An Exploratory Study on the Use of the Communicative Approach in the EFL Grammar Classes in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

This study explores how English teachers in Saudi Arabia use the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes. The paper opens with a series of definitions and features regarding CLT, along with the rationale behind its development. Following that, a section will discuss the importance of teaching grammar in CLT classrooms. The study also investigates how English teachers and learners perceive the CLT approach as a pedagogical technique and how their understanding shapes its implementation in EFL classrooms. Subsequently, the research describes how grammar is taught within CLT frameworks in Saudi classrooms. The paper highlights the challenges teachers face when employing this method and examines the Ministry of Education's role in reducing these challenges. It concludes with suggestions and recommendations for improving grammar instruction within CLT classrooms.

1. Introduction

The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach is one of the recent methods employed in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms to improve learners' communicative competence. It encourages communication and interaction in the classroom to strengthen learners' language skills and help them practice a second language in real-life situations (Richards, 2005). There are two versions of the CLT method: strong and weak. The two versions are used by English teachers in EFL classrooms (Lai, 2009).

Although CLT concerns itself mainly with teaching meaning, listening, and speaking, grammar instruction is also important in helping learners use of English accurately (Wu, 2008; Savignon, 2007). Wu (2008) indicates that one of the CLT aims is to develop learners' grammatical competence. Therefore, English teachers need to provide feedback on grammatical structures and correct learners' grammatical errors in class, as learning meaning without grammar leads to the articulation of incorrect and incomprehensible utterances, which causes misunderstanding and miscommunication between listeners and speakers (Zhong-Guo & Min-Yan, 2007).

Following the view of EFL researchers, grammar instruction needs to be incorporated into CLT; however, many English teachers face challenges in applying CLT in grammar classes. First, a lack of materials and practical knowledge about teaching grammar in CLT classes leads many English teachers to prefer traditional methods for teaching grammar (Woods and Cakir, 2011; Ellis, 2006). Some English learners and their parents opt for a traditional approach instead of CLT because they priorities high grades over acquiring communicative skills. Furthermore, some learners prefer traditional teaching methods in EFL classrooms because they do not want to interact with the teacher and other learners, fearing they may make errors in front of them (Littlewood, 2007).

Relating this to the Saudi context, the paper highlights the Ministry of Education's role in developing English teaching materials since 1970. The materials were modified to be used in CLT classrooms (Abahussain, 2016). As a result, teachers in schools and universities expressed willingness to employ CLT in teaching English, but they encountered many obstacles which encourage them to stick with the traditional approach in teaching English, particularly grammar (Bahumaid, 2013). These challenges include short class time, a high number of learners in classrooms, limited knowledge of CLT, low English proficiency among teachers and learners, and lack of consistency between CLT materials, midterm exams, and the final exam (Batawi, 2007; Assalahi, 2013; Bahumaid, 2013; Nalliveettil, 2014; Alqahtani, 2019).

The Saudi Ministry of Education has created a plan to help English teachers overcome the previously mentioned challenges in CLT classrooms. The main plan is to improve the pedagogical materials and train teachers to use

these materials in classrooms. Additionally, the Ministry of Education tests teachers' English language proficiency levels to assess their linguistic abilities while teaching and interacting in English. Schools and universities have increased English class time to improve exposure to the English language, thus allowing teachers to apply the CLT approach and interact more with the learners in classrooms (Moskovsky,2019; Alqahtani, 2019).

1.   Definitions and Features of the Communicative Approach

The communicative approach, also known as the functional approach, is an instructional method that focuses on developing ESL/EFL learners' communicative competence. It emphasises how to use language in certain contexts, including formal and informal, and interact with others, even when the learner's language proficiency level is low (Richards, 2005). This approach contains four elements: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence (Savignon, 2007). Brown (2007) identifies an additional aspect, which is functional competence. Linguistic grammatical competence involves rules, pronunciation, vocabulary, and spelling. Sociolinguistic competence is more related to language styles, such as formal and informal, politeness, and register. Discourse competence includes rules that transform form into meaning, such as coherence and cohesion. Strategic competence helps EFL/ESL learners to use a target language in communication, even if their English language proficiency is limited (Nalliveettil, 2014). Functional competence focuses on communicating and using the target language for a specific purpose. Bachman (1990) divides communicative competence into several elements, including organisational competence, pragmatic competence, strategic competence, and psychomotor competence (as cited in Brown, 2007, p. 79).

