

Perspectives on the Strategies for Teaching and Learning English as a Second Language at the University of Juba, South Sudan

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47175/rielsj.v1i2.88>

| Majok Mabor Matoc Apadier |

Department of English
Language and Literature -
Rumbek University of Science
and Technology-South Sudan

majokmabor2015@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In line with South Sudan's vision of a self-governing community, much hope was invested in the English speaking world thereby making a shift from Arabisation from the North. As a result, the English language was adopted a marker of identity and opposition to Arabic, language of government, education as well as international communication. As part of South Sudan's look south policy, English was made to be a second language as opposed to a foreign language. In tandem with this country's vision the University of Juba is not spared from the adoption of English as the language of instruction and a learning subject. Due to the democratisation of schooling and education for all, enrolment in the learning of English is increasing and resultantly large classes are emerging. In view of this, the paper therefore examines and provides preliminary results on the nature and feasibility of some teaching and learning of English in large classes at the University of Juba. This was done in light of the principles and concepts of Richards and Rodgers' (2001) Communicative Language Teaching approach. It emerges from the findings that in the absence of a teaching framework there is no uniformity on the strategies that being adopted by both learners and teachers in the learning and teaching of English as a second language.

KEYWORDS

South Sudan; English as a second language; communicative

INTRODUCTION

South Sudan's hope and vision of a self-governing community is linked to the adoption of English as language of government, education, and as a stance in opposition to the Arabisation from the North. The English language is expected to function alongside local languages of South Sudan and serving purposes such as the language of government, key language of education, a unifying language across ethnic groups and a language of international communication. In this view, the adoption of English in the newest state of South Sudan is similar to the South African situation in which it has been perceived, and used as the language of freedom and unity, serving to bind together individuals and groups from different ethno-linguistic backgrounds, both in the country and in the diaspora.

In relation to the key decision by the Government of South Sudan pin the country's vision on the adoption of English saw South Sudanese schools and universities phasing out Arabic and started teaching English. According to Simpson (2008), Arabic has been used in the past as a tool to spread Islamic law and Arab heritage by Khartoum. The move to adopt English as stipulated by South Sudanese Ministry of Education 2015 report is symbolic of nation's vision of closer integration with African neighbours. However, such a

shift will not be automatic and it is likely to be problematic but the South Sudanese want to look south wards which marks a departure from the Arabisation doctrine which was consistently opposed by different rebellions in Sudan. Regardless of the challenges associated with the transition from Arabic to English, the South Sudan's government passed a bill in 2011 which makes English mandatory for teaching in primary and secondary schools.

Although the government of South Sudan is pushing for the total adoption of English there are some challenges which are likely to act as a drawback to this national vision. In the teaching of English as a second language there seems to be lack of an appropriate level of English language proficiency among teachers which has an impact on student's learning. In addition, there is limited understanding on how the development path of language and literacy can be nurtured in education. The learners are not only exposed to poor model of English language but also struggle to understand the concept of the subject matter. This led the Ministry to come up with English language policy framework to improve the standard and levels of proficiency to be attained by teachers and students in South Sudan educational system. However, the proposed framework was not successful because there is an outcry in the most public universities on the standard of English language, English lecturers complain that students are unable to construct a meaningful sentence and the framework on English pedagogy remains unclear and even non-existent.

Against the above backdrop, this research saw the need to look at how English teaching is being done in Universities taking the case of the University of Juba as an example. There is need to interrogate the strategies used by the University of Juba to teach English as a Second Language where no framework for such teaching and learning existed at either school or university level. Thus, this study is crucial as it seeks to expose the areas of concern and offer informed recommendations which are meant to improve the teaching of English in South Sudan's institutions of higher learning. In this regard, the paper progresses on the following standoffs:

- Exploring the strategies being used in teaching and learning English as a Second Language to large and diverse classes at the University of Juba.
- Establish the challenges being experienced in using such strategies.

