IMPROVING TEACHING AND LEARNING THROUGH COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING (CLT) IN THE EFL CONTEXT IN ALBANIA

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ABSTRACT

The Communicative Approach is believed to be the most successful current foreign or second language teaching method. Because of the need for development, using the Communicative Approach in the EFL classrooms in Albania, and incorporating it into the curriculum design is extremely beneficial, but establishing a climate conducive to the best learning and ensuring the desired results is quite complex and time consuming. Students are accustomed to being taught utilizing traditional teaching techniques in the challenging Albanian educational environment. Teachers must, however, move away from conventional approaches and toward more modern ones, such as the Communicative Approach. As a result, the focus will be on the learners' language requirements and assisting instructors in achieving their objectives. However, because more contact and engagement in class can lead to a significant increase in students' conversation time, this practice necessitates the use of effective classroom management measures.
The purpose of this research is to see how the Communicative Approach may help students improve their communication skills. It addresses some of the issues and provides recommendations for successful application within the Albanian curriculum. Furthermore, it is hoped that the Communicative Approach would not only be presented as a positive approach regarding teaching and learning process, but that it will also equip educators and curriculum developers with some practical methods and processes for putting Communicative Language Teaching into practice.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching, communication, Student-centered, curriculum design

INTRODUCTION

The acquisition of English, has mainly one purpose, that of achieving communication competence. As a result, the necessity of having solid English communication skills has raised the demand for English language education all around the world in recent years. According to Broughton et al. (2003) English is by far the most frequently spoken of the 4000 to 5000 living languages. It is only second to Chinese as a mother tongue, which is made up of six mutually incomprehensible dialects that are rarely spoken in China. English has risen from its status as a dialect hardly known outside of the southern counties of England 400 years ago to its current standing as the most dominant language in the world. Moreover, the same authors emphasized that all our language use can be divided into a variety of categories depending on the situation and aim of communication.
For an English language learner, achieving a good level of communicative proficiency is more important than achieving formal linguistic correctness.

Good communication skills in English are only achieved when we have an accurate command of the language. Many people today aspire to improve the level of their English and there are a lot of ways to learn English, including being instructed in school, travelling, or studying abroad and even through media and internet use. The growing demand for English has resulted in a surge in the need for high-quality language instruction, materials, and resources. There is therefore, an increased demand for using appropriate teaching methodology for learners to master quality in accuracy and fluency. Current needs are different from those of thirty years ago when English was required mostly for political activities. As McKay (2002) emphasizes, globalization, international communication, commerce, trade, tourism, the media, and popular culture all use English as their primary language. These have become powerful motivations for mastering English language.

Literature Review

Communicative language teaching enables EFL learners to use the language in an appropriate, functional, and meaningful way. However, Berns (1990) indicated that even though students may have a good understanding of grammatical structures and forms, they are often not well prepared to use their second language effectively and appropriately. Consequently, Albanian classrooms needs to shift from traditional teaching approaches to alternative teaching ones. Richards & Rodgers (1986) pointed out that the "learner in a language classroom should produce as much language as possible". They should be involved in the classroom rather than just being taught; as Benjamin Franklin, an advocate for education, very wisely said, "Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn." (p. 82).
However, several linguists have noted that transferring a specific teaching strategy from one curriculum to another may be challenging in the context of teaching a language. As a result, while attempting to integrate CLT into the Albanian classroom and integrate it into the present curriculum is incredibly helpful owing to the need for quality improvement, it is also extremely challenging to establish a learning atmosphere that facilitates students to acquire their best achievements.

