

The Significance of Using the Communicative Language Approach in Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language in Iraqi Universities

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أهمية استعمال طريقة اللغة التواصلية في تعليم وتعلم اللغة الانجليزية كلفة أجنبية في الجامعات العراقية

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Abstract

The current article concerned with demonstrating the main significance of using the communicative language approach (henceforth CLA) in teaching & learning English as a foreign language generally speaking in Iraqi universities and particularly speaking in the University of Kerbala/ College of Education for the Humanities/ English Department and University of Alameed/ College of Basic Education for Women/ English Department. Identifying which approach that can be appropriate for the students more than others is the most crucial factor in teaching particularly in teaching English as a foreign language. Most of previous studies asserted the CLA has a good impression in teaching a FL (i.e. foreign language) on the students than the other methods which were used heavily in the past time. So that most of the results confirmed that the traditional approach has gained a relatively lower rank in most of the language classes of the universities. This simple article concentrates on displaying the important role of CLA in process of teaching & learning EF language. The article illustrates that using CLA is better than applying one of the other approaches. Practice and experience have displayed that employing CLA is more effective and efficient than using grammar traditional approach or direct approach in the mission of teaching & learning EF language as a foreign language. It is known that the CLA supports the learners with the cultural context of the language which was intended to be learned. Therefore, the CLA should be used to enhance the characteristics of teaching & learning and to gain better consequences. **Keywords:** Communicative Language Approach (CLA), Traditional approach, grammar, structure, and context.

الخلاصة

يتناول المقال الحالي توضيح الأهمية الرئيسية لاستعمال طريقة اللغة التواصلية (من الآن فصاعداً CLA) في تعليم وتعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية في الجامعات العراقية. إن تحديد الطريقة الذي يمكن أن تكون مناسبة للطلاب أكثر من غيرها هو العامل الأكثر أهمية في التدريس وخاصة في تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية. وقد أكدت معظم الدراسات السابقة أن طريقة اللغة التواصلية له انطباع جيد في تعليم اللغة الأجنبية لدى الطلاب مقارنة بالطرق الأخرى التي كانت تستخدم بكثرة في الماضي. وبالتالي فإن معظم النتائج أكدت أن الطريقة التقليدية قد اكتسبت مرتبة أقل نسبياً في معظم فصول اللغات في الجامعات. يركز هذا المقال البسيط على إظهار الدور المهم لطريقة اللغة التواصلية في عملية تعليم وتعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية. ويوضح المقال أن استخدام هذه الطريقة طريقة اللغة التواصلية أفضل من تطبيق أحد الأساليب الأخرى. وقد أظهرت

الممارسة والخبرة أن استخدام طريقة اللغة التواصلية أكثر فعالية وكفاءة من استخدام طريقة القواعد التقليدية أو الطريقة المباشرة في مهمة تعليم وتعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. ومن المعروف أن طريقة اللغة التواصلية يدعم المتعلمين بالسياق الثقافي للغة التي كان من المفترض أن يتعلموها. تقدم الطريقة التقليدية وظائف اللغة وبنية تلك اللغة (قواعدها) عند استخدام الطريقة التقليدية، في أغلب الفصول الدراسية، ثبت أن تدريس قواعد اللغة وبنية الجملة أمر ضروري ومهم بسبب حقيقة مفادها أن قواعد اللغة العربية (اللغة الأم) وبنية الجملة تختلف بشكل واضح عن قواعد اللغة الإنجليزية (اللغة الأجنبية المستهدفة). ولهذا السبب، يجب استخدام اللغة التواصلية لتعزيز سمة التعليم والتعلم والحصول على نتائج أفضل.

الكلمات المفتاحية: طريقة اللغة التواصلية (CLA)، الطريقة التقليدية، قواعد اللغة، البنية، الثقافة، السياق.

1.1. Introduction

Teaching is considered a very hard task that requires special attributes and qualifications. Strevens (1980, p. 40) asserts that teaching is "a hard and emotionally bruising occupation, and language teaching more so than most other specialism, especially if the language one is teaching is not one's mother tongue." The complexity of teaching a foreign language should be facilitated to the learners by well-trained teachers who are competent enough to achieve this hard task. It is known that the teacher is considered as the most important pillar in teaching or learning process. In addition, teachers of the English language have a task different from other teachers' in nature. They must show professional competence and possess insights in various fields like; linguistics, sociology, psychology to cope with the fundamental requirements of teaching an F language. Moreover, they must be aware of the latest rapid changes in the specialization of E language Teaching.