The new nation state of South Sudan comprises of fifty three different ethno- linguistic groups, presenting a linguistic landscape of mixed, and multiple languages of varying size and geographic spread. In addition to a large number of indigenous languages, Arabic also features in the situation, both as an official working language of government and as a Creole, commonly referred to Juba Arabic, which acts as a lingua franca in certain parts of the country.¹ However, it may be more accurate to say there is an Arabic continuum running from South to North of the new nation, with the variety spoken in Northern states shifting towards that Khartoum Arabic. Though the various forms of non- standard Arabic can be written using the Roman alphabet, they basically exist as spoken languages used for communication amongst speakers of different tongues. A further linguistic layer is provided by the presence of English language in South Sudan, evidenced in the republic's choice of English language as official language, and desire to position it centrally in government and education, both as an official working language at national and state levels and medium of instruction in schools and universities.

As mentioned by Power (2011), in the case of South Sudan, arguably national languages and Juba Arabic have stronger claims than English for fulfilling the criterion of local authenticity. However, it can be further argued that English is better positioned to meet other criteria than either local languages or Juba Arabic. As regards Juba Arabic and other

non-standard varieties of Arabic in the state, though these appear to be quite widely spoken as creoles or lingua francas, widespread negative attitudes towards Arabic together with the lack of clear differentiation it offers Southern Sudanese from their Northern Sudanese neighbours, make this an unlikely choice for either national language or an expansion of present, largely oral, functions into more formal, written domains.

The 2011 transition constitution dubbed English as the official language but added that all indigenous languages of South Sudan are national languages and shall be respected, developed and promoted. With an estimated sixty four tribes speaking different languages, the question remains as to how these will be promoted and developed. However, the 2011 Transitional Constitution says that meanwhile in practice, English language is still a long way from serving as the working official language, not least because government members studied in Arabic language in Khartoum.

Further complicating the linguistic mix is another dominant language called Arabic Juba or Juba Arabic slang often used for social interaction in South Sudan. English language, according to the Ministry of General Education 2015 report is the official language of South Sudan, as well as medium of instruction from primary four and above. Therefore, the long term goal of English language policy is to improve the strategies for teaching and learning English language as a second language in South Sudan schools and Universities.

Given the position and status given to English in South Sudan, it follows that the demand for learning English increased and subsequently large classes for English learning emerge in various institutions. This mainly comes from the pressure for the expansion of post- secondary education which is inherent in the development of South Sudan as a modern society. This expansion in students in the face of limited resources and lecturers naturally leads to large classes. These large classes are often perceived as one of the major obstacles in ensuring quality education and indeed there are many researches that point to the disadvantages of large classes and advocate for small classes in university learning in different countries. These include researches done by Ashar and Skenes (1993) on large classes and persistence to completion, Keil and Partell (1997) on first year retention rates, Dillon and Christy (2008) among others. In most of the conclusions of such researches, inadequate funding, absence of political will to provide adequate teaching personnel suffice as explanations to the existence of such large classes. However, the provision of adequate tools to address the difficulty of teaching large classes is seen as an important step towards realizing quality education for all in university settings.

In the case of South Sudan such undergraduate classes are most often taught by a lecturer lecturing to a group of about 150-250 students, creating a situation that can sometimes be inefficient and unrewarding for both students and lecturers. The difficulties in these classes are made worse when teaching English as a second language for example, at the University of Juba South Sudan. The problem of large undergraduate class size is especially urgent in teaching English as a second language situation such as found in South Sudan where English is not only a taught subject but also the language of instruction. Such large numbers impact on the quality of learning achieved and is of particular concern in English language instruction because it impinges directly on the overall educational experience of learners. The aim of this research, therefore, is to scrutinize the strategies for creating conducive teaching and learning English as a second language at the University of Juba.

