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Implementing Communicative Approaches in English Language Teaching: The Case of Burkina Faso

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ARTICLE INFORMATION	ABSTRACT

This article explores the implementation of communicative approaches in English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching in Burkina Faso. Ten years after the revision of the syllabi, the implementation of communicative approaches in EFL teaching is still lagging. Teachers are still struggling to enact communicative approaches in the classroom. This article seeks to understand the factors that hinder the achievement of the communicative goals set by policymakers. This article investigates those hindrances under the lens of teachers who are the expected enactors of communicative approaches in the classroom. It used a mixed methodology for data collection, and the participants are teachers and teacher supervisors. Data analysis consisted of the integration of quantitative data into qualitative thematic units of analysis. The findings revealed that the implementation of communicative approaches did not go beyond the definition of the communicative goal and the design of communicative syllabi. The textbooks and the teaching methodologies remained traditional and teachers did not receive appropriate contextualized training to apply communicative approaches in their classes.

1. Introduction

This article explores the implementation of the syllabi of English as a foreign language teaching in Burkina Faso. The author is particularly interested in the syllabi implemented in middle schools since 2010 to develop the communicative competence of English language learners. Policymakers in Burkina Faso have adopted communicative competence as the objective of foreign language teaching since 1983. In 2010, the goal of communicative competence was translated into the classroom through the revision of the former grammatical syllabi and the design and implementation of functional syllabi (Some-Guiebre, 2018).

The revision and design of the syllabi were not followed by the implementation of communicative competence in the classrooms. More than ten years after implementing the new syllabi, the concept of communicative competence remains a myth in the educational system in Burkina Faso. English language learners are still unable to hold basic communications in the target language. Teachers seem to focus their teaching on grammar and vocabulary lessons, while communicative activities seem nonexistent. This article investigates the hindrances to the implementation of functional syllabi designed for classroom activities since 2010. Data collection methodology is mixed using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Research participants are all English as a foreign language teachers who received formal preservice training at the local teacher education college.

2. A view on Communicative competence

Communicative competence was introduced in English language teaching towards the late 1970s with Hymes (1972) as its leading proponent (Kramsch, 2006). Hymes' view of communicative competence responded to Chomsky's disregard for social factors involved in language learning (Celce-Murcia, 2007). Hymes' view of language teaching breaks with the traditional perspective, which is a set of grammatical structures—phonemes, morphemes, and syntax—that could be learned through extensive drilling of grammatical patterns and pronunciation (Savignon, 2018; p. 2). Besides, Savignon argues that communicative competence exposes learners to grammatical structures and "norms of usage and appropriacy in a given social context" (p. 2).

According to Celce-Murcia (2007), Hymes (1972) goes beyond the linguistic perspective of language learning to include "sociolinguistic competence (the rules for using language appropriately in context) to account for language acquisition and language use" (p. 42).   It has afterward been discussed mainly in the literature and has taken several perspectives. This article relies on the perspective of Canale & Swain (1980) that communicative competence involves grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. According to Canale & Swain, grammatical competence considers lexical knowledge and morphology, syntax, and semantics rules. As for sociolinguistic competence, it focuses on knowledge of sociocultural rules of language and discourse. Finally, strategic competence implies the use of verbal and nonverbal strategies in communication.

Jonhson (2001) sustains this view of Canale & Swain and discusses systemic competence instead of grammatical competence. Systemic competence argues that pronunciation, morphology, syntax, and semantics should be considered in acquiring communicative competence. In the same line, Byran & Mendez (2009:501) argues that students should be allowed to practice and internalize grammatical structures and sociocultural, strategic, and discourse factors of the language.

The adoption of communicative competence as the goal of language teaching implies the use of communicative approaches in foreign language teaching. It assumes that teachers need to depart from traditional teaching approaches, which according to Savignon (2018), is based on conscious towards an unconscious acquisition of oral and written language. The rise of communicative competence led to a diversity of terms inducing communicative teaching, such as "task-based," "interactive," and "process-oriented," "inductive-oriented" or "discovery-oriented." (Savignon, 2018; p. 6). Communicative competence has also led to the development of communicative language teaching, which is the communicative teaching approach discussed in preservice and in-service teachers' training. Dornyei (2009) advocates for communicative language teaching and writes that it is a "methodology centered around the learner's participatory experience in meaningful L2 interaction in (often simulated) communicative situations, which underscored the significance of less structured and more creative language tasks" (p. 34). Similarly, Saleh (2013) argues that "integrating communication and learner-centredness as two complementary aspects of FL instructional strategies may lead to improving students' communication skills" (p. 107). The author claims that communicative activities such as roleplays, group work, games, and problem-solving are opportunities for learners to develop grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic competencies.

