



Exploring the Awareness and Feasibility of Communicative Approaches in English Language Instruction: A Case Study of the Selected Higher Secondary Schools in Pakistan

¹ Waqar Ahmad ² Aziz Ullah Khan

¹ Wah Campus, COMSATS University Islamabad

² Assistant Professor of English at the Department of English, NUML, Islamabad

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*Corresponding author: (W. Ahmad)

Waqarahmadna@gmail.com

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Abstract

English, being the global language of communication, entertainment, education, and career opportunities, has tremendous demand in countries such as Pakistan. However, many people, despite having been educated in and through English, lack adequate proficiency to meaningfully communicate in English. One reason for this is the language teaching methodologies teachers employ to teach English. Although the world over there has been a pedagogical shift from traditional language teaching approaches to methodologies that incorporate Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), government educational institutions in Pakistan still mostly adhere to traditional methodologies. This study, therefore, aimed to examine the status of CLT at the selected higher secondary schools in Pakistan. Specifically, it aimed to analyze the extent to which teachers are aware of the CLT approaches and techniques and to investigate the perceptions of English language teachers about the applicability of CLT at higher secondary levels in Pakistan. Both quantitative (questionnaire) and qualitative (semi-structured interviews) instruments were used to collect data from 30 teacher participants. Quantitative data was analyzed through Google Sheets software, whereas qualitative data was analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings indicated that teachers had sufficient knowledge of CLT and, despite contextual constraints, most of the teachers had favorable opinions regarding the applicability of CLT in Pakistan at the higher secondary level. The study has implications for bringing policy-level changes in English language teaching in Pakistan.

Introduction

In Pakistan, the English language occupies a central place because of being the only official language. Accordingly, it is taught as a compulsory subject and is also used as a medium of instruction in all private and most public schools. However, students struggle in exhibiting English language proficiency even after graduation (Ahmad, 2011). There are several reasons for this low performance of students in the English language. In Pakistani context, learners have very few opportunities for real life communication. Inside the classrooms, traditional language teaching methods are mostly applied. Teaching of English is limited to boring English spelling drills and some formal grammatical constructions. Unfortunately, many teachers who teach English remain unaware of the modern approaches of English language teaching (Khan, 2007). One such approach is Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).

Communicative approaches to language teaching started in the Europe and United States in the 1970s and were later imported to non-Western countries. According to Richards and Rogers (2001), CLT was realized to be the need of the hour because of two fundamental reasons. Firstly, although the English language learners displayed proficiency in grammar and in the receptive skill of reading, they lacked sufficient proficiency to communicate

meaningfully in real-life scenarios. CLT brought about a shift in focus from the structure of language to its use in interactive and authentic communicative situations (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Secondly, CLT was welcomed and supported by many leading applied linguists at the level of theory and academic institutions at the level of practice because it was deemed a suitable alternative to the traditional methods.

The reaction to a traditional focus on the structure of the language did not occur haphazardly. One of the main reasons for the revolt against traditional approaches was the dynamics of fast globalizing world, where immigrants and foreign workers started getting settled in the UK and Europe. These immigrants and workers needed communicative proficiency in English to be able to survive and thrive in European settings. To cater to these language learning needs, the Council of Europe developed an English language teaching and learning curriculum that encouraged “functional-notional concepts of language use” (Savignon, 1991). This step was, thus, a precursor to the focus on communicative competence and the emergence of communicative language teaching as an approach (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

The reaction against structure-focused language teaching methodologies was also partly because of Chomsky’s (1965) critique of structural theories of language, which, he argued, disregarded “the fundamental characteristic of language – the creativity and uniqueness of individual sentences” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 153). Chomsky (1965) believed that competence in a language denotes “the speaker-hearer’s knowledge of the language”, whereas performance in a language implies “the actual use of language in concrete situation” (1965, p. 4). Competence in the language therefore means knowing the structure, grammar, lexis, and phonology of a language, whereas performance means putting this knowledge into practice through meaningful utterances. Chomsky’s (1965) notion thus challenged the traditional language teaching methodologies, which centered on mastering the grammar and lexis of a language at the cost of interactive and meaningful use. This opened avenues for alternative methodologies, the most significant of which is the communicative approach.

The American sociologist Dell Hymes was the precursor of the communicative movement in language teaching. Hymes (1972) used the term ‘communicative competence’ to refer to the contextually and socially appropriate use of language in a particular situation. He believed that mere linguistic competence would lead to failures in social interactions if the language users do not know what to say to whom in what situation. Language learners, Hymes (1972) argued, need to be able to use language according to the sociocultural context in which they are situated.

