Challenges Encountered by ESL Students in The Development of Communicative Competence Skills in Lesotho

Sekoai Elliot Nkhi

Faculty of Communication and Media Broadcast, Limkokwing UniversityLesotho, Moshoeshoe Road, Maseru, 101, Lesotho

senelliot@gmail.com

Thapelo Vincent Lebona

Faculty of Communication and Media Broadcast, Limkokwing UniversityLesotho, Moshoeshoe Road, Maseru, 101, Lesotho

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Abstract

This study explored the challenges that undergraduate tertiary students encounter in the development of communicative competence skills in three selected tertiary institutions in Lesotho. Adopting the qualitative approach, the study employed a case study design for data collection strategies which included face-to-face interviews with lecturers (n=11), focus group discussions with students (n=100) as well as classroom observations (n=2). The findings from face-to-face interviews revealed that traditional methodologies which are mostly employed in the language classrooms because of large classrooms do not enhance students' communicative competence. Furthermore, the findings from focus group discussions showed lack of motivation to learn English language and the anxiety caused by the fear to speak the target language. Further noted from the observations is that lack of language exposure due to scarcity of interactive activities in the classrooms may further render students communicatively incompetent. On these premises, the study thus recommends that students should be exposed to language through activities that encourage interaction. Also recommended is that lecturers should balance fluency and accuracy activities so as to improve students' discourse, linguistic, interactional as well as strategic competencies.

1. INTRODUCTION

The field of second language acquisition (SLA) research explores the way English as second language learners attain communicative competence in second language (L2). Many communicative language teaching (CLT) theorists define communicative competence differently, thus differentiating it from linguistic competence. For instance, Canale and Swain (1980) define communicative competence as a linguistic term, denoting the speaker's grammatical knowledge of syntax, morphology as well as social knowledge about how and when to use utterances in appropriate contexts. Linguistic competence is also defined as the implicit knowledge of the language structure (Kamiya, 2006; Ohno,

2006; CelceMurcia, 2007; Michaud, 2015; Remache, 2016). Therefore, in this study, communicative competence can be understood as the tertiary students' balanced knowledge of linguistic rules and sociocultural behaviours of the use of the target language.

Research on SLA has been conducted from various perspectives over the years. According to O'Grady et al. (1997), researchers intended to advance the way in which second languages were taught towards learners' communicative competence. They were also interested in determining how these languages were learned. This implies that SLA researchers are no longer interested in how second languages are learnt, but how they are acquired (Moulton, 2009). According to Krashen (2013), language learning occurs consciously through instructions in the classroom. Here learners' mistakes are corrected immediately as they arise. Language acquisition, on the other hand, occurs subconsciously, suggesting that learners are unaware that they are 'picking up a language' because of their unconsciously internalised or stored knowledge in their brains (Krashen, 2013).

Language teaching could thus be viewed as stressing the importance of interaction between learners and teachers, with teachers no longer being sources of information or transmitters of knowledge but becoming facilitators. Therefore, such SLA theories such as the behaviorism, mentalism (innatism), cognitivism (rationalism/developmentalism) and interactionism came into being (Lightbrown& Spada, 2006; Brown, 2007; Moulton, 2009; Richards, 2014; & Richard, 2015). This study, therefore, sought to explore the challenges that English as a second language (ESL) undergraduate students at the three selected Lesotho universities encounter in developing communicative competence skills. However, there are no studies conducted in Lesotho on the aforementioned challenges. For instance, a study conducted by EkanjumeIlongo (2015) investigated how English was taught in one University in Lesothoand the challenges that lecturers encountered, but students' challenges were not investigated, so this study sought to fill this gap by investigating the challenges encountered by English as second language (ESL) undergraduate students in the development of communicative competence skills. The study thus sought to answer the following question.

