



# Evaluation of Challenges Faced by Teachers and Students in the Teaching and Learning of English in Public Secondary Schools in Tanzania

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**Abstract:** *This study evaluated the challenges faced by teachers and students in the teaching and learning of English in public secondary schools in Tanzania. Despite curriculum reforms promoting the Communicative Approach (CA) to enhance language competence, English performance remains persistently low in national examinations. The research employed a descriptive design, targeting 28,440 students and 158 teachers, with data collected from 16 schools and 79 teachers using interviews and validated tools. Findings revealed that many teachers lacked a clear understanding of CA, often equating it solely with classroom interaction while neglecting essential components such as grammatical and discourse competence. Resistance to adopting CA was prevalent, primarily due to workload, large class sizes, and rigid syllabi, leading teachers to prefer the traditional, teacher-centered information approach. Moreover, the dominance of Kiswahili in and outside school environments limited learners' exposure to and practice of English, contributing to poor communicative competence. Student challenges included low confidence, limited vocabulary, and lack of motivation. The study concluded that these pedagogical, institutional, and linguistic barriers significantly hinder effective English language acquisition. It recommends targeted professional development to strengthen teachers' pedagogical practices, curriculum redesign to align with communicative goals, and increased support for immersive English use through clubs or "English zones." Addressing these challenges is crucial for improving English proficiency and equipping learners for academic and socio-economic success in a multilingual context.*

**Keywords:** *English language teaching, Communicative Approach, Kiswahili, Teacher professional development, Learner-centered methodologies.*

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## 1. Introduction

English has long been recognized as a global lingua franca, playing a crucial role in international communication, education, business, and technology (Davies, 2005; Crystal, 2006). In Tanzania, English is an official language and the medium of instruction at secondary and higher

education levels. However, for most Tanzanian students, English is not a first or even second language, but often a third language after their mother tongue and Kiswahili (Mtalo, 2017; Rubagumya, 2010). This linguistic situation presents inherent challenges in mastering English, especially given limited exposure to the language outside formal classroom settings.

Over the years, Tanzania has implemented several curriculum reforms aimed at improving English language proficiency, shifting from traditional grammar-focused teaching to approaches that emphasize communicative competence (NECTA, 2013–2015). Despite these efforts, national examination results consistently show poor performance in English language subjects across public secondary schools (NECTA, 2013, 2014, 2015). This persistent underachievement points to a disconnect between curriculum intentions and actual classroom practices, highlighting the need to examine the factors contributing to ineffective English language teaching and learning.

One of the key challenges is the shortage of adequately trained and qualified English teachers, particularly in rural and underserved areas (Mushi, 1996; Mawere, 2012). Many teachers continue to rely on outdated teaching methods that focus heavily on grammar memorization and translation rather than practical communication skills (Brown, 1994; Krishnaswamy, 2014). Additionally, schools often lack sufficient teaching resources, including textbooks and multimedia tools, which are essential for engaging students and facilitating effective language acquisition (Mawere, 2012; Mdimba, 2015).

Furthermore, large class sizes and limited opportunities for students to practice English outside the classroom hinder language development (Mushi, 1996; Mdimba, 2015). Many learners experience low motivation and lack confidence in their ability to use English effectively, often perceiving it as a difficult and irrelevant subject (Nyamubi, 2003; Solak & Bayar, 2015). These negative attitudes are compounded by socio-economic challenges such as poverty and limited access to supportive learning environments, further impacting students' English language outcomes (Mdimba, 2015; Shehdeh, 2010).

Given these challenges, understanding students' and teachers' experiences and perceptions of English language teaching and learning in Tanzania is vital. This study seeks to explore the barriers that affect English proficiency in public secondary schools and to identify practical strategies that can improve teaching methodologies, resource availability, and learner motivation. Addressing these issues is essential for enhancing English language education and ensuring students acquire the skills necessary for academic success and meaningful participation in the global community (Richards & Rodgers, 2011; Brown, 2017).