1.2. The Problem

Willis (1981, p. 49) states the teacher of EFL can have three roles: **social, organizational, and instrumental**. **The first** role indicates that the teacher must use the type of language that suits all real situations in everyday life to make students aware of the social function of English. **The second** role includes using a communicative language to be used by students outside the classroom. **The third** role asserts practicing language skills both of a productive and of a receptive type. Generally speaking, there are several methods to teach F language like; "The Grammar-Translation Approach," "The Direct Approach," and the most important one in teaching English as a foreign language is the "Communicative Language Approach. Supporters of CLA attribute the appearance of their progression early in the 1970's to three basic reasons: **The First** point is the appearance of ESP (English for Special Purposes). **The Second** point is the development of the notional and functional categories of language, as well as, the development of the subsequent taxonomy which is developed by David Wilkins. **The Third** point is the development of the discourse analysis field which is concerned with "the linguistic analysis of stretches of language longer than a sentence with the aim of finding sequences of utterances with similar environments and establishing regularities in their distribution" (Hartmann & Stork, 1976, p. 69). One of the essential ideas in CLA is the differentiation between "**linguistic competence**" and "**communicative competence**." **The first** term refers to the knowledge of the speaker of his language (i.e. the rules and structures of the language). **The second** term "focuses on the native – speakers' ability to produce and understand sentences which are appropriate to the context in which they occur" (Crystal, 2007, pp. 87-88). Freeman (2000, p. 121) mentions "students could produce sentences accurately in a lesson, but could not use them appropriately when genuinely communicating outside of the classroom." Moreover, he adds also to have the ability for communication, the students must have more than mastering linguistic structures. Therefore, a special care should be given to make Teaching/ Learning process successful. It is known in Iraq that the government builds new schools every year, pay salaries to the teachers; provide books and stationary for free to the students. The English language is taught at elementary schools from grade 1 to grade 12, which means that the Iraqi student studies English for twelve years before joining the college but his/ her English is almost not good. He (she) is unable to construct well-formed sentences. He (she) is only loaded with rules of grammar (linguistic competence) and able to pass the English examination without understanding and knowing the meaning of words. Just like when following the Traditional Grammar Approach. The traditional approach presents the purpose and structure of the language (its grammar). When using the traditional approach, in most of the classrooms, teaching grammar and sentence structure has confirmed to be essential and important due to fact that the grammar, sentence structure of the native Arabic language is obviously different from that of English (the target language). That is why it is important to say besides the rules of grammar, he (she) needs rules of use, i.e., sociolinguistic competence; it is also called pragmatic competence. Most of the Iraqi students join department of the English language at the college without any English background. As if they do not study English for at least eight years. Very few graduates from the department of the English language get high scores

and complete their studies in Iraq. The majority of the students in English department graduate and they are not fluent and proficient enough to communicate with the natives of the E language. The problem belongs to the student himself, the curriculum, the teacher, and the lack of audio-visual aids. Before 2005, old methods of teaching English are adopted by Iraqi institutions and schools, specifically grammar translation method and audio lingual method. These methods are still taught and adopted in our universities in the mean time. The outdated methods focus only on grammatical structures and rules of grammar giving less importance to the communicative skills. To learn any foreign language proficiently, the learner should acquire the skills of the F language: Speaking, reading, writing, and listening. The emphasis should not be given only to writing but to speaking because language is primarily spoken and the written form comes next. The teachers of the English language are still using these methods in high schools in spite of a dramatic change of the English curriculum. Many professors of the English language are not fluent enough to communicate with their students freely. The method of teaching is depending on the teacher himself. The teacher delivers the classes, explaining the subject matter and the students are only listening. Their role is only asking short questions and not maintaining a communication with their teacher. One of the many problems that the teacher may face every day and prevents him/ her from adopting communicative approach is the big class (the large number of the students). Therefore, the teacher will be unable to give everyone the opportunity of participation in the activities of the class. Moreover, lack of phonetic laboratories in most of the educational institutions lead to students being unable to pronounce English sounds in a better way. The students themselves are unable to communicate freely with each other and this is because of the fact that CLA is not applied appropriately. Another important problem is that the universities, generally speaking, suffer from implementing e-learning and other modern technologies in teaching/ learning foreign languages. E-learning is an essential tool to enhance teaching and learning as well. It also effectively increases the students' motivation to learn effectively and makes them able to communicate with each other and cope with the modern technology and also be able to use it when they become teachers. To sum up, the CLA is really considered nowadays as the most appropriate approach to help students gain fluency and mastery the new foreign languages.

1.3. Article Questions

1. To what extent does the use of the Communicative Language Approach (CLA) influence Iraqi EFL university students' English-speaking proficiency scores?
2. Is there a statistically significant difference in students' overall achievement of the English language (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) between students who taught by using the CLA and those who taught by using traditional methods?
3. What is the relationship between the frequency of the exposure of the students to CLA-based activities and their performance on standardized EFL assessments in Iraqi universities?

