CHALLENGES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR A SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING IN EFL CONTEXT IN ALBANIA

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ABSTRACT

The communicative approach is considered to be the most successful recent technique in teaching a foreign language. According to the Communicative approach, learning a foreign language successfully comes through having to communicate real meaning in a real context. The real communication teaches students to learn to use the language and the classroom changes from a teacher-centered classroom into a student-centered classroom. However, this approach comes with many challenges, such as large classes, grammar-based examinations, lack of teaching resources and facilities, lack of teachers training, lack of support, influence of traditional practices, limited class time, class management, students' resistance to class participation and their lack of motivation.

Implementing the Communicative Approach in an Albanian classroom setting as well as in its curriculum, on one hand, is very helpful due to its need for improvement, but on the other hand is very challenging to set the environment in which the best learning can take place, in order to obtain the most profitable results. In a challenging Albanian teaching environment, where students are used to be taught using traditional teaching methods, there is a need for teachers to shift from traditional methods to more contemporary ones, such as the Communicative Approach which focuses on the student's linguistic needs and help the teachers achieve their goals. This approach though comes with the need to implement useful strategies in order to manage students' behavior in the classroom, as there is a lot of interaction and communication going on in class and this may result in a lot of students' talking time.

The purpose of this study is to examine how the Communicative Approach can promote students' communicative competencies and also deals with some challenges and suggestions for successful implementation in the Albanian curriculum design. Furthermore, it is hoped not only to examine Communicative Approach as being an appropriate attitude towards learning and teaching environment, but also to help teachers and curriculum designers, who wish to implement Communicative Language Teaching, with some useful strategies and techniques.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching, English as a Foreign Language, student-centered method, challenges, curriculum design.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach dates from the late 1960s. Before this approach, the Oral approach or the Situational Language Teaching has had a lot of impact on the design of a lot of EFL/ESL textbooks, where language was taught by using basic structures in situation-based activities. Linguists and language specialists have always tried to improve the quality of language teaching and also to improve how language is learned and how it is structured in order to achieve the best possible results. They saw the need to focus on communicative proficiency as language teaching rather than on just learning

the language structures. They focused on the communicative potential of language, because by using communicative activities, students would arrive at a degree of language autonomy.

This paper focuses on the communicative approach, as being the most successful recent technique in teaching a foreign language. According to the Communicative approach, learning a foreign language successfully comes through having to communicate real meaning in a real context. The real communication teaches students to learn to use the language and the classroom changes from a teacher-centered classroom into a student-centered classroom.

However, this approach comes with many challenges, such as large classes, grammar-based examinations, lack of teaching resources and facilities, lack of teachers training, lack of support, influence of traditional practices, limited class time, class management, students' resistance to class participation and their lack of motivation. Implementing this communicative approach in an Albanian classroom setting as well as in its curriculum, on one hand, is very helpful due to its need for improvement, but on the other hand, it is very challenging to set the environment in which the best learning can take place, in order to obtain the most profitable results. This study examines how the Communicative approach can promote students' communicative competencies and also deals with some challenges and suggestions for successful implementation in the Albanian curriculum design. This study is hoped not only to examine the communicative approach as being an appropriate attitude towards learning and teaching environment, but also to help teachers and curriculum designers, who wish to implement CLT, with some useful strategies and techniques.

In a challenging Albanian teaching environment, where students are used to be taught using traditional teaching methods, there is a need for teachers to shift from traditional methods to more contemporary ones, such as the communicative approach which focus on the student's linguistic needs and help the teachers achieve their goals. This approach, however, comes with the need to implement useful strategies in order to manage students' behavior in the classroom, as there is a lot of interaction and communication going on in class and this may result in a lot of students' talking time.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

British functional linguists (such as John Firth, M.A.K. Halliday), American sociolinguistics works (Hymes and Labov) as well as some philosophy work of Austin and Searle have put emphasis on the communicative method being more proficient than other traditional teaching methods.

The Communicative Language Teaching, which is an approach to the teaching of second and foreign languages and which emphasizes interaction to learn a language, dates back to the late 1960s. At this time, the linguists did not agree with older methods, such as audiolingual and grammar-translation methods, which were more focused on having a full command of grammatical structures or lexical items, but were not very successful to prepare learners for real proper communication outside the classroom (Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, &Thurrell, 1997). This new approach was coined by Hymes and it was a response to the criticisms of Linguistic Competence from Noam Chomsky, a well-known American linguist, who stated in his classic book Syntactic Structures (1957) that structural theories of language did not account for "the fundamental characteristic of language – the creativity and uniqueness of individual sentences" (Richards & Rogers, 2001, p. 153). In Chomsky's theory, there were two parts: Linguistic competence and linguistic performance. Hymes raised doubts about the effectiveness of grammatical competence of a language, in which the communicative and interactive nature of a language should also be concerned, as language should be taught and learned as real communication. In the Communicative approach, the students have "the ability not only to apply the grammatical rules of a language to form grammatically correct sentences, but also to know when and where to use these sentences and to whom" (Jack. C. Richards, 2001, p.71).

