

On CLT in Iran: Customers or Students' Reflections

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***Abstract:** This study intends to explore students' perceptions about teachers' qualifications to help students learn the communicative skills as they are taught in schools. Another purpose was to determine the most frequently taught communication strategy in high school classrooms in Khuzestan province. Ninety seven high school students participated in this study. A questionnaire and an interview were used. They ticked statements about the support they received and the frequency of communication strategies taught by the teachers. The statements were to be rated on a 6-point Likert-type classification from Strongly Disagree (rated as 1) to Strongly Agree (rated as 6). The findings showed that many students considered the problem of "my teachers did not use English to run the class ($M=6.2$) and "my teachers did not help me when I stopped to talk and they always turned to better students" ($M=5.1$) as preventing them from leaning to communicate more than "the lack of use of group, pair-work or role plays" ($M=4.6$). The mean differences of the two groups were statistically significant ($p=.00$).*

***Key words:** CLT, students' attitudes, teaching English in Iran, communication strategy*

1. Introduction

Good communication skills are a vital key to living a successful life. Business life, family life, social life and all relationships hinge on how well we communicate. Colleges and corporations place a high value on communication as a key skill (Horwitz, 2008; Nunan, 2003). Businesses want workers who can communicate effectively. Employees must be able to communicate clearly one-on-one, write clearly and present information to a group.

In Iran, many schools and language institutes offer English language courses to students. In addition, many universities require students take English courses. Do these courses and classes prepare students to do business with people of other nations and cultures or give them the competence to continue their studies in overseas countries? There are burning questions to ask with respect to communication skills: do the students feel they are taught communication skills? How communication skills are taught in Iranian education system. The answer to some of questions has remained an enigma. One of the pitfalls of education system in Iran is that it does

not equip the graduates with communicative ability in English (Dahmardeh, 2009; Fazel & Aghamolei, 2011). It is noteworthy to mention that English is the international language of politics, education, communication, medicine, tourism, science and technology (Bisong, 1995; Crystal, 1992; Gradol, 2006; Philipson, 1992). Because English is undisputedly the language of information and technology, it is expected to remain influential in the coming few decades (Graddol, 2006; Crystal, 2002). Indeed, David Crystal (2002) asserts that English has become such a pervasive power that it is now unstoppable, so that a shift to another language is unlikely in the near future. Accordingly, if we seek to produce graduates who can compete in the international market and help in the development and advancement of their societies, we have to scrutinize our educational system.

2. Statement of the problem

Despite the assertions of many teachers who claim to be communicative-oriented teachers, there are many obstacles in the way of implementing CLT pedagogy. "There are voices from both students and their parents that students are not taught communication skills to prepare students for career or persuasion of their studies." (Fazel & Aghamolaei, 2011). Kariminia and Salehi Zadeh (2007, p. 290) when discussing the problems of Persian learners of English stated:

Persian learners of English encounter problems in all the language skills. The students in Iran learn English in their native country, where the native language is Persian. The only way to learn English in Iran is through formal instruction, i.e. inside the classroom where the language teachers at school are native speakers of Farsi. There is little opportunity to learn English through natural interaction in the target language. This is only possible when students encounter native English speakers who come to the country as tourists, and this rarely happens.

While Dahmardeh (2009) concludes that textbooks and curriculum are not communicative, some for example, Fazel and Aghamolaei (2011) attribute this inadequacy to teachers' teaching styles and lack of knowledge of modern methods such as task and content-based instruction. And while researchers have been looking at what the inadequacies and pitfalls of the curriculum, little attention was paid to students' own perceptions about teaching procedures and of teachers' qualification to implement CLT. This leads to a need to explore the perceptions of students of the way communication skills are taught and the quality of the teachers to support the learning of communication skills.

3. Aim or purpose of the study

The aim of this study was, as mentioned earlier, to explore Iranian students' perceptions about teachers' qualifications and behaviors to help students learn the communication skills as they are taught in schools. Another purpose was to determine the most frequently taught communication strategy in Iranian high school classrooms in Khuzestan province.

4. The current situation of ELT in Iranian education system

Schools in Iran consist of three levels. The first level which is called *Dabestan* (the primary school) starts at the age of 6 for duration of 5 years of study. The students start their school at this level when they are 6-7 years old. This is followed by middle school which is composed of three years of education. Middle school, also known as orientation cycle (*Rahnamayi*), goes from the sixth to the eighth grade. Having finished the middle school students will be then qualified to enter into secondary school which involves four years of studying. Basically, the students should study twelve years to be entitled to attend national university entrance exam in order to go to university. Concerning ELT, the English language is a foreign language in Iran and students are taught this subject from the first year of the middle school. Students are taught English for seven years in schools. However, the quality of English education in schools is not satisfactory and most of students in order to obtain a better English fluency and proficiency have to take English courses in private institutes (Dahmardeh, 2009; Naghavi & Nakhle, 2003).

