

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION AND STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS IN CLT METHOD USED IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Dr. Evis Kapurani

European University of

Tirana, Doctoral Studies

ALBANIA

ABSTRACT

This study aims to summarize the importance of communication in foreign language teaching and learning and the importance of communicative methods used in teaching not only communication and fluency but also in teaching grammar and other language skills. It also aims to answer the research question and to describe what the elementary schools students' perceptions and opinions are after the challenging interactive and student-centered method Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was used in teaching. The data are collected with a qualitative method and the instrument used is Focus Group. The participants are 189 students of 9-year elementary schools.

The results showed that learning a foreign language through a communicative method is a more effective and satisfying way of learning. It makes the students feel more motivated to get involved during the lesson, to learn and to achieve better results. Students' perceptions and impact after implementing CLT method was surprising because they were all very satisfied and felt really motivated during the lesson, felt active and free to communicate, even though they were used with previously traditional methods and techniques, this change was very welcomed and had a very positive impact on them.

Keywords: Foreign Language Learning, Communication, Grammar, Effectiveness

INTRODUCTION

Communication has been widely discussed for many years as a main and proper tool and aim in foreign language teaching and learning and it has been continuously referred as an essential way for students to be able to transmit it in society and prepare students for the future life. Enhancing and creating communication activities and situations in the classroom is really easy even spontaneously and these activities can be used for the sake of vocabulary or grammar learning as well as for the sake of interaction, active participation motivation and social discussion.

The process of communication is important because helps people to express the meaning of their thoughts. If the teacher creates in the classroom real life situations this would increase students' motivation to learn and would enhance their desire to communicate in topics of interest. The teacher is the principal actor that through communicative activities organized and planned can create the best environment for stimulating communication. When we speak about communication in foreign language teaching and if we refer to the Communicative Language Teaching Method, CLT we do not mean only to develop the speaking skills in the foreign language that is being learned but also other language skills. The communicative activities enhance and develop not only communication skills but also the other language skills of listening, reading, writing, vocabulary learning and inductive learning of grammar rules. Communication is the bridge to pass on other skills development and helps the teacher not to oblige and manipulate students to learn just in a specific context or text book but can enhance learning through a creative teaching. When foreign language teaching focuses only on grammatical rules, repetition, memorization and non-interactive methods that do not involve communicative activities, the students would be competent only for a set of grammatical rules and words of the vocabulary in that language. This students that try to learn the foreign language for several ages when they come out of school are unable to freely use the language in communication outside the classroom because they remain focused only on the contexts that the language has been used in the classroom during teaching without having the possibility to learn the language used in a real context. And all this problems follow the students later on when they need to use the language in practice.

Aim of the Study

This study aims to summarize the importance of communication in foreign language teaching and learning and the importance of communicative methods used in teaching not only for teaching communication and fluency but also for teaching grammar and other language skills.

It also aims to answer the research question and to describe the elementary schools students' opinions after the challenging interactive and student-centered method Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was used in teaching.

Research Question

What are the elementary schools students' perceptions and opinions after the challenging interactive and student-centered method Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was used in teaching?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communicative Language Teaching, CLT

Communicative Language Teaching Method (CLT) is a foreign language teaching method, its aim is to make students to communicate in a foreign language using activities such as oral communication activities, communicating with games, problem solving, paintings discussion, story construction, stimulation, role plays, fill in the space exercises, written communication activities, exchanges of letters and messages, dialogue complementation, images, questions and many others. Games are a good incentive for motivation and communication which helps in learning a foreign language. The teacher in the classroom aids communication creates situations during activities act as advisory for the students. Because the role of teachers is less dominant than in the other methods the students are at the center. Emphasis is placed on communication processes.

Richards (2006) gives some really useful principles about communication which enhance and facilitate language learning: -interaction and meaningful communication are very important in language learning since they enhance learning and acquisition. -Tasks and exercises give students opportunities to negotiate meaning to use language and expand language resources including meaningful interaction. -Communication helps students to use and develop different language skills. -Language learning is easier if activities that involve inductive rules and analysis and reflection of language are used. CLT focuses on group work activities for which Thompson (1996) states that group work increases motivation levels and students produce more language and develop fluency without teachers' pressure or control; they can develop their ideas, social skills, communicative competence and critical thinking.

