

The Communicative Approach in EFL Contexts Revisited

Showqi A. Bahumaid

Abstract—This paper investigates the current position of communicative language teaching (CLT) with special reference to EFL teaching in public education in the Arab Gulf region. It highlights the enormous impact which the communicative approach has had on various aspects of EFL teaching in the region including syllabi, teaching materials and methodology since its introduction about four decades ago. However, there has been greater awareness among TEFL practitioners in the region in recent years as to the limitations of CLT which does not specifically address the needs and concerns of teaching in EFL situations. The most salient deficiencies relate to cultural inappropriateness of some texts and the great demands CLT places on Arabic-speaking teachers in terms of language fluency and competence in communicative methodology. These pitfalls have been aggravated by the EFL learners' low motivation to learn English and their extremely limited exposure to it in the community. These issues can be tackled, as the writer argues, by setting 'realistic' objectives for TEFL in public education in the Gulf region based on a thorough analysis of learners' needs, adopting an 'eclectic' approach in the selection of communicative teaching materials and learning tasks and launching intensive teacher training programs in communicative teaching.

Index Terms—Communicative teaching, eclectic, foreign language, second language.

I. INTRODUCTION

It would be appropriate to attempt, at the outset, a definition of the terms 'approach', 'method' and 'technique' which recur throughout this paper. In as early as 1963, Anthony made the now much-quoted distinction between those three terms. 'Approach' is a specification of the assumptions and beliefs about the nature of language and language learning; 'method' is concerned with the selection and grading of teaching materials; 'technique' refers to the way used for accomplishing tasks in the classroom. In Anthony's words, an approach is axiomatic, a method is procedural and a technique is implementational. This distinction was later reviewed by Richards and Rodgers (1986:28). They maintained that the term 'method' is a broad term which encompasses three elements: approach, design and procedure. 'Approach' refers to theories of language and language learning. 'Design' involves syllabus, instructional materials, teacher and learner roles. 'Procedure' is the way in which method is practically realized in the classroom. This distinction, it seems, has the merits of comprehensiveness

and precision.

Of the various approaches to languages teaching in second- and foreign-language contexts, the communicative approach has been the most widely used one in recent years. A foreign-language context is mainly characterized by the restricted use of such language by members of a community to their exchanges with 'outsiders' as, for example, the use of English in China and Egypt. By contrast, a second-language context is one in which the language is primarily used for internal communication purposes between members of the community who may speak different native languages as is the case of English in India and Nigeria. This paper examines the fate of communicative language teaching in the Arab Gulf countries where English has, in the present writer's opinion, a foreign-language status. Some writers (e.g. Johannsen, 1996:84) claim that the Gulf situation is neither a true ESL situation nor an EFL situation; rather it forms part of Kashru's (1990) 'outer circle' which is composed of countries where non-native or "new" varieties of English are in daily use, such as India, Singapore and Nigeria. To validate this claim, however, a serious investigation involving large-scale surveys has to be conducted.

II. THE PRESENT STUDY

A. Rationale

The communicative approach has been investigated in several studies (Swan 1985; Beele, 2002; Acar, 2005; Xin, 2007; Amin, www.). Studies on the impact of CLT on the TEFL scene in the Arab Gulf region have been extremely limited. Apart from a significant study made by Kharma and Hajjaj (1989), no thorough evaluative study of the subject, to the knowledge of the present writer, has been made. Some unpublished reports (e.g. Byrd, 1986) have been prepared by the local educational authorities, but these are quite restricted in circulation. A critical assessment of the merits and demerits of CLT in the Gulf EFL situation would therefore be entirely justified. In this assessment, the writer had to reflect on his own experience as well as the discussions he had with several inspectors and teachers of English in some schools in the United Arab Emirates.

B. Objectives

This paper aims to make a brief critical evaluation of the impact of CLT in the Gulf public school system. Positive aspects related to syllabi and teaching materials will be specifically highlighted. Meanwhile, the pitfalls of CLT in the Gulf situation will be identified and some suggestions to counter the negative impact of such pitfalls will be made by

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Showqi A. Bahumaid is with the Department of English Language and Literature, in the University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates (e-mail: sbahumaid@sharjah.ac.ae).

the writer.

III. CLT IN THE GULF REGION: POSITIVE ASPECTS

The adoption of CLT in the public school system in the Gulf region has had a positive impact on syllabi, materials, teachers and learners.

The communicative syllabuses employed in public schools in several Gulf countries in the early 1980s and subsequent improvements were considered a radical departure from the earlier structural ones. The new syllabuses specified the final aims to be attained at the end of the secondary school and the specific cognitive, affective and behavioral objectives for each level. They included a list of functions, structures and topics, all graded in terms of what to be covered in each level (Kharma, et al, 1983).

As far as teaching materials are concerned, the local educational authorities in the Gulf resorted to the production of specially designed communicative materials by contract with international publishers rather than using commercially produced communicative materials which would not be entirely appropriate for the local Arab culture. The outcome of this venture was the Crescent series which was introduced in the Gulf schools in the early 1980s. In subsequent years, the educational authorities in the region produced their own materials (e.g. English for the UAE) under the supervision of British and American consultants. Most of the topics in such materials were drawn from the local environment and were particularly relevant for learners.

From the teachers' perspective, the introduction of CLT has been welcomed as it reduced the burden imposed by earlier approaches in which the teacher had to be at the centre stage. The inclusion of communicative tasks and activities has enabled the learner to play a major role in class while the teacher acts only as a 'monitor' or a 'facilitator'.