5. Definition of CLT

At the end of the 1960s, Audio-Lingual Method met a drastic attack from both American sociolinguistics and British functional linguistics based on the study of language from a wider perspective (Savignon, 2005). Hymes (1970) put forward the term —communicative competence to refer to appropriate language performance in contrast to "linguistic competence". At the same time, Halliday (1973) Wilkins (1972, 1976), Widdowson (1972, 1978), and Brumfit and Johnson (1979) emphasized the functional and communicative potential of language. They saw the need to focus on communicative proficiency rather than on mere mastery of structures" (Richards and Rodgers, 2001:153). Influenced by this view of language learning and teaching, "Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) came into existence with explicit attention on language in use (ibid)", which expanded the dimension of language from the previous linguistic forms to communicative function.

According to Savignon (1983, p. 10), the various pedagogical principles of a communicative approach to language teaching can be summarized as follows:

1. Teaching is learner-centered and responsive to learners' needs and interests.
2. The target language is acquired through interactive communicative use that encourages the
3. Genuinely meaningful language use is emphasized, along with unpredictability, risk-taking, and choice-making.
4. There is exposure to examples of authentic language from the target language community.
5. The formal properties of language are never treated in isolation from use; language forms are always addressed within a communicative context.
6. Learners are encouraged to discover the forms and structures of language for themselves.
7. There is a whole-language approach in which the four traditional language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) are integrated.

6. Debates on communicative competence

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 (Canale & Swain, 1980, pp. 29-30).

The term was coined by Dell Hymes in 1966, reacting against the perceived inadequacy of Noam Chomsky's (1965) distinction between competence and performance (Richards and Rogers, 2001). To address Chomsky's abstract notion of competence, Hymes undertook ethnographic exploration of communicative competence that included "communicative form and function in integral relation to each other" (Leung, 2005). The approach pioneered by Hymes is now known as the ethnography of communication (ibid).

Debate has occurred regarding linguistic competence and communicative competence in the second and foreign language teaching literature, and scholars have found communicative competence as a superior model of language following Hymes' opposition to Chomsky's linguistic competence (Widdowson, 1978). This opposition has been adopted by those who seek new directions toward a communicative era by taking for granted the basic motives and the appropriateness of this opposition behind the development of communicative competence.

The notion of communicative competence is one of the theories that underlies the communicative approach to foreign language teaching. Canale and Swain (1980) defined communicative competence in terms of three components:

1. grammatical competence: words and rules
2. sociolinguistic competence: appropriateness
3. strategic competence: appropriate use of communication strategies

Canale (1983) refined the above model, adding discourse competence: cohesion and coherence

A more recent survey of communicative competence by Bachman (1990) divides it into the broad headings of "organizational competence," which includes both grammatical and discourse (or textual) competence, and "pragmatic competence," which includes both sociolinguistic and "illocutionary" competence (Bachman, 1990). Strategic Competence is associated with the interlocutors' ability in using communication strategies (Faerch & Kasper, 1983).

Through the influence of communicative language teaching, it has become widely accepted that *communicative competence should be the goal of language education*, central to good classroom practice. This is in contrast to previous views in which grammatical competence was commonly given top priority.

7. Previous research

Naghavi and Nakhle (2003) examined the effect of cooperative learning strategy of Student Teams Achievement Divisions (STAD) on developing oral communication skills of intermediate language learners at a Language Institute. Utilizing this strategy, a list of six oral communication

skills were proposed and used as the most related skills to intermediate learners. The experimental design of the study depends on voluntary selection of choosing the group of the study, which consisted of 60 intermediate learners. The following tools were used to fulfill the purposes of the study: Oxford Placement Test, a pre-post oral communication skills and cooperative learning strategy of STAD which consisted of a teacher's guide and students' handbook. The findings revealed that the program was effective in developing students' oral communication skills as there was statistically significant difference between the pre and post administration of the test.

