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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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The power of the communicative approach: An investigation of classroom practices of English teachers working in vocational high schools

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Abstract

This research examines classroom methodologies aligned with the communicative approach, gauging the perspectives of English teachers working within vocational high schools (VHSs). The study, employing a qualitative case study research design, engaged 10 teachers from diverse backgrounds. The participants volunteered for the study and were selected through a maximum diversity sampling technique, a purposeful sampling method. The research methodology encompassed data collection through interviews, observations, and document analysis. Content analysis was applied to scrutinize interview data, whereas observational and document-based findings were subjected to descriptive analysis techniques. The study revealed a prevalent utilization of teacher-controlled activities and a predominant teacher-centric classroom layout among teachers. Notably, a considerable proportion of in-class time was allocated to grammar instruction, whereas comparatively lesser emphasis was placed on fostering reading, speaking, writing, and listening skills. Moreover, it was found that multiple-choice tests and alternative assessment formats such as performance evaluations and projects were exclusively employed; using other alternative assessment approaches like observations, interviews,

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learning diaries, and portfolios was rare. It is also found that English instruction in VHSs heavily relies on textbooks, supplemented by the occasional integration of audiovisual materials. Overall, teachers expressed a consensus that there exists a need for enhancement in curricular frameworks, teaching aids, as well as assessment and evaluation tools within the English instruction domain.

KEYWORDS
communicative approach, communicative competence, English language teaching

Practitioner points

- There is a preference for teacher-controlled activities and a prevalent teacher-class dynamic in classrooms.
- Grammar teaching takes precedence in in-class activities, leaving limited time for enhancing reading, speaking, writing, and listening skills.
- All teachers use traditional assessment tools, neglecting alternative methods like observations and interviews.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Using language as a conduit for expressing thoughts and emotions and exchanging information is the fundamental basis of communication. With the swift advancement of communication and transportation infrastructure, the ability to communicate across different languages has emerged as an imperative facet of contemporary society. Consequently, researchers have shifted their focus toward foreign language teaching, exploring a spectrum of approaches such as grammar translation, the natural approach, audiolingual methods, and cognitive learning, which have been prevalent for years. Central to this study is the communicative approach, emphasizing the effective utilization of written and verbal communication—the primary function of language—rather than the mere teaching of linguistic forms.

By the early 1970s, the communicative approach has garnered recognition as a pivotal teaching model in English language instruction. This approach posits that language encapsulates functional significance and social meaning. Hence, mastery entails linguistic form and comprehension of their communicative functions and social implications. Within this framework, learners are tasked with correlating linguistic forms with contextual knowledge to decipher intended functional meanings conveyed by speakers (Juan & Flor, 2008; Littlewood, 1981; Smokotin et al., 2014).

The primary objective of the communicative approach is to cultivate proficiency in using the target language in real-life scenarios, prioritizing language application over strict grammatical instruction. Grammar, although integral, is assimilated with other language skills, becoming a tool for precise communication rather than the sole focus of teaching (Terrell, 1991). Integrated language skill development is fundamental in this approach, as Breen (1980) highlighted, emphasizing activities aimed at holistic language skill acquisition. This multifaceted approach ensures learners' competence by fostering grammatical accuracy and adept use of appropriate language structures within specific contexts (McKay, 1979).

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Traditional teaching methodologies have shown deficiencies in developing students' communicative competence and speaking skills within second and foreign language education. Thus, the communicative approach becomes a revolutionary paradigm shift in language instruction, emphasizing communication in foreign language classrooms. Widely accepted in European, English-speaking, Western, and Asian countries, it addresses the need for robust language learning communication (Ardıç, 2019; Demirezen, 2011; Tarannum, 2012).

Within the communicative approach, classroom tools and activities should diversify to optimize learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Engaging participants, activities, and teaching tools interactively facilitates learning, necessitating the utilization of written, auditory, visual, and audiovisual devices. Teachers employ activities like role plays, discussions, group work, and presentations, encouraging active English usage. These communicative activities enable learners to apply acquired language skills in diverse contexts (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Learning materials within the communicative approach should mirror real-life situations encountered by native speakers, facilitating the acquisition of communication skills, the primary goal of this approach (Huang et al., 2012; Sarıçoban & Tılfaroğlu, 1999).

In literature exploring communicative language teaching, researchers like Littlewood (1981), and Richards and Rodgers (2014) have sought to delineate its characteristics, fostering its growth and reach. Studies assessing its implementation by teachers, conducted by Guthrie (1984), Long and Sato (1983), Nunan (1987), and Karavas-Doukas (1996), reveal the scarcity of its implementation in language classrooms.

Despite teachers' claims of implementing the communicative approach, their practices often align more with traditional methods. Implementing the communicative approach remains more theoretical than practical in classrooms (Karavas-Doukas, 1996). Savignon (2003) attributes this to various challenges teachers face during activities rather than flaws inherent in the approach. Sato and Kleinsasser (1999) found contradictions between teachers' conceptions of communicative language teaching and actual classroom experiences due to challenges such as deductive grammar explanations and crowded classrooms. Similarly, Bal (2006) observed English teachers' reliance on grammar and reading activities over communicative approach activities. However, studies also highlight the positive impact of communicative approach practices on language learning. Experimental studies by Temizöz (2008), Dalak (2017), Şenel (2021), and Kaya (2019) underscore the enhancement of students' language skills through communicative approach-based activities.

Vocational education is a cornerstone in nurturing individuals with the requisite vocational expertise crucial for sustainable economic and social development. In the context of vocational high schools (VHSs)—pivotal in Turkey's vocational education—English proficiency is vital (Özdemir & Şahin, 2020). Therefore, understanding teachers' perspectives, crucial in fostering this competence regarding the communicative approach, assumes significance. Thus, this study endeavors to scrutinize classroom practices within the communicative approach based on the insights of English teachers working in VHSs.

