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English Language Teaching in Contexts of LMD Implementation: A Glance at Teaching and Assessment Practices

Hamissou Ousseini[1]

[1] *Assistant Professor, Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines, Université Abdou Moumouni, Niamey, Niger*

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Corresponding Author:

Hamissou Ousseini

Email:

Hamissou.ousseini@fulbrightmail.org

Abstract

Purpose*: This paper presents some empirical insights about the effect of the LMD system (Bologna Process) on practices at an English as a foreign language (EFL) program in a Sub-Saharan African (SSA) country. The study aimed at examining the dominant pedagogical practices and changes caused by the new system.*

Methodology*: Based on a qualitative case study methodology and a theoretical framework that draws from Stenhouse (1967; 1975), classroom observation data, interviews, and documents were collected and analyzed thematically.*

Results*: The analysis has revealed the predominance of lecturing through dictation and practices of summative assessment. These practices are contrary to the principles of the LMD system. This has been interpreted as a resistance from educators to use the new modes of teaching and assessment favored by the socio-constructivist and student-centered approach brought by the LMD system.*

Practical Implications: *Considering the theoretical perspectives underpinning the study, the findings suggest the predominance of practices that are not favorable to English language learning. The study has certain implications for the implementation of LMD, stressing the need to redesign LMD practices based on empirical procedures that strives to understand the foundation of educators' resistance to change.*

Originality/Value*: The study makes a contribution about the application of Western educational tools to other contexts and raises the need for understanding the contextual teaching cultures prior to reform endeavors.*

1. Introduction

Reforms in contexts of English language teaching (ELT) is a recurring phenomenon, mainly in countries where English is a foreign language (EFL). These reforms are generally geared towards increasing the performativity of systems (Goudiaby, 2009; Jegede, 2012). One of the most recent reforms, known as the LMD system (the Bologna Process), is an initiative undertaken by twelve Sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries to harmonize their higher education curricula (Modou et al., 2014). In other words, the scope of the LMD reform goes beyond ELT programs but touches upon the field of professional and pedagogical practices (Eta, 2015). The latter are central to this research, which emerged from the growing complaints about the quality of teaching in higher education programs (Miliani, 2017)) despite the changes mandated by the new system since 2010 (Modou et al., 2014). Considering the LMD system as a major educational borrowing, it was judged necessary to

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investigate the teaching and assessment practices in those programs in order to understand the extent to which changes took place. To this end, two central questions have been formulated in relation to those practices at an EFL program in one of the public universities in Niger.

1. What are the predominant teaching and assessment practices at the EFL program?
2. To which extent do these practices comply with the LMD system?

To help understand the scope of the current study, perspectives from relevant pedagogies and those from Stenhouse (1967; 1975) are presented next.

A Theoretical and Historical Background

The LMD system is one of the world largest examples of educational borrowing (Brøgger, 2014; Eta, 2015). This was a reform first undertaken by forty European countries in their attempt to align the architecture of their higher education programs to the Anglo-Saxon models (Ljosland, 2011). Afterwards, this became subject to adoption by many SSA universities to harmonize their degree structures and curricula. The main objectives of the reform included "the establishment of a credit system, the promotion of student mobility nationally and internationally, the development of professionalization of studies for the socio-economic integration of students and the improvement and modernization of the curriculum" (Eta, 2015, p.168). It, therefore, aimed at changing academic offers in order to match the global practices.

The most important justification for the adoption of the LMD system relates to the changes it mandated on pedagogical practices. According to Eta (2015), the LMD system came with the aim to make adjustments to the pedagogical practices. In Eta's view, "change is envisaged in the way courses are designed, taught and assessed" (p. 172). These changes were suggested based on the beliefs that previous practices in those contexts were outdated and needed to be replaced (Thanh, 2011). In other words, the LMD system requires the replacement of the transmissive approach by a socio-constructivist approach which favors learner interaction in the classroom (Diaouné et al., 2008; Miliani, 2017). As Eta (2015) added, practices in the new system are "participatory but mostly student-centered and outcome-based" (p. 172).The system, therefore, relies on the use of tutorials, seminars and other modes of producing and applying knowledge. It emphasizes the development of procedural knowledge in learners (Miliani, 2017). Furthermore, the system involves a more continuous use of assessment to support student productivity. In fact, the LMD system encourages the use of formative assessment which enhances learning rather than ensuring a logical control tied to certification (Haroun, 2013).

