is a valuable resource in integrating the skills of communication across languages. In line with this view, the present study regards communicative skills such as speech, letter writing, listening to news and reading a newspaper article as universal. The participants' views, however, suggested that they would not necessarily support learners in

drawing on their MT communicative skills in English language communication; they experienced bilingualism as more of an interference in the development of learners' skills in English. This could in part be grounded in participants' perception that the learners brought with them a weak foundation of communicative skills from the early grades. It could also be owing to the teachers' lack of training in plurilingual strategies of language learning. There was little awareness among the teachers that learners' communicative skills acquired through their upbringing and cultural activities can support them in learning an additional language. Cummins (2001) advocates an approach involving translanguaging between the MT and the target language, arguing that this allows students to acquire linguistic knowledge and skills from their MT and gradually transfer them to the target language. An implication of the finding relating to mother tongue policy is, therefore, a need to implement research-based knowledge of plurilingual approaches to language teaching in both pre-service and in-service teacher education, enabling teachers to support their learners' development of communicative skills through more effective pedagogies.

### ***Classroom environment***

The lesson observation indicated that the students' seating in rows with the teacher's position at the front was a limiting factor to peer-peer and student-teacher interaction and collaboration in the classroom. This could probably explain the dominant role that Tr3 and Tr5 played in the reading activities while the students read the passage and dialogue from the textbook in chorus. The seating arrangement appeared to prevent interactive activities like roleplay and discussion in Tr5's and Tr3's lessons. When teaching communicative skills, the classroom setup is an essential factor in facilitating learner-centered, communicative activities, enabling interaction with instructional materials and peer-peer assessment as well as support (Nunan, 1991). Interestingly, the classrooms observed in the present study would have been possible to reorganize in order to encourage interaction among students and reposition the

teacher as a facilitator of communication (cf. Nunan, 1991).

## Conclusion

### *Major limitations to the teaching of communicative skills in Karamoja and possible solutions*

The present study has uncovered limitations to effective teaching of communicative skills in English in the transition class in Karamoja connected to the following themes: syllabus disconnect, inadequate teaching resources, cultural limitations, pedagogical limitations, mother tongue policy and classroom environment.

A possible solution to the problem of syllabus disconnect is to create relevance by training teachers to align the syllabus provisions to the context of the learners' lives and experiences. As for the problem of inadequate teaching resources and that of cultural limitations, a solution can be to utilize locally available resources that appeal to the learners' interests and reflect local cultural life. These can be used to promote integrated communicative activities such as oral-written demonstrations, roleplay, or accounts of traditional events accompanied by drawings or songs. Relatedly, limitations connected to the classroom environment can be overcome by organizing rearrangements of the classroom layout to facilitate movement and interaction.

Arguably, pedagogical limitations identified in teachers' lack of strategies to promote communicative skills could be addressed through deliberately focusing on training workshops in communicative teaching strategies for in-service teachers. These workshops could equally equip teachers with integration of local language which aligns with the English language syllabus provision for the transition class. In relation to provision of quality instruction, retooling teachers in communicative skills pedagogical strategies could go a long way in implementing a culturally relevant syllabus, thus aligning with the objectives of the National Teacher Policy of Uganda (NTP 2019).

Having established major limitations to communicative skills teaching in the selected

transition classes in Karamoja, the next step in the action research cycle will involve collaborating with the participants to design and implement a contextualized instructional approach to teaching English language communicatively. This will bring out new insights that can be drawn on by teachers, learners, teacher educators and policy makers in Karamoja and similar hard-to-reach areas, but also in other contexts aiming to improve learners' development of communicative skills in a second or foreign language.

## Disclosures

### *Conflict of interest*

The authors declare no competing interests.

### ORCID

Namusiginyi B: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-7233-5110>

Ørevik S: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0812-4572>

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## Appendices

### Interview guides

#### Teacher interview guide

Section A: general question.

1. What is your experience with teaching English language in the primary school class specifically here in Karamoja?

Section B: specific questions.

2. What skills of English language do you teach?
3. What challenges have you encountered in teaching English language in your school?

4. What method (s), ways or strategies do you currently use to teach the skills of English language in your class?
5. What do you find challenging in using these methods to teach the English language skills?
6. In what ways do these challenges affect the expected learning outcomes?
7. Based on your experience in English language teaching in Karamoja, what suggestions can you provide to improve your practice of teaching the English language skills?

#### School Administrator Interview Guide

Section A. General questions

1. For how long have you been head of this school?
2. What sets this school apart from other schools?

Section B: Specific questions

3. What kind of support systems are available for your teachers who are teaching English language to improve instruction?
4. What specific challenges have you observed with the way English language is taught in the transition class in this school?
5. How have these challenges affected the teaching and learning of English language in this school?
6. What improvements would you like to see in the way used for teaching English language in the transition class?