The following research questions serve as the compass for this study's exploration:

RQ1: *What specific activities do English teachers commonly employ in their classroom practices within the communicative approach?*

RQ2: *Is there a convergence between the organization of classroom participants and the communicative aspects of classroom interactions within the English course?*

RQ3: *To what extent do English teachers emphasize different language skills in their English classes within the communicative approach?*

RQ4: *What teaching tools do teachers utilize in their classroom activities when implementing the communicative approach?*

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RQ5: *Do the guiding principles of the communicative approach align with the assessment and evaluation practices adopted by English teachers in their classrooms?*

RQ6: *What recommendations and suggestions do English teachers propose to enhance the efficacy and utilization of the communicative approach within classroom practices?*

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to meticulously assess the classroom practices of 10 English teachers working within VHSs framed within the communicative approach. The choice of a descriptive case study aligns with the research's aim to provide a detailed description of a phenomenon within its real-world context (Yin, 2014). In the research process, a holistic multiple-case study design was employed. This design, encompassing multiple cases, enables separate analysis of each case, facilitating subsequent comparison to attain a comprehensive perspective (Yin, 2014). Case studies capture multifaceted situations and diverse viewpoints, offering compelling evidence for portraying numerous cases more effectively (Neuman, 2014).

Data collection for this study involved employing semistructured interviews, observations, and document analysis methods. Interviews were subject to content analysis to derive insights, whereas observations and document analysis were scrutinized through a descriptive analysis method.

2.2 | Study group

Ten English teachers from VHSs actively participated in this research. VHSs represent educational institutions dedicated to imparting technical knowledge and practical skills in specific vocational domains alongside a curriculum of cultural courses. These schools utilize workshops and laboratories to facilitate hands-on learning experiences, while internships and industry connections are pivotal in shaping students' career paths postgraduation.

The participant selection process involved employing the maximum variation sampling method, a purposive sampling technique aimed at encompassing individuals with diverse characteristics and qualities (Creswell, 2017). The 10 English teachers included in this study comprised seven females and three males, deliberately selected to encompass variations in professional seniority, VHS experience, education levels, and training related to the communicative approach. Due to research ethics, the teachers' names in the study group were kept confidential and given as alphanumeric codes (e.g., T1 = First Participant Teacher). For further details regarding the participants, refer to Table 1.

2.3 | Data gathering instrument

2.3.1 | Interview

The semistructured interview questions were meticulously crafted in line with the pertinent theoretical foundation. Subsequently, two experts meticulously reviewed and refined these questions, restructuring them where necessary. These semistructured interview inquiries were centered around probing the alignment between the principles of the communicative approach and various facets of classroom practices. The focal points encompassed the congruence between these principles and the activities conducted, organization of classroom participants, teaching tools

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TABLE 1 Participants' demographics.

Code	Gender	Seniority (years)	VHS experience (years)	Education level	Training on communicative approach
T1	Male	21	8	Master's degree	Yes
T2	Female	22	15	Master's degree	Yes
T3	Female	24	6	Undergraduate	Yes
T4	Female	21	9	Master's degree	Yes
T5	Female	24	13	Undergraduate	No
T6	Female	23	17	Doctorate	Yes
T7	Female	18	15	Undergraduate	No
T8	Female	27	25	Undergraduate	Yes
T9	Male	23	2	Master's degree	No
T10	Male	22	6	Undergraduate	No

Abbreviation: VHS, vocational high school.

employed, assessment and evaluation instruments utilized, prominent language skills within these activities, and insights from teachers regarding more effective utilization of the communicative approach in classroom settings.

2.4 | Observation

Three observations were conducted within schools to observe in-class English lesson activities spanning 9th, 10th, and 11th grades. However, observations weren't feasible in the 12th grade due to an internship period and relaxed attendance requirements after an earthquake disaster. Each school underwent four observation sessions, totaling eight class hours. The initial observation served as an orientation phase for students and teachers; thus, no formal notes were taken—subsequent observations involved completing a semistructured observation form and field note documentation. Furthermore, video recordings were made and evaluated by an expert researcher.

2.5 | Document analysis

Document analysis encompassed various materials aligning with the Communicative Approach's integrated language skills teaching principles and diverse teaching tools. The document analysis involved examining textbooks from the Ministry of National Education General Directorate of Secondary Education, supplementary materials such as "*More and More*" by Kurmay Publications and "*Think Turkey*" applications by Cambridge University Press on the Education Information Network (EIN) of the Ministry of National Education. Additionally, VHS exam documents, including written and practice exams across grades, were analyzed coherently with communicative approach principles.

2.6 | Data collection process

Observations focused on scrutinizing English teachers' classroom interactions and practices, involving multiple permissions and four sessions per school. The initial observation was a familiarization process and involved no

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formal documentation. Subsequent observations used a structured form for documentation alongside field notes and video recordings, further evaluated by another researcher. Data were collected from MoNE books and sources on EIN in the document analysis. In the interviews, semistructured questions focusing on teachers' classroom practices and classroom interactions were used. Interviews with 10 English teachers centered around classroom practices and interactions. They were ~35 min long and recorded for transcription.

2.7 | Data analysis

In the study, content analysis was used to analyze the data obtained from interviews, and the descriptive analysis technique was used to analyze the data obtained from observations and document analysis. In the analysis of the interviews, the recordings were first transcribed. Then, each of these transcripts was subjected to content analysis according to the themes and sub-themes specified in the coding table in Table 2. Descriptive analysis techniques were utilized for observations and document data, organized and presented within the study's theoretical framework. The findings incorporated direct quotations from the data.

2.8 | Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, validity means that the subject matter is presented objectively and accurately, while reliability is related to the study's replicability (Keller, 1995; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). Rigorous measures ensured this qualitative study's credibility, transferability, and consistency. Triangulation, integrating interviews, observations, and document analysis, fortified the construct validity of the research.

TABLE 2 Coding table.