Several other scholars elaborated on the concept of communicative competence and offered numerous models for putting communicative competence into teaching practice. The most significant work in this regard was carried out by Canale and Swain (1980) and Savignon (2001). According to them, communicative competence is centered on four distinct competencies: linguistic or grammatical competence, sociolinguistics competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. Canale and Swain (1980) explained them thus:

Grammatical competence: knowledge of grammar, structure, lexis, and phonology of a language.

Sociolinguistics competence: knowledge of the social context in which communication takes place.

Discourse competence: knowledge of how to form meaningful utterances through cohesion in form and coherence in meaning.

Strategic competence: knowledge of strategies such as guessing, rewording, using gestures, etc. To make communication successful.

Following Hymes’ ideals, the communicative approach attempts to make learners communicatively competent by teaching the four skills in an integrated and meaningful manner. The use of language in meaningful real-life situations therefore lies at the center of CLT (Savignon, 1991). Additionally, the methodology follows a learner-centered approach as against the traditional approaches where teachers act as providers and learners as receivers of knowledge about the structure and lexis of the language. The goal of language teaching in CLT remains to build the communicative competence of learners through the use of authentic material and meaningful classroom activities (Richards & Schmidt, 2002).

According to some scholars and researchers, the central principles of CLT are as under:

- CLT focuses on all aspects of communicative competence rather than only on linguistic competence (Brown, 2007; Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

- It views the development of language ability as dependent upon activities that engage the learner in meaningful and real-life language use (Brown, 2000; Holliday, 1994; Richards & Rodgers, 2001).
- It focuses on minimal native language use and attention to overuse of error correction (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Rao, 2002).
- Classroom tasks are performed in the form of pairs and groups of learners (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Savignon, 2005).
- Teachers perform the role of facilitators and monitors while students are active participants in the negotiation of meaning (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Savignon, 2001).
- Grammar is not excluded. Grammatical structures can be better understood and internalized while learners communicate (Brown, 2007; Savignon, 2005).
- Errors are considered natural and inevitable, especially during fluency-based activities (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).
- Use of any fixed or standard model of methodology, set of techniques, or prescribed textbook is not necessary (Berns, 1990; Savignon, 2002).
- It is the integration of skills rather than simply on oral or written communication (Savignon, 2002; 2005).

Since CLT is an approach rather than a method, a wide array of classroom tasks and activities can be incorporated into language teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). However, these tasks and activities must have certain characteristics: they must involve information sharing among students, negotiation of meaning must take place, and the nature of the activities must be interactive. Such communicative activities achieve four specific purposes, according to Littlewood (1981). Firstly, they enable learners to practice the language they are learning in the form of whole tasks. Secondly, participating in these activities motivates learners since they become interested in the negotiation of meaning and information sharing. Thirdly, a kind of natural learning environment is created because of the real-life-like nature of the activities. Lastly, these activities help the teachers create the right kinds of contexts for language use, which supports language learning.

In the context of Pakistan, traditional approaches to language teaching have been in practice for a long. However, the recent attempts by the government indicate a desire to shift from the traditional ways of language teaching to communicative-based methodologies. However, very little research focus has gone into whether the syllabus and teachers incorporate CLT in the context of Pakistan and whether they believe it is implementable or not. This study therefore focused on the status of CLT at the higher secondary level in Pakistan. Specifically, it wanted to determine the extent of awareness of English language teachers at higher secondary level about the communicative approach and its various principles and techniques, and the perceptions they had about whether CLT is applicable in Pakistan considering the contextual challenges teachers face.

Methodology

This research is exploratory and hence uses a mixed-methods approach as the methodological framework. Mix-methods research combines quantitative and qualitative modes of inquiry to delve both broad and deep into a phenomenon to be able to fill the research gap (Dornyei, 2007). To determine the extent of CLT knowledge and awareness of secondary school teachers, quantitative data was collected through a Likert scale questionnaire. Additionally, to explore the perceptions of secondary school English teachers about the applicability of CLT, qualitative interviews were used as the data collection technique.

The participants of the study were full-time male and female teachers at various governmental, semi-governmental, and non-governmental colleges located in Wah Cantt, Pakistan. There were a total of 30 participants to whom the questionnaire was administered; interviews were carried out with 5 teachers from this group. Their minimum qualification was an MA in English language/literature. The average age of participants was 37 years; the youngest participant's age was 25 years and that of the oldest was 47 years. The average teaching experience of the teachers was 12.1 years. All the names used for the participants are pseudonyms because of ethical considerations.

