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University EFL learners' perceptions of communicative language teaching and learning

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore Slovak EFL learners' perceptions of the fundamental principles of communicative approach, which has been employed as the primary way of teaching foreign languages for the past five decades. Research participants were formed by 111 Slovak university EFL leaners – teacher trainees (n = 111), who were asked to demonstrate their level of agreement to the statements concerning communicative language teaching by responding to a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire. The calculated means indicate that overall, the research participants are in agreement with the selected principles of CLT as they agreed with 16 out of the 18 chosen statements. However, they appear to be neutral about two aspects of CLT, the use of native language at EFL lessons and discovering and investigating grammatical rules by learners themselves. Arising out of the research results, the conclusions are drawn, and pedagogical implications are discussed.

Keywords: CLT, communicative language teaching, communicative approach, L1, L2, EFL learner

1 Introduction

Communication language teaching (CLT) has been the approach widely used among teachers and instructors since the early 1970s (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). This method has been considered by many as the main approach to teaching foreign languages. However, as Farrell and Jacobs (2020, p. 3) maintain, "not many English language teachers or second language educators are in agreement or even clear in their own minds as to what exactly CLT is, and there exist as many diverse interpretations as there are language teachers and others in second language education". Further, it appears that grammar-based approaches, which are somewhat in the opposition to the CLT approach, may still be employed to varying degrees in plentiful countries worldwide (e.g., Wheeler, 2013 or Williams, 2017). Therefore, this study attempts to contribute towards this topic by examining Slovak university EFL students – teacher trainees – prospective English language teachers' perceptions of CLT. For the purposes of this research, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What are the respondents' attitudes and perceptions of CLT?
2. Which statements achieved the highest score?
3. Which statements achieved the lowest score?

2 Communicative language teaching and learning

Communicative language teaching (CLT) established as its objective the teaching of communicative competence (Richards, 2006). According to the CLT principles, language learners best learn when they take part in meaningful communication (Scriverner, 2011). Coelho (2004) maintains that the communicative competence consists of four components, namely structural (grammatical or linguistic) competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic (socio-cultural) competence, and strategic competence. The structural competence is concerned with the use of grammar, vocabulary phonology, and semantics (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). The discourse competence refers to combining words and sentences into coherent whole, which means that the text must be logical, reasonable, and well organized (Metruk, 2018; Romanowski, 2017). The socio-linguistic competence represents the ability to recognize and produce language that is relevant to particular contexts of communication (Coelho, 2004). Finally, the strategic competence is predominantly concerned with the use of verbal and non-verbal means of communication so as to avoid the communication breakdowns (McKenzie-Brown, 2012).

The main characteristics of the CLT involve the following (Benati, 2009; Gondová, 2012; Metruk, 2018):

- emphasis of meaning over form;
- errors are tolerated and regarded as an inseparable part of the teaching, placing emphasis to the learning process; attaching special significance to self-corrections;

- presentation of language aspects in contexts, not in isolation;
- all the language skills and systems are deemed important;
- language learners need to be actively involved in the teaching and learning process, doing plenty of pair-work and group-work communication activities;
- pupils and students bear responsibility for their learning;
- teachers usually perform the role of a facilitator, adopting the learner-centred approach rather than the teacher-centred approach;
- teachers take into consideration the differences, needs, and feelings of their learners;
- mother tongue is used when it facilitates learning or if it speeds it up;
- informal assessment assumes profound importance; learners need to be provided with plethora of positive feedback.

CLT thus approaches language learners from a different perspective. The learners are at the centre of attention, being actively involved in activities, working on all the language skills and systems. The teacher – facilitator organizes the teaching and learning process, creating positive learning atmosphere, leading their learners to discovering and investigating the rules on their own, and taking some responsibility for their learning. Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2013) and Součková (2020) also support this notion by claiming that the authoritative perception of an instructor is becoming overshadowed, and that rather than considering two distinctive roles – the teacher and the student ones, one ought to seek for some kind of a partnership. Plenty of pair-work and group-work activities are employed in order to activate as many learners in the classroom as possible.

Special attention is paid to feedback, placing particular emphasis on formative assessment. In connection with this, Gan and Leung (2020, p. 10) explain that "[t]here has been an increasing professional and policy interest in using formative assessment as part of the learning process in the classroom, with increasing numbers of educators regarding it as an effective means of closing the gap between students' current and desired performance". It means that it is more about offering feedback rather than concentrating on the performance (Brown, 2004). Providing learners with positive feedback, showing them where and how they can improve thus appears to be rather useful.

