

TEACHING ENGLISH TO SPEAKERS OF OTHER LANGUAGES – A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF APPROACHES, METHODS AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

This paper critically examines how teaching English with the “communicative approach” is better than grammar and translation method. Why do administrators love communicative approach? Market research says people want to speak English fluently to look confident and important. People want to learn English faster and that’s why emphasis on communication comes with many drawbacks as it ignores the grammatical rules required in academic and other situations. The positive side of Communicative approach is that it lays importance on pattern; and sensitivity towards pattern in language acquisition is very helpful.

In Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) teachers belong to various linguistic backgrounds. In KSA people speak Arabic of various shades. In fact, the progress of English learning of Saudi students should have been spectacular with Arabic speaking Egyptian, Sudanese and Moroccan teachers through bilingual methods but the expected learning outcome has not been achieved. Many of our students see learning English as Pennycook says, “an unpleasant but sadly necessary occupation” (Harmer, page 5).

It is always assumed that education is very boring and the ESL teachers like other teachers in other departments have the onus of making classes interactive and vibrant. It is also said that teacher-centred education is a traditional method which is one-sided because students remain passive. In order to have a vibrant class there is more and more focus on learner-centred education which requires students to learn and apply with small intervention and support from the teacher. However, learner-centred approach has many challenges because it works best in small classes or in an environment where learners have geared up themselves to learn and take the challenge to learn. It is noted that Olsen and Kagan’s collaborative approach or team-based learning is quite successful in handling learning in large classes.

This study is a descriptive research of the mixed results of various approaches and methods. In this paper, I will talk about the best practices like how the Think/pair/share method in a collaborative manner had shown some success in language learning through participation among students, and also helped in finding the reasons of poor performance of students in language learning classes.

Keywords: learning strategies, group work, communicative approach, audiolingual approach, collaborative approach, teacher-centred approach, student-centred approach

Introduction:

In Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) people speak Arabic and though there are millions of immigrants who populate all sectors of Saudi economy, the Saudis do not need to learn English. English is being taught to students to keep pace with the world, to incorporate advanced knowledge and in the spread of Islam and Islamic culture (Badawood and Elyas, 2016). The general expectation is that since the immigrant is employed in the services sector, they are required to learn Arabic to serve better. This expectation also spills over into the education sector where the immigrant teacher must speak in Arabic. However, English cannot be taught through Arabic or any other language because language is always learnt through application and interactions.

In the area of ESL/EFL numerous educational models and practices are being adopted and modified to teach English to speakers of other languages. The communicative language approach which is very popular these days discourages the use of L1. This strategy is very popular, through practice and application in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia. But in those countries the learners get to apply the language outside their homes which is not the case in Saudi Arabia. In KSA learners can practice English only in class because outside the class and at home there is no need to speak in English. These models and practices have been accepted and followed globally, yet there is not much data to show that these practices have always resulted in better teaching and learning outcomes for non-English speaking students from diverse backgrounds.

There are many methods of teaching English and teachers have always tried and tested ways to achieve the best outcome from their teaching practices. With varying class sizes and various cultural factors no method can be used without modifications. Students in KSA have a very flexible educational environment. A student is given utmost importance compared to the educational framework I had dealt with personally as a student.

Background of the Study

From close observation over the last five years a situation has arisen when teachers are more concerned about how to teach effectively. At Jazan University, we strictly follow the lesson objectives as set by the University and therefore the teacher is supposed to complete the course within the stipulated time. With enough time, an experienced teacher is likely to complete the course and achieve the desired goals. The course is such designed that even with unforeseen changes, a sincere and dedicated teacher should be able to complete the course and even if a student misses any part of the exam, the student will have the scope to complete the course through the provision of make-up examination.

Why do I focus much on completing the course? I personally believe that the desired objectives as set by the university cannot be met with if the teacher does not complete the course. The course is designed in such a manner that a student will be left nowhere, if the course is not completed. For example, a student in JU has to study the same book for English for one year which is divided into two semesters. Now if the student did not complete the portion of the prescribed text in the First semester, the same student will struggle a lot in the second semester and the whole learning will be unsatisfactory. As a result, the student fails to master the language and at the same time the student will not find any value in the course. So while teaching, the teacher has to take care of the students' learning through the completion of the designed course.