Theme	Subtheme
Classroom activities and activity control	Teacher controlled
	Teacher–student controlled
	Student controlled
Classroom participant organization	Teacher–classroom
	Dual working
Language skills featured in activities	Reading
	Speaking
	Writing
	Listening
Teaching tools	Using information network resources
	Written, visual, audio, audiovisual
Measurement and evaluation	Written Exam, Practice Exam,
	Performance and project assignments
Recommendations	Teaching material suggestion
	Training program proposal
	Measurement and evaluation proposal

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The researchers maintained objectivity during observations and interviews, refraining from personal influence. Theoretical grounding and a structured interview form bolstered internal validity while analyzing interview data through predefined themes ensured coherence and integrity. Building trust with teachers via permissions enhanced the fidelity of data representation. Member checking, involving participant review, validated the findings' accuracy. The research process was extensively detailed to promote transferability, elucidating every facet from model to conclusions. Presentation of direct observations and document analysis without interpretation bolstered internal reliability, while independent data coding by two assessors yielded a high Cohen's κ coefficient of .81, signifying exceptional agreement between coders (Landis & Koch, 1977).

The theoretical framework was clarified by considering the relevant literature, and an interview form was developed to increase the research's internal validity (credibility). In analyzing the data obtained from the interviews (content analysis), themes and subthemes were given, and integrity was ensured by checking the relationship between them. The member-checking technique was also used with three participants for the credibility strategy. Member checking is used when the researcher asks one or more study participants to check the account's accuracy. This check involves returning the findings to the participants and asking them (in writing or an interview) about the report's accuracy (Creswell, 2017).

3 | FINDINGS

The study utilized three methods to gather participant data: individual interviews, observations of in-class activities, and examination of educational materials and assessment tools. The first is the data obtained from interviews to determine the views of English teachers on classroom activities. The second one is the data obtained by observing the in-class activities of English classes. The third one is the examination of the textbooks used in classroom activities, the supplementary materials of the MoNE Education Informatics Network, the Regulation on Secondary Education Institutions, and the written and practice exam documents used as assessment and evaluation tools.

3.1 | Findings related to the first research question

One central theme and three subthemes emerged for the first research question, probing the activities employed by English teachers in classrooms. The overarching theme identified was “Activity and Activity Management,” comprising subthemes of “Teacher Controlled,” “Teacher–Student Controlled,” and “Student Controlled.”

Teachers' perspectives were sought concerning the types of in-class activities, their selection criteria, and methods of maintaining control during these activities. Although participants acknowledged employing various techniques, predominant use was reported for teacher-controlled activities like lecturing, translation, and mechanical exercises. In contrast, fewer teacher-student controlled activities such as question-answer or structured text usage were mentioned. Participants indicated minor utilization of student-controlled activities like role-playing, dialog, or game-based methods. Consensus among teachers highlighted the influence of factors such as students' English proficiency, classroom ambiance, subject content, teaching resources, and curriculum in determining these activities. A few excerpts from participants' views on the types of classroom activities, how they decide on the activities, and how they ensure classroom control are given in Table 3.

3.2 | Participants' perspectives on classroom activities

Participants were queried about their preferences for in-class activities, methods of selection, and strategies for maintaining control during these activities. Despite employing diverse techniques, participants predominantly

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TABLE 3 Participants' views on classroom activities and activity management.

Theme	Subtheme	Sample excerpts
Activity and activity management	Teacher controlled	I use translation, lecturing, gap-filling, matching, and a small quantity of dialogue writing in my lessons. I usually decide on the activities according to the source's content. MoNE's 11th and 12th-grade books are much higher than the level of vocational high school students. So, I use activities from lower-level resources (T1).
		Our lessons mainly consist of lecturing, translation, and mechanical exercises. I decide on these activities according to the issue's subject, content, and appropriateness. For example, I use lecturing and translation-type activities to teach grammar (T2).
	Teacher–student controlled	In vocational high schools, since the English lesson hours are less than in Anatolian high schools and the students' academic level is low, I explain the grammar subject to be acquired without going into too much detail. I do question-answers in line with our textbook's directions, making them write sentences (T6).
		Our activities are varied. Depending on the subject's content, I use a lot of sentences or text construction and question-answer style activities. However, when necessary, I also give lectures and play games. I generally try to enrich the content of the book. My students have difficulty accepting exercises and studies they do not see in the book (T10).
	Student controlled	I prioritize role-playing, simulation, problem-solving, discussion, and games that students can interact with, and I include text creation, gap-filling, and question-and-answer activities related to the text. Occasionally, I include activities to keep students active with tasks and projects. Time constraint is a big problem. Considering that the weekly English lesson hours are 5 hours in 9th grade and 2 hours in 10th, 11th, and 12th grade, I decide according to the learning level of the students (T8).
		I know I should create natural environments in the classroom and have role-playing activities. I do not know that discussion activities would be more useful, but I cannot apply them. Reasons such as student level, limited class hours, students' absenteeism too much, and textbooks cause me to teach my lessons with more classical methods (T9).

leaned towards teacher-controlled activities, favoring methodologies such as lecturing, translation, and mechanical exercises. Conversely, fewer instances were reported for teacher-student controlled activities encompassing question-answer sessions, structured sentence formation, or text-based exercises conforming to predefined structures. Participants indicated limited utilization of student-controlled activities such as role-playing, dialog enactment, and game-based approaches.

When deliberating on activity selection, unanimity prevailed among teachers regarding influential determinants. Participants uniformly underscored factors including students' English proficiency, classroom ambiance, subject matter, available teaching resources, and alignment with the curriculum as pivotal considerations shaping their choices.

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3.3 | Observation findings on English lesson activities at School A

Observations were conducted in Class 9/C at School A on multiple dates and times: February 22, 2023, March 15, 2023, April 26, 2023, and May 17, 2023, spanning sessions from 12:45 to 13:25 and from 13:35 to 14:15, with a class size of 22 students.

Throughout the observed lessons, several activities were notable: there were 17 occurrences of the Fill-in-the-Blank activity, nine instances of the Matching activity, six times where Language Structure Topics were explained, five activities on Sentence Writing using Linguistic structures, three sessions of Reading Aloud and Answering Text-related Questions each, and one instance of Pronunciation activity.

