

# Preferred Teaching Methodologies in a Jazan University Context: Challenges & Prospects

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## Abstract

Communicative Language Teaching has undoubtedly played an instrumental role in aiding people learn English so that they possess communicative competence. After 4 years of working as an educator with Jazan University between 2011 and 2015, my observations were shared on why CLT should be favored over other methods and approaches. There were many contemporary applications of CLT. Johnson and Johnson noted five characteristics that the author contended are quintessential for language teaching. *Appropriateness* is the first of them followed by *focus messaging*, *psycholinguistic processing*, and then *trial and error* or *risk taking*. The characteristic of *free practice* is the last of the five. These characteristics have formed the basis of my research methodology. The author does a juxtaposition between CLT and the Audio-lingual method in his context. In addition, course content is described in all 5 skills and their textbooks. These courses and sources are evaluated from the lenses of CLT and audio-lingualism. A description of my setting in the KSA will help to further understand the nature of Saudi perspectives about learning English, the education system, educators and the level of students in Jazan University. The challenges in the approach that have come to the surface from teaching in my context will be of focus.

## Keywords

Communicative, Language, Teaching, method, English, Arabic, Saudi, Jazan

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## 1. Introduction

Albeit the Communicative revolution has come to pass in history, the influence of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the globe is still tremendous. As a language instructor with the preparatory year of Jazan University for close to 4 years, my feeling is that out of the approaches I have had exposure to, CLT is to some extent the most effective approach for teaching in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). In this paper, my understanding of CLT is elucidated and reasons are provided for my partial support of this approach in my teaching context. A description of my setting in the KSA will allow the reader to further understand the nature of the culture towards learning English, the education system,

educators and the level of students. My focus will be on challenges in the approach that have come to the surface from teaching in my context.

## 2. Literature Review: Communicative Language Teaching

In the introduction, the author identified CLT as an approach over a method. They are consistent on a theoretical level but allows for flexibility in instruction than other methods do. This approach is popular and widespread due to its versatility. [4] My understanding of CLT is an integrated approach to teaching communication in speaking, listening, reading and

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writing. It also offers a comprehensive approach to L2 language learning. [6] Some other methods and approaches focus on meaning only. CLT upholds form/grammar and meaning. [8] According to George Yule [10], there are many versions of CLT. Among the many versions, I prefer the strong version. Richards and Rodgers [8] are of the view that it is the act of 'using English to learn it' as opposed to the weak version

which concentrates on 'learning to use' English. The problem with the Saudi context is that most students from elementary to secondary levels learn English in Arabic as the medium of instruction (MOI). Perhaps this is more consistent with the weak version. The proof that it does not possess efficacy is that most students speak either broken English or Arabic in preparatory year Jazan University classes.

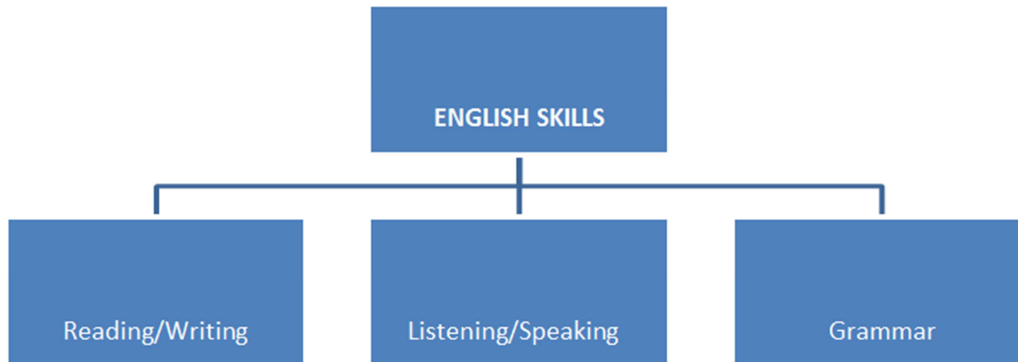


Figure 1. English skills taught in Jazan University.

Furthermore, CLT is a very versatile and flexible approach. This is one of the reasons it has gained popular currency in language learning. Broadly speaking, communication is emphasized but there are no set objectives. As Richards and Rodgers [8] state, the range of exercises are vast. Trial and error and committing mistakes is part and parcel of the learning process. [5] Guided role play is also an asset to my teaching approach. I have espoused that it helps learners understand conversations in different settings such as the mall, doctor's office, and vacation etc.

