

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING ON STUDENTS' ENGLISH READING COMPREHENSION

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ABSTRACT

People from non-native English speaking countries usually encounter the issue of learning and appropriately using the English language. It is an important to have higher acquaintance with the English language since most of the curriculums are designed and imparted in English. The non-native English speaking countries persistently put efforts to improve the English learning levels through innovative pedagogies. The study reports the results of an intervention for improving the reading comprehension skills. The study aimed to examine the effectiveness of communicative English language teaching program on students' reading comprehension skills. To achieve the intended objectives, a non-equivalent pre-test, post-test quasi-experimental design was employed. The participants were the first year law students in two classes at the University of Gondar. The principle of randomization was applied and the groups were categorized as experimental and control groups. The intervention was carried out for two months of the academic year 2017. It was hypothesized that the students taught through communicative language teaching instruction would improve their reading comprehension skills better than those doesn't had this exposure. An English reading achievement test was developed and employed to assess the pre and post intervention levels. The validity and reliability of the research instruments were statistically measured and found the fit. The intervention programme was focussed on different aspects of reading comprehension. The data were analyzed using appropriate statistical tests. Results indicate that the reading comprehension skills score of the experimental group improved significantly and to an extent greater than the control group due to the treatment. Hence, the present study strongly recommends that instructors should employ communicative language instruction at University level for teaching EFL reading lessons.

Keywords: Communicative language teaching, English language, Reading comprehension, Reading lesson

INTRODUCTION

Modern science and technology are increasingly changing the world into a global village and bringing people from different places around the world into frequent communication. Globalization has brought wider changes in the socio-cultural aspects of human life including language. The colonialism in the past centuries along with the outburst of globalization has given an unprecedented usage and acceptability of English language. The language English plays a crucial role in many spheres of human life including education, science, technology, politics and trade. English has become the widest spread language in the world, used by a plethora of people around the globe. English is now an international language, spoken in many countries both as a native and as a second language or foreign language. It is taught in the higher institutions in almost every country on this earth (Kachru and Smith, 2008). The countries with diverse population and culture also use English as a medium of communication between the people as the distinction in their mother tongue doesn't allow easy communication.

Wright (2000) and John (as cited in Richards 2008) mentions that language has both its transactional and interactional functions, language is used not only as a means of communication but also as a means to relate and build the relationship with other people. The expansion of communication, information, and technologies facilitated the wider usage of different languages by people from different cultures. Although the linguistic skills are traditionally acquired in natural settings, the current time demand its learning and to acquire qualifications, especially for learning the foreign

languages. English is one of such foreign language being taught and learned by a large volume of people around the globe. Ethiopia is also not an exception for the influence of English language. Being a non-native English speaking country, Ethiopia always has tried to incorporate the English language in Education and other areas.

The problems in teaching and learning English as a foreign language (EFL) are related to both teachers and learners. This problem is partly affected by teaching methods. Chen (1998) stated that most EFL teachers teach language by lecturing and focusing on grammatical rules instead of language use. It is much more effective to teach language from context and meaning. According to Richards & Rodgers (1986), communicative language teaching is an approach to teach a foreign or second language which emphasizes to acquire communicative competence. Along with CLT, the role of the English teacher has changed as well. Brown (1994) also touches on the role of the teacher as one of the important considerations in the communicative language teaching and suggests that this role be that of a facilitator and guide, but not an all-knowing best owner of knowledge. He also attracts attention to their importance of autonomous learning by pointing out that students should be given opportunities to focus on their learning process through an understanding of their styles of learning and the development of appropriate strategies for autonomous learning. In other words, students should be the managers of their learning process (Larsen-Freeman, 1986).

The communicative language teaching offers several advantages, not only the improvement of communicative skills but to develop the creative thinking and problem-solving skills. It aims to foster cooperation rather than competition—each person's success is linked to every other member's success—and this also to develop critical thinking skills. The learners are thus, becoming direct and active participants in the learning process; they must work collaboratively with other group members on tasks assigned and must learn to monitor and evaluate their learning. In every communicative language teaching activity, the communicative intent is always emphasized. In communicative class, students use the language a great deal through communicative activities, (e.g., games, role plays, group work, etc.). According to Johnson (1982) activities that are genuinely communicative would help the learners to a great extent. In connection to this, Brown (1994) indicated that in communicative language teaching, the teacher designs the social interaction structures as well as learning activities. Similarly, Larsen Freeman (1986) indicated that communicative language teaching could maximize the potentials of people involved in it. Teacher's role also changes drastically from traditional lockstep organizations; he/she speaks less, acts as a facilitator of learning and is responsible for the creation of a highly structured and well-organized teaching environment which promotes group-based learning.