It should be also noted that CLT has been in recent years considerably influenced by modern digital technologies, which have spread rapidly worldwide (Cimermanová, 2017; Pokrivčáková, 2019). However, in spite of their overwhelming impact, technology does not substitute for teachers, but rather serve as a tool for facilitating the learning process and making it more appealing and suitable to younger generations, who grow up with technology.

2.1 Communicative language teaching vs grammar-translation method

The grammar-translation method (GTM), which is in some kind of an opposition to CLT, was considered to be the traditional way of teaching languages (Lee & Davis, 2020; Rafat, 2022). It was criticized as it only concentrated on literal and word-to-word fixed translations between L1 and L2, mother tongue being the medium trough which teaching takes place (Al-Maamari, Al-Hamzi & Al-Mamari, 2021; Qian, 2023). Further, vocabulary and grammar are presented in isolation, learners memorizing word lists and grammar rules. Students operate in artificial situations rather than acquiring language within meaningful and contextualized activities. The teacher predominantly employs upfront teaching, not taking learners' differences, needs, and feelings into account. The students are rather passive, taking notes and having opportunity to speak only when asked to.

Tab. 1: Differences between CLT and GTM (source: Wang, 2013, p. 22)

CLT	GTM
Attention to form and structure	Attention to meaning and communication
Emphasis on memorization	Emphasis on using
Teaching without contextualization	Teaching with contextualization
Emphasis on grammatical rules	Avoiding providing explicit grammatical rules
Emphasis on Translation	Avoid using translation
Emphasis on reading and writing	Emphasis on listening and speaking
Focus on linguistic competence	Focus on communicative competence
Focus on accuracy	Focus on fluency
Use of pattern drills	Peripheral use of drilling
Teacher-centered	Student-centered

Listening, speaking, and pronunciation are not important, and it is only the summative assessment which receives emphasis; formative assessment is scarcely present (Celce-Murcia et al., 2014; Gondová, 2012; Metruk, 2018; Salkind, 2008). Kováčiková (2015) also explains that not only is the grammar-translation method out of date, it also hinders motivation and decreases the eagerness of learners with learning differences. Table 1 summarizes the key differences between the two methods.

Despite the fact that CLT has been widely acknowledged as the primary teaching method, GTM (and its modified forms) are still employed in a number of countries regarding foreign language education (e.g., Nassaji, 2015; Piasecka, 2013, or Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Thus, EFL learners may be quite familiar with this way of teaching languages. The key question then arises whether the students are able to use language effectively and if they can successfully accomplish the purpose of communication – goals which are less likely to be achieved when GTM is employed.

Prospective teachers – students of teaching study programmes at Slovak universities are taught CLT as a principal way of teaching languages. However, it is likely that during their lower-secondary and upper-secondary school levels, they might have experienced grammar-based teaching to some extent. Further, they may not entirely agree with all the principles of CLT. Therefore, this study attempts to examine the attitudes towards CLT as perceived by EFL teacher trainees.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research background and research questions

In order to explore the respondents' perceptions of CLT, a questionnaire survey has been chosen as a research method. Three research questions were formulated:

1. What are the respondents' attitudes and perceptions of CLT?
2. Which statements achieved the highest score?
3. Which statements achieved the lowest score?

3.2 Research participants

Using the convenience sampling, the research participants were formed by the B.A. and M.A. university student trainees of the study programme Teacher Training of English Language and Literature at a Slovak university. The total of 111 students (n = 111) were employed, out of those being 85 females and 26 males. They were 21.6 years of age on average, 105 of them being of Slovak and 6 Ukrainian nationality. At the time of completing the questionnaire, they had been studying English for approximately 12.9 years.