Although the University of Juba has been teaching English as a second language since 1972 and socio-cultural diverse classes have been steadily increasing in size over the years, no study has been conducted to establish the successes and/or challenges of the English as second language teaching strategies the university is using. In addition, no teaching

framework is available in South Sudan for teaching English as Second Language. Therefore, research examined the nature, contextual relevance, responsiveness, successes and/or challenges of the design and application of teaching strategies of English to undergraduates at the University of Juba. This was done as a way of developing a framework for teaching and learning English as a Second Language to undergraduates in this institution and many like it.

METHOD

In collecting the data necessary for this research, a descriptive qualitative approach was adopted. Such an approach used three main methods for collecting data namely, interviews, observations and document analysis. Burns and Grove (2003) describe a qualitative approach as a systematic subjective approach used to give meaning to life situations. Descriptive qualitative research hinges on the lived experiences of the people being studied. Therefore, the researcher used the descriptive qualitative approach to establish the successes and challenges of the strategies being used in teaching and learning English as a second language. Data was presented according to themes that emerge from data analysis. The principles and concepts of Richards and Rodgers' (2006) Communicative Language Teaching approach were used as theoretical lenses in data analysis.

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that the University of Juba adopted the Cognitive Academic Learning Approach (CALLA) as a Curriculum guide for teaching English as Second Language. This was adopted as the main strategy of teaching English although there are other strategies that can be used to aid this strategy. Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) was created specifically for students that spoke and wrote limited English (Chamot and J. Michael O'Malley (1990). CALLA enables students to become more proficient so that they are able to take part in content directed instructions. Such cognitive model of learning is used to help students to comprehend and retain language skills and concepts of the content being taught. This is content based English as a second language model for intermediate to advanced students abridge to mainstream. Content and language are developed together as the focus is on and application of learning strategies.

In the CALLA strategy, learning can be grouped into three modules of knowledge: declarative knowledge of facts, procedural knowledge of how to do things, meta-cognitive relates current learning tasks to past knowledge and learning procedures. These learning strategies focus specifically on the development of academic language and a related curriculum. In this view many public schools incorporate this into their ESL programs and the University of Juba ESL students as well need to take responsibility for what they learn and how they learn it.

The CALLA model seeks to make the learning English become more successful academically by providing the learners with opportunities to learn grade appropriate content, develop the listening reading, speaking and writing proficiency needed for university level classrooms and most importantly by focusing on explicit instruction in learning strategies. The University of Juba adopted this strategy because some of lecturers and students have limited proficiency in English given the fact that it was using Arabic as the medium of instruction in the time South Sudan and was one Sudan, prior 2011 when South Sudan independence. In addition to that the strategy adopted because English is now the medium of instruction in South Sudan and everyone, hence it is used in instructing all courses at the University of Juba.

In addition, the CALLA model specifically assists students that are forced to learn English as a second language in order to survive in the American public school systems. The method involves an instructional model that helps teachers know how to implement learning strategies so that students can grasp the concepts much easier and faster. Given the role of English in South Sudan, the ESL curriculum at the University of Juba seeks to produce students who are competent in writing and spoken English the ESL curriculum at the University of Juba states. The goal of this curriculum is to ensure that students can apply language learning strategies to instructional level texts. This will be monitored by the ESL teacher and classroom teachers. Students are expected to develop meta-cognitive skills to think about how to learn and improve their own learning. To develop students who can think independently, problem solve and take control of their own learning, these skills should be encouraged and teacher dependency decreased. Thus students should take part in brainstorming, group discussion and reflection. Students are expected to apply strategies independently to their learning tasks.

Furthermore in working in the regular classroom, ESL lecturer has an opportunity to assist the students in applying the strategies and assess the students' performance in the mainstream. For the CALLA to be efficient and effective, ESL lecturers at the University of Juba must first prepare the students for learning using this strategy and to do the must find out more about their background and take a look at how students previously approach an academic task. The teachers will then incorporate the right learning strategies for a specific task. Students will practice the strategies on those tasks. The University of Juba adopted CALLA because it embraces other teaching strategies like cognitive, meta-cognitive and social/affective strategies. The ESL curriculum at Juba University urged that a small number of strategies be introduced and taught so that learners can feel successful with them.