Previously, in the 1970s, English Language teaching in the Albanian context was dominated by the Grammar Translation Method. The course book which illustrated this method was essential, which concentrated on grammar and vocabulary, but it also provided the learners with some opportunities for interaction. In the following era up until the 1990s, there was an improvement in English teaching methods. Other course books used at that time were "English for the first class" with the emphasis on morphology, syntax, and glossary with a tendency on elaborating on English vocabulary. Since the 1990s, with the opening of the Albanian borders, there has been great interest among Albanians to study English as a Foreign language. New course books were introduced in the 2000s such as "Headway", "Wishes", "Blockbuster", "Upstream", "To the top" etc. These course books have a focus on enhancing vocabulary, reading comprehension, grammar, and pronunciation practice as well as functions of the language. Despite the evolution of the new English curriculum in recent years, the state of teaching of English language in Albania has remained based on traditional methods.
Second language learning, particularly English, has changed greatly over the last 30 years. As Richards (2006) emphasizes, some years ago, language learning focused on gaining grammatical competence. Students had the habits of producing error-free phrases. All they used to do was to produce memorized dialogues and performed them, consequently they did not have the chance to make errors. According to Richards (2006) the teacher was seen to have a strong control over the learning. Language learning has since evolved in recent years. There is now more emphasis on the communicative aspects of language. Richards (2006) points out that nowadays there is a different perspective on language with more "collaborative creation of meaning, interaction between the learner and users of the language and more negotiation of meaning as the learner and his or her interlocutor arrive at understanding" (p.4). As a result, the method of teaching plays an important role in teaching a language. This is the reason why teachers should make every effort to implement an innovative teaching approach in order to examine its impact and effectiveness with regard to how the language is taught. For instance, several linguits

have emphasized the need to develop communicative sylabus for language teaching. Nunan (1991) indicates there are five features of communicative tasks that facilitate learners in the development of their language acquisition.
He talked about the communicative approach which is characterized by (1) A concentration on learning to communicate the target language through interaction, (2) Incorporation of real texts into the classroom setting, (3) Provision of opportunities for learners to focus not just on language but also on the learning process itself, (4) A greater emphasis on the learner's personal experience as a valuable contribution to classroom learning, (5) An attempt to integrate language acquisition in the classroom with language engagement outside it.

ELT in the Albanian context

According to the Albanian Ministry of Education Sport and Youth (MoESY) Report (2016) before 1990, English language learning and teaching in Albania was like the entire education system and influenced by the political class in power. During that time children began to learn English in Class V at the age of 11 along with other foreign languages such as French, Russian and Italian. On political and ideological reasons, foreign language education priorities have shifted. Students at high schools in major cities learned one foreign language between the ages of 14 and 18, but many rural schools did not teach a foreign language at all.
Nowadays, the Albanian Education system offers English classes to students from the first grade in public elementary schools. According to the MoESY's report (2016) schools tend to offer "regional and European foreign languages in conformity with the Council of Europe's orientation towards plurilingualism and multiculturalism" (p. 18).
In high schools, ELT is based on high school curricula developed by the Pre-University Department and the Institute for Development of Education and authorized by the MoESY. Since 2009, English, along with other foreign languages, is considered a priority. The weekly class schedule has been expanded from two to three times per week. The syllabus is designed according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.
During the period of 2005-2013, English language learning became a priority for the MoESY. "In the 2007-2008 school year, 76% of all students who were studying foreign languages in pre-university education were learning English" (p. 49). Since English became an elective subject in the State Graduation Assessment, with the highest coefficient for admittance to higher education, ELT has attracted much interest. Instructors' organizations debated MoESY's use of funds to encourage English language teachers across the country to reach the necessary teaching standards and to deter English teachers from quitting the profession. The Ministry of Education and Science has worked closely with the English Language Teachers' Association of Albania (ELTA) to increase the quality of English language teaching and learning in Albania.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study aims to recognize CLT as being an effective approach which helps build learners' communicative competence and to examine the outcomes that communicative methods have on individuals that study English as a Foreign language. Furthermore, to determine a number of difficulties and challenges in implementing Communicative Language Teaching in the EFL context of Albania and to make some possible suggestions for successful implementation into the curriculum design.

Research Questions

The following research questions are designed to follow the process of data collection in this study:

•Is there a difference in the implementation of the CLT approach in public as opposed to private schools? Where are these difficulties most evident?