1. What challenges do English as second language undergraduate students encounter in the development of communicative competence skills?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The enquiry therefore adopted Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of second language learning and acquisition which underpins this study. This theory views language learning and acquisition as the product of interaction between lecturers and students. For communicative competence, students should be exposed to input that encourages them to interact amongst themselves, with a lecturer acting mainly as a facilitator. The theory has been found to answer the main question of the study, focusing on the challenges facing students in developing communicative competence and the teaching strategies employed by lecturers in their classrooms. Literature states that teaching methods which do not encourage interaction amongst students in the classroom cause students' communicative incompetence. Literature further attests that lecturers teach many students in one classroom in which case have difficulty enhancing students' communicative competence. However, it is not clear how this problem can be averted. The sociocultural theory, however, discourages transmission of knowledge, but it

encourages interaction between lecturers and students where lecturers act as mediators. This transmission of knowledge is what Freire (2014) terms 'the banking concept'. The banking concept of education sees students as containers or piggy banks wherein information is deposited and then withdrawn during examinations. However, Freire (2014) views communication as the means through which students' learning and acquisition of English language can hold meaning.

2.1 Language learning and ESL development

The behaviourist theory views children as learning to speak from other human role models through a process which includes rewards and practice (Cooter &Reutzel, 2004; Richard, 2015). According to Willis (1997), Moulton (2009) and Lightbrown and Spada (2006), teaching approaches such as audiolingual and presentation, practice and production (PPP) are behaviorist, emphasizing habit formation and the role of practice in English as a second language (ESL) in classrooms. In this view, language involves the formation of habits and controlled responses to previously rehearsed dialogues, resulting in teacher training which stresses mimicry and rote learning (Cooter &Reutzel, 2004; Lightbrown& Spada, 2006; Moulton, 2009). However, this theory prompted Chomsky's (1965) syntactic structures whereupon he purports his linguistic theory of generative grammar that shifted fundamentally from structuralism and behaviorism (Cadzen& Courtney, 1996; Taha &Reishaan, 2008).

The major purpose of Chomsky's generative grammar presented a way of analyzing syntactic structures which consider this underlying level of form. To achieve the aim, Chomsky drew a radical distinction from Saussure's (1959) in Naoua (2016) 'langue' and 'parole' that differentiates between a person's tacit knowledge of rules of a language and the actual utterance of that language in real situations. The author referred to the first distinction as competence (one's ability to use language) and second performance (the real demonstration of competence in speaking and listening) (Phillips & Tan, 2005; Taha &Reishaan, 2008; Naoua, 2016). Chomsky argued that linguistics must concern the study of competence, not just confining itself to performance (Clark & Clark, 1977; Crystal, 1987; Ohno, 2006; Taha & Reishaan, 2008; Remache, 2016). This suggests that students must preferably be taught to be communicatively competent in English language before focusing on 'performance'. Researchers therefore believe that students cannot be taught how to use a language in situations that require listening and speaking (performance) without being exposed to how to use it first (competence) in the classroom. Performance could thus be understood as the product of competence and not vice versa.

However, Chomsky's notion of competence was met with criticisms by such researchers as Dell Hymes and Michael Halliday amongst others. Hymes (1972) opposes Chomsky's idea in that he excluded the sociocultural aspects in his study of language. In consonance, Halliday (1970) in Remache (2016) refutes the dissimilarity between competence and performance as being of little use in a sociological context. Another researcher who drew on Hymes' and Halliday'snotions of communicative competence is Munby (1972) who asserts that sociocultural factors must form the basis of language because it is the backbone of social interactions. On this basis, students must be taught to use language through interactions, not only with peers in the classroom, but also outside in their societies.

Drawing on Hyme's thought of communicative competence, Widdowson (1973) stipulates that students acquire the knowledge of grammar and knowledge of appropriateness, that is, how to

use a language correctly in different contexts (Remache, 2016). Chomsky's view on language acquisition thus contrasts with the social cultural theory which sees language as the product of the society, with students having to interact with their classmates and the society. For that reason, the researcher believes that in learning and acquiring a second language, it is essential for students to develop ways of communicating with others using the target language besides phonological and lexicogrammatical knowledge. Therefore, adopting interactive teaching strategies can stimulate an interaction between students and lecturers.

