



The Effect of Using Communicative Language Teaching on Developing English Speaking and Listening Skills of Iranian Secondary School Students

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Abstract

This study attempts to measure the effect of the implementation of the communicative approach (CA) on the speaking and listening skills of Iranian third year secondary students. In order to address this issue, a quantitative study was conducted on two randomly selected intact classes at renowned Bentolhoda Secondary School. These two classes were assigned as experimental group (20 students) and control group (20 students). Various communicative activities were used with the experimental group while the control group was exposed to traditional, non-communicative, instruction using structurally based methods, such as the audio-lingual method. A pre-test was administered to both groups at the beginning of the experiment to ensure that they had the same language background. At the end of the experiment, a post-test was assigned to both groups to determine whether the CA had positively affected the students' speaking abilities. The experiment lasted approximately four weeks of the second term of 2016. A final self-report questionnaire invited participants to evaluate their views (positive or negative) regarding CLT. The form designed by the researcher consists of 16 items in the students' opinion. The students have to rate each item according to their opinions.

Keywords: communicative language teaching, speaking skills, listening skills, communicative activities

INTRODUCTION

Language is a hall-mark and the most enduring artifact of any community. It plays significant roles in social interaction and transmission of social values. Across the globe, language is the center of the educational enterprise. There are over a billion people learning English as a foreign language while over 750 million people have English as a second language. One of the most accepted trends in the field of foreign language teaching (FLT) is the communicative approach (CA) or *Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)*, which was introduced in the 1970s by a group of European Council experts. The basic principle that underlies the CA, is that "learners must learn not only to make

grammatically correct, propositional statements about the experiential world, but must also develop the ability to use language to get things done" (p. 25).

The goal of communicative approach lies in activities. Communicative activities are aimed at developing students' ability to use language to interact with people in real situations. Due to its noticeable effectiveness, the communicative syllabus has recently been adopted in Iran. In line with the previous discussion, the problem addressed by the present study will be confined to measuring the effect of the communicative language teaching implementation on the listening and speaking skills of some secondary female students in Pars Abad, Ardabil.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Methods of English language teaching define language in different ways. Some of them identify language with grammar and vocabulary. Others see language as an abstract set of semantic, syntactic, and lexical features. For some others, language is the ideas, concepts, and norms of social and linguistic behavior which are manifested in daily life (Richards, 1984). ELT methods before the emergence of the CA can be classified, as we shall see below, into traditional and pre-communicative methods. Each type claims to aim at helping students to communicate in the target language (Larsen-Freeman, 2004). However, some methods have succeeded to some extent in producing competent speakers whereas others have failed to achieve such goal.

The grammar-translation method, the audio-lingual method, and the direct method are examples of the traditional methods. The grammar-translation method, as Brown (2000) explains, makes an extensive use of the mother tongue with little concentration on the target language, focuses on forms and inflection of words, begins reading of difficult classical texts earlier, introduces vocabulary in the form of lists of isolated words, and emphasizes long elaborating explanations of grammar, with little attention to pronunciation. Richards and Rodgers (2006) have also described it as unable to help students to speak the target language fluently, frustrating the students and making few demands on the teachers. The opposition the grammar-translation method faced in the mid- and late nineteenth century laid the "foundations for the development of new ways of teaching languages" (ibid, p. 7) that grew "out of naturalistic principles of language learning, such as are seen in first language acquisition" (p. 11). This again led to the emergence of the 'natural methods', which resulted in what is known as the direct method.

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.

The communicative classroom has come to have characteristics that differentiate it from the non-communicative classroom. Basically, it is an environment where "features of genuine communication are evident" (Gullen, 1998, P.1). A communicative classroom according to Taylor (1983), requires an atmosphere which "encourage[s] learners to exercise their own initiative in communicating" and "in which communication can take place comfortably". Communicative activities have an important role in creating opportunities for students to use the language for communicative purposes. Generally, communicative activities are "fluency-based activities" (Trait, 2001, p.1) which encourage meaningful and purposeful interaction between students, where they bridge an information or opinion gaps, ask for or give real information, find out about the opinions of the other students, etc.(Gower et al.1995; & Harmer, 2003).