The questionnaire, using Likert scale, was designed for eliciting teacher-participants' views and perceptions regarding the applicability of CLT in Pakistani context. The questionnaire contained a total of 18 questions. The

questions revolved around the main principles and techniques of CLT, the constraints teachers may face in their particular contexts about implementing CLT, and suggestions regarding how to overcome these hurdles and constraints. To ensure that there is no response bias, items in the questionnaire included statements both in favour of and against CLT and its applicability (Dornyei, 2007; Tuckman, 1999).

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted since they can explore deep into participants' understating of particular issues (Hatch, 2002). A highly structured interview, where every question has fixed wording and order, fails to elicit the true understating of the concept. By using the interview guidelines, the participants' leads were followed to explore the areas that arose during the interaction. Each interview was audio-recorded and was later transcribed for analysis. Proper ethical procedures were followed, and permissions were gained from the educational institutions as well as teachers participating in the study.

The questionnaire data was analyzed in three different ways. Firstly, individual teacher-participant data was analyzed through graphical charts. Secondly, an overall impression of the result was gathered, which included minimum score, maximum score, averages, and percentages. Thirdly, the questionnaire items were grouped based on three main themes, that is, principles of CLT, contextual constraints, and teacher/learner roles. In the groups, both favourable and unfavorable items were included and analyzed.

Interview data was analyzed through thematic analysis. The transcribed data was read and reread several times to be able to examine the perceptions of participants about the applicability of CLT in their teaching context. By doing a thorough reading of responses of each participant, the inter- and intra-participant similarities and contradictions in the responses were determined. The data collected with the help of interviews helped considerably in confirming or negating the analysis of the questionnaire data.

Questionnaire Findings

The possible range of scores on the questionnaire was from a maximum of 90 to a minimum of 18. The maximum range of scores obtained by participants was 76 and 48 was minimum, with 60.87 being the average score. A general impression of the results in Figure 1 below indicates that generally participants were in favour of CLT and their results show that CLT is possible to be implemented in the Pakistani context with minor adjustments in context.

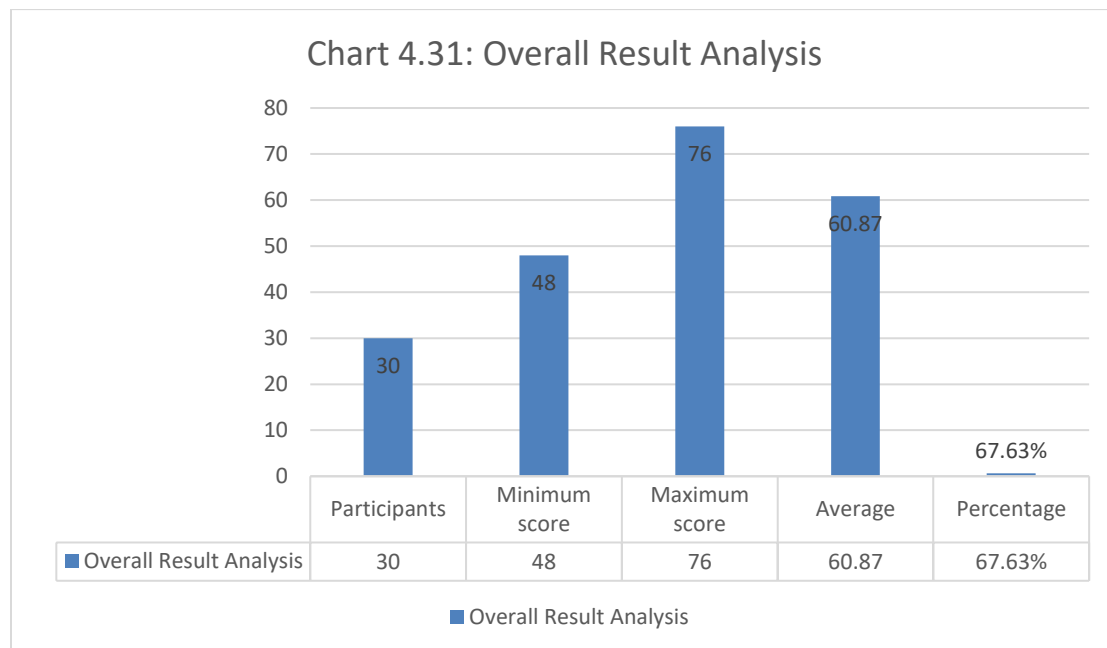


Figure 1: Overall Result Analysis

The questionnaire items were divided into three broader themes: CLT Principles and the extent to which they are relevant to Pakistani classrooms (8 items), the contextual constraints associated with CLT that teachers may

face in their teaching environment, and how to manage them (6 items), and the roles that teachers and learners need to play for effectively implementing communicative approaches (4 items). Every issue in the themes was presented in two items each, one favourable item and the other unfavourable. This was done to validate and strengthen the evidence for a particular perception. The results based on each of these three main themes are displayed in the following paragraphs.