There are several reasons behind the introduction of CLT. The communicative approach emerged in 1960 to address and overcome the weaknesses of traditional approaches (Nalliveettil, 2014). Researchers and educators found that focusing only on developing grammatical competence was insufficient. Learners require a new approach to help them develop their communicative competence and encourage them to interact with others using the target language in different contexts (Richards, 2005). Another reason for establishing this approach was European migration. The increasing number of immigrants in Western Europe created a growing need for improvements in ESL/ EFL education (Wang, 2013).

Pedagogues and researchers did not only establish the CLT but divided it into two types. The first is strong CLT, also referred to as the task-based communicative approach. This version of the CLT focuses on adopting communicative tasks as the main tools for learning a target language. The second version is weak CLT, also known as task-supported language learning. This approach includes some communicative tasks to provide learners with the opportunity to communicate in a target language (Lai, 2009).

Although many English teachers believe that the CLT focuses only on listening and speaking, researchers, such as Savignon (2007) and Wu (2008), hold different perspectives. Savignon (2007) states that the CLT is not only concerned with oral communication but also helps develop learners' reading and writing skills. Wu (2008) suggests that the CLT is not only for learners who want to travel and communicate in English with native speakers. Instead, this approach is suitable for teaching ESL/EFL for various purposes, including business and education. The CLT helps English learners develop the four skills – writing, reading, speaking, and listening – within a communicative environment. Wu (2008) also identifies other features that set the CLT apart from other approaches. He points out that many English teachers mistakenly believe that the CLT focuses only on teaching meaning; however, this is not true. The CLT includes the development of grammatical competence and the teaching of language form. While the CLT pays more attention to learners' fluency, it also includes feedback correction to develop learners' language accuracy. CLT researchers and teachers believe that ESL learners' errors can be reduced gradually over time through exposure and practice of the target language, alongside feedback such as recasting. Recasting is usually used in English CLT classrooms by teachers who repeat learners' incorrect utterances in their corrected form (Wu, 2008). Varela and Doughty (2009) highlight another feature of the CLT: the communicative approach is not limited to teaching English in ESL/EFL classes; it can also be employed in content-based classes, such as mathematics and science, to develop learners' English language skills. In their study, Varela and Doughty (2009) emphasise that using the communicative approach for teaching grammar in content-based classes improves learners' grammatical competence.

2.   Why Is Teaching Grammar in a CLT Class Important?

Researchers and teachers hold two differing views regarding teaching grammar in the classroom. Some agree that grammar teaching is important because it develops learners' linguistic competence. Others believe teaching

grammar in the classroom is unnecessary since learners can acquire grammar naturally by communicating with native speakers outside the classroom (Ellis, 2006). Ellis (2006) shows that many studies indicate the necessity of teaching grammar in a formal setting. Learners who learn grammar in an English classroom tend to acquire the target language more accurately and within a shorter period compared to those who learn a second language naturally. Ellis (2006) adds that while communicative grammar teaching materials, such as textbooks, are scarce, relying only on the grammar-translation method is insufficient. Zhong-Guo and Min-Yan (2007) contend that avoiding teaching grammar, especially by teachers who adopt the CLT, is not helpful for learners. Without grammar teaching, learners struggle to construct grammatically correct sentences and express themselves if they want to discuss certain ideas. Due to the lack of grammar teaching, misunderstanding and miscommunication between speakers and listeners would occur, as speakers the grammatical knowledge required to express themselves in the second language correctly. As discussed in the previous sections, communicative competence encompasses different elements, including grammatical competence. This proves the importance of incorporating grammar teaching into communicative classrooms.

Zhong-Guo and Min-Yan (2007) propose a suitable technique for teaching grammar in a communicative classroom. They recommend that teachers adopt the *practising, absorbing, and practising technique,* which provides learners with the opportunity to explore grammatical rules and practice them in the classroom.