A cognitive strategy is one type of learning strategy that learners use in order to learn more successfully. These include repetition, organising new language, summarising meaning, guessing meaning from context, using imagery for memorisation. All of these strategies involve deliberate manipulation of language to improve learning. Classifications of learning strategies distinguish between cognitive strategies and two other types, meta-cognitive strategies organising learning, and social/ affective strategies which enable interaction.

The learner remembers new words by visualising them represented in a memorable or ridiculous situation. This makes it easier and faster to recall these words. In the classroom activities which can be describe as cognitive strategies include making mind maps, visualization, association, mnemonics, using clues in reading comprehension, underlining key words, scanning and self-testing and monitoring. Harmer (1987) believes that the deduction/induction strategy is worthwhile since it enable students to consciously apply learned or self-developed rules to produce or understand the target language.

Harmer (1987) contends that the deductive/inductive strategy is one of the best in grammar teaching as it makes students produce the second language or make up rules based on language analysis. Since this is done not with the whole class but rather with students in pairs, the teacher is able to get students to ask and answer questions quickly and efficiently. The results of this study revealed that the language learning strategies most commonly used by the learners who participate in this study were meta-cognitive strategies. Cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies are specifically related to certain language tasks. In vocabulary tasks, the meta-cognitive strategies of monitoring and self-evaluation were used, alongside the cognitive strategies of resourcing elaboration. In listening tasks selective attention, self- monitoring and problem identification were the

meta-cognitive strategies employed whilst, note-taking elaboration, inferring and summarizing were the cognitive strategies being employed.

Another interesting observation from the learning and teaching of English is that, lecturers of ESL at Juba University work in overcrowded classrooms. When there is a large number of learners in classroom, teaching especially of grammar, can become difficult. Often, teachers do not notice that some learners are not developing any skills, or are absent. Group work therefore is one of the important methods that ESL lecturers use when teaching at Juba University. This method is supported by Dyer et al. (2000) who point out that group work encourages learners to participate maximally in discussions and explanations of grammatical structures.

In addition to the above, the University of Juba had recommended that lecturers to integrate technology in teaching English. The adoption of technology is being encouraged and tools like overhead projectors are available in lecture rooms. However, because of some limitations and challenges within the context of South Sudanese tertiary education, many lecturers at University of Juba are not confident as to whether ICT should be incorporated into ESL teaching and learning. The most important element of these challenges is that supporting equipment like computers is not widely available or used. Moreover, many students are not trained to use ICT tools properly. Furthermore, lecturers have not been trained in the use of sophisticated technology, thus inhibiting their use. Hence, the students become bored with same style of teaching approaches.

The study also observed that the lecturers are using direct method when teaching English as a second language. As the direct method based upon the cognitive methodology, it provides flexibility and adaptability for students. This is because the cognitive teacher aims to achieve the maximum benefit from all the methods and techniques at their disposal. With this cognitive enlightening, college students are able to learn English more efficiently by finding, creating, thinking, or observation through the mental processes according to cognitive theories. This method came into practice as a solution for the problems confronted by the teachers who used the Grammar-Translation method in their classrooms. As the name suggests, this is a method of teaching English directly through English. This method was augmented with the explicit teaching of grammar in which the students have to practice the rules through mechanical practice. Such exercises consist of isolated and unrelated sentences. Lecturers taught grammar through consciousness-raising tasks which ask the students to grammatical explanations from the data they have been given.

It was also observed that lecturers used the integrated method of teaching English as a second language. The lecturers taught English pronunciation with judicious use of audio cassettes and compact Discs and THRASS method. The importance of pronunciation lies in the fact that it helps students read effectively.