The audio-lingual method also makes use of dialogues. However, they are predominantly pre-set. This is a common tool used for Saudi students. CLT allows learners to be more autonomous devoid of pre-set dialogues. [5]

As a requisite and at the very least, the end goal for students should be communicative competence. In spite of their disagreement, both Chomsky and Hymes have merit in their definitions. In my view, the two understandings can be reconciled. A native speaker of English should have some role in setting the standard for competence as Chomsky noted. An educated native speaker who has some grounding in English will be a meritorious reference as the language in many cases is second nature to them. Even though only comprehensible pronunciation is a goal of CLT [8], I think proximity to native speaker pronunciation may prove to be an asset. Hyme's contended that communicative competence means 'language needed in order to communicate in a language community' [4]. The syntactical variation and correctness of native speakers will prove to be of tremendous value. After attaining competence, one should be, at the very least, a semi-autonomous learner. One of the characteristics of good

learners is that they become less teacher-reliant and take on more responsibility. According to the workbook for this course, 'autonomy means letting the learner take responsibility so that they can take English beyond the classroom.' [4]

There are however some setbacks of this approach that should be noted here. For example, the types of students that will have utility with CLT will primarily be independent students. Dependent students who due to cultural reasons or even reticence are teacher-reliant may not find it beneficial. [5] Moreover, minimal translations of words are necessary in my context so that students are aware of meanings when they use English. Also some education systems advocate rote memorization instead of innovation and critical thinking. This may be another roadblock on the path to L2 language acquisition. Further to this fact, this approach satisfies students who are extroverts. Introverts may not learn as much as his/her counterparts. [5] Again some cultures may honour introverts which may not enable CLT to be universal in nature. This approach is also portable and not always comprehensive for all demographics. In other words, students inclined towards academics may find it simplistic and perhaps too basic. [5] This may be a requirement for students at initial stages to reach communicative competence. There is also a lack of roles for first language usage. This approach may be too easy for L1 learners. In addition, due to the generalities of CLT, Cook notes that there 'is a lack of views on discourse processes, communication strategies etc.' [5]

This approach can be customized based on needs analysis to the context in question. As Richards and Rodgers [8] state, "CLT today is understood to be a little more than a set of very general principles that can be applied and interpreted in a

variety of ways." Some general principles are spelled out by Richards and Rodgers [8]: L2 learning via communication and classroom activities should inculcate genuine communication, fluency, and lastly trial and error which are inevitable in the learning process. As stated, the principles of this approach are broadly understood. For example, any device that aids the student is valued, including grammar. In the Audiolingual approach, grammar is avoided. [8] Pages 156-57 of this book proves exactly this fact in a juxtaposition of the Audiolingual approach and CLT. [8] The parameters of the former method are narrowly defined where the latter approach is very broad and general. For this reason, I fundamentally disagree with Prabha in his assertion that

"if an element of a method is chosen... to be true and it is combined with other elements on the same basis, then it constitutes a new method because it is informed by theory." [4]

CLT is encompassing of elements from a variety of methods. Henceforth, a set of techniques may not have to constitute a new method. Instead it may fall under the purview of CLT. This aids me in teaching English to preparatory year Engineering students. It also assists

"teachers (who) may have to develop their own set of beliefs and principles... novice teachers can adopt an approach... modified to the needs of each teaching situation." [4]

Furthermore, there are many contemporary applications of CLT. Johnson and Johnson note five characteristics that I feel are quintessential to this approach. *Appropriateness* is the first of them followed by *focus messaging*, thirdly *psycholinguistic processing*, and then trial and error or *risk taking*. The characteristic of *free practice* is the last of the five. These characteristics will form the basis of my research methodology.

#### *Limitations of Study*

Perhaps my observation of students could have been grouped according to college as there are varying levels of students from Pharmacy, Engineering and Community colleges. Including other colleges to his study would have enhanced the sample size. The author could have also consulted and compared observations with other teachers to get an understanding of their views on the subject matter. Moreover, the administration and management could have also been interviewed so as to collect their perspectives on the matter. In addition, restricting my study to five characteristics of CLT according to Johnson and Johnson may have excluded other aspects specific to CLT. The author found that these characteristics were the most encompassing and henceforth used with them for this reason.