Interaction is thus central to second language acquisition. One of the ways through which interactionists explain how students acquire a second language is through input. According to Krashen (2013), Long (2017) and Loewen and Sato (2017), students acquire second language when the comprehensible input is a bit higher than the current level of the acquired competence. On this basis, lecturers should teach students language structures beyond their knowledge, further suggesting that messages delivered to students must be understandable even though they are higher than their current level. Lecturers should include students in making choices of the intended messages, drawing on what students like most because it can increase their motivation to learn. In agreement, Gass (1997) accords that "Input is perhaps the single most important concept of second language acquisition. It is trivial to point out that no individual can learn a language without input of some sort" (p.1). Noted here is that students acquire language in only one way such as comprehending messages, or receiving a comprehensible input.

Notably, Krashen (2013) maintains an adequate comprehensible input as necessary for automatic acquisition of grammar. In this view, the deliberate or explicit teaching of grammar is not necessary, since it can be acquired subliminally with the aid of the language acquisition device (LAD) (Brown, 2007; Schutz, 2019). Lecturers could thus expose students to listening and reading materials so as to help them to learn grammar unconsciously, the reading process which I consider to lead to improved linguistic repertoire. Listening to the target language use could also expand students' lexicon, followed by writing down new words used for the first time around them; they could then check meanings of such words later in their dictionaries. As a result, they could use newly acquired lexical items as part of their own lexicon in their future discussions with their lecturers and/or classmates.

According to Richards (2006), students should partake in classroom activities meant for promoting cooperation rather than individualism. Such activities can involve debates or role plays to allow students to interact with one another. Therefore, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZDP) in students would be improved, with slow students learning from the more advanced ones (Zhang, 2009; Lantolf, 2011). In the process, students could also easily listen to their classmates in group work or pair work, instead of over relying on their lecturers. This suggests that they are expected to take on a greater degree of accountability for their own learning as independent users of L2. For this to happen, lecturers should just be facilitating and monitoring for 'scaffolding', the means by which lecturers assist students against any communication breakdown or correction of mistakes during interactions (Lantolf & Beckett, 2009).

There are several emotive determinants for second language acquisition, including motivation, self confidence, and anxiety (Patrick, 2019; Mhlongo et al., 2020; Tseng, 2021). For Krashen (2013) and Patrick (2019), these variables both restricting and permitting factors for second language acquisition. On the one hand, restriction thwarts language students from fully using

the comprehensible input. When this emotive filter is up, the comprehensible input does not extend to language acquisition device (LAD).On the other hand, when it is down, it will permit the input to be conveyed to the LAD (Johnson, 2004; Krashen, 2013). As such, students should be motivated to learn because if they are not motivated, even good lecturers in terms of language teaching and facilitating will not be able to get through them. One of the researchers has also witnessed this phenomenon in one of his English lessons that students with low motivation do not perform well.

Lecturers, therefore, should ensure that they uplift students' spirit for finding English more interesting to learn in class. The abovementioned postulations further imply that lecturers should ascertain students' motivation and self-confidence so as to easily acquire second language, thus leading to their improved communicative competence in English. Motivation can also be cultivated by not interrupting students or overcorrecting their errors when speaking (Mangubhai, 2006). Literature has shown a correction of such errors as causing students' loss of confidence and motivation. Therefore, we agree that students should be given time to play in class through activities which they like so that they can acquire the language unconsciously.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative approach and a multiple case study design. Nonparticipant and naturalistic observations were employed in this study to gather data on the type of teaching strategies that lecturers employed in their classrooms, and how such approaches affected the development of students' communicative competence skills (Creswell, 2014; Fraenkel et al., 2015; Ryan, 2019). Therefore, a total of two hundred and twenty (n=120) students from one institution was observed, and they were observed as they were taught, especially the kind of behavior they displayed during instructions and how they interacted with their lecturers. Students were therefore assigned labels or pseudonyms; female students were labelled as SOf1, SOf2…while males were assigned SOm1, SOm2 etc. Furthermore, focus group discussions with students (n=100) on the kind of challenges they encounter in the development of their communicative competence as well as face-to-face interviews with lecturers (n=11) from the three selected institutions were employed.