•Do the teaching techniques used in the classroom during the English learning process affect student attitudes towards English?

•Is the English Teaching curriculum ready to implement CLT to meet student needs and their level of English proficiency?

•What are the major difficulties that Albanian EFL teachers encounter in their attempts to adopt CLT in the Albanian context?

•Is the CLT approach used in the classroom and, if so, how?

In order to collect the data required, the opinions of 50 high school students were obtained using a student questionnaire and 15 high school teachers were interviewed. The information obtained was then investigated and analyzed. This quantitative data enabled the assessment of learners' attitudes towards learning English through the Communicative Language Teaching approach. It also explored various factors that affect the implementation of Communicative English Language Teaching (CLT) in Albania. In addition, the qualitative data gathered, explored teachers' attitudes towards English teaching methodology, particularly CLT and the perceived difficulties and challenges in the process of implementing this approach in the classroom.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

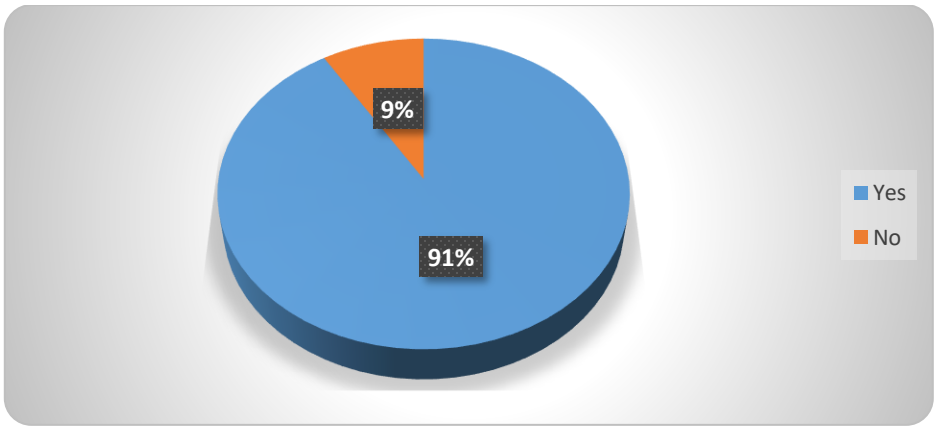
The opinions of the students regarding traditional foreign language teaching methods, and in particular, traditional methods used for teaching English, were recorded and measured using the following items. 72.4% of the respondents agreed that "According to traditional methods of teaching English, grammar is the main focus," 21.8% of them were neutral and the remaining 5.8% disagreed. In response to the item – "Listening to recordings is seldom used in my classroom" - 76% of the respondents fully agreed. Regarding the item "I prefer reading out loud different texts and exercises we complete in class" 60.6% of the participants fully agreed, 16.8% disagreed and the remainder were neutral. The statements "Learning in my class is teacher-centered" and "The English textbooks I use now provide me with many opportunities to express myself" 57.8% and 57.6% of the respondents agreed respectively while the rest represented by 16.6% and 19.6% did not agree with these aspects of traditional teaching. 48.4% of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that "The language used in the classroom by my teachers is mostly Albanian". 47.6% of respondents preferred repetition after the teacher while learning English, whereas 1/3 of the participants did not agree. In response to the item "I prefer following the English textbooks I use now to learning through struggling to communicate by myself", 40.6% of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed, while the rest, respectively 33.2% and 26.2% disagreed or remained neutral regarding this issue.