## 1.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite English being a compulsory subject and the medium of instruction in Tanzanian secondary schools,

both teachers and students face significant challenges that hinder effective teaching and learning of the language. These challenges include inadequate teacher training, reliance on traditional and ineffective teaching methods, limited teaching and learning resources, large class sizes, and minimal opportunities for practical language use outside the classroom (Mushi, 1996; Mdimba, 2015; Rubagumya, 2010). Consequently, students often perform poorly in English language examinations, reflecting low proficiency and a lack of communicative competence (NECTA, 2013; 2014; 2015). This situation undermines national education goals that emphasize English proficiency as essential for academic success and socio-economic development (Mosha, 2010). Therefore, there is a critical need to evaluate the specific challenges faced by both teachers and learners in public secondary schools to inform strategies that can enhance English language teaching and learning outcomes in Tanzania.

## 1.2 Research Question

The study was guided by this research question:

1. What challenges are encountered in teaching and learning of English Language in public secondary schools in Tanzania?

## 1.3 Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by the theoretical framework of language learning in light of learner autonomy as proposed by Aaron Chao (in Benson, 2011), who stated that language was learned through "pushing against one's limits of communication concerning frequency, intensity, and efficacy." This theory emphasized that effective language learning involved active student engagement in communication, where learners were aware of their own linguistic boundaries and consciously strived to expand them. Communication was not only the end goal but also the process through which learning occurred, and autonomy involved students recognizing what they could and could not do in the target language. The concept of "pushing" highlighted the importance of active, self-driven effort, both within and beyond the classroom environment. Furthermore, the dimensions of frequency (how often students engaged in language use), intensity (how much effort they exerted), and efficacy (how effective their learning strategies were) framed the way learners interacted with the English language. Therefore, this study examined how students perceived their own engagement with these elements—how often, how hard, and how effectively they pushed their limits to better understand their self-assessed effectiveness in English as a subject.

## 2. Literature Review

### Challenges Encountered in Teaching English

A study by Levina, P. (2017) in New Zealand, aimed at investigating the perception of English teachers in the department of English and teachers, understanding on CLT. The study employed 10 English teachers from one department in a law higher education institution that were interviewed. The findings indicated that there are factors that affect implementation of CLT in the Lao context related to teacher's factors that include: misconception of CLT, traditional grammar-based teaching approach, teacher's English proficiency and lack of CLT training. On students' case, issues raised were, students low English proficiency, students learning styles and behaviour and lack of motivation to develop communication competence. On the other hand, there were problems caused by education systems which were the power of examination, class size, and insufficient funding to support CLT and also the lack of CLT interaction in society and school.

In addition, Mustapha et al (2013) conducted research in Indonesia on communicative language teaching. The following problems were found as the major problems in implementing communicative language teaching approach as the medium of instruction. It was noted that teachers in Indonesia have no confidence in using English in front of their students. So, the conditions of supportive language environment are not easy to create in their school because teachers lack confidence to use English language in front of their students. In the observation many teachers use Bahasa (official language of Indonesia in teaching English language), except and perhaps when greeting students before session begin and end. Mustapha commented that in this situation students do not have good, functional English language models to learn from. It is seriously difficult to imagine how students in this learning environment could develop a good sense of purpose and direction in learning English. He also commented that there is a lack of authentic learning materials and hence teachers tend to rely on non-communicative learning tasks (such as grammar-based worksheet) and also there is absence of visible social uses of the language outside the classroom confines (ibid). Li (1998) conducted a study with 18 Korean secondary English schools EFL teachers studying at Canadian University to identify their perceived difficulties in adopting CLT. Li found that the difficulties noted in Southern Korean students were created by four factors:

1. Difficulties caused by teachers,
  - i. Deficiency in spoken English
  - ii. Deficiency in strategies and social linguistic competence

- iii. Lack of training in CLT
  - iv. Misconception about CLT
  - v. Little time for expertise in material development.
2. Difficulties caused by students
    - i. Low English proficiency
    - ii. Little motivation for communicative competence
    - iii. Resistance to class participation
  3. Difficulty caused by Education system
    - i. Large class
    - ii. Grammar based examination
    - iii. Lack of logistic support
  4. Difficulties caused by CLT itself can be due to lack of effective assessment instruments (Li, 1998).