Research questions and hypotheses

This study aims at investigating the effect of communicative language teaching on the listening and speaking skills of Iranian third-year secondary school students. The research questions are:

1. Will the application of communicative language teaching have a positive effect on the speaking and listening skills of the third-year secondary school students?
2. What is the students' attitude toward learning English through communicative language teaching?

And our null hypotheses are:

1. Communicative language teaching doesn't affect the speaking and listening skill of Iranian secondary school students.
2. Students' attitudes toward CA strategy training are negative.

METHOD

In order to decide whether or not the hypotheses formulated could be rejected, the following steps were taken for the selection of participants, materials and procedures used in the study.

Participants

The population selected for this experimental study was third year students at the renowned Bentolhoda High School for girls in Pars Abad, Ardabil. For homogeneity of students, prior to research, an oxford placement test as a proficiency test was given to the students and the participants of the study were selected based on the results of the proficiency test. Forty students in the intermediate level were selected for this study. Finally, based on their scores, the participants of the study were divided into two groups randomly; one experimental group and one control group. Both groups consisted of a total number of 40 students: 20 in experimental groups and 20 in control group.

Instruments

Oxford Placement Test

Oxford Placement Test was used in this study in order to homogenize participants according to their level of language proficiency; the test contained 60 multiple choice items and one paragraph of writing from Oxford Placement Test (2001). The participants was given sample time to answer the questions.

Pre-test, Post-test

The study involved a pre-test and a post-test, which covered the listening and speaking skill. The tests were designed according to: (a) the CA principles; (b) the related literature, particularly procedures of similar studies; and (c) the textbooks of students.

The speaking test targeted the following sub-skills: (1) discourse management: coherence and cohesion devices by reading about a given situation then choosing the best response orally; (2) making the best choices for real-life situations by providing contextually appropriate responses orally after reading four personalized situations which are described in a few sentences and end with a question; (3) pronouncing words correctly and with appropriate intonation; and (4) engaging in an interview with the examiner.

The listening test targeted the following sub-skills: (1) understanding functions: listening for specific information (focusing on meaning rather than form) through multiple choice items in order to observe the students' ability to comprehend a short talk; (2) sound discrimination and recognition of phoneme sequences by asking the students whether the pronounced words are the same or different and by circling the words they hear; and (3) guessing meaning from context by listening to short conversations and choosing the correct definition of the underlined words.

The Attitude Questionnaire

At the end of the course a final self-report questionnaire invited participants to evaluate their views (positive or negative) regarding CLT. The form designed by the researcher consists of 16 items in the students' opinion with five rating scales. The students have to rate each item according to their opinions. The questionnaire is adapted from Saezhong (2005).

Procedures

The independent variable used in this study consisted of two conditions: an experimental condition in which the students practiced listening and speaking skills according to the principles of the communicative approach (CA) and a control condition in which the students practiced listening and speaking skills according to the traditional methods. Both groups had the same number of hours of instruction, which were two sessions weekly, one hour and thirty minutes each session.

The treatment lasted for 8 sessions: 2 sessions a week and each session lasted for one hour and thirty minutes. The dependent variable was the listening and speaking skills of both groups. Based on Oxford Placement Test 40 students in the intermediate level were selected for this study and the participants were divided in two groups randomly; one experimental group and one control group. Then a pre-test was administered to both groups at the same time at the beginning of the course. At the end of the experiment, a post-test was administered to both groups and the results were compared in these two groups after getting Mann-whitney test results in order to find out the effect of CLT on the English learning of students. Pretest and posttest were the same. Then at the end of the study a questionnaire was given to students in order to find their attitudes about learning and teaching through communicative language teaching.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The main aim of this study was to explore whether an experimental application of the CA could positively affect third-year secondary students' overall listening and speaking skills. In this chapter, I will discuss the research questions and hypotheses related to this problem. The mean scores of both the experimental and control group will be used to verify or reject the research hypotheses. In addition, a *t*-test and Mann-Whitney Test will be applied to see whether the differences were significant or not. The computer program called SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) will be used since it has been admitted by many researchers in the field as being the best program used for the analysis of results.