 It was important therefore to seek permission from the gate keepers before collecting data. The researchers thus sought permission from the Universities' authorities. Researchers introduced themselves with an ethical clearance certificate number 10260307_CREC_CHS_2021 to the Registrars of the selected Universities who wrote them consent letters which they took with them to the participants. Participants were further told that participation in the study was voluntary and therefore they were free to withdraw should they feel uncomfortable (Creswell, 2014). Participants were given consent forms to fill before interviews started. Furthermore, data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis approach. We employed a thematic analysis within the latent approach because meanings were attached to what data revealed. That is, we went beyond what the participants have said by examining and identifying the implicit ideas, theories and conceptual interpretations within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Palmer & Coe, 2020; Javadi & Zarea, 2016). In ensuring the credibility of findings, we took the findings back to the participants to see if their views were captured accordingly. Furthermore, each researcher went through the

study alone before taking it to our colleagues for their constructive criticism. Finally, the study was passed to the language editor who ensured that it was properly written.

3.1 Analysis

Focus group discussions with students (n=100) revealed the following themes: language anxiety, lack of motivation and deficiency in grammar.

3.1.1 Language anxiety

Concerning language anxiety, students provided different reasons why they always become anxious. One of the reasons cited as their greatest challenge was that of classroom presentations. The students mentioned that standing in front of others and speaking English made them sweat. They cited that one of the reasons for the fear to speak was brought about by the fact that their English was not good at all. One student expressed the following:

"Whenever I have to speak, especially during presentations, I feel so scared. One of the reasons is my English. Whenever we make grammatical mistakes, other students laugh at us, so it is really difficult to speak under such circumstances" (SM20).

Another student had a similar concern which was caused by his classmates. This is what he said:

"Our classmates from private schools are the ones who intimidate us because their English is so good, so much that you see some lecturers smiling whenever they roll their tongues. So, for me it becomes so difficult to speak especially after they have spoken" (SM15).

Another response from (SM21) raised an important issue that needs close attention from lecturers as follows:

"When we try to speak English in class, there are those who think they know better and they always laugh at us, so it discourages us".

It is therefore probable considering the above comments that these students are the ones who hide behind others during classroom discussions because they are afraid to speak. Others might as well develop a negative attitude towards English language. Furthermore, other students mentioned that teachers from high school discouraged them from speaking because they favoured those who spoke with particular accent over those whose accent was not fancy. That played a negative role because it is now affecting them since they were not given enough time to speak. One student mentioned that:

"I never had a chance to speak in class, even when there were debates competitions, only those from private schools were always at the fore front. That made some of us feel inferior because we never get to stand before others, and that is why I do not feel comfortable to stand and speak English before people" (SM25).

Corrections of mistakes by their former teachers and their current English language lecturers seem to be another cause of anxiety. One student verified such corrections as in:

"One lecturer once stopped me while I was speaking; he corrected me and after that correction, I had forgotten everything that I had intended to speak. I just stood there tonguetight and my presentation was gone.

I wished he could have listened and then corrected me after I had finished" (SF14).

Another student added that:

"I am a shy person, so if somebody interrupts me while I am speaking, everything just vanishes. The same applies to other students who will be laughing at us even if our lecturers do not interrupt us. Kannete (really) they make us so uncomfortable, that is why I do not like to speak in class" (SM17).

The findings from students further reveal that intimidation went beyond the classroom setting. Apparently, the students who were affected here were mostly majoring in Journalism while others in Broadcasting. This is what one Journalism student said:

"Hmmm, where do I even begin? It is so challenging with my level of English, especially when I have to go outside to gather news. I once had to interview a white person and the interview lasted longer than I had anticipated because the white man kept correcting my mistakes every time, I tried to ask him a question. I was no longer comfortable at all" (SF27).

Another student from Broadcasting added the following:

"I am a Broadcasting student, and it is so challenging to broadcast anything in English. Sometimes we are asked to take turns during our radio programmes in class. Our lecturer mostly likes to take part and we sometimes have to ask her questions. One time, I was sweating, and my voice was shaking because I did not know which questions to ask. These exercises are important because they help us to prepare for life after school, but I sometimes wish that they were done in Sesotho because iyhoooo…English"! (SF30)

The above comments seem to imply that students faced challenges in English which might obstruct their future. Such students' motivation might be low.

