

**TEACHING ENGLISH IN A LANGUAGE CENTER VERSUS A
TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM: EVIDENCE FROM THE AMERICAN
SHELF, THE ENGLISH LABORATORY OF UNIKIS, AND THE
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH**

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ABSTRACT

This study undertakes a comparative analysis of English language teaching practices across three distinct pedagogical environments in Kisangani: the American Shelf, the English Laboratory of the University of Kisangani, and the Department of English within the same institution. Each of these environments embodies a different conception of language education, reflecting broader debates in applied linguistics regarding the balance between communicative competence, practical training, and theoretical grounding.

The American Shelf, functioning as a language center, positions itself as an informal yet dynamic learning space where communicative approaches and resource-based learning predominate. The English Laboratory, by contrast, represents a semi-specialized environment that combines structured exercises with modest technological tools, offering learners opportunities for practice though often constrained by infrastructural limitations. Meanwhile, the Department of English reflects the traditional academic classroom model, emphasizing theoretical knowledge, linguistic analysis, and formal examinations as the cornerstone of language mastery.

Using a cross-case analysis framework, the article explores these contexts through key comparative dimensions such as teaching methodologies, resource availability, technological integration, learner motivation, and learning outcomes. The findings reveal that while the American Shelf fosters learner autonomy and prioritizes oral communication skills, the English Laboratory provides an intermediary model that seeks to merge practice with controlled instruction, though hindered by insufficient digital resources. The Department of English, despite its academic rigor, tends to privilege knowledge transmission and evaluation over interactive or experiential learning, which may reduce learner motivation in multilingual settings where practical communication is highly valued.

The comparative insights suggest that no single environment is entirely sufficient in addressing the complex needs of English learners in Kisangani, a city characterized by linguistic diversity and growing demands for global communication skills. Rather, the study advocates for hybrid or blended approaches that integrate the strengths of each model: the communicative dynamism of the American Shelf, the structured practice of the English Laboratory, and the analytical rigor of the Department of English. Such an integrated framework may lead to more comprehensive language acquisition, better learner engagement, and improved educational outcomes in multilingual African contexts.

Keywords: English teaching, American Shelf, English Laboratory, Department of English.

• **English teaching**

English teaching is the process of instructing learners in the English language, focusing on developing skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. It involves teaching grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and communication strategies, often adapted to the learners' age, background, and goals.

• **American Shelf**

The American Shelf is a cultural and educational space supported by the U.S. Embassy and hosted in certain libraries, universities, or cultural centers. Its main goal is to provide access to American resources and to promote English language learning, American culture, as well as academic and cultural exchanges.

In general, an American Shelf offers:

- a. Library resources: books, textbooks, novels, reference works, magazines, and newspapers in English.
- b. Digital resources: access to databases, online platforms, e-books, and teaching materials.
- c. Audiovisual materials: films, documentaries, and recordings to improve listening skills.
- d. Educational programs: English workshops, reading clubs, debate clubs, cultural discussions, and lectures.
- e. Academic opportunities: information about scholarships (e.g., Fulbright, YALI, etc.), studying in the United States, and exchange programs.

In Kisangani, the American Shelf is hosted within a partner library (often at the University of Kisangani), and it serves as a complementary space to traditional classrooms. The American Shelf in Kisangani is one of six American Spaces located throughout the DRC.

• **The English Laboratory**

The English Laboratory is a specialized learning environment designed to support the teaching and learning of English through practical, interactive, and technology-enhanced methods. Unlike a traditional classroom, an English Laboratory (often called a Language Laboratory) provides learners with access to tools and resources that allow them to practice listening, speaking, reading, and writing in a more dynamic and individualized way.

Key Features of an English Laboratory:

- 1) Audio-visual equipment – headphones, microphones, recorders, and projectors for listening and speaking practice.
- 2) Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) software – programs for grammar exercises, pronunciation drills, vocabulary practice, and interactive tasks.
- 3) Internet access – to use online resources such as digital dictionaries, learning platforms, and authentic English materials.

