EFL Teachers-Related Challenges when Using Communicative Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT

The current study investigates English teaching methods in the preparatory year, female campus, in a Saudi Arabian University. Although it has been recurring in the literature that traditional methods of ELT are the norm in the Saudi context (Alfallaj 1998; Alnafaie 2013; Al-Seghayer, 2011; Al-Seghayer, 2014; Elias 2015; Alrabai, 2016), the present study found that the most frequently used method was CLT. The study discusses the challenges that instructors encounter in adopting the CLT method. The study used a questionnaire that was administered to English instructors in PYP, a female campus in a Saudi university (SMU), to identify the difficulties in adopting CLT. The findings of the study showed that the most frequently used EFL method was Communicative Language Teaching. Moreover, the study found that when considering using CLT, language instructors are likely to be encountered with two types of challenges: linguistic and cultural, and professional depending upon possible certain factors. Based on the findings, some pedagogical recommendations are presented.

Keywords: EFL, ELT, CLT.

1. Introduction

English language teaching in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia depends, to a great extent, on the traditional methods. It follows methods such as Grammar Translation and Audio-lingual (Al-Seghayer 2015). Therefore, English teachers in Saudi Arabia use some techniques in order to perform these methods, including structural analysis, chorus work, answering questions, corrections, and translating texts. Also, most teachers rely on reading and giving some detailed information when they teach. This, in turn, takes much time and effort. The role of students in the process of learning is passive as they listen to their teacher’s explanation of grammar and vocabulary. They are instructed to memorize vocabulary and grammatical rules. In addition, students read passages and get Arabic translation for words. Al-Hazmi (2006) mentioned that in writing skills, students write according to the level of sentence only.

Additionally, Khan (2013) explained that the teaching and learning process inside classes in Saudi Arabia focuses essentially on reading and writing skills, neglecting listening and speaking skills as teachers pay less attention to them. Furthermore, Equally, Ahmad (2014) asserted that English teachers in Saudi Arabia pay great attention to grammar as a crucial component in teaching EFL. Studies in the Saudi context (Al-Seghayer, 2014; Alshammari, 2011; Kharesheh, 2012; Mahmoud, 2012) have shown that teachers use their mother tongue in translation as a language transfer in teaching English to their students in order to explain new words, explain grammar and make sure that their students understand. This, in turn, could lead to Saudi students’ deficiencies in the four basic language skills.
The claims that CLT is neglected in the Saudi context made it imperative to find out whether CLT is used at the university level and what challenges teachers would encounter when teaching EFL using CLT.

1.1. Research problem
No one can deny the role of teaching methods in learning and teaching EFL. Those methods help students to learn language skills effectively though each one has demerits. However, previous studies have shown that most teachers depend totally on the use of traditional methods in teaching EFL (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015; Alfallaj 1998; Alnoafaie 2013; Al-Seghayer, 2011; Al-Seghayer, 2014; Elyas 2015; Alrabaie, 2016). According to these studies, learners' language skills are not developing due to the use of teacher-centred methods. This study sought to find out what the most frequently used method in ELT from teachers' perspectives and hence identify some of the most difficulties they would encounter. The university under study is referred to as Saudi Middle University (SMU) to keep anonymity. Thus, the present study has tried to answer the following two research questions.

1.2. Research Questions
The study is based on the following research questions
1. What is the most frequently used EFL method in the Preparatory Year Program (PYP) in Saudi Middle University (SMU)?
2. What challenges do instructors encounter in adopting this method?

2. Literature Review
As a matter of fact, there are many reasons for focusing on this method. First, students need a way to enhance their fluency, so this method will help them. Secondly, this approach will help students to use authentic materials in learning EFL. Also, this method enables students to learn EFL in a meaningful way. Finally, most students need to improve their communicative competence, which is the most appropriate for them. However, many studies proved that instructors encounter many difficulties in adopting or applying this method.

Austain (2003) reveals in his study that the idea of adopting exams that focuses on the mastery of grammatical items, reading comprehension and vocabulary competence rather than on competence for communication may hinder applying this method. Also, Austain added that there is another reason that hinders applying this method relates to teachers’ lack of appropriate time to develop authentic communicative materials for the language courses they teach.

Additionally, Thompson (1996) found out that this method requires teachers to have sufficient time to prepare authentic instructional materials and communicative activities. Moreover, teachers' lack of in-depth understanding of the goals, principles and operational knowledge and skills of communicative language teaching also makes them adhered to traditional approaches.

