

INTRODUCING THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH IN LIBYA: RESISTANCE AND CONFLICT

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Abstract

Although communicative language teaching (CLT) is well recognized as the leading theoretical and the most effective model in English language teaching (ELT), it is still uncertain how culturally suitable it is regarding Non-Western cultures of teaching and learning, including Libyan-Arabic culture. Any teaching methodology is only effective to the extent that teachers and students are willing and able to accept and apply it with trust and optimism, and whether it is accepted or not is largely determined by a set of circumstances and beliefs that these teachers and students have been surrounded by and socialised into.

Many Libyan teachers and students of English do not seem to have gone through any fundamental changes in their perception of efficient language instruction and in their daily teaching and learning practices. Based on my experience as a language educator in several Libyan universities, and on my professional thinking, I argue that CLT has not received widespread enthusiasm, has failed to make the expected impact on ELT and the traditional approach is still prevalent in many Libyan foreign language classrooms. There is a host of constraints on the adoption of CLT in the Libyan context which includes, among others, beliefs about the roles of teachers and students, teachers' lack of language proficiency and sociolinguistic competence, examination pressure, and cultural teaching and learning styles.

This article examines how these beliefs, pedagogy, and structures which have developed in the Libyan English language classroom culture limit pedagogical change advocated by foreign and Libyan education policy makers. The issues raised serve to acquaint the reader with some of the complexities of pedagogical change in Libya. The issues could also be of significance and relevance to other countries with a similar educational system and linguistic situation.

The paper concludes with highlighting the need for taking attentively eclectic approach and making well-informed pedagogical options that stem from a deep understanding of the cultural and educational values that influence language learning and teaching styles.

1. INTRODUCTION

English is classified as a key to promoting international relations, attaining scientific knowledge and technological expertise, fostering economic progress, and participating in international competition. The growing need for proficient users of English in this era of globalization has had a major influence on English Language Teaching (henceforth ELT) in Libya. Among a number of changes aimed at improving the quality of ELT, teachers of English have been encouraged to adopt a communicative language teaching (henceforth CLT) approach (Orafi & Borg, 2009).

To facilitate the implementation of CLT in Libya, along with the introduction of local training programs, some university teachers of English have also been sent abroad, specially to the English-speaking West, for further training. Furthermore, some Libyan universities have signed agreements to joint academic programs with British universities to conduct graduate degrees in the area of ELT (Gewider, 2012). For example, Misurata university signed a cooperative agreement with Nottingham Trent university leads to an MA in the field of language teaching. At the request of the Libyan government and increasingly through foreign initiatives, British teachers acted as curriculum consultants and developers, English teachers, and teacher trainers at some university language centers. For example, The Libyan English Teaching in Universities Project (LETUP) was introduced in 2006 by the Ministry of Higher Education and run-in partnership with British Council Libya. LETUP was active in several universities in Libya, where English language skills were relatively low, and there is a shortage of Libyan English language teachers (Najeeb & Eldokali, n. d). Nottingham Trent university also started collaborative post graduate programs in partnership with Misurata university in the fields of English language Teaching and Information Technology. Although all of these joint programs have been suspended recently due to the current instability of the country, many Libyan education policy makers, one can safely say, are inclined to adopt CLT as the “appropriate” approach for Libyan foreign language

classrooms, at least in its theoretical representation in official curriculum documents.

However, it should be mentioned that CLT is based on Western views of language teaching. It is still uncertain how culturally suitable it is regarding Non-Western cultures of teaching and learning (Vaezi, & Abbaspour, 2014; Ellis, 1996), including Libyan-Arabic culture. Although many authors claim that the communicative approach is the matchless way of training English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) learner and the most efficient kind of training for those who need to be a part of the target culture, this may not hold true in all contexts. In other words, the communicative approach (CA) may not meet the needs of others in non-English speaking countries, who are learning English for a different purpose and who have no hope of ever visiting or integrating into an English-speaking country and no desire to adopt English culture. In other words, motivation for learning English in some contexts is not integrative and it is just pragmatic and job orientated. In regard to this issue, Ellis (1996) maintains that "The idea that Western culture has discovered a language teaching methodology with universal application, and that communicative competence shares the same priority in every society, may be just such an assumption" (p. 216).

Any teaching methodology is only effective to the extent that teachers and students are willing and able to accept and apply it with trust and optimism, and whether it is accepted or not is largely determined by a set of circumstances and beliefs that these teachers and students have been surrounded by and socialised into (Ozsevik, Z. 2010). Although educational policies and school curricula moved toward CLT in EFL contexts, authors have identified a gap between policy and practice (Hayes, 2009). (Littlewood, 2007; Nunan, 2003). The implementation of CLT has met obstacles and conflicts in EFL classrooms in Libya (Orafi, 2013). Various research studies (e.g., Altaieb, 2013; Orafi, 2013; Orafi and Borg, 2009) testified that instruction in EFL classrooms was still based on the traditional approach. In other words, despite the efforts devoted, many Libyan teachers and learners of English do not seem to have gone through any original changes in their perception of successful language education and in their classroom routines. That is, CLT has not received pervasive support and the traditional approach is still prevailing in many classrooms (Orafi and Borg 2011). Based on their findings, these researchers revealed that although many Libyan instructors announce to

be adherents of CLT, in reality, there has been opposition to CLT since its very beginning.