- 4) Interactive sessions – focus on communication skills, role-plays, and pronunciation improvement.
- 5) Teacher supervision – teachers guide learners, monitor their progress, and provide immediate feedback.

• Department of English

The Department of English is an academic unit within a university or higher education institution that focuses on the study, teaching, and research of the English language, literature, linguistics, and related fields. Its main functions usually include:

Language Instruction – Teaching English as a foreign or second language to students for academic, professional, or personal purposes.

- a. Literature Studies – Exploring English and American literature, as well as postcolonial, African, and world literature written in English.
- b. Linguistics – Analyzing the structure, use, and evolution of the English language, including phonetics, phonology, syntax, semantics, and sociolinguistics.
- c. Translation and Interpretation – Training students in translation studies, especially between English and local/national languages.
- d. Research – Conducting studies in fields such as applied linguistics, discourse analysis, English pedagogy, comparative literature, and cultural studies.
- e. Teacher Training – Preparing future teachers of English for secondary schools, language centers, or higher education.
- f. Cultural and Academic Exchange – Promoting cross-cultural understanding through seminars, conferences, and collaborations with international institutions.

In the context of Kisangani (University of Kisangani), the Department of English likely serves as both a training ground for English teachers and a center for research on language, literature, and cultural studies, while also providing a strong foundation for careers in translation, interpretation, diplomacy, media, and academia.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The teaching of English in Kisangani reflects broader global dynamics where English functions as a lingua franca that facilitates education, international communication, and professional development. Scholars such as Seidlhofer (2011) and Jenkins (2015) emphasize that English today transcends its native-speaker boundaries to operate as a shared medium of interaction among speakers from diverse linguistic backgrounds. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), this global role is mirrored in higher education, where English is increasingly seen as a gateway to international academic networks and economic opportunities (Muganga, 2020). While traditional classrooms remain the backbone of higher education, offering formal instruction through structured curricula and state-mandated syllabi, they often rely on teacher-centered approaches and limited resources (Kabuya, 2019).

In recent years, however, new pedagogical spaces such as the American Shelf and the English Laboratory in Kisangani have emerged, providing alternative models of English instruction. These spaces emphasize interactive, learner-centered practices, authentic materials, and access

to digital technologies—elements that enhance exposure to real-world language use and promote autonomy in learning (Little, 2007; Benson, 2011). For example, the American Shelf often integrates cultural programs, debates, and access to online libraries, while the English Laboratory prioritizes audio-visual tools and task-based learning activities. Such innovations align with global shifts in language pedagogy toward communicative competence and experiential learning (Richards, 2006).

The coexistence of these environments raises critical questions regarding their comparative effectiveness in improving language outcomes, stimulating learner motivation, and shaping teaching methodologies. As Coleman (2006) argues, the spread of English in expanding-circle countries necessitates a careful evaluation of both traditional and alternative models of instruction to ensure relevance to local contexts. Therefore, understanding the comparative value of traditional classrooms, the American Shelf, and the English Laboratory is essential for informing language education policies in Kisangani and more broadly within the DRC. This comparative approach can guide policymakers and educators toward adopting pedagogical practices that better integrate innovation, learner engagement, and resource accessibility, ultimately strengthening higher education outcomes.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Language centres, often externally supported, prioritize communicative and learner-centered methodologies (Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Harmer, 2015). These centres aim to create immersive environments that foster practical language use. They integrate authentic materials such as newspapers, podcasts, and videos, facilitating real-world language exposure. Additionally, the use of audio-visual tools enhances listening and speaking skills, providing students with dynamic learning experiences. Interactive pedagogy, including task-based activities and role-plays, encourages active student participation and collaboration.

Research indicates that these approaches significantly improve language proficiency by engaging students in meaningful communication. For instance, a study highlighted the positive impact of authentic materials on learners' performance in English classes, demonstrating improved comprehension and retention.