A specific observation instance from April 26, 2023, between 12:45 and 13:25, delineates the classroom scenario:

Upon the teacher's arrival and attendance taking, the introduction of a PowerPoint presentation commenced the lesson on teaching the past simple tense. The instructor dedicated 9 min to elucidating positive sentence structures in the past tense via the prepared PowerPoint slides. Subsequently, a fill-in-the-blank exercise comprising 15 questions about the topic ensued, where students were tasked to solve the queries themselves, extending for 11 min. Following this, a 6 min activity involving matching the first and second forms of 20 verbs occurred. The lesson reverted to the PowerPoint presentation, with the teacher explicating negative sentence usage in the past tense over 7 min (School A, T1).

3.4 | Observation findings on English lesson activities at School B

Observations were conducted in Class 10/E at School B across multiple dates and times, namely on February 24, 2023, March 22, 2023, May 03, 2023, and May 26, 2023, during sessions from 08:50 to 09:30 and from 09:40 to 10:20, hosting a class size of 21 students. Noteworthy activities witnessed during these English lessons comprised a range of practices. The dialog-building activity occurred eight times while role-playing activities were noted five times. Activities like video watching, translation exercises, game playing, and pronunciation practice were observed thrice each. Additionally, the explanation of language structure topics occurred twice during these observations.

One specific instance from May 3, 2023, between 9:40 and 10:20 am, illustrates the classroom scenario: The teacher directed students to page 85 of the "Count Me In 10" textbook, focusing on the unit theme of food festivals. Activity 1A was introduced, involving pair work, where students matched quoted sentences with types of celebrations, lasting 4 min. Activity 1D on page 87 followed, requiring pairs to work together for 9 min. Subsequently, students were prompted to imagine themselves at a festival, preparing to describe it to their partners, with 10 min allotted for brainstorming and note-taking. Students then presented their ideas to the class (School B, T2).

3.5 | Observation findings on English lesson activities at School C

Observations occurred in Class 11/J at School C on various dates: March 01, 2023, March 24, 2023, April 26, 2023, and May 24, 2023, during sessions from 08:00 to 08:40 and from 08:50 to 09:30 h.

The observed English classes at School C involved a variety of activities. These included practicing reading texts and answering associated comprehension questions nine times. Additionally, gap-filling and matching activities were each utilized seven times, while creating texts using linguistic structures was observed four times. Explaining language form-related topics arose three times, and there were two instances of answering questions based on listened texts. Singing and pronunciation activities each occurred once during these sessions.

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An observation instance on April 26, 2023, from 08:50 to 09:30, portrayed the teacher's approach: the teacher opted not to use the Grade 11 English textbook, deeming it beyond her students' level. Instead, she employed more straightforward resources from the Ministry of National Education's EIN to focus on fundamental skills. Using EIN sources, the teacher displayed a reading text on the smart board, instructing students to silently read and listen attentively to the text's pronunciation as she read it aloud to different students. The lesson concluded with a discussion involving comprehension questions related to the text (School C, T3).

3.6 | Findings related to the second research question

The study investigated whether the classroom organization and communicative aspects in VHSs' English courses aligned. The analysis identified a central theme, "Participant Layout," alongside subthemes: "Traditional" (students facing the teacher), "Pair Work" (students working in pairs), and "Group Work" (collaborative tasks among students). Teachers' perspectives on classroom participant organization are detailed in Table 4. A few excerpts from the participants' views on the participant organization of classroom activities are given in Table 4.

Participants predominantly highlighted traditional participant layouts, emphasizing that about 70% of activities adhere to this model, with minimal incorporation of pair (20%) and group work (10%). Some teachers expressed challenges with

TABLE 4 Participants' views on classroom participant organization.

Theme	Subtheme	Sample excerpts
Participant layout	Traditional	A traditional participant layout is provided in most of the activities we do in our classes. If I need to give a rough ratio, I can say 70% traditional, 20% pair work, and 10% group work. In pair and group work, I find it difficult to explain what they should do and the content of the activity, and I get tired (T5).
		Our participant organization is strictly traditional. Pair work and group work are forced for sure. There is much reluctance. They don't touch us as much as possible (T7).
	Pair work	I use traditional and pair-work layouts. I use conventional formats in mechanical activities and pair-work layouts in activities such as question-answer and dialogue writing. However, I have often encountered that many of my students do not do what they are asked to do in pairs- work layout, and they talk among themselves in Turkish about things irrelevant to the subject (T1).
		The traditional layout is predominant in my lessons, but I also include pair work. I try to include pair work. When I want them to write dialogues, I want them to work in pairs (T4).
	Group work	Our participant organization varies according to the classroom atmosphere and the type of activity. For example, we can say pair work when writing dialogues or texts, group work when playing games, and traditional question-answer activities. I think group work is essential, but if you ask how successful I am in implementing it, I cannot say I am very successful. In group work, a common idea is expected to emerge, but in our activities, sometimes, no idea can appear at all (T6).
		As I said, I try to do activities that will make my students active, so I also do group work. Since our class sizes vary between 10 and 20, I have more chances to implement it. My main goal in group work is to ensure that they can work together and produce work rather than creating great products related to the lesson. However, students have deficiencies not only in English but in almost all subjects, so most of the time, the results I want may not come out (T8).

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implementing pair and group work, mentioning difficulties in guiding activities and students' reluctance. Although one instructor noted the prevalence of traditional layouts, another noted using both traditional and pair-work arrangements, albeit encountering students' tendency to engage in irrelevant discussions during pair work.

Teachers varied in their approaches, attributing the participant organization to classroom dynamics and activity types. Although some emphasized the importance of group work in fostering collaboration, they admitted challenges in eliciting cohesive ideas during such activities due to students' limitations. Another teacher highlighted efforts to engage students in group work despite facing challenges in achieving desired outcomes.