CLT also focuses on fluency rather than on accuracy as Richards (2006) mentions that activities that aim fluency reflect the natural way of language use and meaningful usage of language through communication strategies in order to achieve communication and to link language use in context, while accuracy activities are based just on the classroom context, focus on correct linguistic utterances, practice few language usage, keep language under control and do not focus on meaningful communication.

In CLT errors have been regarded as natural phenomena in the process of learning English and Larsen-Freeman (1986) explain that students can be good at communication when errors of form are tolerated and when teacher let the students to autocorrect. About the role of the teacher in CLT Breen & Candlin (1980) refers to the teacher as facilitator, organizer and guide in the classroom and communicative activities.

Teaching Foreign Language Grammar through Communication

Communication is not used just for the sake of communicating or fluency in a foreign language it can be used even in teaching grammar according to Richards (2006) foreign language learning is simpler when students communicate through interaction, tasks and exercises, in this way they can compromise meaning, use interpersonal language and extend their knowledge. Communication makes possible the use of different language skills and ways of speaking or manners of behavior and ways of expressing and language usage. The activities that involve students in communication help them discovering language rules in an inductive way. In this way inductive way of learning students have the possibility to create their own examples in a spontaneous way.

Thornbury (1999) lists some advantages of the inductive way of learning a language and grammar: -When students self-discover grammar rules it is easier for them to acquire those rules by the existing mental structure than the other rules that are presented in a certain way to them. - In this way students can be more active during learning and not passive and this can bring them more motivation and attention. -And because collaboration is more effective in problem solving this give students the opportunity for more practice. While the deductive way of teaching grammatical rules may be frustrating for students and explanation is based on memorization.

Richards (2006) makes a difference between a traditional method such as Grammar Translation Method (GTM) and CLT method. GTM method is focused on the deductive way of explaining grammar where rules are presented to the students, they have to memorize them and then use in examples and given exercises. In CLT method grammar is taught inductively and the students have the possibility to formulate the rule based on the exercises and also they can learn these rules by interaction, by use in work groups and by communication, in this way they can acquire better this rules since they do not have just to memorize by heart but they learn the rules in a more natural and effective way. CLT that focuses mainly on communication and inductive learning of language and grammar can provide to the learner a better opportunity to communicate than a method based on grammatical rules, repetition and memorization. In CLT and inductive grammar teaching the teachers makes communication the focus of language teaching and students have the opportunity to create real communication and focus on their own learning and can build up their own communicative competence because even their errors are tolerated by the teacher who does not correct all the mistakes continuously and constantly for not interrupting and affecting fluency, they can also develop their fluency as well as accuracy and expand and develop all the other language skills

CLT a Contemporary Useful Method in Foreign Language Teaching and on Students' Motivation to Learn

According to Harmer (2007) nothing motivates the student more than success and nothing de-motivates the student more than continuous failure. It is part of the teacher's art trying to provide that the students are going to be successful because the more their success lasts the more their motivation to study will last. But when it comes to success this does not mean that we should make it too easy to be achieved because it would cause the students to lose respect for

duties during learning but either not too difficult to achieve because what students need it is to have a sense of achievement. It is part of the teacher's job to establish the right level of challenge for the students, which is neither too simple nor too difficult and include students in learning tasks where they can succeed. The teacher should also guide students toward success by showing them how to do things properly. An important thing is create confidence between student and teacher relationship and teacher's behavior should motivate students to learn and be more involved during the lesson. The activities implemented on the classroom are of a crucial importance for enhancing students' motivation. If students like the activities implemented on the classroom and if they receive good feedback or results which means that they learn and acquire better language skills will enhance their involvement during the lesson and their interactivity on the learning process. For this reason, the teacher should try to combine the activities and techniques used on the classroom in order to give to the students the opportunity to get involved on the learning process and to take responsibility about their own learning, trying to make them feel powerful and motivated.