The above foundations of the LMD system are close to the theoretical perspectives found in works of Lawrence Stenhouse (1967; 1975). The latter posited that teaching is more important through groups (seminars, tutorials…) and that education should serve the purpose of inducting individuals to enhance their individuality and creativity. By emphasizing the

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importance of the process model, as opposed to the objective (traditional) model, Stenhouse takes education as a way of increasing an individual's "freedom to create and develop ideas" (Stenhouse, 1967, p.8). Education, here, is expected to provide experiences towards individual growth and development. In Stenhouse's perspectives, the primary role of a classroom is to methodically and consciously help learners share and reconstruct their fragmentary experiences. Aware of the influences that contextual factors exert on teachers, he dismisses the quality of learning from any educational curricula targeting learner achievement based on behavioral objectives. For him, any inquiry about learning should take the working group as the starting point rather than an individual (Stenhouse, 1967, p.6). This situates learning as a social activity and places sharing as a fundamental element for individual growth. The perspectives of sharing experiences are grounded in the idea that worthwhile knowledge is speculative and indeterminate. This presupposes that the use of behavioral objectives can neither encompass all the learning that occurs in a classroom nor take into account the internal and external factors that influence teaching. Taking this into account, Stenhouse's process model suggests the formulation of educational curricula based on principles of procedures or praxiology (Elliott, 1991). A principle of procedure is not a behavioral objective but the means of teaching with which ends are constructed. As Elliott (1991; 2006a; 2006b) clarified, ends cannot be specified independently or prior to teaching. They are intrinsic to practice and cannot be defined in advance. Principles of procedure therefore define the process "in which the meaning and significance of structures are reconstructed in the historically conditioned consciousness of individuals as they try to make sense of their 'life situations'" (Elliott, 1991, p.10). Based on this perspective, the effectiveness of teaching depends on the effectiveness of the process rather than the achievement of pre-specified behavioral objectives (Elliott, 2007), which are central to the traditional approach.

To connect the above with perspectives in ELT, language socialization should be a process through which participants share and reconstruct their experiences in relation to the curricular content rather than memorize this for the purpose of examinations. This raises the problem of assessment with the traditional approach in which students are graded based on what they memorized. In Stenhouse's process model of education, assessment is attached to the purpose of improvement. It positions the educator not as a marker but as a critic (Stenhouse, 1975: 94). The process model, therefore, enables the learners to discover their strengths and weaknesses through the criticism provided by the educator. In this way, it also enables the educator to assess his/her own teaching. Similar to the LMD system, Stenhouse does not totally reject examinations. The latter are possible in the process model, but they must not be allowed to influence students and divert them from their aspirations. In other words, examinations should not emphasize memorization, which is central to the traditional approach.

Research on the Implementation of the LMD System

Research about the LMD system in the SSA contexts is diverse, but very little has been done in relation to its implementation within specific programs. In the Nigerien context, only a

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mixed-method study conducted by Modou et al. (2014) could be of relevance. Nonetheless, this had a general scope. It was a post-implementation evaluation study which looked into university educators' and students' perspectives about the LMD system. The study found that teaching at the selected university is generally based on dictation. It was also found that assessment was less frequent than prescribed by the LMD system. These findings are relevant to the current study, but there is need to narrow the scope by looking at practices within specific programs. Besides, the study by Modou et al. (2014) took place only two to three years after the LMD system implementation in Niger. A look at the current situation is necessary as this could reveal whether changes have occurred since then or not.

Another important study evaluating the implementation of the LMD system was carried byDiaouné et al. (2008). Data were collected based on a mixed-method approach from participants affiliated to seven universities in Guinea. Similar to Modou et al. (2014), the study found that the traditional mode of teaching (dictation) was more pervasive than the use of interactive strategies. Furthermore, the study revealed the predominance of written examinations as opposed to the use of oral feedbacks and other forms of formative assessment. As the researchers concluded, this situation is partly due to the educators' lack of skills in relation to the new modes of teaching and assessment. Overall, the two studies are meaningful for understanding the realities of the LMD implementation in SSA countries. However, their broad scope does not allow understanding about language-related programs which nowadays tend to cherish ELT methods, such as *task-based language teaching* and *communicative language teaching*, which fairly emerged from socio-constructivist perspectives. Investigating the scope of the LMD system implementation at the EFL program is, therefore, a way to examine the extent to which those perspectives are grounded in the process of teaching and learning English.