Large class size is considered one of the constraints in adopting this method. In other words, there is a strong correlation between large class and instructional methods. Previous studies have revealed that large class size is considered as one of the challenges in the successful implementation of sound instructional approach at classroom levels (Karim, 2004; Musthafa, 2001; Mckeachie, 1986; Hailom, 1993). This is because it could be difficult for teachers to manage the practical implementation of communicative principles, activities and techniques like pair and group work and other cooperative learning activities. Moreover, large class size creates a strong influence on students learning outcomes as it limits classroom management, teacher-student interaction, and communicative based assessments.

Furthermore, studies (Adi, 2012; Larsen Freeman, 2003; Rao, 1996) have found out that certain types of constraints were present when applying CLT, the most relevant of which are teachers’ English proficiency, their lack of in-service training, classroom management problem, CLT textbooks and standardized paper-based tests. Misconceptions about CLT, Lack of enough time for materials development for the communicative class, were also some challenges encountered by teachers when using CLT or hinder them from teaching with the CLT.

3. Methodology
3.1. Instrument and Procedure
The questionnaire was administered to English instructors in PYP, female campus, and 25 of them participated. The purpose of this questionnaire was to identify the difficulties in adopting CLT in the preparatory year, female campus, SMU.

The data collecting tool used in this study was administered electronically in two phases. The present study adopted a questionnaire designed by Ozsevik (2010). Firstly, we surveyed the participants with one
question to find out what the most frequently teaching method they always used. Based on the results, a follow-up questionnaire about the most frequently used method was administered to answer the second research question. The data was analyzed electronically by representing the participants’ responses in percentage, as shown in the table. The participants were asked to rate items in terms of their difficulty as follows (1 = Not a challenge at all; 2 = A mild challenge; 3 = A challenge; 4 = A major challenge).

4. Results and Discussion
4.1. The most frequently used ELT method in PYP at SMU

The questionnaire aimed at exploring the most frequently used ELT method by instructors in PYP, at SMU, female campus. The results of the questionnaire, as shown in the figures below, show that (52.00%) of participants reported that they always use Communicative Language Teaching Method. Other methods are reported to be used less frequently with only (48.00%) always use Direct Method, (24.00%) always using Audio-Lingual method, (12.00%) always using Grammar Translation and (4.00%) always using Silent Way Method.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Method used</th>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Grammar Translation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12.00%</td>
<td>24.00%</td>
<td>28.00%</td>
<td>20.00%</td>
<td>16.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Communicative Language Teaching Method</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>52.00%</td>
<td>32.00%</td>
<td>12.00%</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Audio-Lingual Method</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>24.00%</td>
<td>28.00%</td>
<td>32.00%</td>
<td>8.00%</td>
<td>8.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Silent Way Method</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4.00%</td>
<td>8.00%</td>
<td>48.00%</td>
<td>32.00%</td>
<td>8.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Direct Method</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>48.00%</td>
<td>36.00%</td>
<td>12.00%</td>
<td>4.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Contrary to what has been found in the literature (Alfallaj, 1998; Alnofaie 2013; Al-Seghayer, 2011; Al-Seghayer, 2014; Eljas 2015; Alrabai, 2016), the present study found out that the most frequently used ELT method in PYP, female campus is Communicative Language Teaching. This finding could be attributable to some variables at play in the context of the study. Nearly 50 percent of the teachers who participated in the present study are native speakers of English. Hence, the challenge relevant to teachers’ linguistic and cultural proficiency is not a challenge to be considered. Furthermore, the majority of the participants hold higher degrees in EFL and has at least three years of experience.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. academic degrees of the teachers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
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</table>

The above table shows that the highest rate is given to Master of English (MA) (62.50%) descending to Master of Education (M.ED) (16.66%), Bachelor of English (BA) (16.66%), other (4.16%) and Doctorate Degree (PhD) (0.00%). This result indicates that the majority of English instructors (62.50%) have the academic degree of Master of English (MA).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3. How many hours of class do you teach a week?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaching hours per week</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of teachers</td>
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</table>

The above table shows that the highest rate is given to 9 hours (58.33%), descending to 14 hours (25.00%), 15 hours (16.66%) and 10 hours (0.00%). This result indicates that the majority of English instructors (58.33%) teach 9 hours in class per week.
The above table shows that the highest rate is given to (31-35) (37.50%) descending to, 10-15 (20.83%), 21-25 (16.66%), less than 10 (12.50%), 26-30 (12.50%), 16-20 (0.00%), 36-40 (0.00%) and 41 or more (0.00%). This result indicates that the average of students in the class is large.

