

Togolese EFL Teachers' Attitudes towards the Communicative Approach: A Case Study of Secondary School Teachers

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Abstract

The main focus of this study is to investigate some togolese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' attitudes towards Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) known as a modern and efficient language teaching approach. The overall objective is to know the context in which CLT is implementable in the togolese EFL setting. Questionnaires adapted from Karavas-Doukas (1996) were administrated to 75 secondary school English teachers in Lome, the capital city of Togo, in order to investigate their attitudes towards the communicative approach. It was found that the participants were favourable to some of the principles of the communicative approach namely principles regarding group work and students' role in the classroom, while they rather favoured the non-communicative approach as regards error correctness, teachers' role and the place of grammar in the teaching process. Thus, it was suggested that since the participants showed positive attitudes towards the communicative and the non-communicative approaches, the best teaching approach to improve togolese EFL students proficiency must be a mixture of the communicative and the non-communicative approaches.

Key Words: *Communicative Language Teaching, Grammar-Translation Method, English as a Foreign Language, English Language Teaching, attitudes.*

1. Introduction

English is one of the languages highly valued in the world in term of status. In the words of Kachru (1998: 90), "it is the language on which the sun never set." This quote illustrates how English has attained a position which the other languages of the world can hardly rival (Graddol, 1997). It is spoken everywhere in the world; millions of people use it daily while other millions are willing to learn it (Friedrich, 2000) due to the benefits of having a good command of the language. As Short et al. (2001:3) put it, English is "... becoming increasingly necessary for success in the working world leaving those who do not speak it behind." Otherwise stated, it "is a powerful instrument for economic success" (Johnson, 2009:132) for countries and individuals as well.

Well aware of the benefits of the English language, the governments of many countries in the world –like Rwanda and Gabon in the African context to mention but only these few – have launched intensive educational campaign with the main objective to enable their citizens to have a good command of the language. Consequently, they allocate great budgets to the teaching of

English besides revisiting their educational policy regarding English in order to enable the inhabitants to learn and speak it fluently.

In the togolese context, though the official language is French, English still has a considerable status and it is increasingly used in a variety of domains. For example, many job announcements in Togo require candidates to have a good grasp of English. Thus, the concern of togolese educational authorities in making English a compulsory school subject from secondary school to university is to provide learners with the opportunity to learn the language and consequently be competitive on the job market.

However, the methodology used to teach English in the togolese EFL context does not prove effective. This method has all the characteristics of the Grammar-Translation Method. After at least seven years of English education in secondary schools, togolese students in general have difficulties to communicate fluently in English (Kpoblahoun, 2014). In his study, Kpoblahoun showed that most of the participants were averagely proficient in English while others were poor. An evaluation of the averagely proficient survey students' speaking and reading skills showed that they could eventually read a text written in English but their speaking skills were nearly inexistent. Other studies also reveal that togolese EFL students have difficulties in mastering the English language in general (Tarno, 2014; Tetteh, 2012; Zotoglo, 2011; Solevo, 2009). One of the recommendations of Kpoblahoun (2014) is to shift from using the Grammar-Translation Method of teaching English to that of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) which is a modern language teaching innovation nowadays. In this respect, this paper seeks to investigate teachers' attitudes towards CLT in the togolese EFL setting.

Teachers' attitudes are necessary to investigate when planning to implement a new teaching method. As Breen et al. (2001:472) put it "any innovation in classroom practice from the adoption of a new technique or textbook to the implementation of a new curriculum has to be accommodated within the teacher's own framework of teaching practices." The underpinning reason for investigating teachers' attitudes is the resistance the new teaching innovation may face when its principles clash with the attitudes of the teachers (Orafi & Borg, 2009). In this respect, teachers' attitudes need investigating in order to "revise, refine, or change attitudes which may not be compatible with the principle of that approach" (Karavas-Doukas, 1996: 188).

