

KURDISH STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARD COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING AT A UNIVERSITY IN KURDISTAN REGION IRAQ

***Berivan Mohammed Ahmed Abdullah, Assistant Lecturer, MA
TESOL***

University of Zakho, Iraq, Kurdistan Region

Abstract

This is a small scale piece of research that has been conducted to investigate about the Kurdish students' perceptions of CLT in Kurdistan. The samples involved in this study were 40 Kurdish undergraduate students; 6 out of these 40s were interviewed via skype. The participants were chosen based on their knowledge regarding CLT. These students have been taught the CLT principles for one year and for almost three years they have been taught through CLT. This study was collected by a mixture of qualitative and quantitative data through using a set of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. This was done in order to find the answer to three research questions which are: (1) what are students' attitudes toward CLT? (2) Do students think that authentic materials should be used by teachers in English classes? (3) What are the challenges that Kurdish students face when they are taught through CLT method? The findings of the study revealed that students have a positive attitude regarding the use of CLT, as it contributed much to the real world language. Moreover, the results showed that the students are in favour of the use of the authentic materials because they are more interesting than other materials. However, some challenges might face the teachers and the students while implementing CLT in Kurdistan context, such as: lack of authentic materials, lack of teachers' knowledge, grammar-based exams and students' proficiency level. Therefore, the findings also revealed that these difficulties can be tackled and by that this approach will work more properly in Kurdistan.

Keywords: CLT: Communicative Language Teaching, FL: Foreign Language, EFL: English as a Foreign Language

Introduction

English is a highly evolving language that requires extensive engagement for effective communication to be possible. Therefore, many Asian countries have changed their adopted approach of teaching English from a traditional method to a communicative one (CLT) based on real situation use of English.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was introduced in the 1970s and is regarded as one of the most effective approaches to language teaching (Bandl, 2007). Although it has been used for a long time, it still remains a popular method and an accepted approach for teaching English in many countries. However, despite the attention given to CLT, many teachers do not apply CLT to a satisfactory extent due to challenges faced by the teacher and the students, which should be addressed.

Over time, teaching the English language in Kurdistan witnessed many changes with regards to both materials and approaches. In the past, the main method used in the Kurdish context was the grammar-translation method, the direct method, and audio-lingual method (Al-Hamash and Abdul-Rahim, 1982; Al-Chalabi, 1975). However, Kurdistan's Ministry of Education has recently changed the curriculum to include a course book with the title 'Sunrise', which is mainly based on CLT (Biarayee, 2009) to engage students' communicative abilities. However, adopting a more communicative method has little value if Kurdish teachers, who lack training, are to implement CLT using the traditional method of instruction.

Rational of the study

The rationale for carrying out this research is related to several fundamental points. Most importantly, through this study, the attitudes of students towards CLT will be examined. Moreover, based on this study, the advantages and disadvantages of the use of CLT will be discussed in order to identify areas of improvement.

Therefore, the educational system of Kurdistan might needs some improvement such as shifting the role of students from listeners to communicators, class size should be ideal and group work should be adopted. The exam system in Kurdish schools needs to be reformed with the adoption of communicative tasks that cover the four main skills, reading, writing, listening and speaking, and that are less reliant on grammar based exercises.

Literature Review

Over the past 50 years, the history of CLT has witnessed many changes. Since its introduction as a method of language teaching, CLT prompted a continuous evaluation of course design and teaching

methodology. Richards (2006, p.6) divided the history of the evolution of CLT over the last 50 years into three phases: “traditional approaches, classic CLT and current CLT”. The 1960s represent the first phase of development, in which lessons were based on grammar competence. The second phase of development of the CLT method took place between the 1970s and the 1990s, this phase of communication was based on information gap and discussion activities. The third phase is the current CLT and is based on real communication in a free context. Interestingly, although Richards divides CLT into three phases, he does not specify where this development occurred. For example, in Kurdistan where this research study takes place, it should be noted that due to the rapid progress of education, the first two phases were missed out. With this argument this question may be raised whether it would be easier to put CLT into the curriculum without being into the first two phases or it would be challenging?