Testing the hypotheses and answering the research questions

In order to measure the effect of the CA on the students' listening and speaking skills, a number of questions were raise. To answer these questions, this section will present the results of the statistical analyses of the experimental and the control group's pre-test and post-test and attitude questionnaire, as well as Mann-Whitney Test.

Statistical analysis of the EG's and CG's pre-tests

In order to find out an answer to the main research question experimental and control groups' pre-tests will have to be analyzed first. The scores obtained by both groups were computed to verify the experimental and control groups pre-test's mean, median, variance, standard deviation, maximum, minimum and range. The results are shown in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1. Descriptive analysis of the experimental group's pre-test

	N	Mean	Median	Variance	SD	Minimum	Maximum	Range
Experimental Group	20	10.3500	10.5000	6.766	2.60111	7.00	15.00	8.00

Table 2. escriptive analysis of the control group's pre-test

	N	Mean	Median	Variance	SD	Minimum	Maximum	Range
Control Group	20	10.0500	10.0000	6.366	2.52305	7.00	15.00	8.00

The above table shows descriptive analysis of the control group's pre-test. Much evidence can be illustrated through the following figure which clearly shows the level of experimental and control groups in the pre-test.

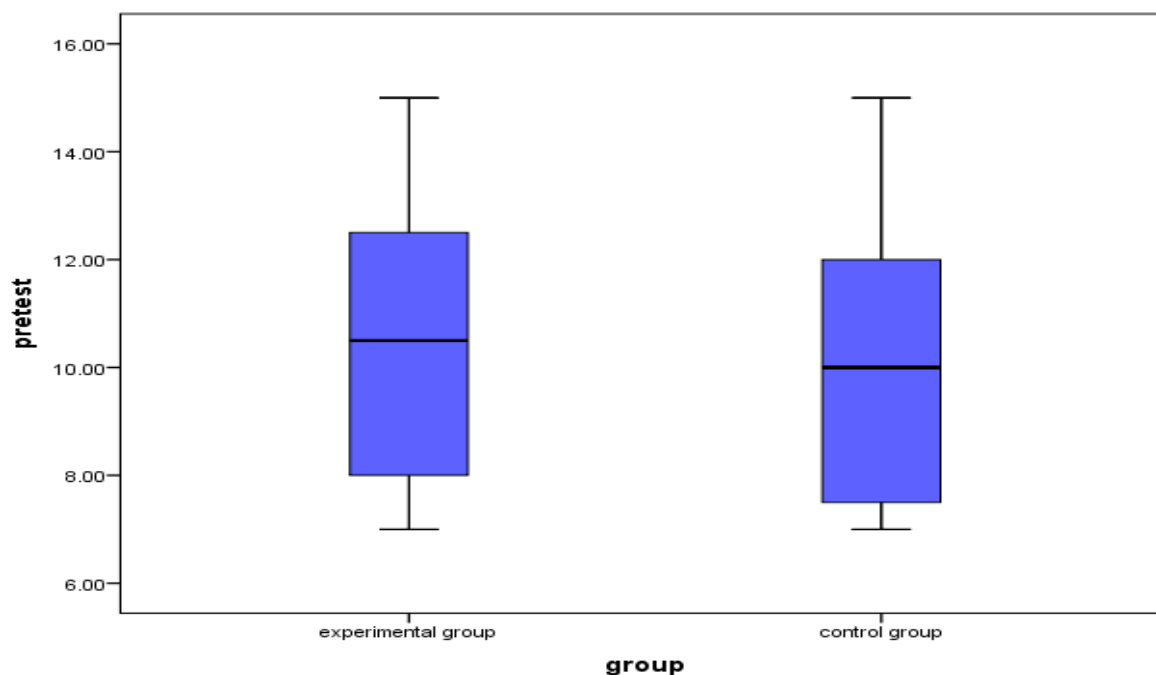


Figure 3. Pre-Test of Experimental Group and Control Group

Furthermore, the pre-test results for both groups did not reveal any statistically significant difference between the two groups. This means that before the application of the experiment they both had nearly similar listening and speaking levels. That is to say, they had the same language background.