To the best of my knowledge no study has ever been conducted to investigate the possibility of implementing CLT or the communicative approach in the togolese EFL context. Therefore, this current study addresses this gap.

The following questions guide this study:

1. What are togolese EFL teachers' attitudes towards the communicative approach?
2. How can the communicative approach be implemented in the togolese EFL context?

2. Review of the literature

2.1 Communicative approach

There is a plethora of literature regarding language teaching methodologies namely Grammar-Translation method, Reading approach, Direct Method, Audio-lingual Method and Communicative Language Teaching method. Of these language teaching methodologies, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), also referred to as the communicative approach, the notional-functional method, the teaching for proficiency method or proficiency based - instruction method, is considered to be the most effective language teaching methodology. With this method, the ultimate goal of teaching a language is to develop in learners the communicative competence in the target language. In its practices, fluency is valued over the mastery of vocabulary and grammatical rules.

Historically, the communicative approach originated from “the changes in the British language teaching tradition dating from the late 1960s” (Richards & Rodgers, 1986: 64). Thus, this teaching method having proved effective gained prominence and its use spreads in the western world, especially in English speaking countries. In this respect, it is considered as a language teaching method that is suitable mostly to ESL setting. However, it is also increasingly used in EFL settings.

The communicative approach is characterized by its principles as regards group work, quantity and quality of error correctness, teachers’ and students’ role in the classroom and the importance of grammar. First, class activities under the communicative approach are mainly done in small group work (Larsen-Freeman, 1986) which is considered to benefit significantly students. According to Richards (2006: 20), small group work benefits students in that

- They can learn by hearing the language used by other members of the group.
- They would produce a greater amount of language than they would use in teacher-fronted activities.
- Their motivational level is likely to increase.
- They will have the chance to develop fluency

Second, under the communicative approach error correctness must be as limited as possible. Otherwise stated, not all of the errors students make are dealt with by the teacher and thus, they are not perpetually corrected. The proponents of the communicative approach considered that errors are a completely normal phenomenon in the development of communicative skills (Littlewood, 1981) and they, i.e. errors, indicate that learning is really taking place. In this respect, the communicative approach values fluency over accuracy. This clearly shows that under the communicative approach the mastery of grammatical rules is not the

first aim in the teaching process, but rather that students be able to express themselves freely in the target language. To attain this goal, teachers and students assume roles that are quite different from their roles in other language teaching approach like the Grammar-Translation method.

Third, the communicative approach is characterized by a learner-centeredness, which means that learners are the mostly active participants in the learning process. Consequently, since the communicative approach is based on communication the teacher is no more the dominating authority figure in the classroom; rather he/she is a facilitator of communication among all the students (Breen & Candlin, 1980) who must necessarily feel free to express themselves in the target language, unthreatened and non-defensive. Besides, the teacher is a coordinator and manager of class activities, language instructor, source of new language, consultant and participants in the class activities (Littlewood, 1981). As regards students, their role is to interact among themselves instead of interacting with the teacher; consequently they participate actively in class activities cooperatively with the teacher acting as a facilitator (Gomez, 2014).

2.1 Previous studies regarding teachers' attitudes towards CLT

There is a plethora of studies in the literature as regards teachers' attitudes towards the communicative approach (Chang 2000; Liao, 2003; Mangubhai et al., 1998; Ngoc & Iwashita, 2012; Rajabi & Godasdhara, 2016 to mention but only these few). However, there is currently no investigation on the communicative approach in the Togolese EFL context. As such, only studies conducted abroad are reviewed.

