



Barriers of Achieving Communicative Competence in English Language through the Existing Policy: Time to Research for a New Parameter

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Abstract

We live in an age where English is a Lingua-Franca. Consequently English language learning is a mandatory part of the education system of our country. Hence, students are taught English language according to communicative Language Teaching method in secondary, higher secondary and tertiary level with a view to make them proficient in communicative English. However, the frustrating fact is that they are not achieving the expected communicative competence. This is because teachers are in a never ending dilemma about what to do; whether to stick to the policy or to go with the flow. This paper aims at exploring the problems the teachers face while teaching English language especially in achieving students' oral communicative skills. And therefore, it digs out the gaps in the policies and practices that hinder them to develop the expected English proficiency by following the existing education policy. The study has been conducted on 30 teachers from different institutions. The data has been collected through direct fieldwork observation, and interview. In addition, a few recommendations are provided on the basis of the results. This study will hopefully help teachers and policy makers to find some new parameters to increase the quality of English language education aiming at attaining communicative competence.

Keywords: *ELT, CLT, English, education policy, communicative competence, Bangladesh.*

1 Introduction

For the students of Bangladesh, English is a foreign language which is considered as the second language to some extent. At present English is taught according to CLT method in our country. The prime objective of introducing CLT was to make the students communicatively competent and to make them comfortable in using the target language anywhere (Rahman & Karim, 2015, p. 77). As a result, students of our country are prone to be interlinked with this language. They are supposed to be literate and to have a good communication skill in English. However, the most appalling fact is that we do not see any satisfactory result in their output especially in their verbal communication (vocabulary, grammar, and listening comprehension). The four language skills are closely related to this communicative competence. Students are

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taught to read and write in English from grade 1. Although verbal communicative skill is one of these four elements, it is not practiced there. We all know that verbal communication skill mandatory to achieve communicative competence and it is really important to cope up with the modern era. With the beginning of this new decade many aspects of education are evolving towards ED-techⁱ. As a result world is getting smaller and learners are getting exposed to the outer world. Consequently, communicative competence is a must for every learner. “Communicative competence is a term in linguistics which refers to a language user’s grammatical knowledge of syntax, morphology, phonology and the like, as well as social knowledge about how and when to use utterances appropriately” (“Communicative competence”, n.d., para. 1) .

Although communicative competence is closely related to language literacy, students of our country do not seem to achieve this skill by product of their academic curriculum. They are learning to read and write English language. However, speaking and listening are far away from the concern of both the teachers and the learners. They are only concerned of literacy. “Literacy is popularly understood as an ability to read, write and use numeracy in at least one method of writing, an understanding reflected by mainstream dictionary and handbook definitions. Starting in the 1980s, however, literacy researchers have maintained that defining literacy as an ability apart from any actual event of reading and writing ignores the complex ways reading and writing always happen in a specific context and in tandem with the values associated with that context”(“Literacy”, n.d., para. 1). And therefore, language literacy means, attaining “the ability of reading, writing, and using numeracy” in a particular language”(“Literacy”, n.d., para. 1). However, according to the modern perspective literacy is not complete without achieving oral communication skill of that particular language. English is a foreign language and it is a compulsory subject in the primary, secondary and higher secondary level in our country. And therefore, students have been taught English for the last twelve years or even sixteen years according to CLTⁱⁱ approach. According to the syllabus teachers are used to concentrate on reading and writing of English language which is a part of the second language literacy. However, they cannot focus on achieving communicative competence for the learners. As a result students are lagging behind with their communicative competence in English. There must be some issues which have to be concentrated in order to maximize the expected output from CLT method. Then the researcher has made a survey. There she has tried to find out the core reason of this lack of English proficiency among the students. Moreover, she has tried to dig out the teachers’ perspectives regarding the issue as they are working in the actual field. In today’s study we are concerned about the problems of teaching English language especially achieving oral communicative competence of the learners.

2 Literature Review

From the early 1970s the term *communicative competence* had brought under the discussions of second/foreign language proficiency. Although the term itself may have been new, the underlying concept it represented was in fact rather straightforward: if the purpose of language study is language use, then the development of language proficiency should be guided and evaluated by the learner’s ability to communicate. In naturalistic (non-classroom) settings, human language communication of course takes both oral and written forms and develops in one or more languages wherever social interaction occurs. Sandra (2017) Bangladeshi education policy makers thought of making it formal and achieving communicative competence through classroom setting. Previously English curriculum followed (GMT) Grammar Translation Method. However it could not bring out the expected result. Researches underwent again and

again. As a result policy makers introduced a new method of teaching English that is CLT. The National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) of Bangladesh introduced CLT in 1990s (National Curriculum and Textbook Board).