Improper teaching approaches as mentioned by most students seem to be another cause of language anxiety. One student complained as follows:

"I am from an English language medium school where everything was done in English. Even ladies who were sweeping the school yard communicated with us in English. Our teachers never spoke Sesotho in class as they were expatriates. We were greatly exposed; however, I feel like my English is declining because here we are taught in Sesotho and English. Furthermore, lecturers come to class, teach and then go out or they sometimes read for us and then leave" (SF29).

This remark gives the impression that students who have been exposed to English from high school might see their level of communicative competence drop because of lack of exposure.

The above comments seem to suggest that students are not comfortable to speak English language because of what they were subjected to previously. It is therefore probable that students who have a negative attitude towards English are those from previously disadvantaged backgrounds.

3.1. 2. Lack of motivation

Regarding the issue of motivation, students gave several reasons for their lack thereof. Some students revealed that they were not motivated enough to study in general, so English language was no exception. Most of them mentioned that they learned only to obtain a degree, so immersing themselves in studying was not what they wanted. One student commented as follows:

"I do not want to lie I am not here because I wanted to be educated; I just want to pass and get a degree. That is why I am not getting good marks in English because I am not interested in speaking it" (SF45).

Another student apparently had a different motivation to learn English, and he expressed the following:

"I wanted to be an English language teacher because I heard that teachers are paid better that than most civil servants, and it is not hard to find a job as a teacher. I just want to complete the course and then start looking for a job" (SM33).

An interesting comment was raised by (SF35) regarding her reasons for majoring in English language. This is what she said:

"I did not want to be a teacher, but I was forced to be one by my father who is an English language teacher. I wanted to be something else, so I am just doing this teaching thing for my parents" (SF35).

The responses from students seem to indicate lack of interest in the acquisition and learning of English, and this makes it possible for them to be communicatively incompetent.

Most of the students further reported their lack of confidence in English because of their poor backgrounds, so they expect lecturers to be their sources of motivation. Their comments therefore seemed to suggest that lecturers could not come to class to teach and then go out without motivating them. For them, motivation is very important because it makes them feel like they are on the right path. Some say they did not have enough information about their courses of study, so if lecturers motivate them enough, they can do better and even those students who are negative can change their attitudes if motivation is sufficient. Below are some of their comments.

"As an aspiring journalist, I always expect my lecturers to tell me more about journalism and the kind of contribution I can make. I want to be a good writer, so this means that my English lecturer ought to inspire us so that I can be a good writer. For me, an inspiration can be in the form of inviting some journalists or editors who can give us some good tips when it comes to news writing" (SF36).

Another student seemingly agreed with (SF36)'s suggestion as follows:

"Our lecturers play an important role to our learning. It does not matter in which subject, so their motivation makes us want to be like them or to be even better than them" (SF38).

Motivation seems to be an important factor for students' learning. So, if students believe that they can learn best when they are highly motivated, it is possible based on their comments that motivation can greatly help them to improve their English language skills.

3.1.3. Deficiency in grammar

Grammar appeared to be one of the factors that students revealed as a challenge. Students who cited this were mostly those who attended English-medium schools. Asked about what their challenge was concerning grammar, the students mentioned that they were not taught sufficient grammar at high school. This is because their teachers focused on their spoken skills more than anything else. As a result, they became more competent in spoken discourse than in written language. One student expressed the following:

"I seriously have a problem when it comes to written English. I always get the spelling wrong and I write as though I am speaking" (SM55).

Another student added by saying the following:

"Writing is my weakness because we never get to write a lot at high school, so it becomes a real challenge for me whenever I have to write" (SF52).

When asked about the causes of grammatical challenges besides not being taught enough grammar, most revealed that social media impacted on them negatively because of their ample exposure to it. This is how one student expressed her feelings:

"I make silly grammatical mistakes when I have to write formally because of the short forms that we use when we chat with my friends. We use contracted forms and we also do not follow any grammatical rule. This impacts us negatively because we tend to transfer those mistakes to our formal writing" (SF50).