CLT implementation creates a motivating classroom environment giving to the students the opportunity to learn through communication in a foreign language and it is more useful and effective than other traditional methods. Its principles are really useful and effective and if they will be applied in the classroom the teachers need to modify their teaching methodology. In this way the activities that include repetition, memorization, grammatical rules, drills, and multiple choices should be replaced with activities that include communication, interaction, meaning negotiation, tasks and games. The shift to CLT should be viewed as a new strategy to implement contemporary methodology on foreign language teaching and developing teachers' teaching skills and creativity in the classroom including even topics of interest for the students, which will help them be more motivated to develop their own learning strategies and confidence.

Jacobs & Farrel (2003) identify some crucial components which help this shift such as: - Focusing more and giving attention on the role of the students in the classroom activities rather than on the external stimuli of the environment. In this way the attention shifts from the teacher to the student and teaching and learning shifts from teacher-centered to student-centered. -More attention should be given to the socialization of students in community and society rather than acting as individuals not considering the social or individual differences. In this way school becomes a more inclusive institution and connects school environment with social context and outside world. - Focusing more on the meaning and functional use of language rather than structural forms. -Viewing learning as a life-long process rather than learning just for a specific time and context and just for the sake of examination and evaluation.

CLT Method Activities and Implementation

Paulston & Bruder (1976) classify the activities used to enhance communication during foreign language teaching which are also used on the CLT method and despite their main aim of helping students to gain their communicative competence; they have even other specific aims: -Dialogues and social formulas that are related to greetings, presentations, complaints, thanksgiving, feelings etc.

-Duties related with the community that have to do with students' capacity to interact outside the classroom.

-Activities for problem solving where the students have to find the possible solutions of a given problem through collaboration.

-Role plays where students improvise the assigned role by creating the scene and the plot of the part that they are going to interpret.

Harmer (2001) mentions different types of activities which enhance communication and are used on CLT method:

- Acting scenes or parts of works or dialogues found or built by the students themselves. To realize this activity should be created a supportive atmosphere in the classroom giving to the students time to rehearse or to repeat.

-Games where students are actively involved in the interaction.

-Discussions in pairs or groups.

-Presentations where students present a topic for which they are prepared.

-Role play affects the fluency and prepares students for specific situations; students do not feel themselves as students but as real participants in a given situation, they view the classroom as the environment where the conversations are being realized such as an airport, a meeting place, a train station etc.

Communicative teaching activities make the classroom active and the lesson interactive, also they are motivating and enjoyable and arise students desire to learn while traditional exercises may be frustrating and make students passive. In teaching it is very important to consider students perception about activities used and communicative activities implementation, the way they want and prefer learning a foreign language and their attitude towards the language. Students' opinions and views of learning a foreign language are very important in order to meet their needs and to find the best methods to teach them in the way they want to and in the way they would succeed.

In one of my previous papers a questionnaire was used in order to understand students' points of view, preferences and needs about learning based on the principles of foreign language methods. And the results have shown that they prefer learning with authentic materials, learning vocabulary by learning words that they take from a context, learning through communicating, playing games and freely expressing their opinions and ideas and through interaction, working in groups, cooperating with partners and freely communicating. They also prefer when the teacher is a counselor or facilitator and errors should be constantly corrected only when it is needed in other cases errors should not be instantly and constantly corrected for not interrupting or affecting communicative fluency. Students prefer a student-centered learning and communicative activities which create communicative desire, interaction and motivation. All these aspects and activities mentioned above make part of the principles of contemporary interactive methods and CLT method in particular. Most of the students do not like any more traditional methods and their principles such as focusing on accuracy, grammatical rules, frustrating tasks, memorization, imitating models, focusing in specific context, not being able to communicate freely, having a teacher acting as a leader and a teacher-centered learning, lack of

classroom cooperation and not being able to use language in communication outside the classroom setting.