The languages could be learned through social interaction by undergoing redefinition and re-conceptualization of the materials to become internalized. Reading skills are enhanced in a learning environment where learners interact and use language for socially constructing meaning (Wei, 1996). In communicative language teaching, teacher role should also shift from knowledge transmitter to thought mediators (Yu, 2001). As an effective facilitator, teachers intervene and assist in the problem-solving process, and assess group interactions and monitor how students are developing their language skills, which allows them to adjust their procedures to enhance students learning (Chen, 1998).

It is true that English is growing its importance as an international language of communication. With it, there is also a growing awareness that the mastery of communication skills in English is necessary for academic and non-academic purposes. Reading in English, in particular, is said to be one of the most widely used modes of communication. As second language researchers believe, reading the language of English is a useful tool for language learning besides the role it plays in communication (Ramies, 1991; Tuan, 2010). Attesting to this fact, Saville –Troike (1984) quote, "...the language skill which is most likely to develop.... (academic) competence is reading ." In fact, the ability to read is of paramount importance for academic success. This is very important in the case of English language as a large volume of academic and scholarly writing is being done in the English language.

Communicative language teaching is a student-centred, instructor-facilitated instructional strategy in which a small group of students is responsible for its learning and the learning of all group members (Kagan 1989). Students interact with each other in the same group to acquire and practice the elements of a subject matter to solve, complete a task or achieve the goal. Most studies on the effectiveness of communicative language learning have constantly indicated that this methodology promotes higher achievement, more positive interpersonal relationships, and higher self-esteem than do competitive or individualistic efforts (Gomleksiz, 2007; & Johnson, 1994). The learning process in the group would facilitate all the learners and can bring wider changes.

There are many efforts taken place to introduce innovative curriculum and teaching pedagogies to address the issue of language teaching. Although national policies and school curricula shifted toward CLT in a variety of EFL contexts, researchers have pointed out that there is still a gap between policy and teaching practices (Nunan, 2003; Littlewood, 2007). The implementation of CLT has encountered problems and resistance in several EFL classrooms (Ellis, 1996; Li, 1998; Liao, 2000; Karim, 2004; Rao, 2002; Savignon, 2002; Yu, 2001). Various research projects reported that instruction in EFL classrooms is still predominantly based on traditional approaches (Li, 1998; Liao, 2000; Rao, 2002; Nunan, 2003; Littlewood, 2007). The ideas of CLT are different from the educational values and traditions of many EFL settings (Li, 1998). Also, situational factors such as large class size, test-oriented instruction and students' low proficiency have also influenced CLT practices. Even if the policies and curricula support the adoption of CLT, ultimately it is only the classroom teachers who decide what happens in their classrooms.

Acquiring skills in a foreign language is largely depends on the exposure, teaching and learning processes. As a reflection of these factors, mastery of reading comprehension skills by students of English as a foreign or second language remains largely unachieved. The awareness of the existence of this problem has led researchers to suggest different ways of tackling it. From the researcher's observation in the University system, most students' reading comprehension skills are not par with the standards and most EFL teachers often provide insufficient opportunities for learners to practice the target language. These negative trends are reflected in their achievement and their scores are very low due to the problem of reading comprehension skills. In this crucial context, the researcher has begun to concern about the student's low performance in English particularly in their reading comprehension skills and has started looking for the solutions to this problem. The wider context of poor language skills of the students made it necessary for the researcher to look for alternatives to language teaching that enables students to develop their proficiency in the English language. Communicative language teaching approach is, thus, chosen and hypothesized to help students develop their reading comprehension skills. Li (1998) indicated that communicative language teaching is an efficient and effective way of language teaching to improve students' language skills. A structured intervention can bring better changes in the language and other psychosocial aspects (Azeez, 2015). Therefore, a structured intervention program was designed to improve the reading comprehension skills of the students. The effectiveness of the program was explored through analyzing the pre and post status of student's comprehension levels. The present study hypothesized that students taught through cooperative language teaching would improve their reading comprehension skills better than those taught through conventional instruction methodologies. This hypothesis was based on the experience of the author in observing the poor learning outcome of the students who have been taught in the conventional teacher-centric pedagogies.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