Studies were also conducted in China on suitability of CLT, Burnaby and Sun (1989) Commented that teachers get problems in using CLT, problem mentioned were the context of the wider curriculum, traditional teaching method, class size, resources, equipment, and the low status of teachers who teach communication rather than analytical skills and strategic competence. Different Teaching and learning strategies have varying degree on success. In most cases learners' academic performance may be influenced positively by their active participation in the classroom (Emerson & Taylor, 2004; Johnson, 2004). In the traditional classes there was less involvement in productive thinking, but interaction between students, the learning materials, other students, and the teacher are significant to learning outcomes. (Singh & Mohamed, 2012; Achievements in the second language (L2) learning requires the learners to take ownership of learning activities through interactions, that is the active participation and the use of target language in a more authentic context (Tabber & Dekoeijer, 2010).

It has been said that in Nigeria schools have academic underachievers because of the low communicative skills in English caused by teachers who rely on lecture method (Udesemowo, 2005; Oluwole, 2008). The 32 traditional "chalk and talk" and writing notes result in rote learning, learner's low level of retention, and passive learning.

Interaction is a key element to successful instructional processes. According to Singh and Mohamed (2012), knowledge is the best negotiation of meaning. In recent years many, educational theorists emphasise social learning and learner centered learning in the construction of knowledge. Studies indicated that classroom interaction promotes improved learning outcomes and critical thinking Kay & Lesage, (2009) not only that but also capture students' attention and interests (Sims, 2003). On the other hand, individual learning styles influence interactions and participation in classroom (DeBourgh, 2008). Some active learners learn by doing, learn by discussing possibilities and relationship, others learn when they see things and

sequential learners gain understanding in learner steps (Felder & Spurlin, 2005) There was another observation which was done in Kenya on the role played by an English teacher and also an observation on whether the teacher is conversant in and abreast with modes teaching which are used and recommended. In an observation it was noted that the role played by English language teachers is one of the tasks in the study. Sifuna (1990) commented that in order to develop learner's competence in speaking and writing there is a need for language Education. It was also noted that competence in all aspects of Language helps students to perform well in all other subject plus English itself; not only that but also school leavers will need good English in different professional, commercial and day to day transactions in Kenya and the internal environment. Make, M., & Ejajo, A. (2021)

In CA, communicative methodology is a learner centered. This does not mean that there is no role played by the teacher in CA, on the contrary a highly competent and imaginative teacher is a major requirement for the successful application of the approach (P,Levina 2017) Teaching materials to be used in the classroom have to be authentic and related to pupils' own life. Otherwise, it cannot be interesting and motivating. A study by Ribaya, E. T. (2019) aiming at examining effectiveness of classroom interactions in promoting English language learning in secondary schools in Tanzania, the study was conducted in Arusha city and six English lessons were observed. To examine the effectiveness of classroom interaction in promoting English language, it was observed in the classroom that the dominant teaching technique used was teacher-centered; there was minimal pair/group work except for the two lessons out of the six lessons observed.

The teacher did most of the classroom activities such as demonstration, explanations, questioning and in other situation where students could not comprehend teacher's question, it was the teacher who answered the question or translated the question into Kiswahili.

On the other hand, it was observed that there were no any teaching aids used in a lesson. This hindered students' thinking, participation and also hindered creativity. Studies done by Craig et al (2014) show that when teaching through a second language, instructors should use a full range of pedagogical strategies in a more explicit way than what they do when teaching through first language. However, there is a great deal of evidence that when exposing learners more in foreign language the greater will be their proficiency. Moreover, research and theories of secondary language acquisition indicate that student's linguistic growth is related to the amount of time they spend with the language in a meaningful exposure. Krashen (1982) called this comprehensive input, Long (1983) referred to it as

"negotiation of meaning" Clapper, T. C. (2015) named it Zone of Proximal Development.