CLT can be best characterised in line with the definition proposed by Richards (2006, p.2): “a set of principles about the goals of language teaching, how learners learn a language, the kind of communicative activities that best facilitate learning, and the roles of teachers and learners in the classroom”. This can arguably be the most comprehensive definition of this method because it includes the aspects that CLT focuses on, such as the materials and the roles of students and teachers.

Communicative Competence

The main goal of CLT is ensuring that communicative competence becomes the goal of language teaching (Hedge, 2000). The term communicative competence was introduced by Hymes (1972, cited in Brown, 2007, p.246) who defined it as “that aspect of our competence that enables us to convey and interpret messages and to negotiate meanings interpersonally within specific contexts”. The desired outcome of the CLT is not limited to only understanding the rules of the language, but rather it extends to successful communication by students in the target language (Knight, 2001). As Larson-Freeman and Anderson (2011) argue, more than just linguistic competence, mainly forms and grammar, is required in order to obtain a language and have the capacity to communicate using it. Communicative competence involves knowing the aim and context of communication as well as what to say and to whom.

Teachers’ and Students’ Roles

Teachers’ and students’ roles are important in CLT. The teacher’s role as a listener and a co-communicator is emphasised, while the student’s role as a communicator is essential. These roles might be challenging for both students and teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL), as the

focus is on students communicating and learning together. This may be very different to other traditional methods that learners and teachers are used to. Hu (2002, pp.95-96) best describes the vital roles of the learners in the CLT classroom which are assumed to be “those of negotiators for meaning, communicators, discoverers, and contributors of knowledge and information”. This is very different to the role of passive learners. Learners in CLT are encouraged to interact with other students in the class and become active members in the learning process. The described role of students is very useful pedagogically, but in Kurdistan, this may be challenging as it is based on asking the learners to have a different type of learning experience to the one they are used to. In their traditional approach to learning, Kurdish students are more listeners than speakers.

Many researchers argue that the teachers’ role has to change radically. Brown (2007) states that the teacher should act as an aide, who encourages the process of communication, and should not be purely an information supplier; however, this argument might be more relevant in the context of some countries and it may be more challenging for students and teachers in Kurdistan as the teachers in Kurdistan are more used to the traditional method (Domily, 2010), where the learning process is more teacher-centred, and students only play the role of listeners.

Activities in CLT

The key point of CLT is the presence of communicative activities that are required in communicative classes in order to achieve the communicative purpose. As Richards (2006) states, CLT activities must give students the chance to communicate. Communicative practices intend to involve students in interaction in order to develop their communicative competence (Savignon, 2007). Thus, CLT involves the integration of various language skills and the use of authentic materials.

Furthermore, communicative activities may allow students to improve their fluency. Fluency in the target language is another important aim of CLT; that is to say the utilisation of language naturally. As Klippel and Swan (2006) suggests that communicative activities encourages students to be better in oral skills performance.

However, the promotion of group work can be problematic, as well as beneficial. It is indicated by Swantarathip and Wichadee (2010) that in order to promote learning abilities, group work is required as it helps students to eliminate anxiety and improve their level of understanding. However, a number of learners may still feel anxious interacting in the target language in class. This may lead to the reticence because of the fear of making mistakes, even though they are placed in groups, specifically in large

groups. As Chang and Goswami (2011) propose, such methodology might not work within large groups because students.

Furthermore, regarding committing errors, CLT deals with errors as a natural phenomenon in the language learning process. Thus, the correction of errors is, if possible, best postponed to the end of the lesson unless they impede conveying meaning.

Using Authentic Materials in CLT

CLT is described as a meaning oriented method. Arguably, meaningful communication helps students to learn a language in a more effective way (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). Thus, classroom activities may be better generated from real life situations so that students would be able to communicate inside and outside the classroom. These resources include the use of texts, video selections, pictures, announcements, web pages, leaflets, and other authentic audio-visual materials such as conversations.