This article examines how the beliefs, pedagogy, and structures that have developed in the Libyan English language classroom culture limit pedagogical change advocated by foreign and Libyan change agents. The issues raised serve to acquaint the reader with some of the complexities of pedagogical change in Libya. The issues could also be of significance and relevance to other countries with a similar educational system and linguistic situation. This speculation is partly motivated by my thorough discussions with colleagues around the country and based on my own observations and perceptions of the educational context in this country. Before the differences between CLT and the traditional Libyan culture of learning can be examined, a brief description of the history and tenets of CLT is needed.

2. COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

Hymes (1972), was among the first to coin the term communicative competence, in response to the theory of the linguist Noam Chomsky "linguistic competence" (Chomsky 1957). Hymes (1972) argues that in addition to linguistic competence, one also needed notions of sociolinguistic competence. He maintains that "the ability to speak competently not only entails knowing the grammatical rules of a language, but also knowing what to say to whom in what circumstances and how to say it" (p. 10).

Many applied linguists embraced Hymes' term and vision, and his conception of communicative competence, in reaction to grammar translation and audio-lingual approaches to language pedagogy. Thus, Hymes notions became part of the theoretical justification for the new communicative language teaching approach and new teaching materials that were compatible with communication as the goal of second or foreign language teaching.

According to Canale and Swain (1980), communicative competence has four dimensions which are grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic. The most obvious characteristic of CLT is that "almost everything that is done with a communicative intent" (Larsen-Freeman, 1986, p. 132). Students use the language a good deal through communicative activities such as games, role plays, and problem-solving tasks.

Some of the characters of the communicative approach are (1) focus on use and appropriateness rather than simply on language form and correctness, (2) a tendency to prioritize fluency over accuracy (3) communicative tasks are achieved through the language rather than simply exercises on the language, and (4) an emphasis is placed on student initiative and interaction, rather than simply on teacher-centred direction (Richards and Rodgers 1986).

As many Libyan school teachers of English can attest, such essential features of language classroom are not easy to create in our schools. There is a host of constraints on the adoption of CLT in the Libyan context which includes, among several others, beliefs about the roles of teachers and students, teachers' lack of language proficiency and sociolinguistic competence, examination pressure, and cultural teaching and learning styles. The following section examines how each of these beliefs, pedagogy, and structures which have developed in the Libyan English language classroom culture limit pedagogical change advocated by foreign and Libyan change agents.

3. TRADITIONAL LEARNING AND TEACHING STYLES

3.1 The role of Libyan teachers of EFL

The teacher in Arabic schools, as the main repository of knowledge, has authority over classroom discussions and students' behavior. Moreover, he/she is supposed to represent the accepted social-behavioral model of educator who is responsible for developing the values and the character of his/her students. One possible explanation of this relationship between teachers and students might be the theocratic roots of Arabic-Islamic culture. Islam holds a deep reverence for the importance of knowledge and considers learning to be the highest religious activity (Barakat, 1993; Cook, 1999).

The impact of this profound "respect" or "alienation" between students and teachers is the tendency among students in Arab schools to adopt a receptive or passive role in typical teacher-centered classrooms, and to look to the teachers to provide the information needed to successfully pass the course. This alienation between teachers and students creates an atmosphere of high tension and anxiety. Based on these values and practices, Libyan language teachers' role is obviously different from CLA teachers. They are guides for students' proper

upbringing as well as the knowledge transmitters and students are the receivers (Rubenstein, 2006).

In terms of the tasks they perform in language classes, CLT emphasizes the process of communication and leads teachers to roles different from the traditional approach. The role of the CLA teacher is to facilitate the acquisition of competence in performing communicative functions in the target language. CLT teachers offer enticement and experience and have no direct control over students. By contrast, Libyan teachers naturally play a key role in the whole learning process and have direct control over students because they are the main source of language knowledge. These values and perceived roles of Libyan teachers are so embedded that they may become an obstacle to adopting a new methodology.