3.3 Instruments and procedure

The selected research method for the purposes of data collection was the questionnaire. This instrument that is commonly used for instances such as this one can be regarded both popular and relevant to the research objectives (Dewaele, 2018; Ponto, 2015; Swamy, 2007). The questionnaire was developed by the author. After that, the instrument was evaluated by author's peers, which resulted in a revision of statements. Its final form consisted of altogether two sections – demographic information and 18 statements (all the statements are in Table 3. The quantitative data were amassed using a Likert scale, which, according to Joshi et. al (2015), refers to a set of statements where participants are asked to express their level of agreement from 1 to 5, where 1 corresponds to a strong disagreement and 5 corresponds to a strong agreement. The reliability of questionnaire was calculated by using the Cronbach's alpha formula, which deals with the measure of internal consistency. The coefficient was calculated at 0.8, on the basis of which the questionnaire can be regarded to have a good reliability for this research (George & Mallery, 2003; Hesse-Biber & Nagy Leavy, 2011). After that, the questionnaire was distributed using the MS Forms platform.

In order to adequately understand and present the level of agreement of the respondents, the interpretation arises out of the study conducted by Sarigöz (2016, p. 213).

$$\mathrm{RO} = \frac{\mathrm{HV} - \mathrm{LV}}{\mathrm{NO}} = \frac{5 - 1}{5} = 0.80$$

RO: range of options
HV: highest value
LF: lowest value
NO: number of options

Therefore, the respondents' level of agreement can be interpreted as follows.

Tab. 2: Mean scores interpretation

Mean score	Score interpretation	Level of agreement
1.00 – 1.80	Strongly disagree	Very low
1.81 – 2.60	Disagree	Low
2.61 – 3.40	Undecided	Neutral
3.41 – 4.20	Agree	High
4.21 – 5.00	Strongly agree	Very high

1.4 Results

Respondents' responses are illustrated in Table 3, ranked in descending order according to the calculated score.

Tab. 3: Questionnaire items mean scores

Statement	Mean
It is important that teacher creates relaxed and friendly atmosphere in which language learning can actually take place.	4.68
It is important that at the beginning of a course, teacher and learners on rules which are then obeyed by both parties throughout the course.	4.45
Students need to be actively engaged in the learning process.	4.44
Learners develop their own routes to language learning, progress at different rates, and have different needs and motivations for language learning.	4.41
The goal of language learning is for English language learners to be able to use the new language both accurately and fluently.	4.40
English language learners have to take (some) responsibility for their learning.	4.24
Students' needs and learning styles (intelligences) need to be taken into consideration by the teacher.	4.21
It is important that good language teachers also appropriately employ modern digital technologies at their English lessons.	4.21
All language skills (listening, reading, writing, speaking) and systems (grammatical, phonological, lexical, discoursal, functional) are important.	4.16
Informal assessment is important; English language learners ought to be provided with plenty of positive feedback during English lessons.	4.14
Errors at English lessons should be tolerated as they form an inseparable part of the language learning process.	4.06
It is necessary to do a lot of pair work and (small) group work activities at English lessons so that learners can actually practice English.	4.05
Teacher initiates at English lessons interaction between students – students ought to interact a great deal with each other.	4.05
Classroom is a community where learners learn through collaboration and sharing.	4.05
Teachers occupy the role of a facilitator, acknowledging the learner-centered approach instead of teacher-centered approach.	3.77
L1 (native language) is used during English lessons only when it facilitates learning or if it makes learning faster.	3.70
Students need to be given space to induce or discover English grammar rules on their own (rather than being explained the rules by the teacher at the beginning of the lesson or before the given grammatical structure is dealt with).	3.04
L1 (native language) actually plays no (or very little) role during English lessons.	2.89

The first eight statements fall into the "strongly-agree" category as the scores within the answers range between 4.21 – 4.68. Students clearly acknowledge when they can learn and acquire language in relaxed and friendly atmosphere, being actively involved in the teaching and learning process, sticking to clear rules which have been introduced at the beginning of the course. They understand that teachers take into consideration their differences,

needs, motivation, desires, and styles, and that they also must shoulder some responsibility for their learning. They deem both fluency and accuracy important (traditionally, the principal focus was on accuracy) so that they will be able to use acquired language items both fluently and accurately. Finally, they are aware of the significance of employing modern digital technologies in the process as they attach high importance to this aspect of teaching as well.

The following eight statements in Table 3 fall into the "agree" category, demonstrating a high level of agreement. It is important that learners work on all their language skills and systems (traditionally, it was grammar, vocabulary, reading, and writing which received excessive emphasis), by performing plenty of pair-work and group-work activities so that they actually have a chance to practice the language (GTM preferred individual or whole-class work). Thus, the interaction student-student, as opposed to the traditional teacher-student interaction, is supported within a community (classroom) where learners acquire language through collaboration and sharing, teachers taking on the role of a facilitator (traditionally, it was the upfront – teacher-centred teaching that was prevalent).