In contrast, university language departments often adhere to traditional curricula that emphasize reading and writing skills. These programs are typically designed to prepare students for examinations (Brown, 2007), focusing on grammatical accuracy and textual analysis. While these methods provide a strong foundation in language structure, they may not adequately address the development of communicative competence.

Curricula in these departments often include courses on writing assessment, reading-writing connections, and writing development, aiming to enhance students' literacy skills. However, the limited integration of interactive and authentic materials may result in less exposure to real-life language use, potentially hindering the development of practical communication skills.

Language laboratories occupy an intermediate position between traditional university departments and modern language centres. They offer some technological integration and opportunities for oral practice, though often constrained by resources. Modern language labs

incorporate tools such as speech recognition software, audio-visual aids, and computer-assisted language learning programs to enhance listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills .

Integrating language labs with existing curriculum materials can create a powerful combination that enhances language teaching effectiveness. This integration involves mapping current textbooks and lesson plans to the interactive capabilities of language lab technology, ensuring that digital tools complement traditional methods rather than replace them (Crystal, 2012).

In summary, language centres, university departments, and language laboratories each play distinct roles in language education. Language centres emphasize communicative and learner-centred approaches, providing rich exposure to authentic materials and interactive pedagogy. University departments focus on traditional curricula that prioritize reading and writing skills, preparing students for examinations. Language laboratories serve as a bridge, integrating technology to offer opportunities for oral practice while supporting traditional learning objectives.

The evolution of language education suggests a growing recognition of the importance of communicative competence. Future developments may involve greater collaboration between these environments, leveraging the strengths of each to provide a more holistic language learning experience.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study follows a qualitative comparative design. Data were collected through classroom observations, interviews with teachers and learners, and document analysis of syllabi and teaching resources across the three environments. The analysis focused on:

- a. Teaching methodologies
- b. Resource availability
- c. Technological integration
- d. Learner motivation and participation
- e. Learning outcomes

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Teaching Methodologies

At the American Shelf, teachers adopt Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Learning (TBL), encouraging real-life conversations and interactive activities.

A learning session at the American Shelf is usually:

1. Interactive and Communicative

Activities emphasize speaking, listening, and real-life communication. Sessions often involve group discussions, debates, role plays, and presentations.

2. Resource-Based

Learners use books, magazines, e-resources, and multimedia materials available in the American Shelf. Digital learning tools (e.g., MOOCs, e-library, films, and documentaries) are frequently integrated.

3. Student-Centered

Facilitators encourage active participation. Learners collaborate in pairs or small groups, developing autonomy.

4. Culturally Enriching

Sessions may include cultural exchange (films, American traditions, or guest speakers). Promotes cross-cultural understanding alongside language learning.

5. Flexible and Varied

Sessions range from English conversation clubs, workshops, seminars, and public lectures to reading sessions. Duration may vary (from 1–2 hours depending on activity).

c. Instructional materials and methodologies used

❖ Instructional materials

The American Shelf is a semi-formal, resource-oriented learning space supported by the U.S. Embassy. It offers access to English books, periodicals, audiovisual content, and computer-based learning. It is not part of the regular curriculum but attracts motivated learners seeking to enhance their English skills outside the classroom.

The English Laboratory uses a mixed approach, combining repetition, drills, and controlled practice with some communicative tasks.

In a language laboratory, teacher supervision guarantees structured learning, discipline, and effective monitoring, while student interaction—with content, peers, and the teacher—creates a dynamic, communicative, and engaging environment for language acquisition.

Types of pedagogical practices observed

In a language laboratory, several pedagogical practices are typically observed to enhance learners' language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing). Here are the main types:

1. Audio-Lingual Practices

- Repetition drills (listen and repeat).
- Pattern practice (substitution, transformation).
- Pronunciation and intonation exercises.
- Minimal pair discrimination.