“Over the centuries, a remarkable number of theories have been experimented in quest of finding out an effective approach to teach English. In the course of time, some shortcomings of those theories to develop learners’ ability and skill in day to day life communication have been noticed. As an effort to solve this problem, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has been introduced. CLT approach mainly focuses learners’ ability, and recovers shortcomings regarding their expressing capabilities of feelings in the target language in real life scenarios. As a whole, CLT approach concentrates to boost up learners’ linguistic, along with pragmatic knowledge in target language”(Rahman, and Karim, 2015, p. 76).

“English Language Teaching Improvement Project (ELTIP), jointly funded by the Government of Bangladesh and Department for International Development (DFID) of the UKⁱⁱⁱ in cooperation with National Curriculum Textbook Board (NCTB), started working to facilitate teaching and learning of English in Bangladesh as soon as new language teaching approach was adopted. It paid significant attention to CLT and introduced the approach in the national English curriculum of the country for the first time in 1990s. From 1997, the communicative English tasks were introduced in the compulsory English Textbooks for secondary and higher secondary level students in Bangladesh” (Rasul, 2016, p. 24). Now we have the revised version of this original Textbook.

In the year 2001, Bangladesh Secondary and higher Secondary English course underwent a reform. The principal goal was to propose a shift away from the long-established grammar translation curriculum practice towards teaching for communicative competence. The stated goal was to make pre-university English language instruction more communicative. The major justification was that English should be used communicatively by the learners preparing themselves for higher studies and not just learned about (Rahman, et al., 2015).

“Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is a set of principles about teaching including recommendations about method and syllabus where the focus is on meaningful communication not structure, use not usage. In this approach, students are given tasks to accomplish using the target language instead of studying it” (Sadeghiyan, 2018). The prime objective of CLT in Bangladesh is to achieve communicative competence among the students. However, there must be some factors which are working as constraints for the proper implementation of this approach which are hampering to achieve the expected result.

Barman, Sultana and Basu (2006) (as cited by Rahman et al., 2015) propose eight factors which were identified as constraints in implementing CLT in Bangladesh: “1) inefficiency of ELT practitioners, 2) economic constraints, 3) administrative set-up, 4) infrastructural limitations, 5) cultural conflicts, 6) seating arrangement in classroom, 7) class size and language teaching and learning and 8) testing. They stated that in Bangladesh, most instructors were able to start the teaching career without previous formal training. Although the government had launched the materials based on CLT, the teachers did not fully comprehend the concepts of communicative competence. Many language teachers were still underpaid which strongly affect their motivation which resulted in the de-motivated environment in the classroom as they had to seek for extra income from teaching as private tutors” (p. 77). With the passage of time some of these constraints have been eradicated. However, most of these scenarios are still present in our

time and context. When the researcher has made the survey she has found that, especially number one, five, seven, and eight factors are still same in the context of Bangladesh.

3 Research Objectives

The aim of writing this research paper is to find out the answers of these questions:

- What is the prime reason for the lack of communicative competence among the learners?
- What are the gaps in the policy and practice that are hindering in achieving expected proficiency in English language among the students?
- How to minimize the gaps and problems to get a good outcome with the conventional CLT approach?

4 Research Methodology

The researcher has conducted the research in mixed method. As the central objective of the research is to find out the challenges teachers face while teaching English, the data has been collected and analyzed from direct fieldwork observation, in-depth, and open ended interactive interviews from the teachers. In addition the researcher has provided a few recommendations on the basis of the suggestions of the teachers, and her own research findings.

4.1 Participants

The participants of this study are mainly the teachers of different institutions. Thirty teachers from different institutions are chosen to find out what are their observations, requirements, and challenges regarding ELT^{iv} at Cox's Bazar Bangladesh. All the teachers are currently teaching English at different government and non- government Bangla medium institutions at Cox's Bazar. Among the teachers, ten are from schools, ten are from colleges who are teaching both secondary and tertiary level students, five are from a private university, and five are from two well recognized language centers. Their age range is 26 to 40 years. Among them 12 are female and 18 are male. The teachers who are teaching at government schools have completed their BA (BED) degree and who are teaching at non-government schools have at least completed or studying BA (Hons') degree in English. The teachers who are teaching at Government College are qualified as BCS cadre. All of them have participated in different training programs arranged for the secondary and higher secondary level teachers. The teachers who are teaching at the private university have completed their post-graduation. And the language trainers are having specialized trainings on ELT and qualified as English Language.

4.2 Data Collection procedures

All the data have been collected in mix method. Primary data has been collected through classroom observation, and open ended interactive interviews. Secondary data has been collected through reviewing different studies and papers on the related topics on ELT and CLT.

4.2.1 Classroom observation

A close monitored classroom observation has been conducted in order to identify the specific points where improvement and modification is required. Four classes have been observed. Two of them are from secondary school, one is from higher secondary and Degree College, and another one is from a private university tertiary level classroom. The researcher has observed those four classrooms actively as a participant and noted down where changes are required.