Challenges Faced in Implementing CLT

Some challenges may be faced when implementing CLT in the contexts of certain countries or cultures as literature on implementation of CLT suggests. This is demonstrated by the findings of Kalanzadeh, Mirchenari and Bakhtiarvand's (2013) study conducted in Iran and Coskun's (2011) study in Turkey, which revealed that the factors that impede the implementation of CLT include grammar-based examinations, students' and teachers' level, the educational system and large class size. These factors, as examined by this study, are discussed as follows.

Context

CLT may not be successful when it is used in different situations and with different cultures as one of the factors that impede its implementation could be the context. Interestingly, Bax (2003) criticizes the use of CLT in his article by arguing that in spite of the significant role of CLT in language teaching, the context is generally neglected. Teaching styles of some cultures may be teacher-centred rather than student-centred, which is the opposite of the CLT instruction. Moreover, a number of studies show that CLT might not be applicable in crowded classes. Such as Hiep's (2007) study in Vietnam, though its findings cannot be generalised to all Vietnam, as Hiep claims, because of the limited samples, however, the findings indicate that large class size can be a challenge to the application of CLT. This is because CLT encourages communication through utilising the target language, and in classes with a large number of students, chances of interaction may not be offered to students evenly. This is relevant to teaching in Kurdistan as it could be difficult to utilise CLT because in Kurdistan each class usually

consists of more than 40 students and lessons are of a very limited time that does not exceed 45 minutes (Biarayee, 2009). These two features might negatively affect communicative competence of the students. Therefore, it is recommended to make class size smaller in order to provide more time to the students to interact in the target language (Littlewood, 2007).

Learners' proficiency level might be another factor as the level of fluency of some students is not the same as others which might affect the implementation of successful CLT. The findings of Li's (1998) study conducted in South Korea revealed that the use of CLT was challenging for some teachers due to the students' low English proficiency.

Lack of Authentic Materials

The absence of authentic materials could be another factor preventing the successful utilisation of the CLT method adequately. Generally, successful teachers with suitable skills can prepare effective materials; however, some teachers might not be able to implement CLT because of their background and teaching experiences as teachers can be affected by the traditional methods based on grammar instruction (Incecay and Incecay, 2009).

Exam Based Classes

The basis of CLT is to develop students' communicative competence and not their grammatical skills. However, some studies indicate that, because of examination requirements, teachers use a combination of CLT and the traditional method (Chung and Huang, 2009). This may be challenging for both the teacher and students as it may be confusing to combine two different methods which have different features.

Methodology

The mixed method approach was chosen to conduct this study. This method was chosen as it provides more in-depth insight to the research as the qualitative data might address some issues that the quantitative data might not. The questionnaire survey and semi-structured interview were constructed as a means to gather information. For achieving the aim of this study three research questions were formed: 1. What are students' attitudes toward CLT? 2. Do students think that authentic materials should be used by teachers in English classes? 3. What are the challenges that Kurdish students face when they are taught through CLT method?

Moreover, the sample size were 40 participants from only one level, undergraduate students in the last year of their studies, in the English department. Their ages are between (20- 30). These students were chosen as they have theoretically and practically experienced CLT. The participants

were from one university in Kurdistan, therefore, the cluster sample is used as Corbetta (2003) argues cluster sampling is the selection of a group instead of individuals and is used when the participants are divided into groups such as in school classes.

Furthermore, since the forty participants are away from the researcher, the questionnaire were sent online. The questionnaire involved close ended questions and the rating scale (strongly agree, agree, uncertain, disagree and strongly disagree) was used as it is easy and straightforward to understand. The second method was the interview which carried out with six of the 40 students and the interview was through the Skype calls.

Discussion and Findings

Simple statistical methods were used to analyse the data obtained from the questionnaire. As for the interview, the thematic approach also known as ‘coding’ was used. Coding is defined as "a name or label that the researcher gives to a piece of text that contains an idea or a piece of information" (Cohen, et al. 2011, p.559). In order to answer the three research questions, this chapter was divided into three sections, each of which is assigned to a theme: attitudes towards CLT, the use of authentic materials and difficulties in implementing CLT.

