

**The Problems Faced by Sixth-Year Preparatory School Pupils in
English as a Result of the Application of the
Communicative Language Teaching Method (CLT) In This
Stage.**

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I. Introduction

Although great efforts have been exerted to enrich foreign language teaching, there is still a considerable number of learners who complain that they have never learnt to “really use the language”, in spite of having had a lot of oral work in the classroom where the foreign language is being taught. So, it is supposed that people working in the field of foreign language teaching continue and increase their efforts to achieve the goal of mastering the use of the foreign language in different daily communications (Yalden, 1981: 1).

Brown (1987:11) points out that a glance through the past century or so of language teaching gives the reader an idea of how varied are interpretations about the best method of teaching a foreign language. Methods have often come and gone with each method claiming to have realized the best results.

Teaching methods are the application of theories, and it is no surprise to see a variety of such applications. Today the single greatest challenge is to move beyond the teaching of rules of grammar to the point that we teach our students how to communicate effectively in the foreign language. Many teachers and material designers believe that grammar classes and texts should be organized according to the functions or purposes that language serves. In a grammar class, they believe, students should be taught, for example, how to ask for information, how to make suggestions or accept and refuse invitations, since these activities represent the real and authentic situations in which language is used (Mckay, 1987: xii-xiv).

Therbury (1999:19) goes as far as saying that "studying the rules of grammar is simply a waste of valuable time". But Brown (2000:14) emphasizes that we should distinguish between grammar as a means to the achievement of proficiency in a foreign language and grammar as an end by itself. Celce Marita and Larsen – Freeman, (1999:1) state that over the years, language teachers have alternated between focusing on language use and language forms. They show a disagreement on whether learning to communicate by actual communicating in the foreign language or by learning the lexicogrammar (the words and grammatical structures) of the foreign language. The controversy

is about the different means of achieving the same end. In line with this conviction that communication in the foreign language is a basic aim of teaching that language, the material of Book 8 (taught at the sixth preparatory stage in Iraqi secondary schools) shows that there is a serious attempt by the authors of the book to include some of the different functions of language in the material of Book 8, as they consider these functions essential for developing pupils' communicative abilities in English.

These functions have been introduced systematically for the first time in the syllabus of this stage, though there are some examples of such functions presented in earlier stages and are represented by some dialogues but with no emphasis on them by teachers of English.

The present paper is intended to investigate the major problems faced by Iraqi learners of English as a result of applying the communicative method of teaching in the secondary schools.

The major tool used in the study is a test designed to elicit some information from the pupils about the problems they face. The test has been given to a random sample of pupils (30 pupils in the sixth preparatory stage, who have recently joined a revision course in English before embarking on the ministerial (Baccalaureate) examination). The participants in this course

have, in fact, come from different secondary schools in Najaf Governorate. In order to make the test as representative as possible of these problems, only two pupils from each school were involved in the study.

At the outset, the test was hoped to be a means of eliciting some information about the difficulties faced by those pupils learning English by the communicative approach. In addition to the test given in this study, the researcher has referred to many references in the field of foreign language teaching to see the problems cited by these references.

II. The Aim of the Study

Though pupils of sixth-year preparatory schools in Iraq exert continuous efforts to master the use of functional notional activities taught at this stage, they often complain that they face many difficulties in achieving this objective. The teachers of English in this stage also show a similar concern about the same point. The failure of those pupils is embodied in their poor performance in the monthly, mid-year and final examinations in English. Moreover, they can not use these functions properly and spontaneously in different daily situations.

The present paper aims at investigating the real problems pupils at this stage face in learning the new material based on the

communicative language approach. The researcher proposes that exploring the real cause or causes of pupils' failure in this respect will lead to workable suggestions and recommendations which may lead to improving pupils' level of proficiency in mastering and handling the communicative material of book 8 and consequently better results may be achieved by the pupils in English at this stage.

III. The Teacher as a Pivotal Element in Teaching Language Skills

Brown (1987:6) assures that contemporary dictionaries show that learning is "acquiring or getting of knowledge of a subject or a skill by study, experience or instruction". On the other hand, teaching may be defined as "showing or helping someone to learn how to do something ". Learning may imply the following:

- 1- It is getting.
- 2- It is retention.
- 3- It is relatively permanent but subject to forgetting.
- 4- It involves some form of practice.
- 5- It involves a change of behaviour.

Teaching is guiding and facilitating learning, enabling the learner to learn by setting the conditions for learning (Ibid: 7). Krashen (1987:34) thinks that language teaching helps when it is

the main source for foreign students who do not have a chance to get input outside the classroom. This is the same thing in our present situation where the classroom is most often the sole place for pupils to receive instructions in the foreign language.

Byrne (1980:39) states that teaching languages is thought of as developing a set of performance skills in the learner. Teaching aims to enable the learner to participate to some degree and for certain purposes as a member of a community other than his own. This is what a lot many Iraqi learners of English aspire to achieve.

Because the teacher plays a significant role in foreign language teaching, no successful learning can take place without this role. When one comes to the teaching of Book 8, one can notice the significant role of the teacher in guiding the pupils towards the adequate mastery of English. Because, in our context, the learner has no opportunity to practise the language he learns in the classroom in authentic daily situations, the classroom turns to be the only place in which learners can practise the use of the foreign language. Hence, the teacher should compensate for the absence of such realistic opportunities. This compensation can take the form of extensive practice of the different functions of the foreign language as they are presented by the textbook.