A group of students from one institution also complained that their grammar was not good, especially in academic writing because they do not understand the academic language. They highlighted that their curriculum is designed in such a way that their English language lecturers come to class with what they have been told to teach by their superiors. As a result, lecturers do not have control over the content. They went further to show that they are mostly given scenarios to apply the language, and it was difficult to apply what they are not taught. This is what one student observed:

"Our module which I thought was English language when I arrived here is called communication and study skills. So, we are using scenarios to apply the language that they think we know from high school. It is not always the case because we were never taught academic writing in English. I do not know what kind of language to use when writing because I only understand the language of compositions and comprehensions" (SF60).

Another comment further highlighted students' dissatisfaction, and one student stated:

"Our lecturer was complaining about our written language. She told us that we use colourful English which is not applicable in academic writing. What is surprising is that we are not taught how to write, but they expect us to write properly" (SM62).

Students who complained about lack of exposure seemed to have fewer problems with grammar, which they considered one component of language to which they were mostly exposed from high school. So, they claimed to have committed fewer grammatical errors in writing. One may assume that students who were exposed to spoken discourse could not write properly

3.2 Lecturers' interviews

Face-to-face interviews with lecturers (n=11) revealed the following themes; overcrowding and traditional teaching methods.

3.2.1 Over-crowding

Another question was in relation to the challenges encountered when employing communicative approaches. Some lecturers stated that they taught larger classes, so it was a bit challenging because methods such us discussions do not need large groups of students for them to be affective. One lecturer expressed the following:

"Discussions become ineffective in big classes because some students can successfully hide behind others, and that way they do not serve the purpose of communication" (LM3).

Similarly, (LM6) further added the following comments: "Well, that depends entirely on the size of the class. You may find that in other cases, we have big classes and students mostly become passive. Some will be discussing issues out of the class which means that once you group them to discuss, you actually give them time to gossip, most of them even do it in Sesotho, pretending to be speaking English once they see you approaching".

The issue of class size seems to be a stumbling block to smooth implementation of discussion as one of the communicative approaches aimed at enhancing students' communicative competence skills. Students also appear to be resistant to this approach by deciding not to fully participate in discussions. This was further evident in one of the classroom observations where students seemed to discuss other things than the topic to be discussed.

3.2.2 Traditional teaching methods

Because of the challenges cited above regarding some teaching approaches, most lecturers stated that they resort to a lecture method. Some further revealed that they use a lecture method in larger classes while others stated that most students do not participate in other classroom activities. All lecturers interviewed reported to be using a lecture method when introducing new concepts. Some lecturers expressed the following.

"It depends on the level of our study of the students. For first years, you find that you are dealing with people who are not familiar with the journalism jargon, so for the first six lectures, I teach them. It becomes bottom down kind of approach so that they get to know the concepts first before I expose them to other methods" (LM5).

Another lecturer seemed to have no option but to lecture students especially if they appear not to understand some concepts.

"…at times when I realise that they are totally clueless of things, I resort to what I call direct instruction which is called lecturing approach…" (LM1).

Some issues appeared to be beyond some lecturers' control and as a result, the resorted to lecturing. This is what one of the affected lecturers said:

"Currently because of Covid-19 we are forced to use lecture method when we have physical classes because we cannot mingle with the students" (LF1).

Another lecturer who appeared to employ several traditional methods in one lecture commented as follows:

"Lecturing is predominant but this other two are happening within lecturing. A direct method is one of them; direct method is when you teach using the target language only. I do also use grammar translation, but I do not use it more often" (LM3).

Given the above comments regarding the lecturers' strategies in their classrooms, a lecture method appeared to be dominant. From their comments it could be noted that lecturers strive to implement interactive strategies, despite the challenge of large classes involving passive students not easily reached by lecturers. This further suggests that students' communicative competence skills would not be easily enhanced.

The following theme emerged from data gathered from classroom observations.