In another paper a study was conducted with 367 students of 9-year elementary schools from 6th to 9th grades and from 11 to 15 years old: six 6th grade classes-134 participants, four 7th grade classes- 81 participants, seven 8th grade classes-136 participants, one 9th grade class-16 participants. These participants were separated in two groups in the experimental group (where CLT method was used) and control group (where traditional methods were used).

134 sixth grade students-87 Experimental Group-47 Control Group.

81 seventh grade students-19 Experimental Group-62 Control Group.

136 eighth grade students-83 Experimental Group-53 Control Group.

16 ninth grade students-16 Control Group.

After using CLT in practice in the experimental group for a 6-months period of time with its techniques and activities such as: the use of authentic materials, language games, scrambled sentences, role play etc., to enhance real communication and real context use of language in the classroom, free communication, free expression of ideas and opinions, motivation, interaction but also vocabulary and inductive grammar learning, it resulted that there was a difference in participants average grade between experimental group and control, in some of the classes the difference was bigger in some lower and not very much significant but in the overall it had differences and the overall difference of the average grade was higher in the experimental group.

This means that CLT usage had been more effective than the other methods and students learning and acquisition was better because the more the student involved during the lesson the better the result in learning and language acquisition. Based on theoretical issues about the effectiveness of CLT method and positive issues of learning language in communication it was somehow evidence of theory proved in practice. CLT impact was also seen on: teaching and learning, motivation, socialization, fluency, teacher and student role. Nunan's (1991) states that CLT method effectively influences teaching and learning, because it gives the opportunity to communicate through interaction, makes use of authentic materials in learning context, gives to the students opportunities to manage their own learning, using their own experiences and opinions as a contribution in the classroom in order to relate classroom language learning with language used on activities outside the classroom, it seems that this method is very interested in the needs and desires of the learners and on the real use of language not only outside but also inside the classroom and since students develop their communicative competence in an authentic context CLT may be considered as a very useful form of teaching which enhances students learning.

Literature Review should be given in this section. All the subheadings in this section should be in font size 12 Bold, Times New Roman, single spaced. The first letter of each word in subheading should be capital.

METHODOLOGY

Design of Data Collection

The data are collected with a qualitative method. The instrument used to collect the qualitative data is Focus Group. The data are analyzed in a descriptive analytic way.

The study makes use of a qualitative method in collecting the necessary data because we are interested in discovering students' opinions, perceptions, behaviors etc. which are abstract notions that need qualitative analyses.

The focus group discussions are conducted with a number of students who have previously been participants on an experimental group where CLT method has been used in practice for a 6-months period of time. The aim of the focus group discussions was to analyze the impact, opinion and the experience of the students who were participants on the group where CLT method was implementation, to understand the impact that this method and its techniques had on them.

Participants

The total number of 9-year elementary schools students (age 11 to 15 years old) in all the studies mentioned above was 367 divided in: 189 students in the Experimental Group and 178 students in the Control Group.

But the participants of this study in the Focus Group discussions are only the students that were part of the Experimental Group which mean 189 students in total. These students are chosen to participate in this study because we aim to discover their perceptions on the CLT method used and in this group was implemented the CLT method while in the Control Group were used the traditional method.

The division in the Experimental Group and Control Group is done for other study purposes explained, analyzed and compared on my previous studies.

Instruments

-Focus Group

The aim of the discussions on the focus group was to analyze the impact, opinion and the experience of the students who were participants on the experimental group after CLT method implementation, to understand the impact that this method and its techniques had on them. The discussions were conducted through questions designed by the researcher aiming to receive the feedback of students' perspectives about how they felt during the lesson, if they liked this method or not, if they liked learning through communication, if they felt motivated to learn more and active during group work, if they acquired grammar and the problems that they might have faced.

-The Questions Used

1. How did you feel during the lesson?
2. Did you feel more motivated to learn during the lesson?
3. Did you feel active during the lesson or did you feel passive during the lesson?
4. Did you like cooperation and group works?
5. Did you feel free to communicate and express your opinions during the classroom activities?
6. Did you feel comfortable with the teacher's role during the implementation of activities?
7. What do you think about grammar acquisition in this way and which are some of the problems you might have faced?