The communicative approach comes with many challenges, such as large classes, grammar-based examinations, lack of teaching resources and facilities, lack of support, influence of traditional practices, limited class time, class management. Students' misbehaviour is one of the many challenges which take place in a communicative language teaching classroom. Different authors have elaborated different models of student's behaviour management or discipline. Burden (2006) categorizes the models of students' behaviour management in three groups: intervening or high teachers' control, interacting or medium teachers' control and guiding or low teachers' control models. In a CLT classroom, teachers are just facilitators and maintain a low profile, they guide students and facilitate the learning process being active participants in the communicative process.

2.2. Activities in a CLT classroom

According to Richards (2006) CLT approach is a movement away from traditional lesson formats where the focus was on mastery of different items of grammar and practice through controlled activities such as memorization of dialogs and drills, but it is a movement toward the use of pair-work activities, role plays, group work activities and project work. The type of activities which can be used in a CLT classroom should reflect the principles of a communicative methodology. Richards (2006) emphasizes that "one of the goals of CLT is to develop fluency in language use. Fluency is natural language use occurring when a speaker engages in meaningful interaction and maintains comprehensible and ongoing communication despite limitations in his or her communicative competence. Fluency is developed by creating classroom activities in which students must negotiate meaning, use communication strategies, correct misunderstandings, and work to avoid communication breakdowns" (p. 14).

Littlewood (1981), moreover, divides communicative activities into two main categories: "functional communicative activities and social interaction activities" (p. 20). Functional communication activities require students to use their language resources to overcome an information gap or solve a problem. Social interactional activities require the learner to pay attention to the context and the roles of the people involved, and to attend to such things as formal versus informal language. Such activities include conversations, discussions, dialogues, role plays, debates, improvisations, and other simulation activities.

2.3. The role of teachers in CLT classrooms

Looking at a classroom, we can see that teachers take on a variety of roles. According to Harmer (2007), teachers adopt different roles ranging from a controller to a facilitator. Harmer (2007) defines a controller, a teacher who "stands at the front of the class like a puppet-master or mistress controlling everything", whereas a teacher who is a facilitator "maintains a low profile in order to make the students' own achievement of a task possible" (p. 235). These two roles of teachers represent opposite ends of a cline of control and freedom. In between these two roles, Harmer (2007) examines other roles teachers adopt in the classroom such as a controller, an assessor, an organizer, a prompter, a participant, a resource, a tutor and investigator, most of them depend on the type of the lesson teachers teach and on the type of the approach teachers decide to use in the classroom. Teachers as a controller is a traditional role where teachers are in complete charge of the class. They control what students do, when they speak and even the language they use in the classroom. This role is appropriate when teachers explain the lesson, when they lecture, when they make announcement or when they bring the class to order (Harmer, 2007). Teachers as assessors assess the students' work to see how well they are performing or how well they have performed. Teachers organize feedback and correction are carried out. According to Hammer (2007), correction should be made gentle, as a "gentle correction involves showing students that a mistake has been made but not making a big fuss about it" (p. 237). Harmer (2007) discusses two kinds of feedback, content feedback, when students perform an activity as an activity not a language exercise and form feedback to see how well students have performed linguistically and how accurate they have been. For the role of an organizer, teachers can organize an activity, can give clear instructions, get the activity going and organize feedback when it is over. As a

prompter, teachers support their students, encourage them or make suggestions about how students may proceed in an activity. For the role of a participant, teachers might participate in activities in the class, sometimes playing roles themselves and improve the atmosphere of the class by giving students a chance to practice English with someone who speaks it better than them. Teachers as a resource make themselves available to students when they need help. They do not intervene where a genuinely communicative activity is taking place, however, they should make themselves available for students to consult them when they wish. The next role is the teacher as a tutor, in the sense of someone who acts as a coach and as a resource where students are in the midst of working and they need the teacher's advice or guidance. The teacher as a tutor has a counselling function and it is a facilitative role. The last role of the Teacher described by Harmer (2007) is that of an investigator. Teachers want to develop their own skills to master the best ways to foster language learning. They investigate the best new teaching methods, observing what works best in class and incorporate new techniques and activities which best fit their students.