-Traditional methodologies (lecture, direct and grammar translation methods)

Observation schedule 1
Date: February 2022   **Module: Functional English**
Start time: 12:00   **Year: 1**
End time: 2:00 Topic: Sentences
Description of the lesson/class:

There were 55 students cramped in this classroom which seemed to accommodate 30 students maximum. There were 45 female and 10 male students. They were first-year students who appeared to be uneasy. They were seated in rows and there was no space for the lecturer to move in between the rows. Because of lack of space, the researcher had to sit in front of the class next to the door. The researcher was unable to sit at the back where he would do during most of the classroom observations that were conducted. The researcher therefore had to focus on students' every move from the front. The researcher tried as much as possible to relax and smile all the time so that he could minimise the Hawthorne's effect. Students appeared relaxed and seemed to continue with their class as usual. The lecture lasted two hours in which the lecturer did most of the talking, with minimal engagement with students.

The observers' notes

The lecturer mostly lectured to the students, but he tried as much as he could to engage them. He spoke English for most of the time and he spoke Sesotho only in cases where he clarified some issues. However, he did not allow his students to answer in Sesotho; he strictly told them to speak English. The researcher, therefore, realised that most students would want to answer questions, yet facing challenges of answering in English, even though they appeared to have answers. For instance, he was teaching them how to develop a paragraph and the definition of a sentence. He, therefore, asked them what a sentence is, the question to which the students provided different, but wrong answers. He then constructed the following sentence: "soccer play boys during their spare time". He asked the students if the answer was correct or wrong. I could only note some commotion, coupled with murmuring among the students who apparently wanted to answer the question. However, the students' self-expression in English was a problem.

Observation schedule 2

Date: 17 March 2022   **Module: Communication and Studies English**

Start time: 12:00   **Year: 2**

End time: 2:00   **Topic: Parts of speech**

Description of the lesson/class:

There were not too many students in this class. Before commencing, the lecturer gave a paper to one student who appeared to be the class rep. The piece of paper was actually the attendance register which the researcher saw when one student who was seated in front of him signed. The researcher was unable to count the students because of their number, but the researcher referred to the register and there were 65 students in the classroom scattered all over the classroom. There were 50 female and 15 male students. Unlike in other classes where students mostly sat in rows, there was no proper sitting arrangement in this class. There was therefore insufficient space for the lecturer to move about and he mostly taught standing in one place. The researcher found a spot at the back where he sat and observed the instructional process. The lecturer then introduced the topic of the day, telling the students to take out their notebooks. He approached the white board and started writing notes. After writing he explained the notes and then asked students some questions.

The observer's notes

The lecturer used both English and Sesotho in his classroom. He mostly lectured in English, but he explained with examples mostly in Sesotho. This strategy seemed to work because most students understood, and they were able to answer when asked questions. The lecturer even allowed some of the students who the researcher saw struggling in English to answer in Sesotho. For those who were trying and yet committing some grammatical mistakes, the lecturer would use recast and the researcher realised that students were not anxious because they were not even aware that they were being corrected as they were speaking. For instance, one student (SOf40) said while trying to construct a sentence using the past tense; "I quited immediately after receiving my money". The lecturer did not interrupt the student, but after the student had finished talking, he said; "Ooh! I see, so you quit after receiving your money? What a clever move"! The student quickly corrected himself and said, "Yes sir I quit immediately after receiving my money". What the researcher observed therefore was that the student did not feel ashamed because the lecturer encouraged him to speak by not telling him directly that he made a mistake. There was a bit of interaction in this class, and the researcher assumed it was because the lecturer used both languages to teach.

4. Discussion

Findings of this study reveal that lecturers employ traditional teaching methods in their classrooms. This was made evident by some lecturers who reported that large classes did not leave them with any choice but to lecture students. Two approaches were reported to be dominant by lecturers which are direct and grammar translation. Lecturers attributed their traditional approaches to students who avoided communicating in the target language during discussions, some of whom hiding behind others. This finding echoes Li's (2003) study that some teachers decided to use the methods or strategies that they were comfortable with to teach their students. The classrooms cramped with students restricted the lecturers from moving about in to reach students, the finding which corroborates Ekanjume-Ilongo's (2015) observation that large classes prohibit lecturers from engaging actively with and knowing the needs of students.