The mentioned studies argue for the opportunities to communicate in target language among students and for the teacher who is knowledgeable and input provider, and the students are active learners. Actually, in the class setting, the teacher working with the students on a given task explains, informs, inquires, corrects and forces the students to speak through a number of tasks.

### 3. Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive research design, as recommended by Omari (2011). The target population included 28,440 students and 158 English teachers from 158 public secondary schools. A combination of purposive and simple random sampling techniques was used to select the study sample. Purposive sampling helped identify representative schools, while simple random sampling was applied to select specific schools, and teachers. The final sample consisted of 16 schools and 79 teachers from 79 schools. Data was collected using, interviews to gather both quantitative and qualitative information. To ensure validity, the instruments underwent expert review and pilot testing, with high reliability scores reported (Cronbach's alpha: 0.826 for teachers and 0.828 for students). Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics with SPSS version 26, while qualitative data were analyzed through thematic content analysis.

### 4. Results and Discussion

#### 4.1 Lack of Understanding of the Meaning and Requirements of Communicative Approaches

Some teachers did not understand the meaning and requirements of CA. One teacher described CA as, "more interactions between teachers and students in the classroom, with teachers giving more questions and the students answering them". When the study asked which activities encompass CA, the respondent was unable to enumerate any. Another one answered that CA, "is only concerned with students being able to communicate"... teaching of grammar is no longer important".

Another teacher answered that CA, is 'only concerned with speaking'. Thompson (2003) argues that language is not just the ability to string together sounds, words, and phrases that enable the passing across of a message. He argued that language is deeper than this, involving communication,

which is the basis of social interactions and interpersonal relationships. Thus, CA envisions language that is not limited by classroom walls, but which learners can use for social interaction both inside and outside of the classroom. Thus, when a teacher emphasizes the use of language only in the classroom, it indicated that this would unlikely lead to development of communicative competence among students.

It is also not correct for a teacher to state that teaching grammar is no longer important in CA. Grammatical competence certainly still remains an important dimension in language training in CA; however, it is no longer the fulcrum in teaching (Richards, 2006). Although grammar is still useful, what is more pertinent is the ability to use language for meaningful communication.

Some teachers could conceptualize the meaning of CA. However, they could not describe the activities that the approach comprises. In the words of one teacher, “CA aims at making learners able to communicate effectively in any social environment”. However, they could not be able to answer that CA comprises of sociolinguistic, linguistic, and discourse. The study found that only four out of ten teachers could define correctly the meaning of CA and describe comprehensively the activities the approach involved.

## 4.2 Antagonism to CA by some Teachers

Roughly, half of the teachers were found to be antagonistic to CA. They argued that CA requires a lot of time for its implementation, which they did not have because of too many lessons. According to the teachers, CA requires intensive preparation, which they simply cannot because of time constraints. Objective analyses of the sample schools support some of the conclusions. School S3 has a population of 286 students but 2 English language teachers while school S9 has a student population of 120 against three English teachers. On the other hand, S7 had a student population of 608 and just 5 English teachers. The findings from this study are in concert with those of Sane and Sebonde (2014), who found that teachers in Tanzania are overloaded with many teaching subjects such that they do not find time to prepare for communicative activities.

Nevertheless, the fact that some teachers do implement CA suggests that time constraints might not be a fully explanatory reason. Many teachers argued that the approach to information, in which the teacher is an omniscient bearer of knowledge whereas learners are passive receivers, is adequate, saves time and helps achieve language objectives. A host of studies conducted in Tanzania supports this finding. Elisifa (2018) found that grammar centered teaching still predominates in Tanzania despite the

introduction of CA, because of many years with the former system. Ndulila and Msuya (2018) found that despite positive perceptions and attitudes towards CA by teachers, they still implement the traditional methods of language teaching, in which they use mainly the information approach.