Regarding the opinions of the students concerning the existing curricula of English language, the vast majority of respondents, represented by 90.2%, agreed that "The "State Matura" examination system is an obstacle to learning and using English for communication purposes". The opposite occurred regarding the statement that "Authentic materials such as newspapers, magazines, brochures, movies, online articles etc. are part of our English class"; this item received agreement from only 1% of the participants, with 74.5% of them either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. The findings additionally reveal that 87.4% of the students who disagreed or strongly disagreed were students studying in public schools. The item "Grammar exercises have a lot of use in my English language class" received agreement from 86.8% of the respondents, while in response to the item "The English textbooks I use now include all four language skills: reading, listening, writing, speaking" a little

more than half of the respondents, represented by 51.2%, either agreed or strongly agreed, while the remaining were represented by 48.8% who either disagreed, strongly agreed or were neutral. On the other hand, 73.4% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed with the item that "The English textbooks I use in class are mainly focused on reading comprehension and on writing" while the remaining 7.2%, disagreed. In response to the item "Listening to recordings is seldom used in the traditional classroom", 71.2% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed while 12.2% disagreed or strongly disagreed and the remainder were neutral. On the other hand, when asked "The English textbooks I use now provide me with many opportunities to express myself", only 42.6% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed while 44% of them either disagreed or strongly disagreed; 13.4% of the students were neutral about this issue. A little over half of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the fact that "Structure is the focus of the English textbooks that I use now". Only 44.8% agreed with the item that "The English textbooks that I use now offer me much help in listening to native speakers" with the remainder of students either disagreeing or remaining neutral.

When asked about the types of communicative activities used in their class the respondents' answers varied and included whole class discussions, group work, making projects or talking about various texts and ideas in their textbooks. It is noteworthy to mention that some of the answers included activities which are not communicative such as completing grammar exercises, reading a text to answer reading comprehension questions, writing examples and ideas on the board, or even reading and practicing grammar exercises aloud. According to Richards (2006) "if students read and practice aloud the sentences in the grammar box, this constitutes mechanical practice" and he further points out that "exercise sequences in many CLT course books take students from mechanical, to meaningful, to communicative practice" (p. 17).

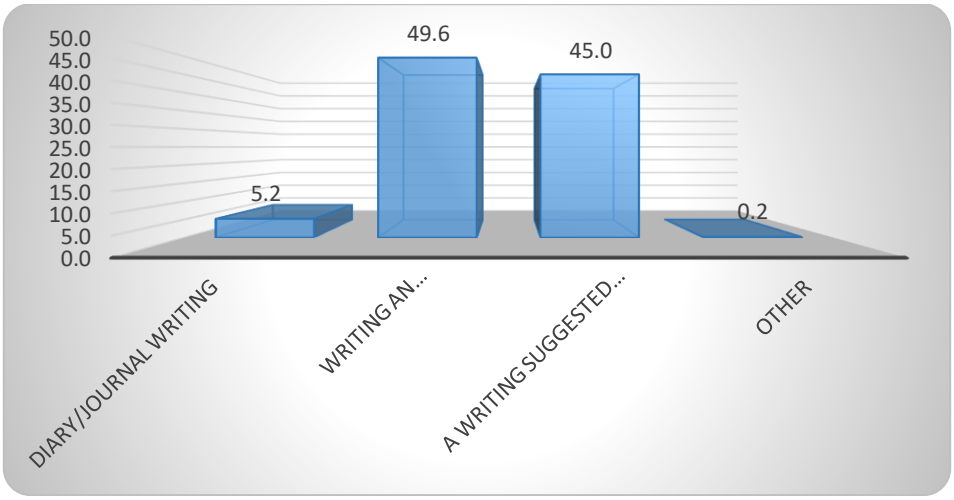
When asked "Is writing important in class?" the vast majority of the respondents represented by 91% admitted that writing in English is important, 41.7% of whom have intermediate level in English and 33.1% of them are upper intermediate level students, whereas only a small number of students represented by 9% do not accept this.



Graph 1 shows students' view on the importance of the writing in English class

In response to the question "What form of writing does the teacher assign you in class?" 49.6% of the participants referred to "Writing an essay / reports / letter / emails etc." and another 45% admitted "A writing suggested by the text". A very small part of them respectively 5.2% answered in the form of a "Diary or journal writing".

The findings showed that their classroom is mainly focused on grammar and writing exercises and more speaking practicing activities, such as games and activities would actually be very beneficial and would facilitate language acquisition. It is important for teachers to understand that the main goal of EFL teaching is to encourage learners' communicative competence rather than just reading and writing skills.