Ngoc & Iwashita (2012) is a comparison of teachers' and learners' attitudes towards CLT in terms of four factors namely grammar instruction, error correction, group and pair work, and teachers' role. In the study, the researchers administrated questionnaires to 37 English teachers and 88 English learners in two universities in Hanoi. The questionnaires were a 4 – point Likert – scale developed by adopting questions from different surveys used in studies on attitudes towards CLT. Teachers' and learners' attitudes were calculated and compared using mean scores and standard deviations. The results of the study showed that both teachers and students held positive attitudes towards CLT in general but teachers' held more positive attitudes than the learners. Besides, teachers' attitudes were more favorable than learners' attitudes for the four CLT- related factors except group and pair work. The participants' favorable attitudes indicates positive signals for the implementation of CLT in the Vietnamese context, given that its core principles, learner – centeredness and learner autonomy, appear to be accepted in the context of the study.

Moreover, Rajabi & Godasdhara (2016) investigated Iranian EFL teachers' attitudes towards CLT. A mixed method approach was used in Rajabi & Godasdhara (2016). It was a three – stage research design, starting with a quantitative data collection through a questionnaire (adopted from Karavas – Doukas, 1996) and then two qualitative data collection through

interviews and class observations. The questionnaire items were categorized in five subscales representing the core principles of CLT namely (i) group/pair work, (ii) quality and quantity of error correction, (iii) the role and contribution of learners in the learning process, (iv) the role of the teacher in the classroom and (v) place/importance of grammar. The qualitative stage was used to explain the results of the questionnaires. The study involved 55 EFL teachers working in public schools in the Khuzestan province (Iran) in the academic year 2014 – 2015. The results showed that generally the Iranian EFL teachers held favorable attitudes towards the principles of CLT and displayed characteristics of CLT in the beliefs and practices.

3. Materials and methods

3.1 Materials

The main research instruments used in this study is a questionnaire. The questionnaire was comprised of two main sections. The first section was destined to get more information about the participants. The second section was to investigate the participants' attitudes towards the communicative approach; it was adapted from Karavas-Doukas (1996) Attitudes towards CLT questionnaire. This section was comprised of 24 items summing up the principles of the communicative approach represented by five thematic groups namely (i) group/pair work (4 statements), (ii) quality and quantity of errors correctness (4 statements), (iii) role and contribution of the learners in the learning process (6 statements), (iv) role of teachers in the classroom (4 statements) and (v) the place and importance of grammar (6 statements). The participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each statements on a 5 – point Likert – type attitude scale, starting from 5 for “strongly agree” to 1 for “strongly disagree”. A high score on the scale implies a favorable attitude.

3.2 Participants

The participants in this study were 75 English teachers working both in private and public secondary schools in Lome, the capital city of Togo, in the academic year 2015 -2016. As regards their gender, they were 65 were male against only 10 were female. Besides, most of them (39.47%) were aged between 40 – 49, followed by 30.26% aged between 21 – 29, and 25% were between 30 – 39. Four of them were over 50 years old (5.26%).

Additionally, the majority (63.15%) of the survey teachers hold a BA degree in English while 17.1% hold a *Maitrise* given the former classic educational system. Besides, lesser proportions, 9.21 %, 5.26% and 5.26% hold respectively a CAP (*Certificat d'Aptitude Professionnel*), a Master's and a DEUG II degrees.

As far as their teaching experience is concerned, it ranges from 1 to 35 years. Among the participants, seventeen teachers had 1-5 years of teaching experience, twenty of them had 6-10 years of experience, ten had 11-15 years and sixteen 16-20 years of experience. Additionally,

very few of them, three and four in number, had respectively 21-25 and 26-30 years of teaching experience. Finally, six had been teaching for over 30 years.

Furthermore, all the teachers declared to have graduated from the University of Lome. In addition, 82.89% of them stated to have never visited an English speaking country while 17.1% stated to have had that experience. Also, 56.58 % indicated that they had never sat for an English test (like TOEFL, IELTS) and 43.42% stated to have sat at least once for a test of the like.