3.2 Incompetence of Teachers

The great demands communicative approach places upon the teacher and the lack of enough properly trained teachers is another major drawback and an obstacle to teaching English communicatively in Libya. Changing teaching methods requires adequate language proficiency and target language cultural knowledge, experience with creating materials and exercises which most of the Libyan teachers lack (Jha, 2014; Elabbar, 2011; Orafi & Borg, 2009). In CLA, teaching contents are not sequential in that they are based on structure complexity or level of difficulty but rather on themes, functions and meanings (Hu, 2002). Thus, lessons tend to be less predictable; teachers have to be ready to listen to what learners say and not just how they say it, and to interact with them in as genuine as possible; they have to use a wider range of communicative skills than in the traditional teacher-dominated classroom. These features of CLA require competent and professional language teachers.

In Libya, there is no standard for ensuring the quality of teachers except that they are B.A holders from one of those English Education programs (Jha, 2013). This is the reason why the proficiency in English of many of them and ability to teach are far from satisfactory. According to many researchers (e.g., Pathan & Al-Dersi, 2013; Javid, Farooq & Gulzar, 2012; Orafi & Borg, 2009), English language teaching programs in Arab universities still fail to produce the desirable results, and the graduates' proficiency in English remains inadequate and below expectation. One

could safely assert that there is a mismatch between the expected quality of teachers and the reality.

3.3 Teaching Process

The cultural support of traditional pedagogy stems, at least partially, from attitudes to knowledge and the roles of the teacher and the student and teaching methodologies flow from the teacher-student relationship.

Memorization and rote learning play an important role in Arabic students' attitudes toward learning. Arabs have deep-rooted sensitivity and a special fascination with their classic poetry, metaphor and literature. In Arabic countries, children of eight or nine years can recite or sing from memory tens and sometimes hundreds of poetic lines. In this culture it is rewarding to the child to exhibit his/her memorization skills to admiring adults. In fact, this has influence even on how some Arab families may view their child's academic progress or relative lack thereof.

Today, many people and even some professors continue to believe that this (i.e., rote learning) is the best way to teach children. When Arab people say "instruction during childhood is like carving on a rock", instruction is referred to rote learning (Barakat, 1993). Arab children in elementary schools are seated in rows and receive explicit instructions in numbers, letters and characters. They participate only when asked to recite Arabic alphabet, multiplication tables or Arabic poems. Good performance is encouraged with high achievers readily acknowledged and awarded by their teachers.

3.4. Meaningless Exercises and Drills

Libya, as other Arab countries, is known for its traditional, teacher-centered, book-centered, grammar translation methods with preference to rote learning and memorization (Jha, 2013). This approach to learning a foreign language emphasizes decontextualized knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. It involves a heavy focus on grammatical rules, vocabulary memorization and translation of (mostly decontextualised) sentences. English lessons are conducted almost solely in Arabic, with little use of English. In a situation such as this one, students are hardly given any good, functional English language uses to model from.

In these classes, teachers rely on a certain textbook which is assigned by the ministry of education and it is the same one throughout the whole country (Orafi & Borg, 2009). An exclusive emphasis is placed on syntactic and morphological rules and other tiny linguistic details.

There is a great interest in the exact understanding of every single item, a little tolerance of ambiguity and a focus on discrete points and specific syntactic constructions.

These features reflect the typical Libyan classroom for learning English. Most of the interaction in the classroom is one way only: that is from the teacher to the students. There is almost no student initiative and little student-student interaction. There is no way that the traditional teacher-fronted language classroom can help learners practice the dynamic nature of genuine interaction in their target language.

These attitudes and practices contrast strongly with the CA which stresses that the student should first cope with the communicative task before being given the grammatical form. They conflict with CLT views on methodology, particularly as they do not appear to encourage what are now considered to be the more relevant goals of language learning, such as effective oral communication.

3.5 Students Resistance

Libyan students' attitude towards communicative activities is another barrier. It is not easy for them to accept CLT as they may find it hard to change their ways of learning, which are still practised and used in learning other subjects. This problem lies in their dependence on teachers' knowledge transmission rather than other ways of learning; for example, learning through cooperative activities. In addition, Libyan learners take learning seriously and tend to regard communicative activities as games for entertainment rather than a learning tool. The students tend to associate games and other communicative activities in class with entertainment exclusively and are sceptical of their value as learning tools.

Early from the start of their English learning, Libyan students do not reach academic satisfaction unless they have memorized what they have learned. The Arabic word for "memorize" (yahfadh) translated literally means "to keep safely," and literal recitation is a very common practice in EFL teaching. For most Libyan students, learning English means memorizing as many new English vocabulary words as possible and reciting as much of the textbook as possible after intensive reading. A learner belief that fluency can be achieved solely through such traditional means as translation, grammar application and rote memorisation can restrict his or her range of strategies.