Our students are mostly of the same age group (18 to 23) and are females and may be married or unmarried. Our semesters run smoothly with little variations or so. However the student profile

is not uniform. The percentage of dedicated students varies from department to department and in some classes the standard of the students is so diverse that sometimes the books have to be kept aside to teach them.

Impediments in learning a foreign language

The economy that runs on one's mother tongue such as Arabic, teaching English cannot bring overwhelming change in the attitude of the learners towards English. But if English is seen as an additional skill to the learners, we need not teach them with the determination required to teach students who are going to specialize on the language itself. Particularly adult learners like to learn what they think is useful. The ability to do things and to be explained in the mother tongue is what they seek. In a situation where transfer of skills, such as mathematics, biology, business, is required, making the learners learn to pick up those technical skills through translation of English is like taking a roundabout path rather than a direct one. In this way, the students fail to learn not only the language but also the skills they want and need to learn. If students understand that the reward is very high if they learn English, only then, there could be a change in the attitude of learning the language.

It was noticed that students did not read the questions properly and when somebody translated the question to them, the students understood and responded but on the whole they answered but without making efforts to understand the meaning of the same questions taught in the class. It was thought that familiarity with the papers might help the students in cracking the examination papers. Even after the teachers distributed the previous years' questions papers, it really didn't help much.

Every question paper in English requires translation, so it was their poor vocabulary which prevented them from identifying the questions. It is obvious that they did not understand the meanings of the words in the question. Form of question changes but without knowing the meanings of the words the student is not able to identify the same words in different forms and therefore forms alone cannot make any impact on students learning if their basic vocabulary is weak. On observation, it was noticed that a good number of students did not practice what was taught in class. As they did not take the pain to revise what was taught in class, everything seemed to be new to them during examination. So, certain habits of the students actually led to their poor performance. Learning a foreign language is all about learning, practicing and applying. Among the majority of the learners, learning was there, but practicing and applying were not there.

Teaching Methods and Approaches

Though there are many approaches to teaching English, the JU ELC is very particular about applying communicative approach. Grammar and translation method has been ousted from the scene as a traditional method. However, in classrooms, we have not been successful in reaping the benefits of communicative approach. In large classes students were found not to engage actively in any tasks. Students need translation of instruction in the mother tongue and once explained they are able to do the work. As expected, the grammar and translation method does not help the student speak in the target language at all.

The modern texts expect a lot of guess work and guess works done with choices (answers) available in the form of multiple-choice questions does not really help students learn the language better. As the text book encourages students to "guess for meanings", this becomes a general habit.

At a rudimentary level, guessing for meanings works fine but for academic purpose guessing for meanings do not fulfil the learning outcome. In examinations, when a student is given “match the columns”, the student applies a lot of guesswork which turns out to be flawed as the student did not understand or remember the meanings of the words or had not put in efforts in understanding meanings during class work. If the student is taught vocabulary in a context-based approach, the students remembered better. For example, when they were asked to talk about healthy foods in listening and speaking class, at first they were confused. When they asked to recall what they did in the reading class about the chapter on Foods, they started recalling the words.

In class-work, a student has the space to make mistakes, but in examinations where one doesn't have a chance of being given a hint have shown to make mistakes which could have been avoided through practice. Even with the use of basic words, during classroom practice very simple words are used which the student remembers but the student is unable to match the words and their meanings even if the text is right in front of them. It has been observed that drilling helps in memorizing the words.

To handle large classrooms, task-based teaching is a very effective methodology associated with communicative language teaching. “Communicative language teaching (CLT) is generally regarded as an approach to language teaching (Richards and Rodgers 2001). It is based on the theory that the primary function of language use is communication. Its primary goal is for learners to develop communicative competence (Hymes 1971), or simply put, communicative ability...In other words, its goal is to make use of real-life situations that necessitate communication” (Brandl, 2008). Other approaches include the cognitive-code approach, and the aural-oral approach (audiolingual method), which also help in learning a new language.