2. Task-Based Practices

- Pair or group work through lab headsets.
- Role-plays and simulations (e.g., dialogues, interviews).
- Problem-solving or collaborative tasks using recorded materials.

3. Communicative Practices

- Listening comprehension (news, conversations, podcasts).
- Speaking practice with peer-to-peer or teacher-student interaction.
- Discussions and debates on given audio/video prompts.
- Oral presentations recorded and replayed for feedback.

4. Individualized/Autonomous Learning

- Self-paced exercises using software or audio programs.
- Vocabulary building with multimedia resources.
- Grammar and structure drills through interactive programs.
- Listening to authentic native speakers to improve comprehension.

5. Technology-Enhanced Practices

Use of audio and video recordings for authentic input.

- Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) programs.
- Recording students' voices for self-assessment.
- Pronunciation comparison with native models.

6. Assessment-Oriented Practices

- Oral tests and interviews conducted in the lab.
- Listening comprehension quizzes.
- Recording-based evaluations of pronunciation and fluency.
- Peer- and self-assessment through playback of recordings.

In short: A language laboratory emphasizes listening and speaking skills, combining drills, communicative tasks, technology-based exercises, and assessments to create an interactive and student-centred environment.

In contrast, the Department of English remains largely teacher-centered, relying on Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) and lecture-based instruction, prioritizing grammar and textual analysis.

1 Role of the Teacher

- Teacher-centered: the teacher is the main source of knowledge.
- Authority figure who lectures, explains, and controls the learning pace.
- Provides instructions, assigns tasks, and evaluates students.

2. Role of the Student

- Learners are expected to listen, absorb, and memorize information.
- Participation is often limited to answering questions when asked.
- Less room for creativity, collaboration, or independent exploration.

3. Instructional Approach

- Lecture-based or textbook-driven.
- Emphasis on rote learning and repetition.
- One-size-fits-all method; little adaptation to individual learning styles.

4. Assessment

- Exams and written tests are the primary evaluation methods.
- Focus on grades and performance rather than process or skills.
- Knowledge measured by recall and accuracy.

4.2 Resource Availability

1) The American Shelf:

The American Shelf benefits from updated materials, internet access, and audiovisual resources.

Learners use books, magazines, e-resources, and multimedia materials available in the American Shelf. Digital learning tools (e.g., MOOCs, e-library, films, and documentaries) are frequently integrated.

1. Print Materials

English textbooks and workbooks (focusing on grammar, vocabulary, writing, and speaking).

Reference books (dictionaries, thesauruses, encyclopedias).

American literature and novels (classic and contemporary works).

Academic books on U.S. history, government, culture, and society.

Test preparation books (TOEFL, GRE, SAT, IELTS).

2. Digital & Multimedia Resources

E-books and online journals (access to American online libraries or platforms like eLibraryUSA).

Educational software and applications for language learning.

Audiovisual materials (CDs, DVDs, podcasts, films, documentaries, lectures).

Interactive English learning platforms provided through the U.S. Embassy or cultural centers.

3. Teaching & Learning Aids

- Flashcards (for vocabulary and grammar drills).
- Charts and posters (phonetics, idioms, American culture highlights).
- Lesson handouts prepared by facilitators.
- Activity worksheets for reading comprehension, writing, and discussions.

4. Periodicals & Current Media

American magazines and newspapers (Time, National Geographic, The New York Times, etc.).

Educational journals for students and researchers.

5. Supplementary Instructional Tools

Discussion guides for book clubs or conversation clubs.

Debate and public speaking materials (guidelines, prompts, rubrics).

Cultural kits (materials for U.S. holidays, history timelines, and maps).

2) The English Laboratory

The English Laboratory has equipment such as audio recorders and headsets, but maintenance issues and outdated tools limit their effectiveness.

Technology-Enhanced Practices

- Use of audio and video recordings for authentic input.
- Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) programs.
- Recording students' voices for self-assessment.
- Pronunciation comparison with native models.