-Procedure

The participants of this study are 189 students who have previously been participants of an experimental manipulated group. This study does not includes comparisons between the experimental or control group this study only collects the options and perception of a number of 9-years elementary school students on the CLT method used on the classroom for teaching English as a foreign language.

The focus groups were conducted in 10 meetings in total, 8 meetings with 20 students each and 2 meetings one with 15 the other with 14 students each.

Each of this meetings lasted from 30 to 60 minutes based on the time the students needed to reply and collect their answers.

In each of the 8 first meetings these 20 students were divided in 4 groups with 5 students each.

And in each of the 2 other meetings the 15 students were divided in 3 groups with 5 students each.

The researcher firstly introduced the questions that were going to be used to all the 20 participant students and then each group with 5 students had to discuss the questions on their own and had a leading student that had the duty to direct the discussions on the group, the researcher during that time passed from one group to the other to help them. Then, the researcher introduced again the questions and each leading student of each group had the opportunity to discuss based on the answer collected from his own group of students.

Of course that this discussions were held while all the 20 participant students were listening and they had the possibility to add or change something if they wanted or based on the replies of the other participants.

The same procedure was repeated for all the meeting conducted.

Then all the answers collected by the researcher for all the participant students are analyzed in a collective and summarized way. And all the results and analyses are contrasted with the theoretical ideas of different authors and methodologists.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The questions mentioned above were used for the focus groups in order to analyze the impact that the usage of the CLT method had on the students where it was used, to find and understand how they felt during the lesson, if they liked the usage of this method, if they like the language learning through communication, if they felt more motivated to learn and active on group works, if they acquired properly the new vocabulary and grammar and also the problems that they might have faced.

All the students were very enthusiastic on their replies stating that they felt very well during the lesson, also they stated that they felt motivated and very active on the class during the activities developed. The good senses created because of the nice atmosphere in the classroom drove to their increased desire to be involved during the lesson. All the students stated that they desired to be engaged more in learning activities and different games. The desire to win or to go on the top in classroom activities made them to increase their self-assessment. This level of motivation gave them the possibility to freely express their opinions and ideas and to speak fluently. Working with different materials gave them a better view of the real world, enriched their knowledge with cultural information about the target language and gave them the opportunity to be creative. Collaboration and group work had the same impact on them and all of them stated that they felt free to communicate and express their opinions during the activities in the classroom. They learned better while listening the language used by the other students or group participants, in this way they used the language more than they would have used it in activities that include only teacher-student communication. They stated that they felt comfortable in activities that include group work, they felt very well while working with each other and listening to each other more than listening and imitating just the teacher's model, and they also felt more responsible about their own learning. According to them group work reduced the dominance of the teacher in the class and increased their participation in the classroom activities, this enhanced more the collaboration and the desire to be more involved and more active in the activities developed on the classroom during the lesson. Nunan (1988) states that students should be taken as a point of reference in order to take decisions related with teaching and this should be realized through consulting and negotiating in order that students have their autonomy and to be able of creating by themselves their objectives and strategies of learning, to have more responsibility and awareness and to be able of self-evaluation.

Regarding teacher's role in the classroom during activities used, although students all answered that they were satisfied they added some comments stating that they have been used with previous traditional ways of teaching and learning and they somehow felt attached to teacher's authority. But they see the innovative techniques used in the classroom as interesting and motivating and they liked very much the teacher's behavior while they were communicating because they had the opportunity to produce meaning of their thoughts and to create a bigger number of sentences and utterances without focusing on their errors since the teacher did not interrupt them while communicating but kept notes of their errors and corrected them later on.

While as far as grammar acquisition is concerned they stated that they felt equipped with grammar knowledge and they had acquired grammar properly and also they felt satisfied during the lesson and while working with grammatical rules in work groups and language games.