#### *Method*

In this study, I observed my students over 4 years on the results of teaching them from Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) versus the audiolingual method which was the preferred method endorsed by the English Language Centre (ELC) administration. Many English teachers were also of the view that the latter had more efficacy in language teaching. I rated students based on the five characteristics of CLT as espoused by Johnson and Johnson.

#### *Participants*

In total, I taught 110 students in my four years at Jazan University. My first year was in the Pharmacy College. I taught English for Specific Purposes there. My second year took place in the Community College where I taught preparatory year English. The last two years were in the preparatory year of the Engineering College. I taught level 1 at this college. The focus of my study will be on the Engineering College.

#### *Data Collection*

I used purposive sampling for my observations as the array of my former students ranged from very low English proficiency: Community College, to a moderate range of competency: Engineering College, to optimal proficiency found in the Pharmacy College. I used the adjectives, low, moderate and optimal, relative to the Saudi context. My observations were noted each semester about my communicative language teaching approach and compared it with other teachers who preferred the audiolingual method. As stated above, I rated students according to Johnson and Johnson, namely appropriateness, focus messaging, psycholinguistic processing, trial and error or risk taking and lastly free practice.

### **3. Description of Context**

One may feel that external factors, such as administration, syllabus, or even potent traditional approaches to teaching which make change challenging, have a stronger impact. [4] The author taught preparatory year English for Jazan University which is located in the southern most region in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Arabic is the L1. English is not widely used as a medium of communication in Jazan however. The level of students in terms of English proficiency is very low as well. Students in Medical, Dentistry, Pharmacy and Engineering faculties are more fluent and perform better than others. Many students are not interested in learning English. In my setting, English is one of the only courses that prevent students from graduation. On a larger scale, it is a language that is reduced to the classroom. This course has four components as per the syllabus catering to each individual skill. The first part of the course deals with listening. This

familiarizes students with technical vocabulary and communication so that they can learn to use it after graduation. The textbook for this course is called *Interactions*. [2] The next component focuses on grammar. This part of the course looks at tenses, but also makes reference to grammar in verbal and nominal sentences. The textbook noted above is called *Basic English Grammar*. [1] The following component focuses on writing. This course starts by teaching students how to write a basic paragraph about oneself, family members and classmates. The structure of the paragraph is taught in some detail. Correcting mistakes on capitalization and punctuation is also emphasized. [2] *Interactions Access* also has another book for reading that is used in the preparatory year. The book comprises of vocabulary related to the reading passages, the passage itself which is followed by questions to test student comprehension.

## 4. Results

As already noted, the author has demarcated his observations according to the five characteristics of CLT as per Johnson and Johnson:

*Appropriateness*, according my observations were very low in Jazan University. An 'inside the textbook' approach was employed in most cases. *Focus messaging* was not present due to over reliance on the textbook and completing course syllabus. *Psycholinguistic processing* was present. Trial and error was not observed in most cases, only errors and the correction of errors or no corrections in many cases. Many students felt anxious for this reason. Lastly, the *risk-taking* characteristic was not observed as skills were taught in a compartmentalized method. The opportunity for use of skills in an integrated approach was not expected nor encouraged.

## 5. Analysis: Obstacles & Challenges

As this research study is based on Johnson and Johnson's five characteristics, we will focus on them in the course of this analysis. *Appropriateness* is the first of them. This ensures that learning a language is done with an understanding of context ie. formal/casual. [8] Students in Jazan University are generally subjected to unfortunate circumstances. Due to a lack of needs analysis, teachers do not conduct lessons according to needs of students. Minimal Arabic translation should also be employed as students in Jazan do not speak or write in English.