In audiolingual approach language is taught as a speech rather than as writing and grammar and this approach was introduced for US army personnel. In audio-lingual method speech is taught through dialogues. In English medium schools, non-English speakers get the opportunity to speak English at school. In KSA, it has been noted, the labourers speak Arabic fluently though they are illiterate and on analysis it has been found that it was a matter of survival for them. For better interactions they learnt Arabic and they also benefitted socially and economically by making friends and bargaining over goods and services (Mart, Cagri Tugrul 2013) In the classroom learners often learn through techniques borrowed from a variety of methods/approaches which is called 'eclectic approach'. Teachers select techniques from various approaches according to the different needs of their learners. Most course books mix methods and techniques in this way. Learners have the innate “Ability to communicate, to interact verbally” and we presume “some knowledge (cognition) both in the perception of units, categories and functions and in the internalizing of the rules relating these categories and functions (which is a process of abstraction) ... In the process of acquisition students learn the production of language sequences: they learn through doing... No matter how much we relate these skill getting activities to real life situations this practice rarely passes beyond pseudo communication.” (Rivers, 1983: 43-44) Though Krashner calls this as pseudo-communication, I feel this is a very important stage in the learning phase of the learner as it enables the learner to break the inhibitions in applying a foreign language. “It is externally directed, not self-originating; it is a dependent, not an independent activity... It is near-communication with all the outward appearances of communication, but in these activities the student does not have to demonstrate that great leap into autonomy – the leap that is crucial.” So this step of pseudo communication breaks the barrier of entering into the foreign language terrain. After this stage of pseudo communication, a learner enters the world of autonomy through conscious and incessant efforts. The three basic conditions of natural learning are exposure to the language, interaction with other people which may also include interaction through the written language. (Kumar, Sen and Eapen, Page 28, Unit 3, Developing Speaking

Skills, Methods of Teaching English, Block III, EFL. With those three conditions in place learning takes place smoothly. Though students have mobile phones but their basic lack of interest does not make them look for meanings and expressions on the internet. So the exposure to language is limited by the learners themselves, and in a predominantly Arabic-speaking environment students do not have the urge to speak in English or need to write in English.

While teaching English, ELT teachers are increasingly taking into consideration the language learning styles that are learner factors. Learning strategies are either behavioral which is observable, or mental and are not visible (Liang, 2009). In a classroom of adults drilling should be done carefully. Often the adult learners get bored with this practice. So, in place of drilling a variety of words when placed and randomly asked to repeat gives the learners more challenge and a shy student can be paired with the extrovert student to achieve the learning outcome of mastering the vocabulary.

In classrooms, we have noticed “Some learners tend to be oriented by visual means and in turn use more listing and grouping strategies, while some prefer learning in an auditory way and are used to listening to tapes and podcasts (Oxford, 2002).” In a single class clubbing different strategies to teach a single chapter can turn out to be time consuming and may turn off student interests. “On the other hand, research done by Scarcella and Oxford (1992) reveals that learners could overcome their weakness in some learning styles with appropriate strategy training” (Page 200, Liang, 2009).

“Despite some existing contention about the effects of age on the rate, sequence, achievement of L2 learning, it is agreed by many researchers that young children often use simple strategies, while older learners tend to apply more sophisticated strategies (Ellis, 1994:541), which accounts for the fact that adults learn grammar and vocabulary faster and better than children” (Page 200, Liang). In our classes, adults found it difficult to understand the structure of sentences because there is no similarity between English and Arabic when it comes to grammar. Nevertheless, “this argument does not mean that adult learners do not need strategies in learning grammar and vocabulary at all; on the contrary, adult learners should raise their awareness of using strategies in a more innovative manner” (Page 200, Liang, 2009).

The Pitfalls of Some of the Teaching Techniques

Why am I so suspicious of using “learning by guessing meanings”? In my class of Mathematics students, the students showed wider knowledge about vocabulary which was lacking among the students of Arts and Biology. I am not very hopeful about this technique of guessing meanings and

any book by Cambridge Publishers lays emphasis on guessing meanings which becomes a habit among students. If students do not learn to use dictionaries to build their vocabulary they are going to make the following mistakes in exam.

For example:

Students were taught when to use **can/can't** and were asked to choose the correct option. The underlined choices in the examples below have been made by 70 percent of the students during class-work and quizzes.