As regards the number of students in a class, most of the teachers (22.37%) stated that they taught averagely between 51-55 students per class. They were followed by 19.76%, 18.42%, 13.15% and 11.84% of teachers who declared that the average number of students in their classes were respectively 26-30, 41-45, 31-35 and 36-40. Also, fewer proportions (5.26%, 4% and 4%) were found for teachers who admitted that they had been teaching averagely respectively less than 10, between 15-20 and over 60 students in a class.

As regards the teaching loads, most of the teachers (40.79%) declared that they had between 20-25 teaching hours in a week. The next significant proportions are 35.52% and 18.42% of the teachers who reported that they taught between 14-18 hours and 10-13 hours respectively in a week. Fewer proportions (4% and 4%) were found for teachers who declared between 26-30 hours and less than 4 hours respectively as their teaching loads in a week.

As regards the number of classes taught, most of the teachers (43.42%) declared that they had been teaching in average between five to six classes in a week. They were followed by 39.47% of the teachers who rather admitted that they had been teaching three to four classes in a week. Not negligible proportions of 13.15% indicated either seven or eight classes as the classes they taught in a week. The rest (4 %) declared that they taught one or two classes in a week.

4. Results and discussion

In order to answer the research questions one, descriptive statistics was used and percentages were calculated.

4.1 Teachers' attitudes towards group/pair work

As regards the "Group/pair work" thematic group, of the four statements (2, 9, 13, 22) on the questionnaire, the highest percentage (100%) was obtained by statement 2 (*Group work activities are essential in providing opportunities for co-operative relationships to emerge and in promoting genuine interaction among students*), while the lowest percentage (52.62%) was reported for statement 22 (*Group work activities have little use since it is very difficult for the teacher to monitor the students' performance and prevent them from using their mother tongue*). Statement 9 (*Group work allows students to explore problems for themselves and thus have some measure of control over their own learning. It is therefore an invaluable means of organizing*

classroom experiences) and statement 13 (*Group work activities take too long to organize and waste a lot of valuable teaching time*) obtained respectively 74.66% and 53.33%.

These findings reveal that the survey teachers had positive attitudes towards group/pair work as shown by statements 2, 9. However, as revealed by the score of statements 13 and 22 they were also conscious of the difficulties group works involve given the togolese EFL setting.

4.2 Teachers' attitudes towards quantity of error correctness

For the thematic group "Quality and quantity of error correctness", the highest percentage (89.48%) was reported for statement 10 (*The teacher should correct all the grammatical errors students make. If errors are ignored, this will result in imperfect learning*). Only 34.32% of the teacher participants agreed with the statement 14 (*Since errors are a normal part of learning, much correction is wasteful of time*).

These results showed that most of the participants did not tolerate errors, mainly grammatical errors. Consequently, they did not have positive attitudes towards CLT as regards grammatical error correctness. The main reason might be the current grammar based teaching method in the togolese EFL context.

4.3 Teachers' attitudes towards the role and contribution of the learner in

the learning process

Regarding "the role and contribution of learners in the learning process" thematic group represented by six statements (8, 20, 4, 15, 18, 5), most of the teacher participants (89.47%) agreed with the statement 18 (*For most students language is acquired most effectively when it is used as a vehicle for doing something else and not when it is studied in a direct or explicit way*). The next highest score (76.32%) was reported for teachers who considered that *the learner-centered approach to language teaching encourages responsibility and self-discipline and allows each student to develop his/her full potential* (statement 8). Statement 20 (*Tasks and activities should be negotiated and adapted to suit the students' needs rather than imposed on them*) also received favourable perception of teachers who agreed with the statement with a proportion of 65.79%. Besides these three statement, i.e., statements 18, 8 and 20, the other three obtained low or average percentages. Only 25.1% of the teacher participants agreed with the idea that *training learners to take responsibility for their own learning is futile since learners are not used to such an approach* (statement 5). On the contrary, a significant percentage of 56.56% of them considered that *since the learner comes to the language classroom with little or no knowledge of the language, he/she is in no position to suggest what the content of the lesson should be or what activities are useful for him/her* (statement 4). A lower percentage (43.47%) agreed that *the Communicative approach to language teaching produces fluent but inaccurate learners* (statement 15).