The introduction of CLT enhanced learners' motivation as it focused on a lively and realistic use of the language and created ample opportunities for learners to participate in various interesting activities such as role play and games.

IV. ADDRESSING THE LIMITATIONS OF CLT IN THE GULF SITUATION

Several studies (Swan 1985; Beele, 2002; Acar, 2005; Xin, 2007; Amin, www) have exposed some deficiencies of CLT which was originally proposed for use in ESL rather than EFL contexts and does not, therefore, specifically address the needs and concerns of EFL learners. With regard to the use of CLT in the TEFL context of the Arab Gulf region, the pitfalls below have been observed. Suggestions for tackling some of those pitfalls have been made by the present writer.\

From a historical perspective, the introduction of CLT in the Gulf region in the mid-1970s did not come in response to the specific local requirements of teaching English. Rather, it echoed the change in mainstream ELT movement toward communicative teaching. It may be argued whether or not it would be feasible to set communicative objectives for Arab learners of English who, after leaving school, would have little opportunity to use the language for communicative purposes. In this regard, the present writer proposes that a

thorough analysis of the Arab EFL learners' needs to learn the language should be conducted. The analysis should embrace all relevant factors including learners' motivation, attitudes, wants, expectations, language needs and preferred learning styles. This is quite essential because it is only on the basis of such an analysis that one can precisely identify the specific objectives and content of the language program that would be most suited to those learners.

Some limitations have been noticed in communicative materials. Commercially published materials have been criticized on the grounds of being 'too demanding' and 'culturally inappropriate' for Arab EFL learners. It is argued that such materials contain authentic texts which many EFL learners find difficult to cope with. As for cultural inappropriateness, one can easily cite examples of texts in commercial course books that are widely used in the Arab region (e.g. "Desperately seeking someone" and "never been kissed" in Headway, pre-intermediate, 1991:38-39 and 58). Meanwhile, some of the materials that were specially produced for use at the country level in the mid-1980s (e.g. New English Course for Iraq), were found to be 'unnatural, forced, inauthentic' (Byrd, 1986 cited in Kharma and Hajjaj, 1989:29). There is certainly a genuine need for the production of communicative materials that would be both 'truly natural' and 'culturally appropriate' to the Arab situation. This enormous task is best entrusted, in the present writer's opinion, to a team of native English-speaking and Arab EFL specialists in order to combine the 'intuitive feel' of English possessed by the former with the 'cultural sensitivity' of the latter.

The rather challenging demands placed on teachers who would use communicative methodology in their classes constitute another major problem. Such teachers are expected to be highly proficient in the foreign language, well versed in the foreign culture, and adequately competent in communicative teaching techniques. However, the majority of Arab teachers of English in the Gulf region lack these abilities. They have learnt English in Arab countries and have had only a limited, if any, opportunity to experience the use of authentic English in appropriate cultural and social contexts. In addition, many of those teachers were taught English along traditional methodological lines. Indeed, some of those teachers find such communicative tasks as information gap and problem solving 'difficult' for them to do, as they clearly indicated to the writer of this paper through personal communication. As a possible remedy to this problem, the writer would call for eclecticism in the selection of communicative teaching techniques for the Arab situation, not eclecticism per se but 'enlightened' or 'informed' eclecticism (Brown, 1980:243; Richards and Rogers, 1986:158). More specifically, eclecticism means selecting those communicative tasks and procedures that have proved to be popular with the Arab learner of English and discarding those which are not. Meanwhile, the educational authorities in the Gulf region should provide teachers of English with intensive training that focuses on communicative teaching methodology using the latest instructional technologies. The design, implementation and evaluation of the training programs would be preferably assigned to highly experienced EFL instructors with wide expertise in those areas.

Learners can maintain their interest in learning along communicative lines if only they have sufficient opportunities to listen to and use the language in the community. However, learners of English in the Gulf region have limited exposure to English outside school. It may be pointed out that the occasional and haphazard exchanges in 'broken' English that occur between Arabs and, say Indians, in shops and restaurants in Gulf countries can hardly help them to utilize the 'communicative' skills they have acquired at school.

V. CONCLUSION

The utilization of communicative language teaching in public education in the Arab Gulf region for more than three decades have undoubtedly produced some positive results affecting both syllabi and teaching material as well as the instructional process in class. However, several pitfalls and limitations have now become apparent. These include questions regarding the 'feasibility' of setting communicative objectives for teaching English in a situation where learners have only limited exposure to English outside the class and may not perceive a real need to use the language in their local community. Other limitations include culturally inappropriate texts and the lack of competence of many Arab teachers of English in the foreign language as well as in communicative methodology. To tackle these limitations, the writer has proposed specifying 'realistic' objectives for teaching English in the Gulf EFL situation on the basis of a thorough analysis of the learners' needs, producing 'culturally appropriate' and 'truly natural' materials, adopting an eclectic approach in the selection of the communicative teaching techniques and learning tasks that would be used in the English classrooms in the Gulf and launching intensive training programs for Arab teachers of English in communicative methodology.

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Showqi Bahumaid was born in Yemen in 1950. His qualifications include M.A. (University of Wales, UK, 1979), M. Phil. (University of Leeds, UK, 1985) and Ph. D. (University of Exeter, UK, 1991) in linguistics. He is Professor of linguistics at the Department of English Language and Literature, in the University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates. He also works as Vice Dean of the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences in the same university. Prof. Bahumaid has published several

articles in refereed journals on various issues in TEFL, applied linguistics and translation.