Graph 2 presents students' answers about the form of writing the teacher assigns in class

The participants were also asked the following question "In your opinion, what are some of the main difficulties you encounter while learning English at school?"

The difficulties that high school students encounter during the English Learning process are mainly a lack of listening skills, lack of course books which have listening activities as well as CDs or OHPs, lack of communicative activities in the classroom, deficiency in speaking English, a lack of time for communicative activities, limited knowledge of English. Moreover, these difficulties were showen more in the public sector rather than in the private one.

On the other hand, lack of teaching resources, or lack of authentic materials is another barrier which makes it difficult and prevents students from learning language efficiently in order to use it as fluently as possible. Furthermore, a lack of activities which foster communication as well as the lack of group work activities are seen as key problems among them.

When asked "According to your opinion what needs to be changed in your classroom so you can be able to communicate effectively and confidently in English" the respondents have given different answers where among the main things that need to be improved in the English Language Learning process are such as 'there should be a greater variety of teaching resources', 'more teacher-student and student-student interaction', 'more communication in the target language in the classroom, also 'more group work' or even 'a transformation of the whole English Language Learning process'. On the other hand, 'visits or field trips in English speaking countries' are seen as a good opportunity to practice English with native speakers as well as 'a good explanation and practice' also 'adequate and updated textbooks 'were some of suggestions made in order to improve English Language Learning in the future. As a result, students would feel more motivated as well as would have more positive impact on students' attitude to learn English.

The purpose of teacher interviews in this study is mainly to supplement the findings of data collected through survey questionnaires by providing responses not dealt with in the students' questionnaire. Interviewees were selected randomly which would help reinforce the reliability of the research data.

Notwithstanding the fact that a large number of the teachers emphasized that they were aware of the term CLT and had a favorable view toward this approach that emphasizes exchange of information, participants identified some significant obstacles and problems in implementing CLT, such as reading comprehension and grammar-based assessments; a lack of efficient and effective evaluation methods; overcrowded classrooms; insufficient time to prepare materials before classes. The findings revealed that the existing Albanian curriculum still depends mainly on a traditional approach due to difficulties and challenges in implementing the CLT approach. 40% of the respondents indicated that reading comprehension in their classes and the grammar-based examination system known as "Matura Shtetërore" was a major problem. On the other hand, lack of efficient

and effective assessment methods is considered difficult by 40% and moderately difficult by another 33%. The reason for this is because English questions on exams are primarily used to measure students' grammar and vocabulary understanding as well as their writing, whereas listening and speaking is not assessed in those multiple-choice assessments. Furthermore, according to 17% of teachers surveyed, large class sizes make it very difficult to implement this method while for another 53% it is difficult whereas for the rest the level of difficulty is considered moderate or somehow difficult.

The interview findings revealed that advanced level of proficiency would enable teachers to use the target language fluently and confidently in the classroom, to serve as good language models for the students and help them to give appropriate feedback on students.
Inappropriate curriculum is identified as a considerable obstacle by the teachers to implement the CLT approach. 60% of the respondents considered this obstacle as either very difficult or as difficult, whereas 30% of them viewed as moderately difficult, while 20% of the participants thought that inappropriate curriculum is somehow difficult or not difficult at all for implementing the CLT approach.
Finally, training of teaching staff is cited as a key aspect in supporting CLT adoption by participants interviewed. 60% of the participants reported lack of teachers' professional training a main problem. According to their opinion, lack of enough training in CLT led to a difficulty in implementing this approach in their classrooms. The rest of the participants, more precisely 40% of them, recognized the lack of professional training a moderate or a mild hindrance.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to shed light on how the Communicative Approach may help students improve their communication skills and also to acknowledge CLT as an effective strategy that aids in the development of individuals' communicative ability. Moreover, this study explored the present situation concerning the implementation of CLT in Albanian High School context
The results for Research question 1 related to the difference in the implementation of the CLT approach in public as opposed to private schools, showed that the greatest difficulties are observed in public schools due to different factors such as the large number of students in English language classes, classroom resources, students limited English proficiency, etc. The findings demonstrated that the difficulties in implementing CLT are most evident in public schools and this situation is different in private schools because they have some teaching resources such as CDs and audio and visual aids and they are characterized by small class sizes with an average of 20 students. In these private schools, teachers have more time to implement CLT activities in their classroom including group and pair work among students.