These results show that the participants were in general favourable to the communicative approach as regards the role of students in the classroom.

4.4 Teachers' attitudes towards teachers' role in the classroom

It was found that the participants did not have positive attitudes towards the role of teachers under the communicative approach. In fact, of the four statements representing teachers' role in the classroom, statements 19 and 21 obtained the highest percentages. Indeed, a significant proportion of the teacher participants (85.52%) considered that *students do their best when taught as a whole class by the teacher and that small group work may occasionally be useful to vary the routine, but it can never replace sound formal instruction by a competent teacher* (statement 21). Also, the majority of the participants (80.26%) considered that *the role of the teacher in the language classroom is to impart knowledge through activities such as explanation, writing, and example* (statement 19). The role of a "transmitter of knowledge" had also been accepted by the majority of the participants who admitted that *the teacher as transmitter of knowledge is only one of the many different roles he/she must perform during the course of a lesson* (statement 16).

However, they were favourable to the communicative approach when it comes to the authority of the teacher in the class. In fact, it was found that most of the participants (71%) rejected the idea of the teacher as the authority in the classroom; they considered that *the teacher as "authority" and "instructor" is no longer adequate to describe the teacher's role in the language classroom* (statement 7).

4.5 Teachers' attitudes towards the place and importance of grammar

As regards the six statements (1, 6, 3, 23, 12, 17) representing the place and importance of grammar, the highest percentage (94.52%) was obtained by statement 1; this implies that nearly all the teachers accepted the fact that *grammatical correctness is the most important criterion by which language performance should be judged*. Moreover, the teachers also held a favourable perception of statement 3; 89.46% of them agreed that *grammar should be taught only as a means to an end and not as an end in itself*. In other words, they considered that the mastery of the grammatical aspects must not be the overall objective in teaching a language; rather, it must help achieve the fluent knowledge of that language. Also, a significant proportion (86.84%) of the participants believed that *direct instruction in the rules and terminology of grammar is essential if students are to learn to communicate effectively* (statement 23). A slightly lesser proportion (69.72%) of them rather considered that *knowledge of the rules of a language does not guarantee ability to use the language* (statement 12). In addition, an average number of the teachers (54.05%) agreed that *for students to become effective communicators in the foreign language, the teacher's feedback must be focused on the appropriateness and not the*

linguistic form of the students' response (statement 6). Also, a significant proportion of them (only 27.64% agreed) rejected the idea according to which *by mastering the rules of grammar, students become fully capable of communicating with a native speaker* (statement 17).

These results show that the participants did not have positive attitudes towards the communicative approach as regards the place of grammar in teaching the English language. The communicative approach values fluency while the survey teachers highly valued the mastery of grammar. However, it should be remarked that they also considered the mastery of grammar rules as an insufficient condition to communicate fluently English (statement 17).

5. Conclusion

Because of teachers' important role in the implementation and the use of new teaching innovations, the significance of their attitudes towards the principles of communicative approach is undeniable. In this respect, this paper sought to investigate some secondary school English teachers' attitudes towards the communicative approach. It was found that they were favourable to some of the principle of the communicative approach namely group work and students' role in the classroom, while they rather favoured the non-communicative approach as regards error correctness, teachers' role and the place of grammar in the teaching process.

6. Suggestions and recommendations

Given that the survey teachers showed positive attitudes towards the communicative and the non-communicative approaches, the best teaching approach to improve togolese EFL students proficiency in English must be a mixture of the communicative and the non-communicative approaches.

The findings of this study call for studies on other main stakeholders' attitudes, namely students, towards the communicative approach. In addition, since most of the participants were located in the capital city, Lome, more studies on teachers in other cities are recommended in order to provide a larger picture togolese EFL teachers' attitudes towards the communicative approach.

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