3) The Department of English

The Department struggles with limited textbooks and insufficient teaching aids, which hampers learner exposure to authentic English input.

In a traditional curriculum, resource availability often refers to the tangible and intangible materials that support teaching and learning. The availability and quality of these resources can significantly affect how effectively education is delivered.

Common characteristics:

- Textbooks and Printed Materials: Most teaching relies heavily on textbooks. Teachers and students often follow the prescribed books closely, with limited supplementary materials.

- **Blackboards and Chalk:** Teaching is largely teacher-centered, using blackboards, chalk, and sometimes overhead projectors. Technology is minimal or absent.
- **Limited Access to Libraries or Digital Resources:** Students often have restricted access to diverse learning resources. Library materials, if available, may be outdated, and digital resources (computers, internet) are rarely integrated.
- **Teacher-Provided Notes:** Teachers may provide notes or handouts summarizing key points from textbooks. Students rely heavily on these for exam preparation.
- **Practical Materials (for science/technical subjects):** Laboratories and equipment, when present, are often limited. Experiments are sometimes demonstration-only rather than hands-on student activities.

4.3 Technological Integration

Technology is central to the American Shelf, where learners use computers, online platforms, and films to enhance listening and speaking. The English Laboratory integrates technology partially, mostly in audio practice. The Department, however, faces persistent challenges of infrastructure and funding, with minimal digital integration.

4.4 Learner Motivation and Participation

Learners at the American Shelf enroll voluntarily, which fosters intrinsic motivation and active participation (Dörnyei, 2001). Students in the English Laboratory show moderate engagement, motivated by the novelty of laboratory sessions. By contrast, Department students often perceive English as an obligatory academic subject, which reduces enthusiasm and class interaction.

4.5 Learning Outcomes

The American Shelf produces learners with higher oral fluency and listening comprehension. The English Laboratory improves pronunciation and controlled speaking practice. The Department develops strong theoretical knowledge, reading, and writing skills, but students often graduate with limited communicative competence in real-life contexts.

Comparative Matrix of Educational Environments

Criteria	Dimension / Indicators	Environment 1 : American Shelf	Environment 2 : English Laboratory of Unikis	Environment 3 : English Department
Teaching Methodologies	Approach, flexibility, learner-centeredness	e.g., Task-based, interactive, learner-focused	e.g., Lecture + discussion, moderate interactivity	e.g., Traditional lecture, limited student engagement
Resource Availability	Textbooks, lab materials, library, classroom infrastructure	Well-stocked library, adequate lab equipment	Moderate resources, limited lab access	Minimal resources, few reference materials
Technological Integration	ICT usage, digital tools, multimedia	High use of LMS, projectors, online resources	Moderate use of technology, occasional multimedia	Low integration, mostly traditional chalkboard

Student Motivation & Participation	Engagement, autonomy, attendance	High participation, collaborative learning	Moderate participation, occasional engagement	Low participation, passive learning
Learning Outcomes	Academic performance, skills, critical thinking	Strong outcomes, high skill acquisition	Moderate outcomes, average skill level	Weak outcomes, limited critical thinking
Teacher Qualifications & Approaches	Education, experience, pedagogical strategies	Highly qualified, innovative approaches	Qualified, uses mixed methods	Basic qualifications, traditional methods
Institutional Support	Administration, mentorship, policies	Strong support, professional development available	Moderate support, occasional training	Weak support, minimal guidance

5.0 CONCLUSION

This cross-case comparison reveals that the three environments play complementary roles in English teaching in Kisangani. The American Shelf promotes innovation and communicative skills, the English Laboratory bridges theory and practice, and the Department ensures systematic knowledge of language structure. A hybrid model—combining communicative and resource-based strategies from centers with academic rigor from traditional classrooms—would optimize English teaching outcomes in the DRC. Policymakers, educators, and curriculum designers should therefore encourage synergy between formal institutions and language centers.

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