3. Teachers' Knowledge and Perception of the CLT

Although the communicative teaching approach is widespread nowadays, many English teachers still lack accurate knowledge about it. Woods and Cakir's study (2011) shows that while English teachers may have theoretical knowledge of the approach, most lack practical knowledge. The English teachers who participated in their study were unable to distinguish between communicative activities and tasks that belong to other teaching approaches.

Littlewood (2007) shows that many English teachers avoid using the CLT for several reasons. First, adopting the CLT can lead to classroom mismanagement challenges. English teachers argue that the class is hard to manage when all learners interact and communicate. Another reason for disregarding this approach is parents' and students' demands. Many parents and students believe CLT will not help achieve high scores on midterm and final exams; therefore, many teachers focus only on teaching material considered important for exams, disregarding communicative tasks. In addition, some teachers, especially those teaching English as a foreign language, struggle to explain certain ideas and communicate effectively with learners due to limited proficiency. As a result, they avoid using CLT and employ traditional approaches instead. Resistance to change is another factor. English teachers are reluctant to shift from a teacher-centered to a student-centered approach (Littlewood, 2007).

Furthermore, Lai (2009) provides another reason for avoiding the communicative approach. His research shows that many English teachers do not use the CLT because learners are reluctant to speak in class. Lai (2009) suggests that instead of blaming ESL/EFL learners, English teachers should find suitable ways to encourage students to talk and discuss in class. One such strategy is to use referential questions, which are similar to those encountered in real-life situations.

Although many teachers face several challenges when using this approach, some find it helpful for developing learners' linguistic competence. Littlewood (2007) suggests that once teachers learn to adapt to, rather than simply adopt, the CLT, they can overcome many teaching challenges. Instead of ignoring the communicative approach, teachers can blend traditional approaches with the CLT.

4. Learners' Perception of the CLT

Many studies indicate that ESL/EFL learners accustomed to teacher-centered approaches and hold similar views about the CLT. In her qualitative study, Chen (2003) shows that the two research participants, Noriko and Seungown, felt uncomfortable doing the communicative tasks. Their shy personalities prevented them from participating and talking to others in the classroom. In addition, linguistic factors form learners' negative perception toward the CLT. Seungown struggled to communicate in class because he was unable to express ideas or notions correctly. The lack of communication strategies and fear of making errors in front of their colleagues are other factors that contributed to Noriko's and Seungown's negative attitudes toward this approach.

Furthermore, many parents and students believe that CLT does not help achieve high grades in midterm and final exams; therefore, many teachers focus only on teaching what is important for the exam, disregarding communicative tasks (Littlewood, 2007). Rao's study (2002) shows the same findings. The participants in his study, who were university students, preferred non-communicative tasks more because they believed it helped them do better in exams. Lai (2009) discovered that learners who depend on grammar translation methods obtained higher test scores than learners taught through the CLT. Another reason for ignoring this approach is that some learners are not motivated to learn English through communication since the opportunities to practice the target language outside the classroom are rare. The lack of communicative teaching materials is another factor that contributes to learners leaning toward traditional approaches (Rao, 2002).

However, another study highlights different learners' views on the CLT. Inceçay and Inceçay (2009) found that EFL learners at a Turkish university preferred both communicative and non-communicative activities. Besides favouring error correction and audio-lingual drills, they enjoyed group work and classroom discussion.

5. Grammar Teaching in Saudi Arabia

Several studies focus on shedding light on how English teachers approach grammar teaching in EFL classrooms in Saudi schools and universities. Assalahi's qualitative study (2013) indicates that, although a few English teachers are familiar with implicit grammar instruction, almost all focus on a form-based approach and explicit teaching methods. These English school teachers believe grammar instruction is essential for minimising learners' flaws and errors. They usually start their classes by explaining grammatical rules, writing these rules on the board, and then asking students to practice through gap-filling exercises, substitution drills, and repetition activities. Moreover, most teachers incorporate Arabic in English classes for two main purposes. Arabic can facilitate grammar instruction; however, some teachers use Arabic only for managing the class or delivering important notices. During instruction, teachers do not forget to provide grammar terminologies and provide direct feedback to students (Assalahi, 2013). Chowdhury (2014) offers another perspective on teaching grammar in Saudi universities. He observes that university EFL teachers usually adopt one of the two methods. Some prefer a deductive, explicit teaching method that depends on presentation, practice, and production. Others follow an inductive, implicit method, which is based on exploration, explanation, and expression.