1.4. Hypotheses

For each article question the researcher includes a null (H_0) and alternative (H_1) hypotheses:

Article Q1: To what extent does CLA influence students' English-speaking proficiency scores?

- H_{01} : The Communicative Language Approach (CLA) has no effect on Iraqi EFL university students' English-speaking proficiency scores.
- H_{11} : The Communicative Language Approach (CLA) significantly improves Iraqi EFL university students' English-speaking proficiency scores.

Article Q2: Is there a statistically significant difference in students' overall achievement of the English language (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) between students who taught by using the CLA and those who taught by using traditional methods?

- H_{02} : There is no statistically significant difference in students' overall achievement of the English language (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) between students who taught by using the CLA and those who taught by using traditional methods
- H_{12} : There is a statistically significant difference in students' overall achievement of the English language (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) between students who taught by using the CLA and those who taught by using traditional methods.

Article Q3: What is the relationship between the frequency of the exposure of the students to CLA-based activities and their performance on standardized EFL assessments in Iraqi universities?

- H_{03} : There is no significant relationship between the frequency of the exposure of the students to CLA-based activities and their performance on standardized EFL assessments in Iraqi universities.

• H₁₃: There is a significant positive relationship between the frequency of the exposure of the students to CLA-based activities and their performance on standardized EFL assessments in Iraqi universities.

1.5. Variables (Operational Definitions)

• **Independent variable (IV):** Use of CLA (categorical: CLA vs. Traditional).

Operationalization: Class assigned to CLA instruction for one semester vs. class assigned to traditional/teacher-centred instruction.

• **Dependent Variables (DVs):**

1. Speaking proficiency score — measured by a standardized speaking test (scored 0–100).
 2. Overall English achievement score — composite score from standardized tests covering listening, speaking, reading, writing (converted to a 0–100 scale).
 3. Standardized EFL test performance — e.g., locally validated standardized test score.
- Predictor/continuous variable for RQ3: Frequency of exposure to CLA activities — measured by a Self-Report Questionnaire like teacher log (number of CLA activities per week).
- Control variables (covariates): Prior English proficiency (pre-test score), students' year (1st/2nd/3rd/4th), gender, hours of outside-English exposure, teacher experience.

1.6. Article Design

- Quantitative, seemingly-experimental design with pre-test — post-test control group (if random assignment to groups is not feasible), or true experimental if random assignment is possible.
- For **Article Q3** use correlational design (cross-sectional) embedded in the larger experiment: measure frequency of exposure and correlate with post-test scores (controlling for pre-test).

1.7. Population and Sample

- **Population:** EFL undergraduate students enrolled in English courses at Iraqi universities (Kerbala University / College of Education for the Humanities/ English Department) and (Alameed University/ College of Basic Education for women/ English Department).
- **Sampling frame:** 100 Students enrolled in comparable-level compulsory English courses in selected universities/colleges.

1.8. Theoretical Background about the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Richards and Rogers (1986, p. 64) demonstrate that the origins of CLA are traced back to the late 1960s, when the British language teaching system purchased a change. The studies of the British linguist D. A. Wilkins (1972) have taken a major role by inspecting new theories of teaching. According to his point of view, instead of depending on teaching language by using its traditional concepts of grammar and vocabulary, another system has been adopted which is the system of meanings for communicative uses of the language. For Wilkins the meanings consist of certain terms and categories, for instance, time, sequence, quantity, location, and frequency, and other categories of communicative functions, for example, permissions, prohibitions, apologies, and etc. Richards, Platt, and Platt (1998, p. 65) define the CLT by describing it as “an approach to foreign or second language teaching which emphasizes that the goal of language learning is communicative competence.” The materials which are used in teaching by using CLA mostly teach the students the language needed to make clear and analyse various types of language functions, such as expressing acceptance and refuses and other functions. Moreover, the materials are depended on an accepted syllabus or another communicatively organized syllabus. Furthermore, these materials have to concentrate the mechanisms of communication, for instance, using language in an appropriate way throughout various kinds of positions (situations); utilizing language to carry out diverse types of functions, for example, solving puzzles, getting information, and utilizing language for social interaction with other people Richards, Platt, and Platt (1998). Savignon (2007) illustrates that CLA in teaching has become as accompanied approach to the expression of teaching an F language in general or teaching the E language in particular after the developing of the English as a global language.