A language classroom should serve as an oasis for the development of students' communicative competence skills because students spend more time in the classroom than any other place (Tran, 2023). However, large classes constrain cultivation of an ambience, with students taking part in their learning. Therefore, Hornberger and Vaish (2008) argue that students will not be communicatively competent in the target language in an environment where there are no opportunities for total involvement with the language. This finding brings back my argument that lecturers should split their classes in halves so as to have sizeable classes. We think that it is the only solution that can allow interaction in the classroom. We agree with Hornberger and Vaish (2008) and Ekanjume-Ilongo (2015) that students who are not immersed in a language cannot be communicatively competent in English. Furthermore, students who are not adequately exposed to language will likely end up lacking necessary motivation to learn the language and thus develop anxiety. We also believe that students would shy away from speaking, fearing to make mistakes in the target language.

Students further complained that some lecturers correct their mistakes as they speak which in turn makes them shy to speak. This finding is against Krashen and Terrell (1988), Spada (1997) and Mangubhai (2006) advice that lecturers should not to interrupt students' acquisition by correcting their mistakes; rather they should allow the natural order to take its course. We therefore agree with the above-mentioned authors' advice because students differ in abilities. This is because others have a strong foundation of English while others, especially from rural areas have a poor background, so they are mostly the ones who are going to feel uncomfortable when their mistakes are corrected. However, in one of the observed classrooms, one lecturer used recast, that is, the lecturer did not directly correct the student, but he waited for the student to finish speaking and then corrected the tense of the verb without humiliating the student. This is what the student said, "I quited immediately after receiving my money". The lecturer did not interrupt the student, but after the student had finished talking, he said; "Ooh! I see, so you quit after receiving your money? What a clever move"! The student quickly corrected himself and said, "Yes sir I quit immediately after receiving my money". This except shows that 'recast' can be a good strategy to encourage students to speak as suggested by Mangubhai (2006).

Furthermore, students cited lack of motivation as another challenge. Regarding this issue, Gardner (2006), Lai (2013) Almashy (2018), Chan (2021) and Shange (2021) assert that motivation is often utmost in the classroom context when students relish what is being taught. As such, stimulating instructional practices and co-operation amongst students as in working teams, pairs or small groups to accomplish a collective goal, can promote students' motivation (Dörnyei, 2005; Almashy, 2022). However, we believe that it is not going to be easy to encourage students towards a collective goal in a classroom of 100 or more students in which it is difficult for lecturers to move about the classroom as observed in one of the classes. Another finding is students' deficiencies in grammar as the other challenge that they encounter in acquiring communicative competence.

This challenge is associated with electronic social media to which students are amply exposed. This finding is commensurate with Nkhi (2023) who found that students' grammatical incompetence came about due to their ample exposure to digital social media wherein they use informal language. In consonance, Purwati et al. (2023) found that most of the students are grammatically incompetent. Even asked about the kind of intervention strategies they employ to address these grammar deficiencies, some lecturers seemed not to know what to do. Surprisingly, lecturers still used traditional teaching methods as interventional strategies to enhance students' grammatical competence, implying that lecturers had challenges for employing communicative teaching strategies towards students' communicative competence skills. This finding resonates with Rouf and Mohamed's (2022) finding that some teachers do not have pedagogical skills which are needed to develop students' communicative competence through interactive strategies. The conclusion is that students' exposure to social media, coupled with some lecturers' inability to implement appropriate communicative strategies when teaching for enhancing students' communicative competence is also a barrier.

5. CONCLUSION

The study sought to find out the challenges that English as second language undergraduate students encounter in the development of communicative competence skills. Findings reveal

that traditional teaching methods that lecturers employ in the classroom make it hard for students to be exposed to the target language. This finding is not commensurate with the socio-cultural theory which stipulates that language is best learned when there is interaction in the classroom. Furthermore, over-crowding in the classrooms also render it difficult for lecturers to employ communicative activities aimed at enhancing students' communicative competence in English language. Lastly, students' lack of motivation to learn English coupled with their grammatical incompetence has further proved to be a challenge for students to be communicatively competent. On these premises, the study thus recommends that students should be exposed to language through activities that encourage interaction. Also recommended is that lecturers should balance fluency and accuracy activities so as to improve students' discourse, linguistic, interactional as well as strategic competencies.

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