In summary, despite efforts to incorporate alternative participant layouts, traditional organization predominates in classroom activities. Teachers mentioned students' disinterest, reluctance, and the curriculum's difficulty as factors influencing these layouts, not only in English but across subjects.

3.7 | Observation findings at School A

During observations at School A's English classes, it was noted that the teacher frequently used the native language to explain language structures, introduce activities, and provide instructions. Similarly, students predominantly used their mother tongue when posing questions, while interactions in English occurred solely during exercise responses. An instance from School A on March 15, between 13.35 and 14.20, illustrates this use of Turkish:

> Teacher: Friends, today we'll delve into the "Present Continuous Tense," or as we say in Turkish, "Şimdiki Zaman [Present tense]." This tense expresses ongoing actions. For example, you use the sentence "I am singing" when you sing. We say this sentence as "I am cooking" in English.
>
> (The teacher writes the example on the board)
>
> When making a present tense sentence in English, the verb "to be" will become "am," "is," and "are," and -ing will be added to the verb. Are there any questions so far?
>
> Student: You said "am, is, are" how do we choose them?
>
> Teacher: According to subject pronouns.

At School A, observations revealed that the teacher frequently offered immediate feedback, primarily focusing on structural aspects during activities. The feedback predominantly related to correcting errors in language structure or acknowledging correct responses. Immediate feedback involved praising or approving correct answers and correcting mistakes when incorrect language behaviors occurred. Here is a sample observation note demonstrating the feedback scenario: (Teacher giving immediate feedback during an activity)

> Teacher: "We'll fill in the gaps in the sentences using the past tense based on the given verbs. Who wants to start? Yes, Furkan."
>
> Student: "Played, teacher."
>
> Teacher: "Good. 'Play' is a regular verb that adds the suffix -ed. Who'd like to try the 2nd question? Irem, would you like to?"
>
> Student: "Let me do it, teacher. She went to Izmir last year."

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Teacher: "Well done, Irem. The verb 'go' is irregular; its past form is 'went'. Let Alperen try the 3rd question."

Student: "They *haved a party last night."

Teacher: "Alperen, be careful. 'Have' is irregular; it doesn't take -ed. The past form is 'had."

3.8 | Observation findings at School B

At School B, observations revealed that the teacher initially explained activities, provided instructions in English, and restated everything in the students' native language. Although attempting to form sentences in English, students frequently interspersed their sentences with their native language expressions, employing both languages during pair work. Here's an example illustrating the use of English and Turkish at School B:

Teacher: (Introducing an activity in the textbook) "Now, open page 78 and listen to the dialogue between Mr. Davis, the school principal, and Jammie, the counselor. They are discussing the survey results on common youth problems in their school. Listen and put a tick about the problematic situations they are talking about. And then, please discuss these situations at school with your partner."

(The teacher also explains the problem situations in students' native language. During pair work after the listening activity)

Student A: Biz de exam fear yok. Unhealthy lifestyle var. [We don't have exam fear. There's an unhealthy lifestyle.]

Student B: Evet. Parental pressure bence yok. What do you think? [Yes. I don't think there's parental pressure. What do you think?]

Observations at School B highlighted the teacher's feedback, encompassing language structure and pronunciation. The teacher acknowledged correct answers by praising or approving students' behavior. Expressly, when students exhibited incorrect language behaviors, immediate feedback on pronunciation was provided. Structural language feedback involved explanations given to the whole class in their native language. A specific observation note exemplifies this feedback scenario on May 26, 2023 between 08.50 and 9.30 at School B during a question-and-answer activity: (Students engaging in a question-and-answer activity)

Student A: "What would you do if you were rich?"

Teacher: "Please do not say 'wuuld,' but 'wud'."

Student A: "Okay, 'wud'."

Student B: "I would buy a new car."

Teacher: "Well done. However, there's a mistake. As we discussed, in hypothetical situations, we use the past form of the verb 'be.' So, it's not 'if you are,' but 'if you were,' right, guys?"

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3.9 | Observation findings at School C

During observations at School C, it was noted that the teacher used the native language to explain language structure topics. The teacher employed English in other instances but consistently repeated each sentence in the students' native language. However, most students responded in their native language when asked questions in English, repeating after the teacher's corrections. Here's an example illustrating the language used between teachers and students at School C: (Teacher introducing the activity)

> Teacher: I will ask you some questions with "How often." I will ask you some How often questions you can give short answers to. Yes, Furkan. How often do you meet your friends?
>
> Student: Bazen, öğretmenim. [Sometimes, teacher]
>
> Teacher: Not "bazen" [sometimes], sometimes.
>
> Student: Sometimes.

Observations at School C revealed that the teacher frequently provided feedback primarily related to structural aspects during English lessons. There were fewer instances where feedback solely focused on meaning or both form and meaning. The teacher often recasts correct student responses. Regarding incorrect language use, feedback was directed to the entire class, eliciting the reasons for mistakes, primarily using the students' native language. A sample observation note from May 24, 2023 between 08.50 and 9.30 at School C illustrates the teacher's feedback during an activity where students created sentences based on displayed images. (Students engaging in the exercise of creating sentences from displayed pictures on the smart board)

> Student A: "They are dancing."
>
> Teacher: "Okay, they are dancing. Good. Next one. Yes, Talha."
>
> Student B: "She is *sleep."
>
> Teacher: "Talha forgot the suffix -ing, didn't he? It should be 'She is sleeping.'"

3.10 | Findings related to the third research question

The study's third research question aimed to identify which language skills were emphasized within classroom activities. Participants highlighted exercises geared towards improving reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills, albeit at varying levels of emphasis depending on activity content and student proficiency. Teachers noted challenges in students' comprehensive skill acquisition due to content limitations, low motivation, and student reluctance, suggesting a gradual development of each skill. The opinions converged on the difficulty of achieving comprehensive language skill development in the classroom.