The respondents also attach high importance to the concepts of mistake (errors) and feedback in EFL classes. They agree that errors they make while acquiring new language items constitute a natural part of their learning process (mistakes were not allowed within the GTM approaches), which is directly and inextricably connected to informal assessment. Learners expect that their teacher provides them with plenty of positive feedback (formative assessment received scant attention in GTM) so that they are praised for their efforts and, furthermore, they obtain invaluable information on which areas of language they need to work on more. The last statement which falls within the "agreement range" is that the native language is employed only when it facilitates learning or when it makes learning faster. Students seem to agree with this approach in terms of using L1 in L2 classes; however, at the same time, it should be noted that another statement concerning native language "L1 (native language) actually plays no (or very little) role during English lessons" only achieved the score of 2.89 (this is one of the two statements that fall within the "neutral" category), making it the item students expressed the lowest level of agreement with. On the one hand, they feel that L1 should only be effectively used in instances when it speeds learning up. On the other hand, they do not seem to agree that mother tongue actually plays little or no role, hence some reluctance on giving up using L1 when learning a foreign language. It seems that respondents still somehow consider their native language to be (to some extent) an inseparable part of learning L2 (traditionally, L1 was regarded as profoundly important in foreign language classes).

The second statement in the "neutral" category concerned discovering grammar rules by students themselves rather than providing mere explanation at the beginning of the lesson or before the given grammatical structure is taught and practiced. Thus, it is also this statement that appears to have some connection with traditional approaches to teaching languages since within CLT, students predominantly attempt to investigate and discover the grammatical rules on their own or with their peers (in pairs and groups) during understanding and noticing stages of teaching and learning grammar, teacher performing the role of a facilitator. The teacher's level of "intervention" and potential "explanation" of rules depends on a number of factors, such as the difficulty and complexity of the given grammar, specificity of learners and their heterogeneity, current classroom conditions, level of learners, etc.

To sum up the results, students agree with the majority of CLT statements. Only two statements reached the neutral level of agreement, while none of the statements respondents disagree with. Overall, it can be concluded that they agree with the principles of CLT.

Conclusion

Communicative language teaching has been used as a principal method of teaching foreign languages worldwide for approximately five decades. It was created as an opposition to grammar-based approaches (Rambe, 2017). However, as was noted earlier, GTM may still be in existence in a number of countries around the world, which means that although the CLT has been in existence for approximately half of a century, not all language teachers use it as a primary way in terms of language education.

This article attempted to explore the EFL learners' – teacher trainees' perceptions of CLT. Overall, it can be concluded that they agree with the majority of questionnaire statements (16 out of 18) – foundations of CLT, but it is suggested that further research is conducted in terms of using L1 at English classes as well as discovering and figuring out grammar rules on their own rather than having it explained by the teacher. Both aspects represent the key principles of CLT. The first one – the use of L1 may be a controversial topic for some teachers and scholars as opinions on this matter vary, and it may be doubly difficult to exactly state and define the extent to which native language "can" be employed at L2 classes. However, the research results indicate that EFL students do not want to entirely give up on employing L1 in L2 classes.

Further, it is also inducing and discovering grammatical rules by learners themselves which they expressed a neutral level of agreement to. In CLT, the teacher does not explicitly provide learners (explain) grammatical rules,

but rather than that they encourage their learners to investigate them on their own (through pair-work or group work activities with the help of their peers). Only after that, some explanation may take place.

Finally, it is also modern digital technologies and their use within CLT that the students agree with. This relatively new facet of education (especially with regard to m-learning and smart devices) represents new challenges for EFL teachers. It should be, however, emphasized that technology does not substitute for instructors, but rather complements the teaching and learning process.

As it is with every study, some limitations, arising out of the research design, can be identified. A larger research sample would possibly provide more reliable data. Further, employing more research methods, e.g. focus-group interviews or EFL lesson observations would definitely prove useful. Therefore, future exploration in this area may take these limitations into account, along with concentrating to a higher degree on statements with the lower level of agreement in order to throw new light on the perception of communicative approach by EFL students within the realms of foreign language education.

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