2. Methodology and Procedures

The current study was undertaken over the academic year 2018/19 through a qualitative case study framework. The selected case was an EFL program from Abdou Moumouni University in Niger. Conformably to the ethical requirements of the university, data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and documents review concurrently with data analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In other words, the three methods depended on each other for the generation of more insights. Observations were undertaken two to three times at Masters' level where the class was comprised of about 45 students. For interviews, questions were generally formulated based on the analysis of data from classroom observations, documents or other interviews. Overall, the interview data were gathered from8 students and 3educators who voluntarily consented to participate to the study. Each of them was given freedom to choose the time that fits his/her calendar and a pseudonym for reporting the data. Most of the interviews lasted around 30 minutes, and all of them were conducted in English. As for documents, they constituted a very useful source of information for the current study. They mainly included course syllabi and other teaching materials, which provided details for corroborating information from other sources (Yin, 2014).

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In terms of data analysis, the process was similar to what Braun and Clarke (2013) called thematic analysis. The latter is a process of identifying themes within the data based on six key steps: Familiarization with the data, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and writing-up (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.87). To reinforce understanding, the initially analyzed data sets were compiled in the same document for a second cycle analysis. This resulted in a matrix where chunks of data had been grouped under themes for further analysis. This allowed shuttling across the data searching for interrelations prior to reporting.

3. Results and Discussion

Considering the theoretical background and the analysis strategies presented above, insights that emerged from the data were categorized and presented in two major themes: teaching practices and assessment practices. These provide strong evidence for answering the two research questions.

Teaching Practices at the EFL Program

Teaching practices here refer to the modes of teaching used by educators at the EFL program. The collected data have allowed the identification of two types of teaching mode: dictation and group mode. While the latter is favored by the LMD system, the use of it was minimally observed. In fact, in most of the observed classes, dictation has appeared to be pervasive. Even in classes where observation was not possible, dictation was reported as the main mode of lecturing. In those classes, educators prefer to read the content out-loud to students, who are expected to write down what they hear.

> *The one who is a full-time teacher, she is dictating. Sometimes she gives handout. (Interview with Alice)*

> *The first thing he does when he comes is to review the last lesson, to make sure we get the meaning. After that, he makes dictation of the lesson. We take notes, and he also takes time to explain. (Interview with Joseph)*

As such, the role of educators is to identify the appropriate content that they will read and explain to students in class. Based on a personal experience, this type of lecturing used to be the only mode of teaching at the EFL program before the advent of the LMD system. This was used by educators to provide students with information they expect them to memorize and give back during examinations. Arguably, this constitutes a resistance from educators to depart from the traditional ways of teaching and to embrace the new ones suggested by the LMD system.

Notwithstanding, the use of innovative modes of teaching – known as group modes – has also been observed in certain classes, but minimally. One of these modes is what Wallace (1991) called seminars, a set of activities usually carried out through whole-class discussions. These have been observed partly in one of Dr Paul's classes:

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> *Around 4:33, there were about 42 students in class. Discussions were carried out based on a set of questions formulated by Dr Paul. This activity allowed students to provide answers or express disagreement with comments made by other students or the educator. The climax of those discussions was observable when questions and interpretations about the symbolic meaning of "mirror" were progressively formulated by students. The educator facilitated the discussions and occasionally intervened to make critical comments or to extract examples of interpretation from the materials under analysis. (Observation notes)*

To make his seminars successful, Dr Paul, sometimes, provides students with some guiding questions for the required reading materials. Based on these questions, students have the opportunity to construct their own understanding of the texts before coming to class. A similar situation has been observed once in Dr Kadidja's class where students were required to read a short story in order to formulate answers to some guiding questions.

> *I always tell my students that it [literature] is not a question of "I am the teacher; I come to give you what you need." You know, it's an arena of discussion. Students have their own ways of looking at what they read, and they have their own reactions. And it's during discussions that you really feel that the student is getting something from what he/she is learning in class. (Interview with Dr Kadidja)*

As such, organizing seminar discussions enables, not only the students to express their understanding of a literary text, but also the educator to have a hint about who is learning from the class and who is not. It offers students freedom to interpret literary texts with their personal, social and psychological backgrounds. In this kind of situation, the EFL students may find opportunities to build cultural awareness, which is a necessary component for building intercultural communicative competence. This use of seminars is an LMD-based medium through which the EFL students may be expected to develop speaking skills or demonstrate confidence in using the English language while making sense of the materials they read.

The most common use of group mode at the EFL program, however, is the one dedicated to small projects carried out by students to either apply the acquired knowledge or produce new knowledge through practice. In almost every course, student projects are part of the requirement.