In a CLT classroom, according to Littlewood (1981), teachers play the role of an observer and a monitor, they step back and intervene when they are really needed by students. Some correction feedback is necessary when students are not sure what to do or to boost their confidence. Sometimes their role is authoritative when there is a need of correcting misbehaviour in class, considering that in a CLT classroom there is a lot of talking taking place. He should also have a role of a facilitator because he creates an environment that promotes communication. Breen and Candlin (2001) favour the role of a facilitator and an independent classroom participant for a teacher. They think it is teacher's role to ensure a successful communicative process among all participants in the classroom. According to Richards and Rogers (2001), the role of a Teacher in a CLT classroom is that one of a facilitator, an organizer and a counselor, because according to them teacher is an organizer who makes sure the communication in the classroom happens. Richards (2006) also emphasizes that teachers in a CLT classroom "assume the role of facilitator and monitor. Rather than being a model for correct speech and writing and one with the primary responsibility of making students produce plenty of error-free sentences, the teacher develops a different view of learners' errors and of her/his own role in facilitating language learning" (p. 5).

2.4. The role of learners in CLT classrooms

A communicative language teaching classroom is a student-centered classroom, where language teaching and learning take place. CLT gives students possibilities to communicate in the target language. Students use the functional aspect of the language to communicate in the target language in their everyday life. They do not rely on teachers all the time for instruction, evaluation, correction, feedback. Richards and Rogers (2001) have emphasized that the role of the student in a CLT classroom is that one of a negotiator between himself, the learning process, interaction between group's activities and classroom procedures. Furthermore, Breen and Candlin (2001) have stated that students "adopt the role of negotiation between themselves, their learning process, and the gradually revealed object of learning" (Breen & Candlin, 2001, p. 18).

According to Richards (2006), learners in a CLT classroom participate in classroom activities that are focused on a cooperative rather than individualistic approach to learning. Students listen to their peers in group work or pair work tasks, rather than relying on the teacher for a model. They are expected to take on a greater degree of responsibility for their own learning.

The purpose of this research is twofold. Firstly, to recognize the Communicative Language Teaching as being an effective approach that helps build learners' communicative competence and to examine how the use of communicative methods have on individuals that study English language. Secondly, to determine a number of challenges in the implementation of the Communicative Language Teaching in the EFL context in Albania as well as to make some possible suggestions for successful implantation in the curriculum design.

The Albanian classroom is a traditional one, and the communicative approach is not used or encouraged very much. Traditional methods are used because teachers think that using the communicative approach interferes with their teaching. Moreover, they think that this method takes a great amount of time and energy. So, the main aim of this project is to present to Albanian teachers a study where they can see that using the communicative approach in the classroom together with useful strategies can achieve great results as well as it can achieve teachers' teaching objectives.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.2. Purpose of the research

The purpose of this study is made of two parts. Firstly, to recognize the Communicative Language Teaching as being an effective approach that helps build learners' communicative competence and to examine how the use of communicative methods have on individuals that study English language. Secondly, to determine a number of challenges in the implementation of the Communicative Language Teaching in EFL context in Albania as well as to make some possible suggestions for successful implantation in the curriculum design. The Albanian classroom is a traditional one, and the communicative approach is not used or encouraged very much. Traditional methods are used because teachers using the communicative approach interferes with teaching and takes a great amount of time and energy for many teachers.

3.3. Subjects

The participants in this study were 10 high school teachers and 20 students. The teachers were with different educational background and also different teaching experiences, some of them had one to two years of teaching experience, and some more than five years of teaching experience. The sample population was from public and private schools. The participants were both males and females.

Students were given the questionnaires personally, and they completed and returned them. The questionnaire had five options, i.e. Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D), Neither Disagree nor Agree (N), Agree (A), Strongly Agree (SA). The statements in the Likert scale dealt with the students' beliefs in using the communicative approach in the classroom and some challenges they perceived in using this approach by their teachers.

3.4. Method and Data collection:

The students' questionnaire was the first instrument used in order to encourage participants to explain their learning experiences. Students were encouraged to state their attitude towards learning English as well as their attitudes towards the CLT approach.

The other instrument was a semi-structured interview where teachers talked about the teaching approaches they use. They expressed their opinion, experiences, and their perceptions of the curriculum as well as the challenges of implementing CLT in Albanian curriculum. Specific answers included teaching the four language skills and techniques they use to teach them.

