

## Iranian EFL Learners' Attitude towards Communicative Language Teaching

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### Abstract

Communicative language teaching (CLT) aims at developing learners' abilities to communicate in a second/foreign language. It represents a change of focus in language teaching from linguistic structure to communication skills. In recent decades, CLT has been accepted and used by many EFL teachers. In this regard, the attitudes of EFL learners play an influential role in their acceptance of the foreign language and the methodologies teachers use in academic contexts. The present study attempted to investigate the attitudes of Iranian EFL learners toward communicative language teaching in schools; the participants were 80 female high school students learning English as a subject matter in their schools. The findings obtained from this study revealed that the dominant methodology in Iran high schools in English teaching is grammar-based method, but EFL learners prefer communicative language teaching, they generally, agree on considering communicative aspect of the language equally as linguistic aspect. They desire interacting and communicating through English in classes.

**Keywords:** communicative language teaching, attitude, Iranian EFL learners

### INTRODUCTION

Communication is simply defined as a process in which a message is sent from senders to receivers. Technically, it is said that the sender encodes a message and the receiver decodes it (Thao, 2005). Modern language teaching and learning has emphasized the significance of refining communicative competence in second language (L2) learners (Canale & Swain, 1980).

Communicative competence is composed of four sub-competencies: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence (Canale, 1983). The first three involve knowledge of the language code, the socio-cultural constraints and rules guiding the use of the language code, and of the rules of discourse necessary to produce coherent and cohesive messages. Strategic competence, however, involves the ability to use problem-solving devices in an effort to overcome communication problems which is derived from lack of knowledge and ability in any of the other sub-competencies.

Communicative language teaching (CLT) is a noticeable theoretical model in English language teaching (ELT) and CLT is accepted by many applied linguists and teachers as one of the effective approaches (Karim, 2004). The main purpose of CLT is to develop learners' abilities to communicate in a second language context. It represents a change of focus in language teaching from linguistic structure to learners' need for developing communication skills (Chang, 2011).

Based on the above mentioned features, all of EFL learners require gaining mastery in communicative aspects of the language in order to learn and use their communicative and linguistic competence in the best way. In this regard, their own attitude about a foreign language and the way of teaching and learning that language cannot be denied. In most of the countries like Iran, English is included as a subject matter in schools, however, the final results in most of the cases are not satisfactory and students graduating from high school lack enough and desired competency after almost six years of language learning. Therefore, the present study aimed at investigating high school EFL learners toward communicative language teaching.

## **REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE**

The emergence of CLT occurred at the time when language teaching was looking for a change (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). Due to the unsatisfactory traditional syllabus that failed to facilitate learners' ability to use language for communication, linguists attempted to design a syllabus to achieve the communicative goals of language teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). Wilkins's (1976) notional syllabus had a significant impact on the development of CLT. To support the learners' communicative needs, Wilkins (1976) included communication function in a notional syllabus. Notions refer to concepts such as time, sequence, quantity, location, and frequency. Communicative functions refer to language functions such as requests, denials, offers, and complaints (Wilkins, 1981). Based on the notional syllabus, a communication language syllabus consisting of situations, language activities, language functions, notions, and language form was developed. As a result, the design of foreign language syllabus focused on a learner-centered and communication-oriented language instruction (Richards & Rodgers, 1986).

The very basic goal of any foreign language teaching is to enable learners to communicate through that language, and this is widely pursued in CLT approach that attempts to improve academic contexts in order to facilitate language learning and later using that language in their spoken and written communications. In this regard, developing meaning rather than grammatical structures is more influential. Given this, learning a foreign language is evaluated in terms of how well learners can use their communicative competence and can convey their intentions in the language.

However, every academic context is not able to apply communicative language teaching method. According to Carless (2004), since CLT was developed in ESL settings where English is not used outside classrooms, the EFL teachers struggled to adopt CLT in EFL environments where English is used only in the classrooms. In addition, the teachers

were concerned about how to evaluate the students' communicative competence. The problems the teachers faced include 1) lack of English environment and 2) lack of efficient assessment instruments. Most EFL teachers identify the lack of English environment as one of the limitations to practice CLT.

Rather than emphasizing the explicit explanation of grammatical rules, CLT pays less attention to the overt presentation of grammar (Brown, 2007). However, CLT does not exclude grammar. CLT suggests that grammatical structure might be better understood "within various functional categories" (Brown, 2007, p. 242). In CLT classes, both accuracy and fluency should be taken into consideration in language teaching, but the aim is to build fluency. However, fluency should not be built at the expense of clear communication (Brown, 2007).