Statistical analysis of EG's and CG's post-tests

In this section the scores obtained by the participants of both experimental and control groups in the post-test were computed. The data of post-test for both groups are shown in table 3 and 4 in the following.

Table 3. Descriptive analysis of the experimental group's post-test

	N	Mean	Median	Variance	SD	Minimum	Maximum	Range
Experimental Group	20	15.6000	15.5000	4.147	2.03651	12.00	20.00	8.00

Table 4. Descriptive analysis of the control group's post-test

	N	Mean	Median	Variance	SD	Minimum	Maximum	Range
Control Group	20	10.3000	10.0000	5.589	2.36421	6.00	14.00	8.00

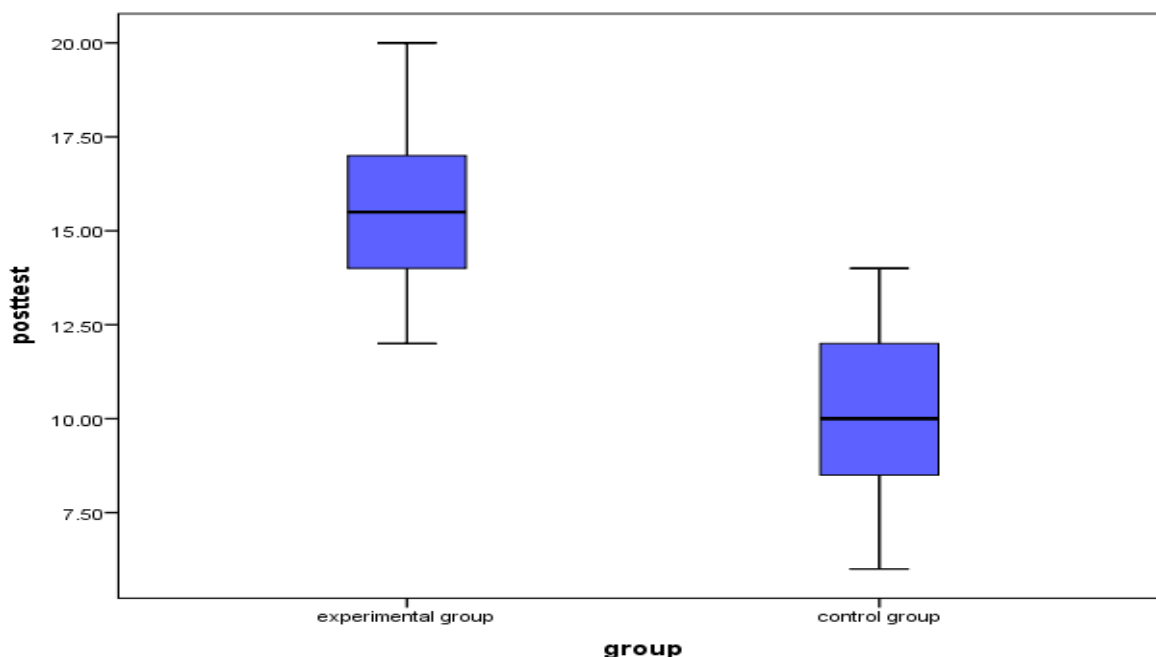


Figure 4. Post-test of Experimental Group and Control Group

Based on the results of the present study, there was no statistically significant difference between the control groups' pre-test and post-test.

Statistical analysis of the differences between EG's and CG's

In order to find out the positive or negative effect of the communicative approach it is necessary to analyze the differences between the results of experimental group and control group's pre-tests and post-tests. The following table will show the descriptive analysis of the differences between experimental and control group's pre and posttests.

Table 5. Descriptive analysis of the differences between experimental and control groups

	N	Mean	Median	Variance	SD	Minimum	Maximum	Range
Experimental Group	20	5.2500	5.0000	1.566	1.25132	3.00	7.00	4.00
Control Group	20	0.2500	0.5000	1.145	1.06992	-1.00	2.00	3.00

However, to see whether this differences between the experimental and control group was significant or not a test of normality was used. The following table will test the normality of differences between both experimental group and control group.