4.2. The difficulties in adopting CLT in the preparatory year, female section, PSAU

Results as in the table show that with regard to the item, Teachers’ proficiency in spoken English isn’t sufficient. The majority have rated it as not a challenge at all (45.83%), descending to mild challenge (25.00%), major challenge (16.66%) and challenge (12.50%). This result indicates that the majority of English instructors (45.83%) have no challenge at all concerning proficiency in spoken English. This result can be attributable to the fact that nearly half of the participant are native speakers of English and could explain why the rest have rated English proficiency as a challenge and major challenge inconsistent with previous studies in similar EFL contexts (Adi, 2012; Larsen Freeman, 2003; Rao, 1996). Similarly, the item, Teachers lack knowledge about the appropriate use of language in context. The item, the knowledge about the target language (English) in culture, has shown nearly the same result. The same interpretation can be applied since the use of language in context of a specific target culture would not be challenging when comparing native speakers to non-native speakers of English.

On the other hand, challenges appear to have been rated by more teachers for the items that are more relevant to the profession rather than to the language and culture items. More than 50 percent of the teachers reported having challenges, major challenges, or mild challenges in opportunities to get CLT training. In the same vein, nearly 60 percent have found challenges or mild challenges in developing materials when adopting CLT for their classes. These results can be attributed to the large class size for those teachers. It seems that teaching hours are not a factor at play since the majority of English teachers (58.33%) teach 9 hours in class per week. These results are also consistent with previous studies. Ozsevik (2010) and Alasmari (2015) found that it was a major challenge for teachers to develop materials and have training opportunities. The reason behind this dichotomy in our result for the item, developing materials, could be because half our participants have a large class size. However, the majority should have the ability to develop materials for CLT classes based on their expertise and qualifications.

Misconception about CLT has shown to cause a mild challenge to (50.00%) of teachers and a major challenge to (12.50%) of them. It has been rated as not a challenge at all by (37.50%) of the teachers. Similarly, Alasmari (2015) found that it represented a challenge for most of his participants. Again, this could be referred to as teaching years and high qualifications.

Based on the results above, it is clear that nearly half of our English instructors have no challenge at all concerning proficiency in spoken English, lack of knowledge about the appropriate use of language in context, and the knowledge about the target language (English) in culture. These items are more relevant to the language, and culture competence teachers have, whether native or non-native speakers of English.
However, it could be argued that since half of the participants are native speakers of English, this could be why there is a matching dichotomy in terms of rating these items. On the other hand, in the more related items to the profession, the majority of English instructors reported having some kind of challenge either with the opportunities for them to get CLT in-service training, developing materials for communicative classes or with a misconception about CLT.

5. Conclusion

The principal finding of the present study is that CLT is the most frequently used method to teach English. Other methods were also used, according to the study. The present study findings have proved that there are challenges in adopting CLT in the preparatory year, female campus, SMU. These challenges are due to the opportunities for them to get training in CLT and getting little time to develop materials for communicative classes. This is relevant to what Austein (2003) mentioned in his study that there is a reason that hinders applying CLT relating to teachers’ lack of appropriate time to develop authentic communicative materials for the language courses they teach. Furthermore, these findings concur with Thompson (1996), who asserted that CLT requires teachers to have sufficient time to prepare authentic instructional materials and communicative activities.

Challenges in adopting CLT such as lack of training, focused exams, students’ communicative problems, class size, deficiency of English teachers' proficiency in oral skills and students' low English proficiency are consistent with previous studies (Adi, 2012; Larsen-Freeman, 2003; Hailom, 2003; Rao, 1996).

5.1. Recommendations

Based on the study findings, some recommendations are presented as follows:

1. Teachers, as well as students, should improve their language proficiency to adopt using CLT.
2. CLT should be used more in the classroom to help students enhance their fluency.
3. Teachers of EFL should get sufficient training to help them achieve the best outcomes when using CLT.
4. Educational institutes and schools should put into consideration the number of students inside the class as class size seems to affect the way of choosing the method of teaching.
5. Teachers should have sufficient time in preparing authentic instructional materials and communicative activities.
6. The study may be replicated in other Saudi universities as it was conducted at one university with a limited number of participants.

References