In accordance with the research objectives and intervention strategies, an experimental research design was employed. A non-equivalent pre-test post-test quasi-experimental research design was applied. The first year law students of the University of Gondar were randomly grouped into experimental and control group. The experimental group had 42 participants and control group had

44 participants. The quasi-experiment was found to be appropriate for studying the effect of communicative language teaching on the development of students' reading comprehension skills.

Participants and Sampling Techniques

In Ethiopia, there are 41 higher education institutions. From these, the researcher selected the University of Gondar as a study site. The improvement of students reading comprehension ability is crucial and urgent for many higher institution students. At the University of Gondar, there were the first year, second year and third year, fourth and fifth year law students in 2017. Among these, first-year students were selected as participants of the study by the researcher considering their lesser familiarity with the English language and they have a course in the English language as well. This is the course through which communicative language teaching was done at the University. This course is redesigned with the purpose of the experiment. In this context, the first year students were randomly chosen for testing the efficacy of the redesigned intervention program. The total number of students in the first year was 86. Among 88 students, 42 students were randomly assigned to the experimental group and 44 were assigned to control group.

Data Collection and Intervention

The researcher used the following instrument to achieve the purpose of the study. An English reading achievement test was developed and employed to assess the performance in English reading comprehension. The same tool was employed to assess the pre and post test comprehension level of the students. Both the experimental and control group were subjected to pre and post-assessment. After completing the intervention package, students were given a post-test examination to assess their overall reading comprehension. A pilot study was conducted and the reliability of the instrument was measured. The reliability score of the same was statistically sound. The test item formats were included questions on vocabulary, cloze and short-answer questions. To ensure the content validity of the tests, the experts were invited to evaluate and validate them. To ensure good inter-scorer reliability, all examinations were independently rated by two TEFL (Teaching English as Foreign Language lecturers).

The study was carried out in the following manner. Initially, a through literature survey was conducted to establish the theoretical background of the study. Then the communicative language teaching program was prepared and validated. Further to this, the reading comprehension skill tests were prepared by the researcher and validated. The designed intervention program was applied for two months to examine the effect of communicative language teaching program on students' reading comprehension. The intervention package for the study was prepared and implemented as per the international standards of teaching communicative English. The program was designed in a more inclusive manner which consists of psychosocial and group activities apart from the core communicative domains. The meaningful participation and attendance of all the members of the group were ensured through rigorous monitoring.

RESULTS

The intervention study was carried out to explore the effectiveness of modern communicative English teaching pedagogies over the traditional teacher-centered teaching modalities. The reflections of the study are detailed. The socio-demographic profile of the participants indicates that more than 90 percent of the participants in both of the experimental and control group belongs to the age group of 18-24. The male students constitute more than 70 percent in experimental group while around 61 percent in control group. It is shown that around 47 of the participant's parents of experimental group have the first degree while 54 of them in control group have this qualification. Around 42 percent of the parents of the experiential group are uneducated while 34 percent of the parents of control group forms uneducated.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Profile of the Participants

Experimental Group (N=42)		Control Group (N=44)	
Age	Frequency (%)	Age	Frequency (%)
18-24	40 (95.2)	18-24	41 (93.1)
25-28	02 (4.8)	25-28	03 (6.8)
Gender	Frequency (%)	Gender	Frequency (%)
Male	30 (71.4)	Male	27 (61.3)
Female	12 (28.6)	Female	17 (38.7)
Parents Education	Frequency (%)	Parents Education	Frequency (%)
First Degree	20 (47.6)	First Degree	24 (54.5)
Second Degree	04 (9.5)	Second Degree	05 (11.3)
Uneducated	18 (42.8)	Uneducated	15 (34)
Parents Income	Frequency (%)	Parents Income	Frequency (%)
3000-4000 Birr	20 (47.6)	3000-4000 Birr	24 (54.5)
4000-8000 Birr	4 (9.5)	4000-8000 Birr	10 (22.7)
8000-10000 Birr	10 (23.8)	8000-10000 Birr	05 (11.3)
Unknown	8 (19)	Unknown	05 (11.3)

It was reported that around 47 percent of the participants of the experimental group has an income of 3000-4000 Birr while 54.5 percent of parents of control group have the same income. Nineteen percent of experimental group participants and 11.3 percent of control group participants are unaware of the income of their parents. The indications from socio-demographic profile reflect that the social and economic circumstances of students are not very promising.