Secondly, *focus messaging* demands that the learner be able to create and understand messages ie. information transfer activities. [8] This can only be done if understanding is emphasized over completing course coverage. For the most

part, student reticence and factors that provoke it such as the role of teachers, anxiety and a lack of motivation prevent students from engaging in the learning experience. It is an imperative that teachers implement some ways to prompt student participation. Recommendations are put forward in my paper about factors that engender reticence among Jazan University students. Furthermore, from my four years of experience, I have observed that course books and many teachers draw on the audio-lingual method over CLT. I tried my level best to transition to CLT as much as possible. In my setting, structure is preferred over meaning. Commentaries on the subject, predicate and complement or use of the 'be' verb and verb tenses take precedence over meaning. For example, the subject and predicate are taught in syntax without much emphasis on meaning. [3] Hence students may not be somewhat sure of meaning or context taught. Meanings and contexts are generally paramount in CLT. [8]

Thirdly, *psycholinguistic processing* involves activities that enhance cognitive usage ie. information transfer exercises and relevant classroom discussions. [8] Moreover, preset dialogues in my context are merely read and memorized. In contrast, the author makes every effort to focus on understanding and delivering the message on these types of activities. Unfortunately, students also face this reticence due to a lack of adequate English education in primary and secondary school. [7] Listening to dialogues and filling in blanks can be found repeatedly in the *Interactions Access*. [2] Students usually already have the answers from predecessors in previous years. This does not help their cause to effectively communicate. The author would generally ask students how they came up with such answers so as to engage their understanding. Perhaps dialogues in various contexts or interpreting illustrations may be better options.

Next, learning takes place in a process of trial and error or *risk taking*. [8] The culture in the Kingdom may not honor errors in the context of language learning or it may be a source of discouragement for students. An alternative setting is necessary for the advancement of this approach. This culture should welcome trial and error as a source of learning. The author has noted that this may be one of the reasons for negative attitudes towards English in my paper on a critical study of attitudes in Jazan University. [6]

Lastly, the characteristic of *free practice* allows the learner to practice skills integrated together instead of learning them alone. [8] In my view, this practice should be conducted by native speakers of English. My reasoning is that once incorrect intonation and/or syntax becomes fossilized, students inherit these mistakes. Peter Roach contended that native speakers should be used for learning proper intonation. [9] Moreover, lessons in preparatory year of Jazan University are taught according to skill and are therefore compartmentalized. The



author has also been fond of asking students to interpret relevant illustrations and diagrams verbally and in writing. This allows for better communication. Contrary to the aforementioned, lessons in Jazan University were reduced to repeating phrases from the *Interactions* textbook coupled with listening and filling in the blanks. In many cases, this occurred without much comprehension. A lot of drilling took place with similar information gap activities. Students were not encouraged to formulate speech and write independently. Instead they learnt 'inside the text' from the course book.

Furthermore, in my context, the syllabus allows for minimal communicative activities after extensive drilling and other exercises. For example, in the syllabus coverage, there are nominal references to communication in grammar instruction. *Ready to Write* [3], the textbook for writing, focuses on exercises and drilling with minimal references to communication. CLT however encourages communicative activities from early stages of teaching. Moreover, in my setting, the author is of the view that linguistic competence takes priority over communicative competence in this course. This can clearly be found in teaching this syllabus. For the most part, this course is not designed to teach how to interact and communicate effectively in society. Perhaps the reason is that English is a language that is predominantly compartmentalized to individual skills and reduced to the classroom.

Further to this fact, a characteristic of the audio-lingual method is that the teacher takes control of the classroom and works within the framework of the theory. As noted above, teachers do not take control of the classroom in CLT. Instead they "help in any way that motivates them to work with the language." [8] The syllabus is set out such that teachers and students are to cover lessons from textbooks without factoring in what motivates students to communicate. Furthermore, students are encouraged to use English in parameters advanced by the textbooks and the syllabus. In CLT, "teachers will not know exactly what language students will use." [8] Thus, this leaves students with a more independent role to formulate their own language by trial and error as already noted.

## 6. Conclusion

In my view, CLT is the most effective approach for teaching English in general. In this paper, included is my understanding

of CLT and reasons for my support for this approach in the given teaching context. A description of my context in the KSA was produced to further understand the nature of the culture towards learning English and the level of students there. The five characteristics of CLT as underscored by Johnson and Johnson have not been encouraged to a large extent. The focus on challenges in the approach that have come to the surface from teaching in my context have also been covered. The author has been somewhat discouraged by the audio-lingual method. According to my observations, the attention span and level of motivation among students were extremely low. For this very purpose, a broad eclectic approach with the five operational traits of CLT espoused by Johnson and Johnson merged with some translation and an analysis of student needs is absolutely necessary.

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