In another study, Fazel and Aghamolaei (2011) conducted research on the attitudes of medical students toward learning communication skills at Hormozgan University of Medical Sciences in Iran. In this cross-sectional study, the questionnaires were distributed to 210 medical students. Twenty eight students were excluded since they either did not return the questionnaires or filled them out incompletely. The results showed that there were statistically significant differences between male and female students and between basic sciences and pathophysiology students on the one hand and clinical course students on the other as regards their attitudes toward learning communication skills.

Dahmardeh (2009) investigated the issue of how to make the Iranian secondary school's English language textbooks communicative. He interviewed the teachers and the authors of the textbooks. However, he ignored the student's attitudes and views about their teachers. Students are the main clientele of the education system in Iran. Having considered the collected data from a variety of sources (Textbooks analysis as well as comments made by the respondents), Dahmardeh concluded that: 1. Iranian students have to study English as a foreign language for nearly seven years in the schools (3 years in Guidance school, 3 years in Secondary school and 1 year in Pre-University level), yet the education they receive neither enables the students to attain full competence in using the English language nor helps them to interact with confidence. 2. English language classes have become nearly one of the boring classes for both teacher and students. 3. He also states that "it is surprising to find that there is no evidence of non-Iranian culture in the textbooks."

Considering what was found in the literature and the researcher experience, the following research questions were formulated:

1. How do students perceive teachers' methods and their teachers' instructional practices to support the learning of communication skills?
2. Are there differences in the perceptions of students who can use English for communication and those who cannot – about their teachers' qualifications in high school?
3. What is the most frequently taught communication strategy in high school classrooms?

8. Methodology

8.1 The design

The research design is exploratory, aiming to investigate, from a student-perspective, the state of communication skills teaching in Iran. This type of design was thought appropriate since there is a dearth of research on this topic, and the present study is the first investigation on how communication skills are actually taught in Iran. Hence, it opens an uncharted line of investigation. Exploratory research provided qualitative data either through interviews; questionnaires or think-aloud protocols. However, in this study, questionnaires were chosen over interviews because interviews require spontaneous answers, which might be hard for students whose English is weak. It is important to note that this communicative-oriented questionnaire was constructed by the present authors of this study. To overcome the barrier of low English proficiency, students were given a chance to answer the questions in either Farsi or English.

8.2 The instrument

In order to categorize the students into two groups: students who were able to communicate and use the language for the purpose of communication and those who were not able to communicate and use their English for the purpose of communication, at the start point, a simulated IELTS interview (May, P., 2004) was administered (see Appendix A). And then a total of 97 high school students, answered a questionnaire. They ticked statements about the teachers' instructional practices and the frequency of communication strategies taught by their teachers (see Appendix B).

8.3 The participants

97 students from different schools answered the questions. In years ranging from the second to the third of high schools, they came from diverse schools; Participants came from different regions in Khuzestan province, including Abadan, Khoramshar, Ahwaz, Shush, Dezful and Shushtar.

9. Results

9.1 Students' responses

When the 97 students were asked to rate barriers that stopped them from learning communication skills or using English for the purpose of communication, the analysis showed that many students considered the problem of "my teacher did not use English to run the class" ($M=6.2$) and "my teachers did not attempt to help me when I stop talking due to my language problems in communication and they always turned to better students" ($M=5.1$) as preventing them from learning to communicate more than 'the lack of preponderance use of group, pair-work or role plays' ($M=4.6$). However, in comparing the mean scores of those who were not able to communicate and those who were able to communicate, the results showed that those who were not able to communicate had an overall higher mean ($M=5.7$) on the perceived effect of lack of group activities and role plays on their learning to communicate compared to those who were able to communicate in English ($M=3.5$). The mean differences were statistically significant

($p=.00$). However, there were no significant differences between the two groups on their rating of the problem of "my teachers did not help me to overcome my language problem. When I stop to continue speaking, they turn to better students." (see Tables 1 and 2)

Table 1. Teacher's activities and behaviors affecting students to learn the communication skills

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
My teacher didn't use English to run the class	97	63.30	6.06
My teacher didn't help me to communicate when I stop talking due to my language problems and they always turned to better students.	97	15.4	1.20
My teacher did not employ group activities and role plays in their classrooms		4.63	1.65
Total	97		

Table 2. Comparison of the mean scores of CCAU and CNAU on the perceived problem of lack of group activities and role plays

Having ability to communicate	Mean	SD	"t"	(p)
CCAU	3.45	1.75	5.466	.000
CNAU	5.71	.56		

CCAU=students who were able to communicate and use the language for the purpose of communication

CNAU= students who were not able to communicate and use their English for the purpose of communication

When asked to rate the frequency of communicative strategies that were taught to them, the analysis showed that many students considered "appeal for help" strategy ($M=5.6$) and "circumlocution" strategy ($M=5.3$) to be more frequent than "non-linguistics signals" such as mime, gesture, or facial expression ($M=3.2$).