## 4.3 Limited Domain of English Language

A recurring theme from this study was the emphasis by respondents, repeatedly, that Kiswahili is the predominant language of use in Tanzania, with English playing a secondary role. This potentially could have implications on the penetrative capability of CA. The study found that very few learners and even teachers themselves used English language outside the classroom. This was similar to findings by Sane and Sebonde (2014) who concluded that English language has a rather limited domain of use in Tanzania, with Kiswahili supplanting it in most situations. The authors noted that even universities in Tanzania use Kiswahili as the predominant language of instruction. Typical answers included:

Teacher 1: *It is the best way, but it is very challenging approach simply because most of my students feel shame to speak English in public. Also, most students do not know vocabulary.*

Teacher 2: *Students are not capable expressing themselves because of uttering English words is difficult.*

## 4.4 Prevalence of Kiswahili language

Kiswahili is used exclusively in primary school and in the society where the students are supposed to exercise their communicative competence in English. Students find it therefore difficult to practice English. Although teaching in Secondary schools is supposed to take place in English, there many instances of code switching. The same also occurs in the citadels of knowledge – universities. This study recommends that to perfect communication, there should be the creation of islands of English, where students can exclusively communicate in English, whether in school or outside. The domain of use of English should be increased. Typical answers included:

Teacher 3: *In primary schools most students are taught in Kiswahili, so it makes it difficult for them to communicate in secondary schools.*

Teacher 4: *Poor foundation of English language as a communicative language.*

*Which challenges do you encounter in the utilization of Open Approach showing methodologies in English language?*

The study asked teachers specific challenges that they face in the utilization of open approach as a methodology for teaching English language. For most teachers, the major challenge was a lack of time to implement the methodology. Some of the answers from teachers included the following:

*Teacher 5: "The methodology is too tedious. If you give a student to solve a problem, you will never be able to cover the syllabus"*

*Teacher 6: How can you allow learners to solve a problem? It will be impossible to finish the syllabus".*

OA assigns problems to students that are open, that is, whose starting point or endpoint are multiple and not given. Consequently, students could have multiple ways of grasping them, understanding them, and solving them (Fani & Ghaemi, 2011; Becker & Shimada, 1997). This could take more time compared with the information approach. Given that teachers are given specific amounts of time to cover certain topics in the syllabus, consistent use of open approach could end up consuming a lot of time, making teachers to be unable to finish the syllabus. Given the beneficial outcomes inherent in the use of OA, such as, development of student creativity, problem solving capacities and a celebration of learner uniqueness and empowerment (Susan, 2009; Wilson et al., 2003), there is therefore a need to design a curriculum that places OA in a more central role.

When solving open problems, there could be several ways to evaluate students' responses. These could include evaluating according to the number of solutions produced (fluency), the number of ideas discovered (flexibility), originality and the degree to which a learners' solution are simple and clear (elegance) (Nohda, 1999). Because there are multiple ways in which students can be assessed in OA, this buttresses the need to redesign the curriculum to ensure a standard and uniform assessment of students in the country.

Nevertheless, teachers' ignorance about the approach and the false assumptions about learners was also found to be a challenge. In the words of one teacher:

*Teacher 7: How can you allow learners to solve a problem in English when they do not know anything....Some will just sit and do nothing. Will be very difficult to complete what are you are supposed to do".*

Inherent in this answer is the premise that learners are an absolute "tabula rasa" – they know nothing and hence will be expected not to be able to solve anything. This is a rather archaic view of learners; the modern view conceptualizes learners as having inherent and acquired knowledge, skills and attitudes, on which a teacher can be able to build on and expand (Nohda, 1999). The deficiency of teacher knowledge, aptitudes, motivation and teaching skills have been noted in other studies. Mushi (1989) reported incompetence in English for the students of Tanzania Secondary Schools owing to poor preparation for teachers of English language in the college. Mdimba (2003)'s research in Ilala District at Benjamin Mkapa Secondary School, Tanzania highlighted amongst others, inappropriate teaching methods in English language and the incompetence for teachers in English language. Shehdeh (2010) examined the difficulties confronting Arabic educators who show English language and found that educators being deficiently arranged, helpless inspiration, utilization of instructor-focused strategies, lacking evaluation methods and helpless educating and learning condition.