> *It's almost at all levels: from first year to Master 2. There are always group-works. It's something that teachers use to create interaction among students, to share what they know and maybe to put them in the real research situation. (Interview with Jacks)*

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A topic is given to students or sometimes chosen by students themselves. They go on research; they try to work together and bring a final report of the work. And then, they come to present the work. They present it in front of the class. (Interview with Ika)

The statement from Jacks highlights an importance of group-work in terms of sharing and knowledge production. This matches the purpose attached to it by Stenhouse (1975) and the LMD system. In this situation, students are given time to work on their projects before presenting their outcomes to the class where these might be challenged by peers. It may be regarded as a process through which students are expected to develop cooperative skills and academic maturity. However, its practices have revealed some drawbacks. Due to limited control from educators on the running of the groups, some students tend to leave others to do the whole work.

You know how students are…some people don't do the work; they don't come at meetings. And because of this social relation between people, you just can't cross the name of a person because he/she didn't attend the meetings. So, you just put his/her name. (Interview with Jacks)

In this situation, social relation stands as an obstacle to learning. It gives place to a sense of solidarity with which some group members take the responsibility of learning for others.

Assessment Practices

Assessment is one of the practices examined by this study. It somehow extends understanding about the modes of teaching presented above. The purpose here is to highlight the types of assessment strategies educators use along those modes of teaching. Data have shown that assessment at the EFL program is more summative than formative. It is generally conducted in four different ways: through quizzes, in-class exercises, final exams and presentations. Some, like Dr Paul, were simply administering quizzes to students at the end of every class. The quiz was a set of questions formulated to assess students' understanding of planned reading materials. As observed, the quiz consisted of a certain number of multiple-choice questions for which students were expected to respond within a certain amount of time.

In other classes, such as those taught by Dr Kader, the use of written exercises was one of the strategies for assessing students' understanding of the grammatical structures taught during the previous sessions. This is a form of formative assessment which was not observed elsewhere at the EFL program. In addition to this, Dr Kader used to organize final exams in which students were asked to answer questions dealing with the information transmitted to them throughout the whole semester. This is contrary to Dr Kadidja's classes where a combination of quizzes and presentations was rather observed. In her syllabus, it was clearly stated that there is no final exam but quizzes and short presentations by students. While the latter were optional, the former were central to the class and administered to students at least three times throughout the semester.

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She gives short stories and evaluates us. After three stories, sometimes four, we have a quiz. (Interview with Aisha)

Considering the insights above, there is a repetitive and frequent use of assessment at the ELP. This is a recent phenomenon brought by the LMD system. Five to ten years ago, educators used to wait until the end of the year to administer a final exam to students. According to Dr Kadidja, this frequency has a positive impact on students' outcome.

What people are trying to do is to have many evaluations before the end of the course. Because we used to have cases where the teacher just gives one final exam and that's it. And we have noticed that with this new system we have less and less students that are failing… (Interview with Dr Kadidja)

The frequent use of assessment, therefore, enables students to have better results. The repetitive use of quizzes, for example, is more beneficial to many students, mainly in classes where educators drop the lowest grades and consider the highest ones.

Some people do as many as six quizzes and sometimes they drop the two lowest and students get to keep just the four quiz grades. (Interview with Dr Kadidja)

As revealed by the interview data, the positive impact of quizzes is not the only reason for their frequent use at the EFL program. Many of the educators use them to cope with certain issues. In Dr Paul's class, for example, they are used as a means of pressure on students to read.

One of the reasons – and I wrote it on the syllabus for them to know that – was to force them to read first. (Interview with Dr Paul)

In Dr Paul's syllabus for that class, the above reason was clearly stated through the objective "to force students into reading the texts […]" It was, therefore, a way of changing students' behavior. This might rather push them to read and memorize the assigned text instead of undertaking a critical analysis of it.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

To summarize the findings presented above, the major insights are discussed below under the key research questions.

What are the predominant teaching and assessment practices at the EFL program?