4.2.2 Interviews

An open ended interactive interview has been conducted on the teachers. Thirty teachers who are currently teaching English have been interviewed to find out their perceptions, requirements and comments on students' improvements and the gap which hinders the expected improvement. All the verbal conversations have been recorded and at the same time noted down briefly into a notepad.

4.3 Data analysing procedure

The researcher has analyzed the surveyed data. The researcher has transcribed the recorded interviews and the notes. Then he/she has read and re-read the transcribed papers to analyze the data and to have a qualitative result on the issue. All the comments have been filtered and the most common and mostly mentioned comments have been brought down for discussion.

5 Findings and Discussions

Before going to find the answer of the research questions the researcher has tried to find out whether the teachers are well aware of the CLT approach or not. The result was quite good for the teachers. Most of them have had a clear knowledge of other elements of CLT: communicative competence, communicative activities, learners' roles, teachers' roles, communicative materials, and so on. They also know that CLT approach focuses on Competence rather than knowledge of language. They can also emphasize on all four language skills equally if they follow the EFT^v training findings. Moreover, they know as a CLT teacher their roles are to participate with the students, help and encourage them in classroom activities, motivate them in using English in classroom and pay special attention to weak students.

5.1 Findings from teachers' interview

Two hundred marks are allocated for English where students are evaluated through written examination. During assessing the students' learning outcome teachers come across only to the written scripts. They can assess students' reading comprehension during the class or through the examination script. However, other two skills speaking and listening which are really important for communicative competence are set aside. It creates a huge negative effect on students' reaction to the new activities teachers try to implement in the classroom. Whereas, the main motto of CLT is to make the learners communicatively competent, only in class six and seven 20 marks have been allocated in the first terminal examination where their communicative competence is being evaluated.

There are two never ending dilemmas which are working as constrain for the teachers to work with this issue. One is dilemma between language acquisitions, and language literacy. And another one is dilemma between English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English as a Second Language (ESL). CLT approach is introduced to make the students communicatively competent in both reading and writing; and to make them prepared for higher education (Rahman, et al., 2015). However, the syllabus is designed in such a way that, students have to concentrate solely on reading and writing in most cases memorizing with a view to attain a good grade. Consequently, in the actual field they are working hard to be literate in the target language. Teachers are helpless to follow the lessons addressed in the syllabus and to cover them for the upcoming examination. And therefore, teachers are following GMT approach in most cases. Although it is said that, English should be taught as a Second Language, in most of the schools and colleges English is taught as a foreign language.

They also share that, parents have a general mind-set that it is the teachers' responsibility to make the learners study and to cover the whole syllabus. As a result, they (P) sometimes do not feel responsible to concentrate on their children's study. If a teacher sometimes practices communicative activities, some parents do not take the matter easily. They accuse those teachers of not covering the syllabus and thus not fulfilling their (T) responsibilities.

Most of the schools do not have enough specialized English teachers. In most schools and colleges the English teachers are overloaded with their courses. They are very much pressured to meet up the syllabus. As a result, they don't feel motivated to take some extra care to students' acquisition of communicative competence. Some teacher share that, the evaluation system of the university entrance exams also hinders students to acquire proper communication skills in English language.

Government is arranging some Training for the teachers. However, these training programs don't have any follow up programs. Consequently the policy makers cannot get proper feedback. Thus the gaps are not solved yet. Again teachers cannot or do not properly implement the new strategy they learn in the classroom due to lack of proper time, lack of infra-structure, lack of environment and acceptance.

Teachers share that, some students do not want to participate in the class activities. Probably they are shy sometimes it doesn't match with their social context. "Culture is often considered as a barrier in creating a communicative form of English learning in EFL contexts" (Rahman, et al., 2015). Another interesting fact is that, they are afraid of making mistakes, lest their friends should mock at them, or sometimes teachers humiliate them for their mistakes. They also do not want to participate in communicative activities for performance consciousness, lack of corrective positive feedback. Moreover, ego boundary hamper them learning and performing.

There is another important tradition. Some people think that, Communicative competence in English language is needed to only those who will go and settle abroad. Students of these areas do not get exposed to the target language. They do not get the chance to watch or hear anything English at home. Moreover, at school they are only taught English grammar, and are being memorized the lesson even if they don't understand which makes the subject more boring for them.

5.2 Findings from classroom observation

Students are less active and they feel comfortable listening to the teachers' lectures. Exam oriented teaching is very common as if they are here in the classroom only to get prepared for the exam.

There are a good number of audio visual manual supplies in the schools and colleges. Some verbal and listening activities are included in the text books. However teachers do not follow them because of the shortage of class timing; they rather read the passage and practice the exercise given in the text book.