However, the development of those competencies requires a revision of syllabi, teaching methodologies, teacher training, and the development of appropriate teaching materials (Canale & Swain, 1980). Riquois (2010) makes a similar argument and points out that communicative approaches require a profound transformation of learning and teaching practices. She writes that textbooks, teaching methodologies, and syllabi should be up to date with the new teaching goals. Teaching departs from isolated teaching of language parts to an integrative teaching approach. Unfortunately, the adoption of communicative competence as the goal of EFL teaching in Burkina Faso and the implementation of functional syllabi are scarcely conducive to any profound transformation of language teaching. As Some-Guiebre (2020) points out, the revision of the syllabi was not followed by a revision of the text and the teaching methodologies.

Quinghong (2009) notes that textbooks are crucial to the development of communicative skills. He advocates for authentic materials, including texts based on learners' daily lives, not explicitly written for learning purposes (Wallace, 1992).   Authentic materials provide opportunities for interaction with language usage rather than with the structures (Bernardo, 2006). Authentic materials expose learners to language that can be used outside the classroom.

The adoption of communicative approaches also entails a revision of syllabi, which allows policymakers and teachers to establish a relationship between learners' needs and objectives and the activities carried out in the classroom (Yalden, 1983). Hence, policymakers should base syllabus design on the needs of learners (Johnson, 2001). Paradowski (2002) states that the first step to designing a syllabus is an analysis of learners' needs through a collection of data on learners, their realities, their objectives, and their communicative needs. Some-Guiebre (2018), however, argues that the themes discussed in the functional syllabi in use in EFL teaching in Burkina Faso betray the need to consider learners' needs in the design.

3. Methodology
The data collection methodology used in this research was mixed discussed in Cresswell (2016), an approach combining qualitative and quantitative data and integrating the two forms of data. Mixed methods offer an opportunity for a complete understanding of the topic investigated. (Cresswell, 2016; Patton, 1990).

According to Cresswell (2016), the diversification of methodologies used to collect data allows a detailed description of the phenomenon and increases the validity of the data collected. Mixed methods research is appropriate when qualitative data or quantitative alone does not diversify the perspectives on the phenomenon (Klassen, et al., 2012). Klassen et al. assert that the quantitative approach is deductive and allows to measure the phenomenon. In contrast, the qualitative approach is inductive and leads to a process unknown to the researcher (Klassen et al, 2012: 378).

Data collection was sequential and consisted in collecting quantitative data before proceeding with qualitative methods (Small, 2011). The researcher collected the quantitative in three regions of the country with 250 EFL teachers. The first half of teacher participants (125) worked in rural areas while the second half worked in urban areas. As for the qualitative data, it included five teacher participants and two teacher supervisors. The researchers selected the five teacher participants of the qualitative data collection among the 250 participants of the quantitative data collection. All the participants are graduates from the local teacher education college.

The methods of data collection were questionnaires and interviews. The questionnaires were addressed to the 250 teachers, and the questions were mainly closed ones. The questionnaires were handed out to EFL teachers and collected directly by the researchers. The interviews for all five teachers and two teacher supervisors were semi-structured and held by phone and face to face. Each interview lasted 20 to 30 minutes. The semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to reformulate questions and probe participants' answers for a better understanding of the research phenomenon (Gray, 2004; Richard, 2013).

The analysis of quantitative data was descriptive based on generating percentages through excel. Then, the researcher integrated those percentages into the thematic units of analysis generated from the qualitative data.