A few excerpts from the views of participants on the language skills that come to the fore in classroom activities are given in Table 5:

As illustrated in the excerpts, teachers faced challenges from limited textbook content, student motivation issues, and a notable reluctance among students, affecting their overall skill acquisition. Teachers expressed concerns about the gradual nature of skill development, indicating that students might not fully acquire these skills

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TABLE 5 Participants' opinions on the language skills prominent in classroom activities.

Theme	Subtheme	Sample excerpts
Language skills	Reading	Our activities aim to develop the four language skills: reading, writing, listening, speaking, and grammar knowledge. I do not think that reading skills are sufficient, but I believe they grow better than other skills. For example, I want to do speaking activities, but most students do not develop their speaking skills sufficiently, even in their mother tongue, let alone in English (T1).
		I think their reading skills improve the most. I make them do reading activities the most (T2)
	Speech	I give the most weight to the development of speaking skills, and I observe this development in my students (T8).
		I think that my activities primarily enable students to develop their communicative skills. I especially observe that some of my 9th-grade students are eager to speak English and make efforts to do so (T5).
	Writing	Writing is ahead of other skills. But not at the desired level. I make them write sentences according to the content of the grammar topic (T6).
		Unfortunately, my activities are shaped by the students' wishes and interests. They are highly reluctant to develop speaking skills. Therefore, I usually focus on writing skills to build the productive side of language and essential reading and listening skills (T10).
	Listening	Some of our students have much better listening skills than other students. I think that in-class activities have little contribution to this. I know that the main reason for this development is that they watch movies and listen to music in a foreign language. The number of such students is around 10% (T3).
		At school, students often shy away from the language skill of speaking. They do not want to participate. Mainly because they are not used to it yet, and they are afraid of being made fun of for mispronunciation. Listening attracts them more. I think this aspect has also improved. They get the most points from this section in the practical exams (T7).
	Inability to use	I do not think our in-class activities enable students to develop different language skills due to low student levels and reluctance. Even if they do, each skill sets gradually (T9).
		I cannot significantly improve my language skills due to the inadequate content of textbooks, lack of student motivation, etc. (T4).

due to these constraints. Overall, there appeared to be a consensus among participants about the difficulty in comprehensively fostering language skills in the classroom.

3.11 | Findings related to the fourth research question

The study's fourth research question aimed to explore the instructional tools employed by participants in classroom activities. Based on the analysis, one theme and two sub-themes were identified. The overarching theme is Teaching Tools, while the sub-themes include Using Information Network Resources and Written, Visual, and Audiovisual tools.

A few excerpts from participants' opinions regarding the teaching tools they utilize in classroom activities are presented in Table 6.

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TABLE 6 Participants' views on the instructional tools they use in classroom activities.

Theme	Subtheme	Sample excerpts
Teaching tools	Using information network resources	I follow the MoNE's book and the resources on EBA. Since the MoNE's 11th and 12th-grade books are much above the level of vocational high school students, I try to use the activities of lower-level resources. I decide on the material we will use in line with the resources on EIN and those I use as a guide (T1).
		Through the EIN Language Portal, I prefer textbooks and materials that are appropriate for the grade level and meet the students' learning levels, needs, and interests. Otherwise, teaching the vocational high school curriculum becomes almost impossible, the same as the Anatolian High School curriculum (T4).
	Written, visual, audio, audiovisual	Audiovisual attracts their attention more. I think what they learn is more permanent. As time passed, I realized the diversity of students' comprehension, so I decided this method was permanent learning. They participate more willingly, and I think we achieve success in exams in this way. I use auditory materials in listening activities. I also use written materials when necessary. I diversify as much as possible. I determine the choice of materials in line with their interests and wishes (T7).
		I use written, visual, and auditory educational tools. I use audiovisual tools relatively less, and I use short materials when I do. When they are long, it is not easy to control the classroom. (T10).

Participants highlighted using various teaching tools, including written, visual, auditory, and audiovisual resources and supplementary materials from the MoNE Education Information Network. They emphasized tailoring these tools based on the subject's content, students' interests, and the classroom environment to enhance engagement and learning outcomes.

3.12 | Findings related to the analysis of English textbooks

The analysis delved into the Ministry of National Education's English textbooks across all secondary education institutions, including VHS, evaluating their alignment with the principles of the communicative approach. The examination revealed that the 9th, 10th, and 11th-grade English textbooks encompass 10 themes, integrating reading, writing, listening, and speaking activities alongside grammar and pronunciation exercises. This comprehensive scope suggests that the materials authorized by the Ministry adhere to the integrated language teaching principle. Moreover, when scrutinizing these textbooks through the communicative approach's lens, which emphasizes written, visual, and audiovisual diversity in teaching tools, it was evident that written and visual elements were predominant. However, the analyzed materials had comparatively less incorporation of audiovisual components.

3.13 | Findings related to the supplementary materials

The analysis of the supplementary materials offered by the Ministry of National Education Information Network revealed that the materials aligned with the structure of the Ministry's textbooks. These additional resources for the 9th, 10th, and 11th grades also encompassed 10 themes, incorporating grammar, pronunciation, reading, writing, listening, and speaking activities. This comprehensive alignment indicates a congruence with the integrated

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TABLE 7 Participants' opinions on methods of measurement and evaluation of classroom activities.

Theme	Subtheme	Sample excerpts
		Of course, unfortunately, there are exams, project assignments, and performance assignments that we have to do. We don't have much time to make different assessments, but I still try to prepare my exams to measure all skills separately as much as possible. I don't think that language skills are fully measured due to limited time and assessment opportunities, but I still try my best (T3).
Measurement and evaluation	Written exams, practice exams, performance assessments, Project assignments	We evaluate and grade with written exams, practical exams, performance assignments, and projects. I do not think these are adequate measurements. We make straightforward exams. I do not believe that students study for these exams (T5).
		Our assessment and evaluation methods are performance, project and written exams, and practical exams, which we must do in line with the regulations. I do not think that these assessment methods adequately measure language skills. For example, I do a listening test as part of the exam, but listening is only in the gap-filling dimension. As much as possible, we give exams that will help them pass. We provide projects and want to follow up monthly, but among the students who take the project, some students do not bring the grades until they are delivered (T9).

language teaching principle advocated by the Ministry. When examining these materials through the lens of the communicative approach, which stresses diverse teaching tools encompassing written, visual, and audiovisual elements, it was evident that the supplementary resources predominantly consisted of written and visual components. However, unlike the textbooks, these additional materials showcased a higher inclusion of audiovisual elements, reflecting a more balanced incorporation of diverse teaching tools in this particular set of resources.