Assalahi (2013) identifies several reasons for the popularity of traditional grammar teaching in EFL classes in Saudi Arabia. One reason is the lack of time. Many English teachers feel they do not have enough time to implement the communicative approach in a 35-minute class. They believe that traditional grammar teaching methods are more effective for a half an hour class. Additionally, some teachers lack enough theoretical and practical knowledge of newer teaching approaches due to an outdated university educational system and the absence of systematic formal training. Another factor is related to classroom materials. Teachers feel that the Ministry of Education does not supply them with updated materials, such as textbooks; as a result, they only focus on grammar teaching (Assalahi, 2013).

6. Using the CLT in EFL Classrooms in Saudi Arabia

Due to the economic growth in Gulf countries, greater attention has been paid to English language teaching (Bahumaid, 2013). In Saudi Arabia, the adoption of CLT began in 1970 when the Saudi Ministry of Education signed a contract with Macmillan Press to publish English textbooks for Saudi learners. A new series of textbooks, titled *Saudi Arabia School English* was published to develop learner's communicative competence.

In 1995, the Ministry of Education made an agreement with King Fahad University to revise the English curriculum and publish new textbooks based on the principles of CLT. Local Saudi educators and writers published the series *English for Saudi Arabia,* which included communicative activities, such as pair and group work and discussion questions that encouraged learners to interact in the classroom. In 2004, another developed textbook was published. The book's title was *Say It in English*, and it focused on role-play and debate activities (Abahussain, 2016).

Consequently, many English teachers were happy to change their way of teaching by adopting the CLT since the shift from a teacher-centered approach to a learner-centered approach was promoted by the authors. In addition, learners found English classes more enjoyable as they became more interactive (Bahumaid, 2013). Some English teachers and learners found CLT beneficial, noting its effectiveness in enhancing learners' English skills and communicative competence by allowing them to practice the English language in real-life situations with greater

accuracy and fluency (Richards, 2005). By applying this method, learners could employ English for various purposes, including narrative writing, conversation, interviews, and reports (Alqahtani, 2019).

However, Batawi (2007) offers a different point of view regarding using the communicative approach in Saudi Arabia. Her study shows that most teachers in both public and private schools prefer traditional teaching approaches that focus on immediate feedback and rely on traditional exams as assessment tools. This study provides several reasons for avoiding the CLT approach in Saudi EFL classrooms. Firstly, many EFL teachers struggle with low language proficiency; as a result, they face difficulties in starting a conversation, communicating with learners, and negotiating meaning. Secondly, learners themselves do not feel comfortable using communicative tasks because they are accustomed to traditional activities. Additionally, the large number of learners in one class makes it difficult for teachers to implement the communicative approach. The inconsistency between CLT tasks and the format of midterm and final exams further demotivates teachers and learners in using this approach (Batawi, 2007; Alqahtani, 2019).

Bahumaid (2013) adds that using commercial CLT textbooks that don't pay attention to Arabic values discourages EFL teachers from favouring them. Many teachers do not possess enough knowledge about new teaching approaches and foreign cultures. As a result, they prioritise traditional grammar instruction (Bahumaid, 2013; Abahussain, 2016).

Nalliveettil (2014) provides additional reasons for avoiding CLT in Saudi universities. He observes that while many university teachers adopted this approach at the beginning, due to various reasons, they reverted to the traditional grammar-translation method. Many EFL teachers used the communicative approach syllabus and materials mainly focused on teaching beginners' native speakers or ESL students. However, these materials proved too advanced for some Saudi EFL learners, especially those with very low English abilities.

Moreover, most first-year EFL learners struggled with communicative tasks due to their low English proficiency level. For example, some of the students were not able to differentiate between English alphabet letters and their corresponding sounds. As a result, teachers returned to traditional approaches since they found the CLT not helpful enough to improve English learning or assess learners' progress (Nalliveettil, 2014).

Adopting the CLT in Saudi universities and schools is challenging, but not impossible. Several studies provide recommendations for successfully implementing this approach in EFL classrooms. Bahumaid (2013) urges educational authorities in the Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, to create EFL CLT textbooks suitable for the Arabic context. Additionally, EFL teachers need different types of training, including English and teaching method courses.