What are Students’ Attitudes towards CLT?

Most of the interview responses showed that students had a positive attitude towards learning English in general. Responses from the questionnaire revealed that 82.50% of the students agreed that *the aim of English language teaching is to help students to communicate in English*. Interviewee A, in expressing views towards CLT, highlighted an interesting point by stating that “*you can learn a language for many years but if you only read books, watch TV or listen to others speak the language, you will never be good enough*”. Most of the participants expressed support for CLT as they believed that it was the best way to learn a foreign language; this was evident from the conducted interviews.

Similarly to the findings of this study, some studies showed the same results in spite of the different geographical area, such as the study by Gamble et al. (2013), which revealed that university students in Japan have a positive attitude towards CLT.

The participants’ reasons for their positive attitudes towards CLT were based on the advantages of CLT features. The findings revealed that some aspects of CLT were very important and beneficial, and some others were less important points.

The Roles of the Teachers and the Students

The most essential point that all the participants agreed on was the importance of students' and teachers' roles. The teacher's role should be as an advisor in the class, and the students should be the centre of teaching and their role should be communicators, as is shown 75% of the students revealed that *the teacher should act as a guide in teaching English*. In addition. Similarly, interviewee E stated that the teacher can be "*a prompter, and support students to encourage them to speak*". Regarding the role of the students, the questionnaire results showed that around 67.5% agreed that *CLT is a student-centred approach*. Almost all of the interviewees agreed that students need to communicate and interact in class in order to learn the language.

Based on the responses from both the questionnaire and the interviews, the CLT approach was seen as a positive, successful, purposeful and active method of teaching.

Students' Motivation

Students' motivation was seen as important as the students' and teachers' roles according to the participants. As interviewee A stated, the success of CLT depends on the way CLT motivates students, and the rest of the interviewees shared a similar opinion by stating that this method helps students to be self-managed and active learners in class. As interviewee C stated, CLT activities "*help students to be more competent in speaking especially in Kurdistan is to help students to be more fluent*". Similarly, as Guariento and Morley (2001) stated that the majority of students and teachers demonstrated that CLT motivates students and helps them to achieve better performance in oral skills.

Communicative Competence

Another essential point for the participants is communicative competence as 75% agreed that *communicative competence is important to learn a language*. Most of the interviewees agreed that CLT enhances students' communicative competence and provides learners with the opportunity to use the language in meaningful situations. According to interviewee D, CLT is one of the effective ways of language teaching "*which aims to enhance students' communicative competence*".

Fluency over Accuracy

Some of the participants mentioned fluency as an advantage of CLT. Interviewees E and D stated that one of the main advantages of CLT is the emphasis on fluency over accuracy. As interviewee D asserted, the benefit of CLT "*is how to speak English language properly and fluently because*

learning the language means how to communicate". Similarly, 72.5% of the students agreed that fluency is the basis of CLT activities.

Error Correction

Error correction and group works were considered as the least important aspects of CLT by the participants, who also reported that making errors is natural.

Do students think that authentic materials should be used by teachers in English classes?

Richards (2006) argues that authentic materials allow the personalisation of the materials in order to keep students engaged in the class. The data from the interviews supported this idea as interviewee E stated that the use of authentic materials enhances learners' motivation and makes students more interested in class. This was reinforced by the data obtained from the questionnaires which showed that the majority of students supported the idea that communicative activities developed their communicative skills. In line with this, the majority of the students agreed that the activities: *group discussion, speaking in pairs, storytelling in front of the class and describing a picture to a partner*, are considered to be communicative activities. Furthermore, Interviewee F stated that authentic materials are suitable for use by Kurdish students in order to learn real life language because the only place where Kurdish students practice the target language is inside the classroom.

What are the challenges that Kurdish students face when they are taught through the CLT method?