4. Findings

Data analysis unveils a contradiction in using the syllabi implemented in English as a foreign language teaching in middle schools in Burkina Faso. 89,4% of questionnaire respondents report owning the syllabi in use. However, only 39,83% declare using the syllabus regularly. The interviews with the teacher supervisor confirmed those findings. Inspector Y, for instance, discussed that teachers are often unaware of the use of the syllabi. According to him, "even if the teachers understand the purpose of the functional syllabi in use, they do not know how to use them. Most teachers in our country have the syllabi, but they do not use them properly."

According to inspector X, teachers are reluctant to change their traditional teaching practices, which slows down the implementation of the functional syllabi that depart from traditional teaching. The questionnaire has revealed that 84.80% of teacher participants aware of communicative teacher approaches are reluctant to dismiss traditional teaching practices that they perceive as more practical for the context of Burkina Faso. In the same view, the teachers interviewed mentioned that communicative approaches were time-consuming and not appropriate for large classes. Teacher P argued as follows, "you know, we have more than seventy students per class. With such large classes, it is difficult for teachers to use communicative methodologies. We will finish the school year, and half the syllabi will not be covered."

Inspector X also pointed out that most teachers are not equipped to use the current syllabi. They have not received any formal training on communicative approaches to language teaching or the use of communicative syllabi. Only 30% of the teachers surveyed reported having received formal training on communicative language teaching during their preservice or in-service training. Paradoxically, none of them was aware of the use of the syllabi. Mr. R, for example, admitted that he heard about communicative approaches during his preservice training. However, he reported not knowing how to use the syllabi. He declared simply teaching the texts suggested and the structural elements enumerated in the syllabi. As for Mr. Z, he stated that he never heard about communicative approaches and had no notion about them. He chose to teach the structural elements pointed out on the syllabi simply. The questionnaire data confirmed this difficulty. 73% of the respondents reported not being aware of communicative approaches and argued using the syllabi as structural ones.

Teachers also discussed challenges relevant to the implementation of communicative approaches in rural areas. 100% of the teacher participants working in rural areas reported having access to little or no didactic resources to teach their students using communicative approaches. According to Mrs. O, to teach a lesson on picture description, students need to have the pictures in hand. Unfortunately, most schools do not offer possibilities of reproducing the images. Another option would be to hang a poster for the whole class to see. However, schools do not own posters and do not facilitate their acquisition.

Teacher supervisors also pointed out the lack of didactic materials as an issue that hinders the application of communicative approaches. They unveiled that a revision of textbooks did not follow the revision of teaching syllabi. The syllabi are communicative, and the textbooks are still based on traditional approaches to teaching. Mr. R, one of the participants, stated that he often uses the internet to find appropriate texts for his teaching. He said, "it is easier for me to find texts for my classes now that I am in an urban area. When I was in a rural area, I did not have internet access, and even if I knew about communicative approaches, I could not have access to proper documentation."

Besides, Mrs. S noticed that the syllabi suggest texts be studied in three of the four grade levels of middle school. In addition, the themes to be discussed do not correspond to those in the traditional textbook. She then deliberately chose not to study any text at that grade level and only teaches grammar and vocabulary lessons.

Teacher participants also raised issues regarding the content of the syllabi. All the teacher participants surveyed and interviewed noted that the syllabi include too many units to be discussed in only one academic year. One of them admitted having to decide between finishing the program and applying communicative approaches to language teaching. He said, "we have a choice to make. Either we work on finishing the program, or we focus on communicative approaches that are time-consuming. Generally, I choose to finish the program because we evaluate the children on the program for their middle school degree."

Another teacher revealed, "the syllabus is too large. In my school, we decided to go for what is more important. We can not covert all the units. So, we reorganized the syllabi for intermediary classes. However, we mostly still use traditional teaching methods."

The last point in the discussion is the nature of the texts suggested in the syllabi. According to teachers, they are impersonal, and students can hardly identify with them. Inspector X supports this view and argues that the texts are often theoretical and historical and do not appeal to the students' curiosity or interest. Teacher Y also added that his students are often not motivated to discuss the texts suggested in the syllabi. However, he added that the learners actively participated in classroom discussions whenever he modified the texts to connect them to their daily lives.