Considering the analysis presented earlier, the traditional approach (transmission) has appeared to be predominant at the EFL program despite the requirements of the LMD system to use student-centered strategies (Diaouné et al., 2008; Modou et al., 2014). The use of dictation at the EFL program is a pure transmission approach, which constitutes a limiting factor to student engagement and English language socialization. With dictation processes,

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students might behave as simple knowledge consumers and not be able to demonstrate their creativity or critical thinking. In pedagogy related classes, they may not be able to "understand, examine, and challenge their previously unexamined conceptions and beliefs about teaching" (Graves, 2009, p.120). They may not also be able to expose their cognition (Borg, 2009) and critically reflect on provided experiences. This mode of teaching may not help develop critical interactions among learners. It is unlikely to sustain listeners' attention for long times. If conducted over an extended period, the audience is likely to lose attention after a certain amount of time. The lack of feedback attached to it makes it difficult for educators to realistically measure the effect of their teaching on students (Wallace, 1991). As such, they are likely to perpetuate the notion of learning as consumption and teaching as pure transmission.

Arguably, the above situation is reinforced by the dominant assessment practice, which may only be favorable to the program administration. As revealed by the findings, the program has increased the frequency of assessments as recommended by the LMD system, but these remain almost entirely summative in nature and process. The EFL program administration has shown signs of satisfaction from that practice, because a higher number of students are successfully passing from one level to another. While this cannot be equated to consistent and successful achievement of leaning, the program seemed to use such outcomes as evidence of quality. Furthermore, evidence has shown that the use of formative assessment at the EFL program is very scarce. Opportunities for students to "understand the aim of the learning and how they can achieve the aim" (Pachler et al., 2014, p.368) are considerably lacking. Learners are, therefore, rarely engaged in a process of discovering the weaknesses of their learning and making adjustments for reaching their learning goals (Stenhouse, 1975).

To what extent do these practices comply with the LMD system?

Even though the analysis of data has revealed strong evidence on the predominance of the traditional model at the EFL program, there exist practices brought by the LMD system. Group mode strategies have been noticed in certain instances, regardless of the difficulties they pose. The use of seminars and other group modes is still embryonic but constitutes a promise for advancement and improvement. An extended use of these strategies by educators is more likely to help learners develop better linguistic repertoires. The development of intercultural awareness in students, for example, is likely not to happen until educators move away from dictation and adopt interactive modes of teaching that enable learners to interact and construct or reconstruct literary and linguistic inputs. As Graves (2009) put it, EFL programs need to teach in ways that help learners "develop skills in becoming not only knowledge consumers and evaluators, but also knowledge generators" (p. 121).

As revealed by data, the most used group mode strategies at the EFL program are the ones consisting of student projects. Even though their use appeared to target the development of academic and heuristic skills, their management remains problematic. In those projects, the level of student engagement has appeared to be very low. There is tendency from students to join groups but never participate to the group work. While this may be explained through

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institutional and socio-economic factors, many of the reasons can be pedagogical. There are chances that educators are not taking time to assign roles to group members, initiate them to group-work strategies, and monitor the extent to which they fulfill their tasks and make contribution to the assigned projects.

5. Final Thoughts

Considering the above answers to the research questions, the use of pedagogical practices required by the LMD system at the EFL program is very low. This has seemed to be hampered by a teaching culture heavily characterized by transmission and rote learning. In order to adopt changes that fit the process model (Stenhouse, 1975) and the LMD system, modes of course delivery and assessment should be aligned to a socio-constructivist paradigm. The spirit of the LMD system should be re-emphasized in order to replace dictation by participatory and student-centered procedures. There is also the need to redesign the assessment procedures at the EFL program in order to enhance the effectiveness of teaching and learning English as a foreign language. In order to achieve this, there is need to back summative assessment with formative practices (see Black & Wiliam, 1998). Formative assessment is a necessary tool for providing students with continuous and constructive feedback on their learning. A frequent use of self- and peer-assessment in that context may help students develop independence and autonomy. Beyond these considerations, the success of the LMD reform considerably depends on more research to understand the contextual teaching and learning cultures as well as the attitudes constructed by stakeholders towards its practices. This is a necessary step for mitigating resistance and other apprehensions.

6. Limitations to the Study

The conduct of the current study was characterized by few limitations. First, there was no possibility to access relevant studies in quality and in quantity. This hampered the discussion of the findings, as the latter require to be situated in terms of contribution to the field. Second, this research did not focus on the extent to which learners and educators feel comfortable with the new modes of teaching and assessment. This is an important aspect that could yield useful insights for understanding the current practice. To this, a quantitative framework could be added to gather statistical data that should raise facts about the quality of learning based on both transmissive and socio-constructivist models. Beyond these limitations, the study remains a baseline for future studies on issues of reforms in EFL Programs. A first direction would be a study into learner acceptance of the socio-constructivist model brought by the LMD System.

Conflict of Interest

The author of the article declares no conflict of interest.

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