3.14 | Findings related to the fifth research question

The fifth research question aimed to explore how English Language Teachers' assessment practices align with the communicative approach. The theme identified was "Measurement and Evaluation," with subthemes encompassing written exams, practice exams, performance assessments, and project assignments.

A few excerpts from participants' views on methods of measuring and evaluating classroom activities are presented in Table 7.

Table 7 shows participants' viewpoints on the methods used for assessing classroom activities, reflecting concerns about the limitations of these evaluation methods in capturing language skills comprehensively. Most teachers expressed that while they employ written exams, practice exams, performance assessments, and projects due to regulatory requirements and time constraints, they find these testing methods insufficient for thoroughly measuring language proficiency. Additionally, participants' opinions collectively highlighted that despite attempts to diversify assessments, restrictions like exam-centric approaches and limitations in assessment variety hinder comprehensive skill measurement.

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3.15 | Findings regarding the measurement documents in School A

Findings from the examination of assessment documents at School A revealed that written exams align with specific regulations. However, the exams predominantly focused on reading and grammar, comprising sections with allocated points. Assessments lacked provisions for evaluating writing, speaking, and listening skills. Moreover, the absence of practice exams was noted by some teachers. The analysis of exam documents also suggests that the evaluation methods at School A may not fully adhere to the principles of the communicative approach and the corresponding guidelines outlined in the Regulation on Secondary Education Institutions.

3.16 | Findings regarding the measurement documents in School B

The examination documents reviewed at School B demonstrated adherence to regulations, incorporating various sections focusing on reading, grammar, vocabulary, and writing skills. Notably, practice exams were organized within class time, encompassing listening and speaking sections. The analysis revealed a balance in assessing different skills: reading (22 points), listening, speaking (both 30 points), and writing (18 points). These findings suggest that School B's evaluation practices align with the principles of the communicative approach and the guidelines specified in the Regulation on Secondary Education Institutions.

3.17 | Findings regarding the measurement documents in School C

The examination documents reviewed at School C indicated a disparity in aligning with regulations and the communicative approach principles. While the exams followed regulations, they showed imbalances in evaluating language skills. The written exam featured sections for reading, speaking, vocabulary, and grammar, but the distribution of points highlighted a lack of assessment in certain areas. Notably, practice exams were conducted within class time, yet they predominantly focused on listening skills, lacking questions related to writing. The assessment distribution emphasized listening over other skills: listening (100 points), speaking, and reading (15 points each). These findings suggest a deviation from the communicative approach principles and the guidelines specified in the Regulation on Secondary Education Institutions.

3.18 | Findings related to the sixth research question

The sixth research question explored English teachers' suggestions to enhance the communicative approach in classroom practices. Participants provided diverse recommendations across three areas: instructional materials, curriculum, and assessment and evaluation. A few excerpts from participants' suggestions for improving students' language skills in classroom activities are given in Table 8.

The analysis showed that teachers proposed simplifying the curriculum in VHSs, focusing on technical English relevant to students' fields. They emphasized the development of resources tailored to departmental studies, suggesting separating course content from other school types to enhance its effectiveness. Regarding teaching tools, they especially expressed their opinions on the widespread use of Web 2.0 applications such as Kahoot and Blooklet and the simplification and updating of textbooks. As for the assessment aspect, a significant recommendation was to shift the evaluation of English away from grades and exams starting from primary school. Participants emphasized the importance of instilling in students the idea that languages are not merely subjects but essential life skills.

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TABLE 8 Participants' suggestions for improving students' language skills in classroom activities.

Theme	Subtheme	Sample excerpts
		Let some books reinforce everyday English. In this way, at least the student thinks the English lesson will be useful (T4).
	Instructional materials	We need to find fun activities, the content of the reading passages is significant, and Web 2.0 tools such as KAHOOT or Blooklet should be widely used for individual or group competitions at the end of the lesson (T7).
		Textbooks are above the students' level of readiness. Textbooks must be organized with content appropriate to the level of vocational high school students (T8).
Language skills development recommendations	Curriculum	The curriculum of vocational high schools needs to be simplified compared to other high school curricula. Technical English should be emphasized. Resources should be developed for the department students' study (T6).
		Separating the course content from other school types and simplifying it will increase the course's effect (T9).
	Assessment and evaluation	English should not be evaluated with grades and exams from primary school onwards. Many students who enjoyed English in the second grade of primary school lose the desire to learn English in the following years and see it as a lesson that requires grades and exams. I believe it is crucial to give the students the awareness that English and even foreign languages are not lessons but something they need to know at every point in their lives (T1).
		… language education should be adopted as a new language to be learned, not as a course to be evaluated by exams (T3).

Overall, participants stressed the need for improved curricula, teaching tools, and assessment methods, suggesting simplifying and customizing course content, integrating modern tools for engagement, and a shift from evaluating language learning solely through exams and grades.

4 | CONCLUSION

Upon thorough evaluation, it's evident that traditional teaching methods prevail in English classes within VHSs despite teachers' exposure to the communicative approach through in-service training. Moreover, the classroom activities rely heavily on teacher-led practices like lecturing, translation, and mechanical exercises, emphasizing traditional interaction. Several studies align with these findings, highlighting that despite the desire to adopt communicative approaches, various constraints impede their implementation. These barriers range from inadequate curriculum and teaching materials to students' proficiency levels, hindering the full integration of communicative strategies.