Items based on principles of CLT comprised teachers' approach to grammar, native language, error correction, and group/pair work. The following table comprises details about the item numbers based on these principles, their average, and percentage. The results propose that generally, the teachers agreed with most of the fundamental characteristics of CLT. The group/pair work activities received the most favourable score. Other areas like grammar, native language, and error correction also got favourable scores.

Table 1: Questionnaire items based on principles of CLT (n=30)

Principle	Item Number	Average	Percentage
Grammar	2, 17	6.90	69.00%
Native Language	3, 12	6.40	64.00%
Error Correction	7, 11	6.80	68.00%
Group/Pair Work	8, 13	7.06	70.67%

The next theme of the six questionnaire items was related to contextual constraints. These constraints are typical of the Pakistani context, mandatory syllabus and textbooks, scanty availability of authentic teaching materials and aids, and overcrowded classes. The results on this theme are presented in Table 2 below. The constraints regarding the textbooks got the highest average, which proves that teachers were of the view that most of the contents given in textbooks are not helpful in CLT methodology.

Table 2: Questionnaire items based on contextual constraints (n=30)

Principle	Item Number	Average	Percentage
Textbooks	1, 15	6.53	65.33%
Teaching Aids	5, 16	6.43	64.33%
Class Size	6, 10	6.06	60.67%

The role of both teachers and learners is very important concerning the enactment of communicative activities in the classroom. Generally, it is believed that Pakistani teachers avoid using communicative approaches in their classrooms. Learners also resist such activities. The results of questions that focused on the roles of teachers and learners are presented in Table 3 below. The highest average among the three themes indicates that the teacher and learners had a positive attitude with regard to the possibility of enacting communicative activities in classrooms. It can be believed that learners could be motivated to play their roles in the implementation of these approaches in Pakistani classrooms at the higher secondary level.

Table 3: Questionnaire items based on teacher/learner role (n=30)

Principle	Item Number	Average	Percentage
Teacher Role	14, 18	7.03	70.33%
Learner Role	4, 9	7.63	76.33%

Interview Findings

The main objective of conducting interviews was to validate the views and perceptions of participants prompted through the questionnaire. Particularly, the purpose of the the interviews was to explore teachers' general understanding ofof communicative approaches, contextual issues they face in classrooms, and what role they can play in the implementation of CLT in higher secondary level classrooms. Initially, an effort was made to know about the general understanding of participants about communicative approaches. They all were familiar with CLT but not much. They all considered CLT a very practical and useful approach. One of the teachers, Teacher A, expressed his thoughts about CLT in these words:

“There are many methods but the most modern and common one is how to communicate with the students. Communication is perhaps the basis of this method where you talk to the students and where the purpose is to enhance their language skills rather than making them memorize the rules, the principles governing the language. So instead of going to that site, the use of practical language is necessary.

Teacher B expressed his views thus:

I believe it is a methodology. It covers all the aspects. Your basic aim is to teach language so it fulfills it. Well, again you come across many people who would say that it is not possible because students come from a background where English is not a second or even third, or fourth language. Perhaps elite families' children have exposure to English because they started learning English right from their childhood. But I believe when you have taken a job as an English teacher so you must try to find some ways and means to use it most of the times. It has its limitations but you can maximize it.

Similarly, Teacher C, expressing his views about the use of CLT, said:

It must be used in class. I just try to use it as much as possible. Again limitations are there. You have to take care of all those areas. Students are mostly shy and they do not have that kind of background so I believe that if it is started at the school level teachers are told about it and are trained at the school level it would be more convenient for students at higher secondary level. If we have to live with it then it should be used across Pakistan.

All five teachers were very enthusiastic and had very positive views about a communicative approach to language teaching. They think that this approach is very essential for countries like Pakistan. According to them, it is a very practical method at higher secondary level because the students already have enough grammatical knowledge. They just hesitate or lack the confidence about oral communication. Another teacher, Teacher D, said about CLT:

I have little bit background about CLT. This one is especially used in language institutions and most of the big institutions of Pakistan. Communicative language teaching is very much discouraged in government institutions. It is not given as much importance as it should be given. But there is need to create atmosphere of CLT in our institutions. Governmental institutions especially.