According to Savignon and Wang (2003), with a major focus on developing learner ability to use language, appropriately communicative language teaching (CLT) contrasts sharply with established traditions that emphasize learner knowledge of formal features. Not surprisingly, innovations in various EFL contexts developed in consonance with the underpinnings of communicative language teaching have faced major challenges (see, for example, Anderson 1993; Bhatia 2003; Cheng 2002; Dam and Gabrielsen 1988; Li 1998; LoCastro 1996; Nunan 1993; Sato and Kleinsasser 1999; Savignon 2002, 2003; Yano 2003).

The origins of these challenges are multiple and include the teacher, the students, the educational system, and communicative language teaching itself (Li, 1998, as cited in Savignon & Wang, 2003). Dam and Gabrielsen (1988) found that the need for teachers to redefine their roles contributed more to difficulty in the implementation of task-based approaches than did resistance from learners. A study by Sato and Kleinsasser (1999) pointed to the inconsistency between teachers' perceptions of communicative language teaching and their actual in-class behavior. And Anderson (1993) reports that in addition to both teacher and learner resistance, the difficulties of implementing a meaning-based program include teachers' lack of communicative competence in English, the lack of adequate teacher preparation generally, and the multiple and excessive demands placed upon teachers. Nunan (1993) suggested that a mismatch between the teaching preferences of the teacher and the learning preferences of learners may be a source of difficulty.

Teachers take particular roles in the CLT approach. First, the teacher facilitates the communication process between all participants in the classroom. The teacher is also a co-communicator who engages in communicative activities with the students. In addition, the teacher acts as analyst, counselor, and group process manager (Richards & Rodgers, 1986).

Ghanbari and Ketabi (2011) conducted a research study, evaluating perceptions of Iranian pre-university teachers regarding the different components of this new curriculum, i.e. attitude, methodology, practice, etc. The findings of research study revealed that there are some stumbling blocks that seriously affect the aims of this

curriculum innovation to be fulfilled in Iran as an EFL context. These blocks involved: The lack of feasibility, triability, and compatibility of the new method with existing values and practices, lack of enough appropriate training and retraining courses, teachers' low confidence in the new approach, practical constraints, unsupportive school environment, and negative feedback from colleagues, school officials, students, state evaluation centers, etc.

Many other studies and researches have also shown that it is not that much easy for the teachers specially the EFL teachers to utilize CLT as an asset to reach the final goal of language teaching in their context with their students. Based on a study that assessed the attitudes of Hong Kong educators toward using CLT in the local context, Chau and Chung (1987) reported that teachers used CLT only sparingly because it required too much preparation time. A study conducted in Vietnam identified class size, grammar-based examination, and lack of exposure to authentic language as constraints on using CLT (Ellis; 1994).

Li's (1998) article on the cultural constraints in introducing the CLT in South Korea points to a number of Asian EFL countries where CLT has been used with limited success—China, Hong Kong, Japan, Vietnam, Pakistan, Singapore and the Philippines. A research by Gahin and Mayhill (2001) showed two roadblocks in the application of CLT in Egypt. First are extrinsic barriers covering economic factors which include low wages, lack of resources, and large classes without adequate facilities; pressure from parents, students, principals, and supervisors cause teachers to sacrifice an ideal CLT syllabus. Second are intrinsic barriers covering cultural factors which include passive-student traditions, negative-to-group-work attitudes, and influences of colleagues in other, teacher-dominated subjects.

Deckert (2004) found that the failure of the application of CLT in the United Arab Emirates was caused by excessive teacher talk and teacher and student perceptions about effective English teaching. Observations showed that excessive teacher talk in explaining to and correcting students causes them to miss opportunities to actively participate using English in communication.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. What are learners' attitudes toward present English practice in their classroom in Senior high school?
2. What are learners' attitudes toward desired instructional practice in senior high school?
3. What are learners' beliefs about English learning and teaching, in general?

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

The participants in this study included 80 female students. Their age ranged from 17 to 18. They had been studying English for about six years in high schools. An intact class (non-random) sampling was used to select the participants.

## Instrument

A pilot version of the questionnaire was developed and tested and the obtained reliability was 0.85. This preliminary version was then modified to its present form. The questionnaire includes three parts; the first part is related to learners' attitudes toward English practice in the classroom in Senior high school, this part includes 11 questions; the second part is related to learners' attitudes toward instructional practice in senior high school, this section includes 11 questions; the final section is related to learners' general beliefs about learning English that includes 21 questions.

## RESULTS

In the following section, the results obtained from data analysis are presented in tables; the tables include distribution of learners answers related to the questionnaire and results of one-sample t-test.