However, it was also revealed that some lecturer's code switched to Juba Arabic during lectures. Some of the lecturers' code-switching situations that emerged in this study seem to fit into Ferguson's (2003) categorisation of code-switching for the curriculum (for example explanation, clarification, exemplification, emphasising, checking understanding) – all these to enhance understanding - code switching for management of classroom discourse (for example when students misbehave), for interpersonal relations (for example joking). The ESL lecturers' "code-switching" situations that came out in this study also roughly correspond with the teacher code-switching functions that were identified by Al-Nofaie (2010), which are eliciting language, checking comprehension, giving instructions, checking for sense, and facilitating lecturer student relationships. What also emerged in this study regarding code-switching by lecturers of English revealed that lecturers code-

switched for explanations, acknowledgements, calling on learners to participate, as well as repeating sentences (for emphasis) in Arabia Juba, so as to enhance the learners' understanding.

The lecturers' judgment about the effectiveness of certain strategies was built upon their own experiences as a successful language learner and as a keen observer of their students' performance. The strategies considered to be essential were broadly associated with learning skills, such as reading, speaking, listening or writing. These strategies served as an important guidance for the teachers in shaping their approaches in everyday English teaching.

Some lecturers use the strategy of being friendly to learners to encourage pupils to seek assistance in case of language difficulties, for example in an interview a teacher says:

Sometimes I sit in class with my students during break time... some bring me self-initiated compositions. Others recite me a poem... others sing an English song... I just listen and comment positively... showing much interest.

According to Dornyei (2008) and Rivers (1992) the way in which the teacher responds to students' concerns contributes significantly towards L2 learning, for example by reacting in an empathic manner, with mutual trust, respect and dependability.

The English lecturers follow a standard assessment program. Informal assessment of both group- and individual work is done as soon as a section of the work has been completed. Learners are observed, as individuals or in groups, on how they master their work. Individual attention is then given to learners who do not perform satisfactorily. This strategy is followed in every section of the work (listening and speaking, reading and phonics, writing and handwriting). Informal assessment is done every Friday, and the learners seem to enjoy it. During these activities they are usually noticeably relaxed and receptive. The progress of the learners is recorded on mark-sheets. In this way, the under-performers can be identified and assisted.

Formal assessment is conducted once all the work has been completed and all the steps of the informal assessment program have been followed. As a result of this, the learners are assisted throughout the completion of informal assessments, and this offers them an opportunity to improve their marks in the formal assessments. During the formal assessments much of the work covered during the informal assessment activities is assessed. Formal reports are handed out at the semester, and are based on work completed in the previous semester. During parent evenings (once a term, after the reports have been handed out), the parents have the opportunity to discuss the reports with the lecturers.

To accommodate the struggling learners, lecturers focus on both group-work and individual work in reading and phonics. Because the learners lack the Basic English vocabulary, assistance in basic reading is rendered once a week for a period by another lecturer. Formal reading lessons are conducted every morning. After sounding the words, formal reading is done in groups (mostly five in a group).

Lecturers also revealed that although the communicative language teaching approach can be appropriate for the University of Juba but it is very difficult to adopt at University of Juba because the classroom sizes could not give much latitude to do. As a result they resorted to traditional language teaching methods which suit their large class sizes. Most of the classes at Juba University have 450 students and this makes it very difficult for lecturers to adopt communicative language teaching for enhancing oral competences. This goes in line with what researchers in ESL countries have observed.

The study also found out that some lecturers use differentiated instruction. This method is the key to a classroom because it is helpful for diverse learners in the classroom. The participants think ESL lecturers should set up groups in their classroom so they can differentiate their instruction by providing different pathways for all learners. They think that differentiated instruction allows all students to access the same classroom curriculum by providing entry, points, learning tasks, and outcomes tailored to students' learning needs. ESL lecturers at university of Juba said that when differentiated instruction is being implemented at first glance, they are saying that it might appear to be noisy and very active.

These findings also indicate that the university students frequently reported employing formal practice strategies and general study strategies. These strategies are likely to be useful in a traditional, structure-oriented language learning procedure. This kind of foreign language instructional environment is directed towards tests and assignments. However, the strategy which involved a concerted, extracurricular effort to communicate in the new language (functional practice strategies) has also been appreciated and practiced by examinees. On the other hand, resourceful, independent strategies which required working independently on mnemonic or meta-cognitive aspects were mostly shunned by the students in this sample.