The findings for Research question 2 related to whether teaching techniques used in the classroom during the English learning process affect student attitudes towards English, revealed that students have a strong motivation to learn English. For instance, some students mentioned that English should be used as a language of communication rather than just a school subject; others showed a strong opinion towards learning English since they want to learn English because they want to travel abroad and get to know new cultures, or they want to study in English speaking countries. The responses demonstrated students' desire to learn English in a communicative manner. As a result, these findings revealed that the teaching techniques used in the classroom affect students' attitude towards English because CLT is considered an approach which helps increase learners' motivation and taking into consideration that students feel more involvement in the communicative activities it results in students feeling more confident in practicing English.
Concerning Research question 3 related to the readiness of the English Teaching curriculum to implement CLT to meet student needs and their level of English proficiency, the results showed that some more work is required in including listening and speaking in our curriculum in order to increase students 'English proficiency level as well as to meet their needs for good communication skills in English. In addition, the use of audio and visual

aids as well as authentic materials and the use of projectors, computers, CD players which help in delivering a lesson according to the principles of CLT would contribute to the use of CLT during the teaching-learning process.

The results for Research question 4 related to the major difficulties that Albanian EFL teachers encounter in their attempts to adopt CLT in the Albanian context, revealed that students and teachers face a lot of difficulties during the English learning-teaching process which are mainly related to the lack of listening skills, lack of course books which have listening activities as well as CDs or OHP, lack of communicative activities in the classroom between them, deficiency in speaking English, lack of time for communicative activities, limited knowledge of English. Furthermore, low-quality of classroom materials is undoubtedly considered to create a considerable level of difficulty by the majority of teachers.

The findings of Research question 5 related to the use of CLT approach in the classroom, demonstrated that the CLT approach can promote students' communicative abilities and students consider it as an appropriate attitude towards an effective learning environment. The findings revealed that teachers were focused mostly on preparing their students for the final exam of "Matura Shtetërore" and they find it difficult moving away from the course book exercises and worksheets. The survey findings also showed that although teachers in this study emphasized the use of communicative activities as more effective than a focus on formal grammatical competence, still they tend to use traditional approaches instead of the CLT approach in their classrooms.

The findings were consistent with Harmer (2007) that when students want to express something, communicative activities might be a great way to do so. In other words, when learners want to use the language, they set a goal and establish communication. So, in a CLT classroom, all students need is the desire and the purpose to communicate.

To conclude, the education system is one of the most important fields in a society because it is the source of all other professions. Thus, the Albanian Ministry of Education should take the necessary steps to improve the teaching-learning quality of all subjects, and most particularly English in order to provide firstly, a good future for all Albanian students, secondly to relieve the strain on English teachers who encounter a variety of challenges in teaching the curriculum and putting its concepts into practice. One suggestion would be for the Ministry of Education to implement an effective teacher training program which can help teachers stay updated on the latest teaching techniques and methods which need to be implemented in the classroom to improve students' communication skills. The responsibility for improving and expanding teaching skills does not rely only on teachers, but rather it is the school's responsibility as well as the agencies' outside the school to make sure that the professional development is facilitated for all the staff of the school. Because these are new techniques that play an important role in the teacher's job, and these training sessions are crucial in order to help students learn and create new teaching techniques which incite students' interest in the classroom as well as encourage their learning. As Larsen-Freeman (2000) emphasized, when students learn a new language, they must learn about how to communicate with that language or how to use the language properly. They are not just learning language structures, but more emphasis is being made on the practice, in other words communication.

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