Most of the participants expressed that implementing CLT in the classroom requires several prerequisites to support the teaching process such as facilities, active students and qualified teachers. The responses stated that *teacher's lack of knowledge, level of students, class size, lack of authentic materials and grammar based exams* could hinder the implementation of CLT. These challenges are discussed below in the order of their importance according to the students.

Grammar-based Examinations

Grammar-based examinations were considered to be the most significant obstacle that impedes the successful implementation of CLT practices in English teaching in Kurdistan. Almost all of the interviewees and most of the respondents of the questionnaire 77.5% thought that grammar-based exams were a major challenge for students and had a negative impact on the use of CLT. According to interviewee E "*one of the difficulties would*

be examination because the examination in Kurdistan are based on the grammar rather than assessing students". The interviewees' answers demonstrated that the curriculum and the final assessments were mismatched in the Kurdish setting. Therefore, English classes led by grammar-based examinations allowed little, if any, room for communication.

It is important to see that the participants showed a genuine interest in creating positive changes in the English teaching system in Kurdistan. In order to overcome this challenge, interviewee C asserted that communicative classes should be evaluated by assessing communicative skills in exams.

English Proficiency Level of Students

The participants also stated that students' different level of English language competence is a very important barrier to implementing CLT. As interviewee B stated, "*students have very different levels of education, some are really good and others are not*". Although the level of Kurdish students seems to be better at English than many countries where English is not a first language, three interviewees expressed their concerns regarding the ability of students to speak in the target language stating that some Kurdish students have poor communicative abilities. Therefore, some students maybe resistant to contributing and participating in communicative class activities. As the questionnaire results revealed, 60% of the participants identified the students' passive style of learning as a serious challenge in class.

Furthermore, most of the students 70% agreed that *teacher's lack of knowledge about the target language culture*, is a major obstacle. According to Bax (2003), it is important to take context into consideration. As argued by most of the interview participants, the context and culture of Kurdistan is different from Western countries. Classes in Kurdistan are mostly teacher-centred, and are crowded with students. In fact, Kurdish students are expected to stay silent and listen to the teacher and only answer teacher's questions. Interviewee E stated that "*students are accustomed to being silent in the class and obeying the teacher, so if suddenly they applied this approach, the students might keep silent*".

Large Class Size

Having large classes is one of the key problems in the Kurdish educational system in general. Accordingly, almost all of the interview data revealed that overcrowded classes are a serious concern in the use of CLT and that this problem should be tackled. Furthermore, interviewee E, in expressing views about class size in CLT, highlighted an interesting point indicating that, in large classes, "*in Kurdistan, the number of students is great so the students will not have enough time to contribute or to participate and share their ideas*". Regarding this obstacle, all of the

participants suggested the same solution which is to break up the class into smaller groups in order to apply CLT methods effectively.

Teacher's Lack Knowledge

Regarding problems that teachers face, some of the participants identified lack of trained teachers as a barrier because the teachers who lack skills are not able to implement CLT in a successful way. Therefore, it might be important that teachers should be fully aware of all the CLT principles in order to successfully provide communicative teaching. In line with this, Interviewee F asserted that “*before implementing such methods in any country, the teachers should be trained on how they can deliver their lessons and how the students must be treated*”.

Lack of Authentic Materials and the Time Factor

Lack of authentic materials and the time factor were reported as the least important barrier that prevents the proper utilisation of CLT in Kurdistan. As the lesson might not last more than 45 minutes, which might pose some difficulties for the teachers when delivering a communicative class.

Conclusion

This research aimed to explore the perceptions of English learners of the use of CLT in the Kurdish context within a university in Kurdistan. There are three research questions which need to be answered to address the aim of this research study. It is worth mentioning that the aims were successfully achieved, as the researcher gathered enough data to answer all of the three research questions. The findings of this research revealed that the majority of the students have favourable and positive attitude towards CLT approach and indicated that most of the students are in favour of the use of authentic materials in class. Furthermore, the results of this study revealed that there were a range of constraints that impede the implementation of CLT in Kurdistan and challenges that face teachers and students in English classes. However, these challenges can be overcome by reducing class size, training teachers, providing authentic materials and changing the system of examination.

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