The conventional assessment policies and evaluation process is another drawback in achieving students' communicative skills. It is also contradictory to the CLT approach. If the teachers try to follow CLT method in the class they can only focus on three skills i.e. Speaking, Listening, and sometimes on reading. However, students are evaluated through written examination. And therefore some students find it useless to practice speaking English.

Larger class size is another hold back. In most classes below secondary level each class has 250-270 students. These students are divided into four sections. Each section has 60-70 students. Among them, 70% students are enthusiastic to be actively performing classroom activities.

The allocated time for each class is not enough for practicing CLT in our country. Each class has at best 35 to 40 minutes. The class size is too big to manage. If the teacher has to ensure content and competence at the same time, it is not possible to manage within this time budget. As CLT is time consuming, it does not match with the traditional class timing and class management system.

6 Recommendations

Although we cannot change the whole policy to get a fruitful outcome, we can follow some strategies to change students' lot. As we have entered into a new decade we may have to think from another direction. Here are some recommendations which are actually some suggestions we may follow to bring out a fruitful outcome out of existing policy.

“No matter how much learners are skilled, but interaction with others in the target language will make them competent. According to William Littlewood (1981) Communicative Language Teaching approach is the best method of transforming learners into the environment of target language” (Rahman, et al., 2015). Many native English Speakers are coming here in Cox's Bazar for different purposes. Students should be encouraged to get a chance to interact with them. Students should also be provided with an English only environment so that they can interact with each other even in the absence of a particular native English Speaker.

In the conventional system students memorize the lesson and sit for the examination. Teachers should train the students to think on a particular issue, make an outline themselves and deliver it both in written format and orally. If the learners can think in English, they will gradually be competent in their oral communication in English. Our curriculum is much enriched. There are different lessons i.e. dialogue making, story, and many more. Teachers should be more creative in developing different activities out of these lessons.

In addition, English only environment has to be ensured at least in the English classroom. Teachers have to be more creative in this regard. They can plan for many interactive session where they will strictly follow English only environment. School authority need to assist their English teachers in this regard.

More exposure to the target language should be ensured. Parents should come forward to help their children in giving them enough space to practice English. As English is not our mother tongue teachers and parents may make their children practice speaking English more and more other than classes. To ensure it, government may facilitate educational institutions to arrange some workshops for parents so that they can understand their role in helping their children in English education.

Government is arranging different trainings to increase teaching quality. They need to think of arranging some follow up programs after a certain period of every training program. It will help them to find out requirements and the facts to be avoided for a better outcome.

Traditional classroom settings are not appropriate for the language acquisition. Teacher centric classroom set up has to be altered into a more interactive one. The traditional mind set

has to be altered. Teachers may act as a facilitator and monitor. They have to be more creative in handling the students. They have to encourage themselves and the students to use the target language to learn the grammar.

ZPD^{vi} in support with Scaffolding has to be implemented in the CLT classroom (Barman, B. and Basu, B.L., 2015). The ZPD refers to the difference between what a learner can do without help and what he or she can achieve with guidance and encouragement from a skilled partner (MacLeod, 2018).

The implementation of the CLT approach has to be ensured from the initial stages i.e. from the primary level of the study; because children acquire language swifter than adults. To do so, English teachers have to be well-trained who will act as facilitators for the students to acquire a new language. If we can take a good care of students' English language acquisition in the primary and secondary schools we will find enough English competence among the students.

Although it is not an easy task, we have to think about revising the traditional assessment policy. This has been an issue of discussion in recent years. "Change in the question pattern can bring qualitative change in education. The same pattern of question year after year not only makes teachers obtuse, it damages the creativity of the students ..." (Billah, 2015).

In one of the renowned schools there is an internal evaluation policy where students' communicative competence has been assessed. Students' speaking skills are evaluated through interviews and different speaking activities. As marks have been attached with the activity students get them prepared for the particular test. And the output is quite good. However, they are still in trouble with the listening skills. We can think of including these types of activities compulsory for all the undergraduate students.

Six teachers along with some students have taken an initiative to improve students English language skill. They have formed a committee. Under the supervision with this committee they have organized a 'Language Fest' on 25th November, 2018, where 500 students have participated. They have arranged a counseling session for the parents of these participants, with a view to making them aware of their role to make their children proficient in English. Moreover, they are hoping to arrange some other activities in near future. Teachers of other region of the city may take such initiatives to help the students with their language skills.

7 Conclusion

It is high time we changed our teaching methodology and evaluation policies. The teachers, the policy makers and the guardians have to come out of the conventional mind set. They altogether should come forward to change the attitude toward English language learning and to find out the real communicative elements in learning English. We should acknowledge the real essence of CLT and should assist our students to recognize the same for a better and more fruitful outcome. Only then they will be competent to cope up with the new decade.

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