5. Discussion
From the perspective taken in the literature review, the development of communicative competence in EFL teaching entails the integration of grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence (Canale & Swain, 1980). Considering all these competencies assumes that teachers are willing and trained to apply communicative approaches to language teaching. However, the data analyzed for this paper unveiled that teachers struggle to implement communicative approaches for several reasons. Among those reasons, we can note the lack of training, the inadequacy of the syllabi, and mainly the reluctance of teachers to try a new approach. This lack of will is a hindrance to the principles of communicative competence, as discussed in Canale & Swain (1980), Jonhson (2001), and Byram & Mendez (2009).

It appears that the adoption of communicative competence as the objective of foreign language teaching in Burkina Faso did not lead to the development of new teaching strategies as suggested in Germain & Netten (2011). The traditional view of language acquisition through the development of grammatical competence seems to be much more valued at the expense of sociolinguistic and strategic competencies. It seems unreal that learners can develop communicative competence if there is no teaching strategy including input, output, and fluency (Germain & Netten, 2011).

Another hurdle to the implementation of the communicative approach is relevant to the use of the syllabus. The findings pointed out that teachers all have access to the syllabi. However, the syllabi display several irregularities that slow down its successful implementation. First, as the teachers discussed, the texts suggested in them are impersonal and irrelevant to learners' daily realities and interests. That irrelevance and impersonality of the texts are impediments to the acquisition of communicative competence, according to Quighong (2009) who asserts that didactic material is crucial in language acquisition. In addition, from Bernardo's (2006) perspective, the irrelevance of the texts does now allow learners to interact with each other and with content and hinders their motivation for language acquisition.

Besides, the syllabi in use were too ambitious and large as discussed in the findings. As a result, some teachers have made a deliberate choice to focus on finishing their programs at the expense of implementing communicative approaches to language teaching. That implies that those teachers browsed through the programs and disregarded the effects on language learning. The conscious decision to disregard communicative approaches infers that teachers ignore the objectives of foreign language teaching, the functional syllabi in use, the content of the themes suggested, and the interaction between learners, between learners and teachers, and between learners and didactic materials (Finocchiaro and Brumfit, 1983).

It also has to be noted that the lack of appropriate didactic material is a major handicap to the development of communicative competence. As Riquois (2010) discussed, communicative approaches recommend a deep transformation of teaching practices. The adoption of communicative approaches should then lead to the revision of the syllabi, the textbooks, and the teaching methodologies. However, if the syllabi were revised to develop functional ones, the textbooks and the teaching methodologies remained unchanged, creating a discrepancy in the implementation of communicative approaches (Some-Guiebre, 2021). That discrepancy favors a confusion that leads teachers to move into their comfort zones (focusing their teaching on grammar and reading comprehension) while minimizing communicative approaches deemed inappropriate.
6. Conclusion

The goal of this study was to explore the implementation of functional syllabi in English as a foreign language teaching in Burkina Faso. It sought to examine the challenges that impede the successful implementation of the syllabi.

The findings revealed that teachers are reluctant to adhere to the concept of communicative competence. Although some of the teacher participants have notions of communicative competence, they admit not applying it to their classrooms because they deem it not appropriate for the context of Burkina Faso which is characterized by large classes, limited time devoted to English classes, and inadequate training of teachers in the concept of communicative competence and in the use of the functional syllabi.

The findings also revealed the lack of adequate didactic material. The lack of didactic material seemed more crucial in rural areas where teachers have little to no access to resources appropriate for English language teaching. Another issue raised in the article is the nature of the texts suggested in the functional syllabi, which was viewed as impersonal by the participants, and the large number of units that pressures teachers to rush through the programs.

The findings also suggested the lack of congruence between the functional syllabi and the traditional-based textbooks which created confusion and led teachers to remain in their comfort zone with traditional teaching approaches. The adoption of communicative competence and the revision of the syllabi appear insufficient in implementing communicative approaches. It would be essential to revise teaching materials and teaching methodologies to motivate teachers to change teaching approaches successfully.

This paper is an important contribution to research on communicative approaches in the context of foreign language teaching. Although the issue is largely dealt with in the literature, very few studies address issues related to English as a foreign language in Africa and mostly in francophone Africa. It was however limited by the number of schools and teachers it targeted. A study on a larger scope might have been more enlightening. Future research might be useful to explore and compare different regions of the country and also examine teacher education programs and the extent to which they address communicative competence.

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