Table 3. three most frequently taught communication skills

Communication strategies	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Appeal for help	97	5.55	.829
"Circumlocution"	97	5.31	1.034
"Non-linguistics signals"	97	3.32	1.846
	97		

10. Discussion

The main objectives of the study were to find answers to three guiding questions: 1) how do students perceive teachers' methods and their teachers' instructional practices to support the learning of communication skills? 2) are there differences in the perceptions of students who can use English for communication and those who cannot – about their teachers' qualifications in high school? 3) what is the most frequently taught communication strategy in high school classrooms in Khuzestan? Looking at Table 1, you can see that many students considered the problem of "my teacher did not use English to run the class" as their main barrier to learn how to communicate in English. Why their English teachers did not use English as the main language of their classrooms? One explanation that can be put forward is that the students speak Farsi at home and many of them do not know the meanings of simple English words and phrases, and it can be difficult for teachers to communicate with them in English.

Another argument for why the teachers do not use English to run their classes or why they did not adopt a communicative approach is that teachers assume their responsibility to transmit knowledge whether in English or Farsi. In our school culture the focus is on the transmission of knowledge and the classes are expected to be teacher centered.

The question of teacher confidence is relevant to the argument of why teachers do not use English as the main language of the classroom. The adoption of a communicative approach holds substantial implications for the knowledge and skills of teachers. Medgyes (1986, p. 112), for example, comments on the heavy linguistic demands made by communicative language teaching on non-native teachers whose energy is 'inevitably used up in the constant struggle with their own language deficiencies, leaving only a small fraction for attending to their problems.'

Large classes are an enormous problem to adopt communicative language teaching. The large classes made it hard for teachers to make use of group work, especially in the classrooms with fixed and immovable desks and chairs. Additionally, due to the over-crowded classes, it is almost impossible to give individualized attention to each learner. Moreover, disciplinary issues dominate large classes. The teachers are concerned much about the classroom management problems that result from over-crowded classrooms.

Still another reason why teachers didn't use English to communicate with their students is that these teachers may encounter resistance from some grammar-oriented students, parents and the educational policy. The present researcher can remember all those bad days in high schools due to students and the school principals' resistance to his use of English as the main language of the classroom. However, there are some students who enjoy seeing their teacher use new words, idioms, grammatical structures, or whatever. These students are more likely to be interested and to interact than if the teacher just gives them the translation or use Farsi as main language in the classroom.

Teachers have heavily-loaded English teaching program. Teachers are concerned that they to cover too many language items, i.e. essentially grammar points, in a limited period of time. This being so, they essentially have to skip activities that focus on productive language skills such as speaking and writing so that they can cover the necessary grammar points in a timely fashion. Finishing all the grammar points on time is vital in that students are tested only on grammar in nationwide standardized tests that they are supposed to take at the end of each school year.

The problem also can be attributed to the testing system in Iran. English questions on standardized tests are principally testing grammatical and vocabulary knowledge of students. There is also a number of reading comprehension and sentence-level translation questions, too. Yet, speaking, listening, or writing skills are not assessed in those multiple-choice tests.

As mentioned earlier, another purpose of the study was to determine the most frequently taught communication strategy in high schools. Table 3 shows that students perceived "appeal for help" strategy as the most frequently taught communication strategy. Teachers taught this strategy more than any other strategy because they might find it easier to teach or transfer this type of strategy and they find it more difficult to teach other communication skill. In addition, these teachers might think that students might find circumlocution so difficult to use because employing this strategy put cognitive pressure on the students. Students should possess a good proficiency to utilize this strategy to their best. Among these strategies, non-linguistic signals were found to be the least frequently taught strategies. This find may be related to psychological and social barriers of employing body language in the classrooms. Teachers might be afraid that their gestures, postures and body movements might be ridiculed and copied by some nosy parkers outside their classrooms. This can also be related to teachers' culture and context. Brown (2007, p. 238) states that people differ tremendously in employing their non-verbal or body language. In some cultures, non-verbal communication is used more than other cultures.

12. Conclusion

What the Iranian students said about communicative teachers and non-communicative activities in their English classroom is informative for teachers concerned with what students are likely to

reject as ineffective practice to meet their communicative needs. The students in this study see all teachers' activities emphasizing formal linguistic competence more than those emphasizing the real use of language. They also did not view teachers to be competent to improve their communication skills.