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For instance, Jabeen (2014) found that despite the teachers' emphasis on the importance of the communicative approach, this approach was not reflected in the activities. Similarly, Haznedar (2010) states that teachers continue to use traditional language teaching methods and techniques in classroom activities even though they know communicative approach methods. Likewise, Akkaş (2015) said in his high school-level research that teacher-centered teaching is generally at the forefront in foreign language classes, and group work that will enable students to communicate among themselves is rarely included.

A study by Ahmad and Rao (2013) determined that the students' reluctance to speak the target language was the most crucial reason for failing to reflect the communicative approach to classroom activities at the desired level. In the study conducted by Ardıç (2019) at the 9th-grade level, it was stated that students use all listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills and that activities for developing all skills are included at different rates. Similarly, Duff and Polio (1990) state that increasing the target language use in foreign language classes is crucial because students have less chance to be exposed to the target language outside the classroom. When the findings obtained from the observations on using the target language in classroom activities are appraised, it can be stated that teachers in the present study try to encourage students to use the target language, but students use their mother tongue more.

When the findings obtained from the teachers' opinions concerning the teaching materials used in VHS English lessons are examined, it can be stated that textbooks are at the forefront, and the supplementary materials in the Ministry of National Education Educational Informatics Network are used for support purposes. Teachers try to diversify the teaching tools. In the document analysis of textbooks and digital supplementary materials, it can be stated that the contents of teaching materials provide diversity. Written, visual, and auditory tools are used more than audiovisual tools. The prevalent use of textbooks and limited diversification in supplementary materials reveal an inclination toward traditional resources. Although attempts are made to vary teaching tools, the emphasis leans towards written, visual, and auditory aids, with less utilization of audiovisual elements. Although efforts exist to provide diverse materials, digital resources, and smart boards have witnessed increased usage in classroom activities. Kasap (2017) said that teachers spend a considerable amount of time on materials to provide various materials to develop different skills and that the use of digital materials in classroom activities has increased with the widespread use of smart boards.

When the teachers' views on the assessment and evaluation tools used in English lessons are examined, we found that teachers' perspectives on assessment and evaluation methods converge, indicating adherence to regulatory guidelines. However, an imbalance is evident in exam structures, neglecting the comprehensive measurement of language skills. The assessments focus on grammar and writing, which lack alignment with communicative language learning goals, which suggest using multiple assessment tools such as observation, interview, learning diary, and portfolio. The analysis of the exam documents also revealed that the exams in two schools were not prepared to measure four language skills, which contradicts both the communicative approach and the Regulation on Secondary Education Institutions. This finding shows similarity with Paker (2006), who found that teachers mostly ask questions about grammar and writing skills in exams, prefer question types such as multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, and sentence completion, and that these exams are not for communicative purposes.

The findings revealed that providing feedback to students primarily emphasizes structure over meaning, contradicting communicative principles. Similarly, observations indicate a teacher-centered layout in the classroom, hindering the holistic development of students' language skills. These findings show similarity with the study of Soğuksu (2013), who found that the feedback given by teachers to students in classroom interaction was not meaning-oriented and, therefore, a communicative learning environment did not occur.

When teachers' opinions regarding the development of students' language skills are examined, it can be stated that they express similar views. That is, curricula, teaching and supplementary tools, and assessment and evaluation tools should be developed.

As a result, although six teachers participating in the study received in-service training on the communicative approach, it was determined that traditional language teaching methods and techniques were used more in VHS English classes. Additionally, it was found that the classroom participant layout was teacher-centered, the four basic

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skills could not be developed sufficiently, the target language was not adequately used in classroom activities, especially by students, and diversity in measurement and evaluation tools was not provided. It was concluded that variety was only offered using supplementary teaching tools.

Considering the present study's findings, significant reforms are necessary to enhance English language teaching effectiveness in VHS. These include curriculum adjustments tailored to vocational and technical English, separate from other high school types. Additionally, in-service training can be organized for teachers to teach vocational English in line with the principles of the communicative approach. In-service training should focus on implementing communicative approaches, and revisions to educational regulations can realign classroom practices and assessment tools with communicative principles. Moreover, encouraging student involvement in European Union projects could also boost motivation for language learning. These recommendations aim to bridge the gap between traditional teaching methods and the communicative approach, fostering an environment conducive to holistic language skill development.

The findings on English language instruction in VHSs underscore several challenges and improvement areas. Despite training in the communicative approach, its practical implementation faces hindrances due to various factors, such as inadequate curriculum and materials. Although textbooks and supplementary materials provided by the Ministry of National Education are commonly utilized, there is a clear need for diversification in instructional resources. Despite attempts to expand digital resources, the reliance on written, visual, and auditory tools indicates a need for a more balanced incorporation of audiovisual elements. Evaluation methods largely adhere to regulations but exhibit limited diversity, heavily relying on exams that may not comprehensively measure all language skills. Moreover, feedback primarily emphasizes structural aspects rather than meaning, diverging from the core principles of the communicative approach. Similarly, teachers collectively express the need for further curriculum development, teaching tools, and assessment methods to enhance language skills effectively.

Based on these findings, recommendations are proposed to improve English language teaching in VHSs, primarily in line with curriculum development, teacher training, and student engagement. As for curriculum enhancement, authorities should revise the curriculum to align with vocational needs, separate it from general high school curricula, and prioritize vocational and technical English. Regarding teacher training, authorities should provide tailored in-service training to teachers focused on implementing the communicative approach for vocational and technical English. Teachers should also foster student participation in European Union projects to bolster motivation for language learning.

In conclusion, this study offers a comprehensive overview of current affairs and provides actionable recommendations for elevating English language instruction in VHSs.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: Süleyman Karataş. *Methodology*: Emine At and Saliha Çiftçi. *Resources*: Orhan Göçer and Barış Aksoy. *Data curation*: Barış Aksoy. *Writing—original draft preparation*: Süleyman Karataş. *Writing—review and editing*: Mustafa Caner. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ETHICS STATEMENT

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards and the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants included in the study. Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

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