To use the communicative approach successfully in the EFL classroom, English teachers should adapt to, rather than adopt, the CLT. This involves selecting only certain tasks that suit the course objectives (Bahumaid, 2013). Batwai (2007) provides further suggestions. She encourages EFL teachers and academic administrators to increase parents' and learners' awareness of the CLT and develop traditional assessments into new ones, consistent with the CLT, such as writing portfolios. Nalliveettil (2014) suggests that Saudi universities should grant some freedom to EFL teachers in choosing syllabuses that match students' language levels and needs. Also, remedial classes and technological facilities must be provided to help develop learners' foreign language skills, while the high-school English curriculum should be better aligned with the first-year university EFL syllabus.

It should be noted that the Saudi Ministry of Education is aware of the challenges that both English teachers and learners face during CLT classes. As a result, extensive plans have been developed to improve the English learning experience. In addition to developing classroom materials that align with the CLT approach, the MOE partnered with a company called Tatweer to train teachers on how to use the CLT in the classroom instead of applying grammar teaching or audiolingual methods (Moskovsky,2019; Alqahtani, 2019). Moreover, the MOE examines English teachers to assess their English language proficiency, which is important for effectively employing CLT in the classroom. The tests also evaluate English teachers' pedagogical knowledge and awareness of current and effective teaching approaches (Alqahtani, 2019). Additionally, increasing the number of English teaching hours in schools and universities is another initiative the MOE has implemented to help teachers adopt this method and improve students' communicative skills (Moskovsky,2019).

7. Conclusion and Discussion

This paper explores the use of the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach for teaching grammar in EFL classrooms in Saudi Arabia. The first section of this research provides information about the nature of CLT

and the importance of grammar teaching for English learners. Although many researchers argue that grammar can be acquired naturally, several studies emphasise the need for formal grammar teaching, as it helps learners acquire English more accurately and in a shorter period.

The second part of this paper provides a general overview of how English learners and teachers perceive CLT. Several studies present different views. Although many EFL teachers, for several reasons, avoid using the CLT, other teachers prefer to implement it in their classes. Many EFL/ESL learners do not feel comfortable doing CLT tasks and tend to favour the grammar-translation method; however, the study by Inceçay and Inceçay (2009) shows that learners enjoy communicative tasks, such as group work.

The final section of this research focuses more on the Saudi context. Firstly, it provides the reader with insights into how English grammar is taught in Saudi schools and universities. Then, it addresses the condition of communicative teaching in Saudi Arabia, emphasising the many difficulties teachers and learners face when they use this approach and the Ministry of Education's efforts to reduce these difficulties.

According to the literature, it seems that applying CLT alongside grammar instruction in EFL classrooms is challenging for several reasons, including the limited number of materials focusing on teaching grammar in CLT classrooms as well as the large number of learners in classrooms, which make it difficult for English teachers to guide learners' interaction. Additionally, the low proficiency levels of some learners hinder some teachers' ability to teach grammar using this method. Many learners also resist this approach because they feel uncomfortable interacting with teachers and other students, fearing they will make mistakes in front of their colleagues.

However, teaching grammar in a CLT classroom is not impossible. The contributions of the Ministry of Education, school administrators, universities, and teachers guarantee the success of using grammar in a CLT classroom. Schools and universities need to provide training for teachers on how to teach grammar and create material following the CLT approach. Additionally, universities in Saudi Arabia should organise conferences and workshops focusing on recent teaching techniques and approaches in EFL classes. The main goal of these conferences is to bring together English teachers to discuss and raise awareness about the most current teaching methods, including how to teach grammar within the CLT framework.

Moreover, English teachers, especially in public schools, should reconsider their beliefs regarding English and grammar instruction. They should be more flexible with new English teaching approaches, especially when it comes to grammar. For example, English teachers can employ an inductive approach to teaching grammar in the CLT classroom instead of relying only on traditional grammar-teaching methods.

Finally, The Ministry of Education need to pay more attention to the issue of class size, since having a high number of learners in one class presents important disadvantages, including classroom mismanagement and difficulties in applying effective teaching approaches such as CLT.

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