*What issues do you come across in applying Informative Approach as you teach English language?*

The study also asked teachers about the issues they come when applying information approach during teaching of English. The study found that according to teachers, this was the most popular pedagogical technique. The following are a sample of some opinions about the method:

*Teacher 8: "This method is very good. It can allow me to cover the syllabus within a very short period".*

*Teacher 8: "When teaching, most students do not know grammar, pronunciations and many other things in English language. This method is appropriate because it enables me to explain the rules of grammar to students".*

*Teacher 9: "I prefer this method because it enables me to deal with large class sizes. I teach a class of over 40 students, how then can give individualized attention to every student in the class".*

As illustrated in the above verbatim responses, information approach has certain distinct advantages, for instance, faster coverage of syllabus, ability to use it in large classes, and capacity to explain to learners issues, like grammar that they did not know. However, findings reported by this study itself (in objective two) show that an informative approach does not achieve its learning objectives in students. For instance, most teachers, the study found, do not understand students, inability of learners to understand textbooks and assignments, few opportunities for students to practice

writing and inability to choose what to write, which does not engender learning good English.

Numerous studies have implicated poor teaching methodology as an antecedent for poor performance and mastery of English language. For instance, Mawere (2012) in an examination of learning of English in Mozambique's state funded schools found educators were underqualified, leading them in poor pedagogical choices when teaching. Shehdeh (2010) examined the difficulties confronting Arabic educators who show English language and found various issues including utilization of instructor focused strategies, educators being deficiently arranged, helpless inspiration, lacking evaluation methods and helpless educating and learning condition.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

### 5.1 Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal significant challenges in the teaching and learning of English in Tanzanian public secondary schools, especially regarding the implementation of the Communicative Approach (CA). Many teachers demonstrated a limited understanding of CA's principles, often misinterpreting it as being solely about speaking or interactions in the classroom without appreciating its broader emphasis on communicative competence, including grammatical, sociolinguistic, and discourse aspects (Richards, 2006; Thompson, 2003). This misunderstanding, coupled with teachers' inability to identify or apply communicative activities effectively, hinders the development of students' real-world language use.

Another major challenge is the reluctance or resistance to adopt CA and other student-centered approaches such as the Open Approach. Teachers cited time constraints, workload, large class sizes, and rigid syllabi as key obstacles, leading many to prefer the traditional, teacher-centered information approach. The dominance of Kiswahili in everyday communication and instruction, along with students' poor vocabulary and low confidence in speaking English, further restricts language practice and application beyond the classroom (Sane & Sebonde, 2014). These factors collectively contribute to poor student performance and communicative incompetence in English, as supported by earlier studies (Elisifa, 2018; Mushi, 1989; Mdimba, 2003).

### 5.2 Recommendations

The following recommendations were arrived at from the findings:

1. Educational authorities should provide targeted training programs to improve teachers' understanding and practical application of the Communicative and Open Approaches. This includes workshops, classroom demonstrations, and ongoing mentorship.
2. The English language curriculum should be redesigned to integrate communicative activities with clear guidelines and flexible pacing. Assessment systems must align with communicative objectives, evaluating fluency, originality, and contextual use of language.
3. To enable effective implementation of student-centered approaches, schools must address teacher shortages and excessive workloads. Hiring more qualified teachers and adjusting timetables will allow adequate time for lesson preparation and individual student attention.
4. Schools should establish "English zones" or clubs to create immersive environments that encourage English use in daily interactions. Enhancing the functional domain of English will boost students' confidence and fluency through regular practice.

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