The third instrument used was reflective journal entries where teachers wrote daily reflections during the time of their teaching and how the experience affects their teaching.

Lastly, the questions were designed to encourage participants to explain their teaching experiences, which were as follows:

(i)   What are the EFL teachers' attitudes towards the use of the Communicative Approach in teaching the four skills?

(ii) Do teachers find it more time consuming to teach English using a communicative approach rather than the traditional approach?

(iii) What are the problems and challenges that EFL Teachers and students in Albania face while implementing CLT in the classroom?

(iv) Is the curriculum appropriate for the Albanian context, the students' needs and their level of English proficiency?

4. RESULTS

4.1. Questionnaire results

In this study, there were 20 students who filled out the questionnaire. It aimed to find out students' preferences and their learning experience, as well as their attitude towards learning English and towards the CLT approach. It had five options, i.e. Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D), Neither Disagree nor Agree (N), Agree (A), Strongly Agree (SA). The statements in the Likert scale dealt with the students' beliefs in using the communicative approach in the classroom and some challenges they perceived in using this approach by their teachers.

The respondents answered questions about their knowledge of the CLT approach as well as their learning experience. Some of the questionnaire items were whether they communicate in the target language in their classrooms, or if they are familiar with CLT. Moreover, whether the teacher practices CLT activities in the classroom, or if they practice speaking and listening often. Furthermore, if a large class size is an obstacle to using CLT activities, if they feel anxious about making mistakes and the teacher corrects their mistakes when they speak. Also, the respondents were asked about the purpose of learning English and about the sufficiency of class time to use CLT activities. Finally, the respondents expressed their opinion about the CLT approach whether it motivates students' learning, if it is appropriate for small group work, or if it includes the four skills and it creates a more relaxed atmosphere.

The data observed through the questionnaire was analyzed using a percentage for every item. It is relevant to point out that the respondents differed in their perceptions about the CLT approach (Figure 1). While 29% of the respondents chose "strongly disagree" as their response on different issues such as not being familiar with the term of CLT approach, or not practice CLT activities in the classroom, not working in groups or practice pair work, or the class time being sufficient to use CLT activities, 33% of them picked "agree" on issues that sometimes they practice speaking and listening in classrooms, or large classes is an obstacle to using CLT activities, also that CLT is appropriate for small group work, creates a more relaxed atmosphere, motivates students, and includes 4 skills. When asked whether CLT is a student-centered approach and that large classes do not allow them to practice CLT activities, 13% of the questionnaire participants responded, "strongly agree". Only 15 % of the participants chose "disagree" on the issue such as having a lot of oral practice in the classroom or not feeling anxious when they speak, and learning English is not just for exam purpose. The remaining 10% of the respondents picked "neutral" as their response.

Overall, it can be concluded that students were not familiar with the CLT as an approach, but they agreed about the issue that communication activities arise the students' motivation to learn English language taking into consideration that language should be taught and learned as a real communication as well as it avoids the monotony in class and creates a more relaxed atmosphere.

The following chart illustrates students' attitude towards the CLT approach as well as their learning experience in the classroom (Figure 1):
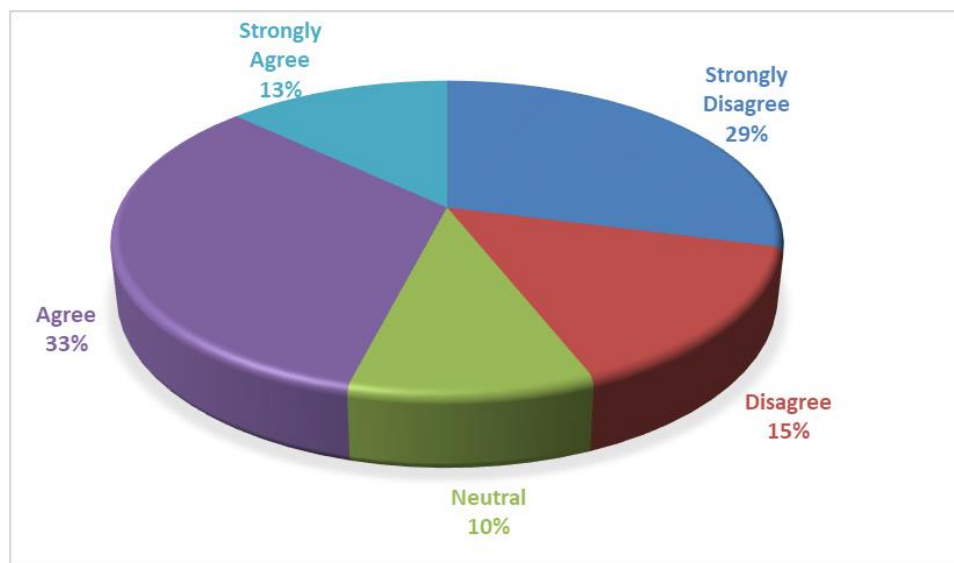
Figure 1. *Students' attitude towards the CLT approach*