Learning strategies alone cannot determine success in English learning, despite their crucial role. In order to achieve the ultimate goal of mastering English, many student interviewees stated that there were other contributing factors. Those factors were, for example, an interest in English, an aptitude for language learning, effort investment in learning, or determination.

CONCLUSION

The findings from this research prove to have pivotal implications for both learners and teachers in the South Sudanese context. Language learning strategies, particularly within the tertiary environment, have moved beyond rote learning and grammar exercises. The current strategies and processes of language learning at the tertiary level are also dependent on many factors such as individual aptitude, perseverance, hard work, and the teacher and student's positive attitudes. What was found was the attribution of English learning success to multiple elements, which is a positive perception. This deters the myth of the absolute power of any single learning strategy in second language learning. It has major implications for the teaching profession, in that the promotion of teaching and learning strategies need to go hand in hand with other important tasks, such as the stimulation of learning interests, the strengthening of learning determination, and the encouragement of learning efforts on the part of students.

The findings from this research therefore can be used to improve the lecturers teaching and the learners learning in a number of ways. Through the sharing of the current research results with both the lecturers and the learners, an awareness of the strategies that are available can be developed. If lecturers can understand the importance and significance of the use of second language learning strategies and if they can pass on this knowledge and practice to the learners, it would be highly beneficial.

REFERENCES

Al-Nofaie, H. (2010). *The attitudes of teachers and students towards using Arabic in EFL classrooms in Saudi public schools*. Novitas-ROYAL, 4 (1), 64-95

- Ashar, H., & Skenes, R. (1993). Can Tinto's student departure model be applied to non-traditional students? *Adult Education Quarterly*, 43(2), 90-100.
- Burnes, N. and Grove, S. K. (2003). *The Practice of Nursing Research Conduct, Critique and Utilisation*. Toronto: WB Saunders Company.
- Chamot A U & O'Malley M. (1990). *The CALLA handbook: implementing the cognitive academic language learning approach*. New Jersey: Reading.
- Chang, C. (2010). *Language learning strategy profile of English as foreign language learners in Taiwan: A comparative case study*. London: Crane Publishing Co. Ltd.
- Dillon and Christy, S. (2008). *The effect of class size on student achievement in higher education: Applying an earnings function*. ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED482389.
- Dornyei, Z. (2008). *Motivational strategies in the language classroom*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Dyer, J.R., Shatz, M., & Wellman, H.M. (2000). *Children's books as a source of mental state information*. *Cognitive Development*, 15, 17-37.
- Ferguson, G. (2003). *Classroom code-switching in post-colonial contexts: functions, attitudes and policies*. *AILA Review*, 16, 38-51.
- Harmer, J. (1987). *Teaching and Learning Grammar*. London: Longman.
- Huang, C. (2004). *Empowering Behavior, Self-efficacy and Satisfaction: An Analysis Using Structural Equation Model Method*. International Conference on Business, Honolulu, Hawaii.
- Kameir and al Watheg. (ed). (2005). *John Garang vision of New Sudan: Rebuilding the Sudanese state*. Cairo: Roya Publishers.
- Keil, J. and Partell, P. J. (1997). *The effect of class size on student performance and retention at Binghamton University*. Office of Budget and Institutional Research: Binghamton University.
- Power, T and Simpson, J. (2011). *Scoping Mission for an English Language Training (ELT) Programme in South Sudan*. Final Report. Department for International Development, Cambridge, UK.
- Richard, J and Rodger, T (2001). *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richard, J.C and Rodgers, T. (2006). *Communicative language teaching*. New York: CUP.
- Rivers, W. M. (1992). *Ten principles of interactive language learning and teaching*. In W. M. Rivers (Ed.), *Teaching languages in college: Curriculum and content* (pp. 373-392). Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Co.
- Simpson, A. (ed), (2008). *Language and National identity in Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
-