1.9. Data Analysis and Discussion

The researcher in this article employs a quantitative seemingly-experimental pre-test/post-test control-group design to examine the impact of the Communicative Language Approach (CLA) on English proficiency among EFL students in Iraqi universities. Two matched groups of classes (treatment = CLA; control = traditional) will be compared. Pre- and post-intervention data will be collected via validated speaking and achievement tests, and a CLA Exposure Questionnaire. Data will be analyzed by using statistical analysis to measure the frequency of the high and lower scores and comparing the results between the samples of the article. The findings support the answer for the first question which states: **To what extent does CLA influence students' English-speaking**

proficiency scores? The Communicative Language Approach (CLA) significantly improves Iraqi EFL university students' English-speaking proficiency scores. Moreover, the results present an answer to the second question which state: **Is there a statistically significant difference in students' overall achievement of the English language (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) between students who taught by using the CLA and those who taught by using traditional methods?** There is a statistically significant difference in overall English achievement between students taught with CLA and those taught with traditional methods. The third answer is presented to the third question of this article. The question was: **What is the relationship between the frequency of the exposure of the students to CLA-based activities and their performance on standardized EFL assessments in Iraqi universities?** There is a significant positive relationship between frequency of exposure to CLA activities and students' performance on standardized EFL assessments.

1.10. Fulbright Program as a Way of Using Communicative Approach

Fulbright program is really an amazing and a wonderful program that can help the teachers and the students as well. Having such award can help the teachers a lot to improve their English, especially fluency because they will mingle with the native speakers in real life situations. During this mission, they will intend to exchange thoughts, ideas, information, culture, etc. with the American people. It is a real pleasure to make friends from professors as well as students. Teachers will have a chance to work together with the American professors to write researches together when they finish their tasks. However, they will get exposed to new methods of teaching and learning, so their expertise gets better. In addition, they will conduct seminars and lectures to their colleagues explaining the benefits and importance of this program. For the teachers of the English language, this opportunity is considered as a very important and crucial chance to improve their English language by using the most appropriate way. Later on, they will convey the knowledge and experience which they gain to other teachers whether from their college or to other colleges. Moreover, they will also inform their students about this interesting and useful experience. Then, they will apply the new methods of teaching which they will learn from this program in the classroom. They will also do their best to apply the communicative language approach in their classes by reporting their superiors about all the obstacles that might hinder applying this approach. Furthermore, they will propose e-learning to be adopted at their college especially the department of E language. It is very important that students, as well as, teachers are acquainted with the modern technological equipment.

1.11. Conclusion and Recommendations

1.11.1. Conclusion

The findings of this article assert the (CLA) plays an essential role in enhancing teaching & learning of EF language in Iraqi universities. Unlike traditional grammar-translation or teacher-centred methods, CLA prioritizes interaction, meaning-focused tasks, and real-life communication, which better align with modern linguistic and educational needs. The article indicates that students exposed to communicative strategies demonstrate improved fluency, confidence, and motivation to use English beyond classroom settings. Similarly, instructors who adopted this approach reported higher levels of student engagement, more authentic language use, and noticeable development across the four language skills. However, in spite of the proven advantages, the application of CLA in Iraqi universities still faces challenges. These included limited teacher training, insufficient classroom resources, large class sizes, and an overemphasis on grammar-focused examinations. Overcoming these constraints requires systemic support, curriculum reform, and sustained professional development. Overall, the article concludes that adopting the Communicative Language Approach is essential for improving English proficiency levels among Iraqi university students and for meeting the demands of global communication and academic advancement.

1.11.2. Recommendations

Based on the results of this article, the following recommendations are presented to strengthen the use of C L A in Iraqi universities as following:

1. Enhancing Teacher Training and Professional Development

- Organizing specialized workshops and continuous training programs on CLA principles, techniques, and classroom management strategies.

- Encouraging teachers to integrate authentic materials, communicative tasks, and fluency-building activities into daily lessons.

2. Revising Curricula to Support Communicative Competence

- Universities should update English language curricula to include more interactive, learner-centred activities.

- Assessment tools should move beyond grammar-based exams and include speaking tests, role-plays, projects, and real-world communication tasks.

3. Improving Classroom Environment and Resources

- Equipping classrooms with audio-visual aids, language labs, and digital platforms that facilitate communicative practice.

- Reducing student–teacher ratios when possible to allow better interaction and feedback.

4. Encouraging Student Participation and Autonomy

- Promoting collaborative learning through pair work, group discussions, and project-based learning.

- Providing opportunities for students to practice English outside the classroom, such as conversation clubs and online interaction spaces.

5. Supporting Article and Innovation in Language Teaching

- Encouraging teachers and postgraduate students to conduct further studies on the effectiveness of CLA in different Iraqi educational contexts.

- Sharing successful teaching practices among universities to enhance nationwide improvement.

6. Strengthening Institutional and Administrative Support

- University administrators should recognize the importance of communicative methods and allocate sufficient budgets for materials, training, and technological tools.

- Policies should be introduced to sustain the adoption of modern teaching methods across English departments.

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