4.2. Interview results

In phase two of the research, there were 10 teachers interviewed. They expressed their opinion about CLT, its challenges and its successful implementation in the classroom. Some of the interview questions asked aimed to find out the teachers' understanding of CLT, whether they are aware of the importance of meaning over form and that the language is used for communicative purposes, also if they use real, authentic materials in their language teaching environment. Furthermore, the interview questions investigated different challenges of using CLT such as class size which hinders to use CLT approach, or "matura shteterore" examination which does not allow them to use freely CLT activities in the classrooms.

Based on the interview results, the majority of the teachers believe that CLT is an approach that requires a lot of preparation on the teachers' part, but it indeed increases a lot of motivation and interest for the students. The interviewees consider CLT an approach which can be used with all level of students, however, the "matura shteterore" examination system influences teachers' methods. Furthermore, they have listed some difficulties that relate to the implementation of CLT in their classroom such as traditional teaching methods, large size classes, grammar-based examination, limited class time, lack of teaching resources and facilities, lack of teachers' training and also class management.

4.3. Reflective Journal Entries results

In the third phase of this study, teachers wrote in their reflective journals. They expressed their opinions on CLT as these reflective journal entries serve to receive a deeper understanding to the participants about this approach. The journal entries were guided by open-ended questions. All teacher participants in this study showed a lot of interest in CLT as a student-centered approach. In their reflective journal entries, only a small number of teachers showed a good insight into CLT. According to them, CLT focuses on students' interaction and this enables them to develop communicative competence through communicative activities such as pair work, group work, different games, jigsaws etc. Also, they point out that in a CLT classroom students communicate with each other in the target language. On the other hand, the majority of teachers in this study had limited understanding of CLT. In their journals they wrote that CLT activities mean speaking and listening tasks and almost none of them wrote in their reflective journals that they used communicative activities in the form of writing or reading. They expressed in their journals a general belief to use CLT

activities to improve the oral ability of their students. Finally, they highlighted in their reflective journal entries that applying communicative activities in their classroom made the class difficult to manage and the students showed misbehavior issues. Moreover, they found CLT activities very time-consuming and they had difficulties in being in control of the classroom and at the same time reaching the lesson's objectives.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

It can be concluded from the data discussed above that implementing the CLT in Albanian curriculum design is not always successful, as the Albanian education system faces some challenges of using the Communicative Language Teaching approach such as large classes, grammar-based examinations, lack of teaching resources and facilities, lack of teachers training, lack of support for teachers, influence of traditional practices, limited class time, class management, students' misbehavior and their resistance to class participation and also their lack of motivation.

With regard to the teachers, the findings revealed that they favour CLT as an approach which is useful for teaching the four skills in learning English as a Foreign Language. However, they believe that implementing communicative activities is a waste of time and they find the Communicative approach more time-consuming to teach English than the traditional approach. Moreover, a lack of training effects seriously teachers' development and motivation.

Regarding students, they also face various problems when CLT is implemented as a teaching method in a classroom. Their expectation is related to the exam system, and this leads to difficulties with the curriculum implementation.

Finally, the findings suggest that the Albanian curriculum is not ready yet for the implementation of the CLT to meet the students' needs and their level of English proficiency due to the large classroom sizes, lack of materials, lack of resources, student's examination system as well as teachers' and students' level of proficiency.

All in all, we can say that teaching a new language involves a lot of motivation, but more importantly, involves an effective teaching methodology. Teaching through the communicative approach includes not only just language teaching, including grammar, vocabulary, phonetics, but knowledge of how a language is used in real communication and how it is appropriately organized. Previous studies have found out several benefits of using Communicative Language Teaching for learning, because it is believed it increases motivation for learning and is more appropriate than those traditional methods which asks students to only solve exercises with fixed patterns and in which imagination and the capacity of speaking is not challenged, so as a result, not improved.

According to McDonough (2012), the failure and the success of the implementation of the CLT in curriculum design can be determined after trying it in the classroom as well as with real learners.

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