The results of the study do show a tendency that most of the students favor communicative and blame non-communicative activities in their English classroom. All the subjects are aware of the fact that the current teaching methods in high schools do not satisfy their modern needs. The only way out is to adopt communicative activities in English learning.

All in all, students' perceptions about their teachers to improve their communication skills were negative. It is necessary that teachers teach communication skills by showing their students that actions speak louder than words. They have to devote time to present lectures or to converse with students. They have to sense your communication ability and hear your accent and pronunciation. This can motivate the students and provide them with the needed input. They also need to integrate technology in their classroom. There are many learning technologies available for communication skills training. These include CD-ROMs, websites and DVDs.

Teachers should ask students open-ended questions that require full explanations to answer. This can help break the cycle in students who like to constantly give yes and no answers. Teachers need to read stories to their young students to improve their listening skills. People enjoy hearing stories. Using stories in the English language classroom is an old technique but at the same time very useful in communicative approach methodology. We call it a miracle for several reasons: Firstly, it is a way of entertainment. That is why all students are encouraged to take part in activities assigned by teachers. Secondly, we can have a lot of pair-works and group-works which are absolutely necessary for teaching and learning English. Students don't feel shy when they talk to each other. Thirdly, storytelling helps the students a lot with their listening and speaking skills. Storytelling can be a receptive skill and can also be changed into a productive one.

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Appendix A: Interview questions

In order to categorize the students into two groups: students who were able to communicate and use the language for the purpose of communication and those who were not able to communicate and use their English for the purpose of communication, at the start point, simulated IELTS interviews (May, P., 2004, pp. 36-38) were administered

Introductory questions

What is your full name?

What do people usually call you?

Where were you born ?

Where are you from?

Part 1

1. What kind of town is it?
2. What's the most interesting area?
3. What's kind of jobs do people do?
4. Do you think it's a good place to live?
5. Do you have any hobbies or interests?
6. How did you first become interested in that?
7. What other things like that would you like to do?
8. What kind of transport do you use regularly?
9. How do people in your country travel on long journeys?
10. How has transport there changed over the last twenty-five years?

Part Two

Describe someone you know, or somebody famous, who has achieved great success.

You should say :

Who they are and what they do

Where they from: their background

How they became successful

And explain why you admire this person

Part Three

1. How does present- day society measure the success of an individual?
2. How can ensure that more people achieve their aim in life?
3. How would you rather be successful in your job or in your social life?
4. Which is more important in sport: winning or taking part?
5. What makes some sports people take drugs to improve their performance?
6. Why are some countries more successful than others in events such as Olympics?
7. How do competitive relationships between people differ from cooperative relationships?
8. In what ways has society become more competitive in the last twenty years?

Appendix B

Communicative-oriented teacher's questionnaire

Date: _____

Name: _____

This questionnaire is private and confidential. The information gathered from individual questionnaire, will be analyzed for research purposes only.

- Remember-there are no correct or incorrect answers.
- Please read each statement and circle the number that applies to you.

Part A

5=strongly agree, 4=agree, 3= neutral, 2=disagree, 1=strongly disagree

-
- | | |
|--|--------------|
| 1 .My teachers used English as the main classroom language. | 5 4 3 2 1 |
| 2. My teachers used to focus their teaching on learners needs. | 5 4 3 2 1 |
| 3. They gave much more time to practice English than to explanation | 5 4 3 2 1 |
| 4. Instructions and directions are done more in Farsi than English | 5 4 3 2 1 5. |
| Feedbacks (such as "that's very good") are given more in Farsi rather than English. | 5 4 3 2 1 |
| 6. Enquiries (such as "Have you seen Reza lately") are done in Farsi rather than English. | 5 4 3 2 1 |
| 7. My teachers required the students to act out and personalize all the dialogues in the textbook. | 5 4 3 2 1 |

Part B

5=always, 4=usually, 3=sometimes, 2=rarely, 1=never

-
- | | |
|---|-----------|
| 8. My teachers used to describe or exemplify the words or phrases that we couldn't understand (Circumlocution strategy) | 5 4 3 2 1 |
| 9. My teachers used to advise and remind the students to ask for help to overcome their language problems while | |

using English to communicate (Appeal for help)	5	3	2	1	
10. My teachers used to utilize mimes, gestures, facial expressions to get their meaning across and they always reminded us to utilize these strategies. (Non-linguistic signals)	5	4	3	2	1