Teacher E also had positive perceptions about CLT and strongly recommended its use inside classrooms:

This methodology should be implemented in Pakistan. If you go to big cities of Pakistan especially Karachi, you will find atmosphere of CLT. Little importance is given to grammar. This is applicable. Yes, I use it. I use both of the methods. It is our compulsion. We have to go through with both of the methods. So GTM is compulsory for us. We cannot get rid of GTM. In spite of this I always try my best to use communicative skills in the classrooms.

Teacher A said in this regard:

Students are very ambitious about this method, and I try my best to encourage the students. Yes, it should be implemented. Policy makers and government should take it as a language and language is never learnt through books. Language is learnt through a communicative atmosphere. We must create an artificial atmosphere in our schools and colleges. Fortunately, in Pakistani schools and colleges local languages have supremacy. It should be taught as a language not as a subject. Principals of colleges and parents take it as a subject, but this is not the subject. This is language. And this is a tool to understand something. We have to take it as a tool. It's not a philosophy. It is a language. It must be learnt in a natural environment like communicative activities. But unfortunately, in Pakistan, we do not have a natural atmosphere”.

Two participants emphasize the training of teachers. They said that teachers' training and motivation are very necessary in this regard. Unfortunately, in Pakistan most teachers are not trained according to the new demand for language teaching. Teachers themselves also do not take an interest. One of the teachers, Teacher C, stated about the training of teachers in these words.

The most important thing is we need very good quality teachers. The basic problem is with the teachers that we do not have good quality teachers and moreover there are teachers in the field, but they do not improve themselves. They are not getting the refresher courses and other things. And a lot of us are still going with grammar translation method and we preferred that one because it is easy. It is quite convenient

for teachers to teach. We should also try to change our examination system. It is a hindrance for communication language teaching because there is no oral testing. We need to restructure our syllabi and we must restructure our approach to language learning.

In a nutshell, all the teachers who were interviewed were very keen on the implementation of CLT. They had positive views and perceptions about CLT. Despite limitations and contextual constraints still they were optimistic and thought that CLT could be implemented in Pakistan.

Discussion and Conclusion

Both the questionnaire and interview findings exposed that the contents given in textbooks are not very helpful in CLT methodology. Mostly the contents given in textbooks promote cramming and rote learning. The books are designed for written examinations and not for oral testing. The results indicated that our examination system is the main hurdle for the implementation of CLT at higher secondary level in Pakistan. However, there is a limited portion of content in textbooks that can be directly utilized in CLT activities. Some interviewees believed that communicative activities could still be generated from textbooks and could be helpful in CLT.

Both the questionnaire and interview findings showed that generally teachers had familiarity with CLT. Although they were not very aware of the basic principles and techniques of CLT they still had a general understanding of it. The English language teachers were very keen and passionate about the applicability of CLT at higher secondary level in Pakistan. They were very optimistic about the applicability of CLT in Pakistan. Although they highlighted some contextual constraints that they faced in their classrooms. The group/pair work received the most favourable results among the questionnaire items. Most of the participants agreed that group and pair work allow Pakistani students to interaction because students do not get many chances to use English in their real-life setting. The participants also indicated that teachers could play a vital role in the implementation of CLT in Pakistan.

The findings imply that teachers should be trained according to CLT requirements. There should be training workshops for teachers. Teachers should be given an opportunity to adjust or mold the teaching methodology keeping in mind the contextual constraints and cultural factors. Policymakers or the concerned authorities should try to minimize constraints such as class size, textbooks, and unavailability of teaching aids. Policymakers should also review and revise the contents and material given in textbooks. The examination system also demands some fundamental changes because it is the main hurdle in the implementation of CLT. The current examination system puts much focus on grammar and memorization. Finally, English should be taught as a language not as a subject. It should be treated as a skill rather than as an object or subject.

There are numerous limitations of the study since it is a small-scale exploratory study, and its findings are limited. Future researchers could explore the correspondence between teachers' understanding and perception about CLT and their actual practices in Pakistani classrooms. More detailed interviews with a greater number of teachers across Pakistan may provide more in-depth data. Overall, the findings of the study show that despite contextual constraints, most of the teachers were firm and optimistic about the implementation of CLT in Pakistan with minute adjustment according to context.

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