Table 2: Reading comprehension levels in Pre and Post stages

Group	N	Pre-test		Post-test		paired difference		T	Df	Sig(2-tailed)
		M	Std	M	Std	MD	MD2			
Experimental	42	2.79	0.34	20.83	3.01	18.04	325.44	-3.81	76	0.000
Control	44	2.88	0.335	2.98	0.577	-0.1	0.01	-1.00	76	0.323

N.B: MD= Mean difference

The reading comprehension test was scored and calculated using appropriate statistics. Further, a paired t-test was applied to find the mean differences of the score of reading comprehension levels in the pre and post stages. The table-2 shows that there is a significant improvement in the mean scores in reading comprehension from pre to post-test of the experimental group. The experimental group's reading comprehension skill post-test score was increased by 18.04 as compared to their reading pre-test score. In proving the significance of these changes, paired sample t-test computed for the experimental score asserts significant improvement, (t)= -3.81, $P < 0.05$. These results imply that the significant change seen in the experimental group from pre -to- post test on reading comprehension test results because of the treatment.

On the contrary, the control group did not show considerable statistical improvement from pre to post test on reading test. The paired sample t-test confirms that the difference registered between the pre and post test was not significant (t) = -1.00, $P > 0.05$. The improvement in the reading comprehension levels of the treatment group is highly attributed to the intervention strategies designed and implemented. The study further explored the gender differences, but it was found that there is no statistically significant difference in the reading comprehension levels on the grounds of gender.

DISCUSSION

The results of the present study underline the implications of focussed interventions for the improvement of core language skills. The results show that communicative language teaching through a well-designed student-centric program based on the procedures and principles of Communicative Language Teaching improved the students' reading skills better than that of the conventional method of teaching. Hence, in the experimental group, there was an improvement of students' reading skills from pre to post-test than the control group due to the treatment. The implications of the present study urge the need for change in the conventional methods of teaching in which the students are merely at the receiving end than their role as an active participant in the learning process.

It is widely accepted in the modern curricula that the active participation of students must be ensured and the process of learning must be redesigned as per the requirement of the student community. The structure programs that are culturally competent would yield better results. The reflections from the study are an ideal example to underline this assumption. Melbey and Lervag (2014) also report same reflections in their study. The authors report that the educational interventions that designed for improving reading comprehension skills had better results. The importance of structured intervention programme for improving reading comprehension skills was reported by Silvana, Robert, Sabra & Kinberly (2012). The authors highlighted how the intervention program was effective for the students with learning disability. Edmond et al. (2009) also indicate the importance of interventions for reading comprehension skills. Their synthesis indicates that structured program will have higher efficacy on student's reading levels.

Although the study highlights the importance of structured intervention programme and its effectiveness on reading comprehension, there are some limitations. The experiment was conducted in a natural setting where some variables remain uncontrolled. Only reading comprehension skills in academic achievement were included in the study. Thus, the consequence of the study may not be generalized to all other skills of university students all over the University/country.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to examine the effect of communicative language teaching on students' reading comprehension skills of the under graduation students. Being an intervention study, the study also aimed to enhance the learners' English reading abilities after learning through communicative language teaching. The findings of the study draw the following conclusion. The structured intervention programs on communicative English teaching can bring better reading comprehension skills than the conventional teaching methodologies. The same is evident from the differences of reading comprehension skills vivid among the experimental group and control group in the pre-post stages. This can be justified since the students' of the experimental group were taught through communicative-based reading instruction in an organized manner. Despite the criticism that the students may be unwilling to read through cooperatively, the results of this research show that through communicative language teaching participants' reading comprehension skills have improved significantly. Therefore, based on the evidence from this study, it is strongly recommended to adopt innovative communicative teaching pedagogies for the improvement of language skills of the students. The adoption of such methodologies is the need of the hour for a country like Ethiopia where most of the educational programs in higher education are being taught in the English language.

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