3.6. Examinations

In addition to the influence of culture, Libyan education might also contribute to the students' learning style (Orafi & Borg, 2009; Jha, 2014). The highly centralized, national examination system is a powerful impediment to change in educational innovation. An obvious drawback in using the communicative approach is the fact that Libyan English teachers have as their primary responsibility the duty of preparing their students to pass public examinations. Tests and examinations are an important part of English teaching. They are frequently conducted in the forms of quizzes, midterm tests and finals. Even small amount of learning is measured by recurrent classroom tests. Only written-form examinations are an important mechanism for the identification of talent and a means of motivation for individual achievement. They have a strong influence on aims, content, teaching methodology and learning styles. Since the future of their students is in their hands, preparing them for the senior schools and universities by helping them score well on the national English examination must be the major focus of their teaching. These examinations are the crucial criterion of a student's academic future.

This pressures and nature of the traditional examination system and education pattern nurture the students' ways of learning English. Therefore, they commonly use the learning strategies that could prepare them for the discrete-point, structurally based English examinations. Student records in public examinations are treated by the community as the most important indicator of the quality of schools. Teachers and principals are rewarded according to how many students from each school succeed in the examinations and enrol at higher schools and universities. Such great social pressure pushes teachers to focus their attention on preparing their students for examinations. In reality, passing exams is the single most important aim of schooling, despite whatever is stated in the syllabus. Thus, teaching and learning for exams become the "guiding principle" of school life.

In addition, these grammar-based examinations do not normally test communicative skills. Reconsidered in this light, the Libyan teacher could be doing the student a wrong by focusing on communicative skills while the examination is testing linguistic skills. The contents of the national exams are on knowledge of the English language such verb tenses, sentence structures, punctuations, spellings and reading skills. Listening and speaking as communication skills are usually not tested. Thus, the

grammar-translation method has been very popular and effective in preparing for exams. This nationally mandated policy seems to be adopted because some decision-makers believe that communicatively oriented testing instruments are difficult and expensive to develop. With passing competency-based national exams as the sole purpose for students and their teachers, it is certainly understandable why the grammar translation method prevails.

3.7. Social Context for English Teaching and Learning

The social context should also be considered when discussing the appropriateness of CLT (Hayes, 2009). In Libya, English is regarded as a foreign language rather than a second language and CLT demands that learners have sufficient exposure to the target language which provides opportunities for language acquisition to occur. Resources other than school textbooks for EFL teaching (e.g., videotapes, English language books, newspapers and magazines) are very difficult to find in Libya (Jha, 2014). Native English speakers are not common among the teachers of EFL and Libyan teachers with near-native competence, as has been said previously, are scarce. Further, Native English speakers are not easily accessible by most students outside the classroom. The fact that the English language is not used in everyday social communication makes communication-based instructional materials lose their pedagogical value. The English language speaking environment thus is not conducive to learning, as Ellis (1996) explains, "Whereas ESL is integrative, in that it is designed to help individuals function in the community, EFL is a part of the school curriculum, and therefore subject to contextual factors such as support from the principal and the local community, government policy, etc." (p. 215).

It is not easy for Libyan language teachers to undertake radical changes to adopt CLT because of other social constraints. At the individual level, an important pragmatic support of the conventional approach to EFL teaching is that such an approach has been in place for a long time. Almost all Libyan English language inspectors, senior teachers and even education policy makers have been trained in it and they have professional and emotional commitments to its form and function. Many Libyans have learned to read and write, and to speak, with varying degrees of effectiveness, in English using the traditional approach to EFL.

Thousands of EFL teachers have been “successful”, according to their criteria, and are familiar with this approach (Jha, 2014).

4. CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to investigate the obstacles a communicative approach must overcome in Libyan foreign language classrooms. It explained how CLT may not succeed to make the expected effect on ELT in Libya partly because some of its most important principles and techniques conflict with expectations of teaching and learning that are deep embedded in the Arabic-Islamic Libyan culture of learning. Some of these difficulties are related to the approach itself while others are embedded in the past teaching and learning traditions. From the discussion of the role of Libyan teachers, learning styles, and social context, which have found to have conflicts with those rooted in CLT, it suggests that Western researchers and educators in the field need to reflect on the importance of considering the social context in deciding what counts as appropriate methodology and to value the knowledge, perspectives, and pedagogies of other non-Western cultures. However, it is necessary to emphasize that this paper is not claiming that such a change is impossible, impractical or undesirable. There is no reason to assume that teachers do not embrace CLT if they could come to realize that teaching English is not only teaching grammar and the true mastery of a language involves communicative competence.

Each educational system develops and functions in a cultural context, and educational practices and approaches are usually related to that context. To teach successfully in a system, one has to know what works for that system, and what is foreign to it. It is thus very important for Western EFL teachers to realise that the traditional approach in EFL teaching and learning in Libya, and in other Arab countries has strong historical, cultural, and economic supports or demands, It has some rationale, if not advantages, in the Libyan cultural context that are not necessarily obvious to Westerners since these reasons and benefits are not as relevant in a Western situation of second language teaching.

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