Birds can't fly. (can/can't)

A newborn baby can drive a car. (can/can't)

In an exercise, students were asked to choose the correct phrase to complete the sentences to express 'future time', the students have written the following:

I have a toothache, I am going to call the police. (call the manager/call the police/see the dentist)

I hear a burglar, I am going to see the dentist. (call the manager/call the police/see the dentist)

We teach the students to use "to" and "too" at L2 and they also start showing discomfort as it makes them think a bit harder to solve the increasing complexity of the lessons learnt. Teachers often simplify rules to an extent that they get a bit nervous when there is a little bit of change in the question pattern. For example, "how should one distinguish between 'too' and 'two'" They were taught that if there was a noun such as car (s), book(s) etc. as shown in the following examples, they should use two (which means a number) because one can count cars and books. They should use 'too' if there is a blank at the end of the sentence to indicate also and use too before an adjective.

The following responses were made by 60% of the students during final examination.

I saw _____ too _____ cars near the park. (Use too /two)

My sister got _____ two _____ books on her birthday (Use too /two). My brother wants to have two books _____ to _____.(Use too /two)

This problem is _____ too _____ difficult. I can solve it.(Use too /very)

I have a sedan. Rana wants a sedan _____ to _____.

(Use too /two)

Finally, there is no alternative to practice and we had seen in writing assignments that students could not write simple sentences in relation to the following questions which have been taught in class for two semesters. More than 60 percent students write the following answers even after class-practice, quizzes and Progress Tests.

What is your name? **My name R....** (the verb "is" goes missing)

How old are you? **old19 years** (The required answer is "I am 19 years old.)

Describe your house? **My house pig.** (The correct answer is "My house is big")

Where do you live? **J****** (The correct answer is "I live in J****.")

So we can see when we try to simplify things, students may only learn to answer a question in examination but not know how to express their thoughts in real life situation. As a brainstorming activity it is nice to have them guess meanings but making them use a dictionary will make them engaged in learning the language seriously in a reading activity or a listening activity context.

To manage a big class, we often divide the students into groups and Jeremy Harmers (Page, 118) also discussed the disadvantages of group work, such as: “the class gets noisy, some students don’t like it, they take longer time to organize,” while some do not participate at all and are likely to carry on their mistakes throughout the course. So to help weaker students, the teacher should check the scripts individually, if possible, or correct the stronger student’s script and give it as a model. Nevertheless, pair work expedites learning among students.

Since communication in English is the biggest challenge for students, we have often experienced that students use mother tongue more in group work. In a large class use of mother tongue remains dominant. In the audio-lingual method, we have observed that students sometime pick up mistakes during the chain drill and it becomes a bad habit of repeating errors. A great deal of alertness is required during question-and-answer drill. The following mistakes occurred during a drilling session in grammar class.

Teacher: Where are you going Asma?	Student 2: Where are you going to Rafa?
Student 1: I am going to the cafeteria.	Student 3: I going to the cafeteria.
	Student 4: Why are you going to Mona?
	Student 5: I go to the caféteria.

Conclusion:

Krashen has rightly pointed out that the three basic conditions of natural learning are exposure, language interaction and the need to communicate and these conditions are essential for any mode of learning (Page 28, Eapen, Kumar and Sen, EFL). The student needs to communicate in two forms: speaking and writing. The students mostly dread writing because the errors are visible. No matter how many visuals we show our students and tapes we play in classroom, learning will depend on individual interest and policies of the country.

If a student does not have a chance to get a job or an opportunity to use the skill meaningfully after learning English, the student’s interest in learning English also reduces and is reflected in the disinterestedness in class. So it is not always the weakness in teaching method that is responsible “for the lack of successful English writing” (Sultan Al Hazmi, 2006).

Language is about memory and practice. A vocabulary taught and left unused is of no use. Since many of us have learnt English from lecture methods in an English medium setting and this is more like an immersion technique. This immersion technique along with strong supervision led us to learn English through application. But our students come from a background where English is not used at all.

Students come with a set of learning habits which is very similar to grammar-translation method. Students learn rules of English grammar in their mother tongue (Arabic) and understand questions through translation by the teacher and then they carry this habit of being explained even at college level including examination halls. Overall, the learning outcome is not as expected. However, more students are interested in learning English and if the policies of the country provide fruitful scope in the language, the learning graph will surely show a positive change. In spite of all the difficulties in group work and audiolingual method, we have been successful in managing large classes and ensuring full participation of the class as groups ensure some sort of anonymity to shy students.

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