Table 6. Test of Normality for differences between experimental and control groups

		Tests of Normality					
		Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
Group		Statistic	Df	Sig.	Statistic	Df	Sig.
Difference	experimental group	.179	20	.092	.914	20	.078
	control group	.258	20	.001	.830	20	.002

As table 6 shows, for testing the normality of differences between two groups two model of testing was used, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk. As table above indicate, in the experimental group the score of significance was equal $0.092 > 0.05$. Because this score is above 0.05, so we can accept the normality of this data.

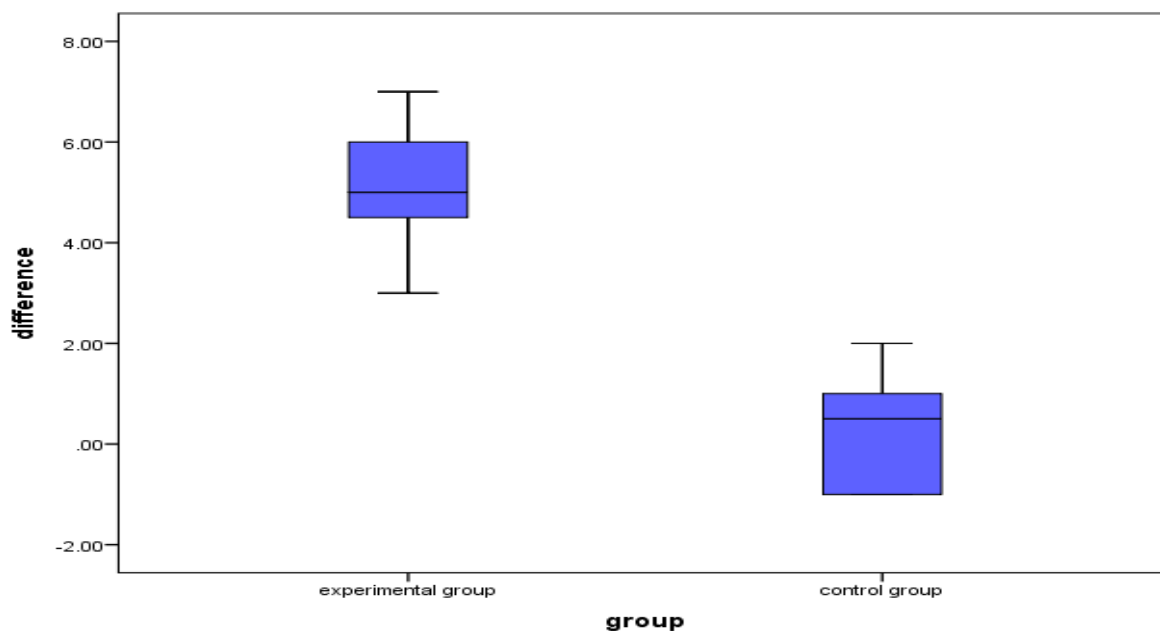


Figure 5. The Differences of Experimental Group and Control Group

Much evidence can be illustrated through the following table, which shows the Mann-Witney test value and whether it is statistically significant or not. The result of Spss software for this test is as follows.

Table 7. The results of Mann-Whitney Test

Test Statistics	
	Difference
Mann-Whitney U	.000
Wilcoxon W	210.000
Z	-5.468
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Exact Sig. [2*(1-tailed Sig.)]	.000 ^b

There is significant difference between two experimental and control groups. This is proof that the experimental group outdid the control group with a statistically significant difference. Hence, it can be said that the CA had a strong positive effect on the students' listening and speaking skills. Thus, the null hypothesis, which stated that: "the CA had a negative effect on the students' listening and speaking skills", was not supported because results showed a significant difference between the experimental group and the control one.

The statistical analysis of EG's attitude questionnaire

This section tries to answer to second questions of research, which is "What is the students' attitude toward learning English through communicative language teaching?" In order to find out the students attitudes toward the application of communicative approach in order to learn English, a questionnaire with 16 questions was given to the students at the end of experiment. The participants of experimental group fill this questionnaire.