During the discussions the students stated that at the beginning of CLT implementation in the classroom they felt skeptic at first about the way that this change would function, if they would adopt it easily or not, if they would understand it or not. Because they were not used to be free of constrains and at first there were difficulties at communicating easily and freely being afraid of errors and judgments and they needed teachers' observation and control because they felt they must take the teacher's approval for everything. But what it is important is that they stated that time after time they were used and felt really comfortable in taking their own management of language learning. They had more space for interaction and cooperation and grammar acquisition was not done only by learning the new rules by heart but through communicative activities and they felt really comfortable on the environment create don the classroom during the lesson.

About grammar Richards (2006) makes a difference between the traditional Grammar Translation Method (GTM) that focuses on the deductive way of grammar teaching where the rules are presented to the students and they must memorize them and then to use them in the given examples and exercises and Communicative Language Teaching where the grammar is taught inductively and the students have the possibility to formulate the rules through interaction, through using them during group work and through communication. This is a better way of grammar acquisition and the students can learn the grammatical rules better than just memorizing them because this is a more natural and effective way of learning.

These results are proof of the theory related with the effective use of CLT method in teaching and learning and positive views about foreign language learning though communication. According to Richards (2006) language learning is easier when students communicate through interaction, tasks and exercises, in this way students can produce the meaning of their thought, use interpersonal language and expand their knowledge. Through communication students can make use of different language skills, different forms of expressions, different ways of behaviors etc. The classroom activities that involve students in communication help them to discover the rules of the language in an inductive way. In this way students can create spontaneous examples. Interactive methods that use communication in teaching such as CLT make the students active and motivate them to learn more in order to achieve better results and an effective learning, this enhances students desire and enthusiasm to succeed and improve their skills.

CONCLUSIONS

Communicative activities enhance and develop not only communication skills but also listening, reading, writing, vocabulary learning and inductive grammar rules. The activities that involve students in communication help them discovering language rules in an inductive way. The communicative language teaching method implementation created a motivating classroom environment giving to the students the opportunity to learn though communication in a foreign language and it was more useful and effective than other traditional methods. Grammatical

competence and rules were acquired through communication. CLT impact was seen even on the motivation and socialization of students and on their relationship with the teacher. The shift to CLT should be viewed as a new strategy to implement contemporary methodology on foreign language teaching and developing teachers' teaching skills and creativity in the classroom.

Students' opinion after implementing a challenging communicative method in teaching was surprising because they were all very satisfied and felt very good and motivated during the lesson, feeling active and freely communicating, even though they were used with previously traditional methods and techniques, this change was very welcomed and had a very positive impact on them. According to them group work reduced the dominance of the teacher in the class and increased their participation in the classroom activities.

The results showed that learning a foreign language through communication is a more effective and satisfying way of learning for the students. Communication is important not only for speaking but also for interacting and learning even the other language skills. This successful way of learning makes the students feel more motivated to get involved during the lesson and more motivated to learn more and to achieve always better results, this enhances students' desire and enthusiasm to succeed and improve their skills.

The effects of communication in foreign language teaching and learning can be viewed as a strategy that can be used in teaching to expand the teaching skills and the creativity in the classroom.

The findings and results of this study are limited in the context and environment of the participants and we cannot make generalizations across the country but this study remains as a scientific evidence regarding the debates over the use of contemporary methods in Albanian context and other expanded researches with other or more participants can give even more results and analyses.

Recommendations

-Teachers can improve their methodology of foreign language teaching by being more creative and trying to use activities that make the students more active in the classroom and enhance their motivation to learn and to succeed. Being closer to the students needs in learning a language means providing them the "food" they need and the "food" that would make them be better students and expand their language knowledge, develop their language skills and create their own language competence.

-Further focus group discussions with foreign language learners can provide us with more results and different insights about the use of communication in teaching.

-Other studies can be done to analyze the effects of communication on learning using different methods of data collection and on different perspectives or participants.

-Other studies can be done to analyze the importance of using communication in the foreign language teaching classroom regarding even other influencing factors.

-Other studies can surpass the methodological and pedagogical perspective and expand the insight analysis in the influence of social context in foreign language learning.

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