**Table 1.** Distribution of Leaners' Answers

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Present English Practice in classroom	80	3.29	0.41	0.46

**Table 2.** Results of One-sample t-test

	Test value= 3					
	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Present English Practice	14.49	79	0.000	0.65	0.56	0.74

Table 1 and 2 illustrate the distribution of the participants' answers to the first research question that deals with leaners' attitude toward the present teaching and learning conditions in their classes. Accordingly, the mean score is 3.29, and standard deviation is 0.41. Based on the findings in Table 2, the significance level is 0.000, t is 14.49, degree of freedom is 79; thus, it can be stated that EFL learners believe that grammar-based teaching is dominant in their high schools.

**Table 3.** Distribution of Leaners' Answers

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Desired Instructional practice	80	3.65	0.40	0.04

**Table 4.** Results of One-sample t-test

	Test value= 3					
	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Desired Instructional practice	6.26	79	0.000	0.29	0.19	0.38

Table 3 and 4 illustrate the distribution of the participants' answers to the second research question that deals with learners' attitude toward their desired teaching and learning conditions in their classes. Accordingly, the mean score is 3.65, and standard deviation is 0.40. Based on the findings in Table 4, the significance level is 0.000,  $t$  is 6.26, degree of freedom is 79; thus, it can be stated that EFL learners believe that although grammar-based teaching is dominant in their high schools, they prefer communicative language teaching to be applied by teachers in their classrooms. They wish to communicate and interact through English language.

**Table 5.** Distribution of Learners' Answers

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
General Beliefs about English Learning and Teaching	80	3.69	0.41	0.04

**Table 6.** Results of One-sample t-test

	Test value= 3					
	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
General Beliefs about English Learning and Teaching	14.77	79	0.000	0.69	0.59	0.78

Table 5 and 6 illustrate the distribution of the participants' answers to the third research question that deals with learners' attitude toward their desired teaching and learning conditions in their classes. Accordingly, the mean score is 3.69, and standard deviation is 0.41. Based on the findings in Table 6, the significance level is 0.000,  $t$  is 14.77, degree of freedom is 79; thus, it can be stated that EFL learners' general view is to provide language classes with communicative language teaching which is more useful and important for them. Accordingly, the effective way of language learning is talking and communicating.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

From learners' point of view, English teaching in their classes is mostly grammar-based and they often do sentence drilling and repetition. Teachers mostly use Persian language and they mainly explain grammatical rules. Learners are not required to talk too much in class. Teachers design the activities in classroom interactions and allow trial-and-error attempts to communicate. Teachers try to create conditions to use English in classes and correct errors. These are the major conditions occurred in English course in high schools. Based on the results, it can be concluded that the dominant methodology in Iran high schools is grammar-based and there are not enough opportunities to communicate in English in the classrooms.

However, considering the results related to the second research question, it can be stated that the desired conditions have not been accomplished yet for EFL learners in high schools. The results show that learners in high school do not prefer grammar-

focused methodologies, sentence drilling and repeating sentences uttered by the teacher. They do not like to talk Persian in English classes and spend great time in explaining and practicing grammar rules. They desire talking and interacting in English, they favorable methodology is communication-based teaching with opportunities to interact with classmates in English. They prefer great attention to be paid to communication rather than grammar. They desire to make trial-and error attempts to communicate in English and they like their teachers to create an atmosphere that encourage them to use English in class. These learners prefer teachers to correct their errors.

Considering the final research question, the obtained results revealed that learners generally agree that the effective way of English learning is not through practicing and memorizing grammatical rules and Persian language should not be used in classes for better understanding of the lessons. Teachers must correct grammatical and pronunciation errors of the learners. Effective way of language learning is by using language in learners' point of view. In learners' view, English is useful in getting a good job to the extent that they believe English education should begin in elementary school. Learning English is important for people in Iran. EFL learners wish to gain master like native speakers. Their general preference toward English learning is communicative language teaching.

The obtained results revealed that mostly language teaching in Iran high schools is grammar-based but EFL learners prefer to have communicative-based teaching in their classes; they believe that English learning is necessary for their personal and professional success and this can be accomplished well through using the language and interacting with their peers rather than practicing and memorizing grammatical rules. These rules must facilitate their communication not inhibiting EFL learners from interacting and making errors; errors need to be considered as source of learning and learners struggle to communicate and use the acquired and mastered rules. The lack of great communicative atmosphere in English classes leads high school students in Iran to attend private institutes for improving their language knowledge. These institutes are gaining their popularity among Iranian as much as before and people of different age groups and different educational background seem to find the solution in these institutes. They offer great opportunities for learners to learn, use and communicate in English. Unlike school, nearly all of the materials being used in these institutes provide learners with knowledge in language skills and pay equal attention to structures, pronunciation, spoken and written aspects of the language.

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