Table 8. The descriptive statistics of EG's attitude questionnaire

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Attitude	20	81.25	100.00	93.5625	4.37312
Valid N (listwise)	20				

The following figure clearly indicates the degree of accession of the experimental group from the application of communicative approach.

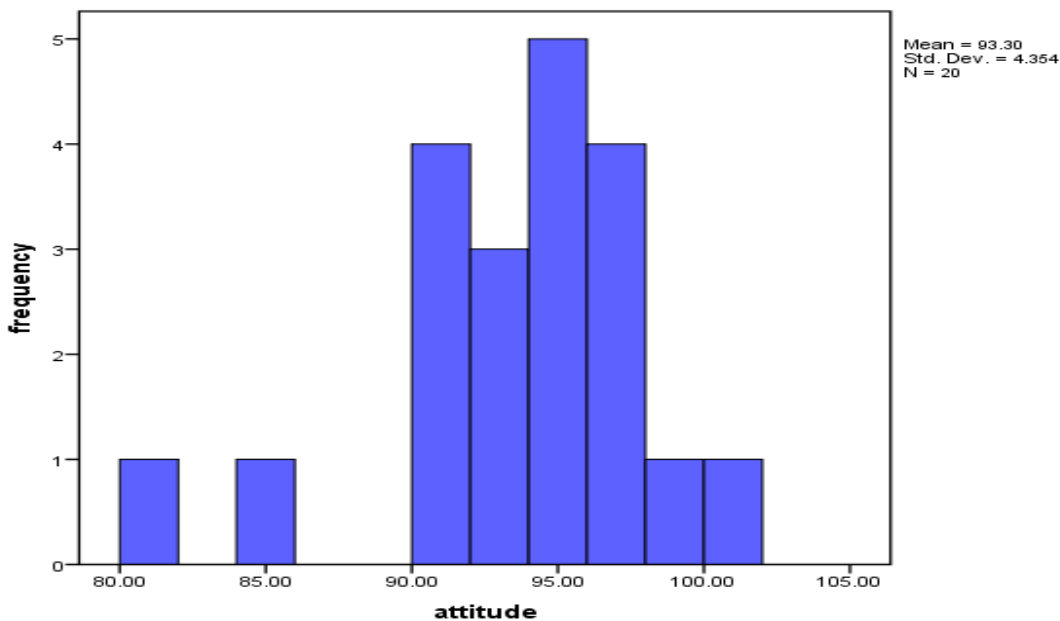


Figure 6. The frequency of experimental group's attitude.

As the figure 6 clearly indicates the participant had positive attitude toward learning English through communicative approach. For testing the reliability of attitude questionnaire, the Cronbach's Alpha was used. The next table will indicate the extent of reliability.

Table 9. The reliability statistics of attitude questionnaire

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.736	16

In the Table 9, the result of Spss software for the reliability of attitude questionnaire by Cronbach's Alpha was 0.736. Because the score of Cronbach's Alpha was plus 0.736, so

the questionnaire was reliable. According to these results the null hypothesis of "Students' attitudes toward CA strategy training are negative" is completely rejected because results showed that the participant had positive attitude toward learning through communicative approach.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The main finding of the analysis shown in Tables indicated a positive answer to the major question of the study. It was found that the CA had a positive effect on the students' listening and speaking skills. This was proved through the higher mean scores that the experimental group obtained in the post-test. Specifically, the experimental group's performance was more differentiated than that of the control group in the post-test. Several pedagogical implications emerged from the results of the present study. To begin with, the study could be an attempt to contribute to the Iranian educational reform process, encouraging an effective implementation of the CA in Iran schools. In light of these results, the following recommendations were made: (1) that a shift should be made from non-communicative to communicative ELT; (2) that educational policy-makers should consider the applicability of the CA in the Iran context; (3) that EFL teachers should receive in-service training in applying CA principles; (4) that students should be encouraged to speak the target language with their colleagues; and (5) that local ELT textbook writers should work along communicative.

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