IV. The Communicative Approach.

A review of literature on communicative competence reveals many meanings of the concept and the way it should be used in second or foreign language instruction. We realize two viewpoints:

A- Communicative competence includes grammatical competence.

B- It does not.

The second view has (3) bases as follows:

- 1- Children focus more on being understood than on speaking grammatically.
- 2- Full grammatical competence comes at a later stage.
- 3- Language learning is more effective when it involves real communicative acts (internet).

Schmitt (2002:7) states that in CLT, the focus is on learner's message and fluency rather than on grammatical accuracy. Historically, CLT is seen as a response to the Audio-lingual Method and as extension or development of the Notional-Functional syllabus. CLT is characterized as a broad approach to teaching rather than as a teaching method with a clearly defined set of classroom practices. As such it is most often defined as a list of general principles or features. One of the most recognized

lists of such features is David Nunan's (1991) list of features. These include:

- 1- Emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction, by using the target language.
- 2- The use of authentic texts in learning situations.
- 3- Providing opportunities for learners to focus not only on language but also on the learning process itself.
- 4- Enhancing the learner's own personal experiences.
- 5- Linking classroom language learning with language activities outside the classroom.

Finochiaro and Brumfit (1983: 91- 3) give the following list of the CLT.

- 1- In CLT, meaning is paramount.
- 2- Dialogues centre on communicative functions, provided that they come from the inside of the learner.
- 3- Contextualization is a basic principle.
- 4- Language learning is learning to communicate.
- 5- Any device that helps learners to communicate is accepted.
- 6- Translation may be used when needed.
- 7- The use of the native language is allowed.
- 8- Communicative competence is the desired goal.
- 9- Teachers can help learners in any way that motivates them to communicate.

10- Fluency is a primary goal.

CLT is considered an "umbrella" approach of language teaching that has become the accepted "norm" in the field of Foreign Language Teaching. It is also believed to be a catchall term, not every one agrees on its interpretation or application.

CLT is the product of dissatisfaction with previous methods of teaching especially, the audio-lingual method and the grammar-translation methods. CLT makes use of real-life situations that necessitate communication. The teacher's role is to set up situations that learners may encounter in real life. A teacher should talk less and listen more. That's to say, this approach is learner-centered. Students do most of the talking and the classroom is far from being quiet. The behavior of the teacher and the learners should be as similar as possible to the behavior of people in the "real world".

The teacher should work as a facilitator. He sets up exercises and gives direction, but the learners do much more speaking than in a traditional classroom.

CLT also emphasizes social and situational contexts of communication. Addressing a person in the proper way can make a big difference in having a successful exchange.

Learners in CLT learn about language in social contexts like the difference between speaking with an elder and a peer.

Now most teachers of foreign language claim to use a communicative approach in some way or another and no one wishes to be described as non-communicative teacher.

Littlewood (1981) assures that one of the most characteristic features of CLT is that it pays systematic attention to functional as well as structural aspects of language.

The concept of communicative competence was originally developed by the sociolinguist Hymes (1972) as a response to Chomsky's model of competence/performance. This concept was further developed in the early 1980s by Canale and Swain. According to Canale (1983:5), communicative competence refers to the underlying systems of knowledge and skills required for communication. The communicative competence comprises four types of competence as follows:

- Grammatical competence.
- Sociocultural competence.
- Discourse competence.
- Strategic competence.

Hymes' (1972) students do not simply learn the linguistic structure and grammar rules, but they have to learn how to use the language properly. In CLT, what matters most is not whether the learners learn to use the language accurately, but whether they can get their message across.

V. Grammatical Structures vs. Communicative Functions.

Although there are several advantages for organizing a grammar class according to grammatical structures, there is danger that learners may not be able to communicate effectively which is the main purpose of grammar classes. Because of this potential danger many teachers and material designers believe that grammar classes and texts should be organized according to the functions that language serves. (McKay, 1987: xii-xiv).

Widdowson (1989) insists that it is a mistake to concentrate solely on functions considerations while ignoring form altogether.

Halliday (1973) sees language as a means of functioning in society and he introduces three functions of language:

- 1- Ideational (telling people facts or experiences).
- 2- Interpersonal (maintaining personal relationships with people).
- 3- Textual (expressing the connection and organization within a text. For example, clarifying, summarizing, and signaling the beginning and end of an argument).

A communicative approach helps learners to become fluent, but it is insufficient to ensure comparable level of accuracy. Nunan (2001: 9) states that language is seen as a unified system

and the ultimate aim of the learner is to approach the target language norms of the native speaker.

VI. A Description of the Functional Material of Book 8:

Book 8 " comprises (15) units. Units 13, 14, and 15 are review units. Units 1, 2, 3, 7, 9, and 10 present different functions of language like: introduction, greeting, leave-taking, offer, invitation, apology, expressing opinions, and other functions of language. These functions are presented in Book 8 for the first time, and there is no way to control their use other than memorizing them by the pupils. The difficulty arises when we know that these functions are new for the learner at this stage. He might have met some of these functions in previous stages of his study represented by some dialogues, but not in such density as the case now in the present stage (the sixth preparatory stage). There are other activities in all the units of the book which all make a heavy burden on the shoulders of pupils in this stage. Because the material is extensive, teachers often find themselves in need for more time to cover all the functions of the book.

VII. The Time Allotted For Practice by Pupils

Time is no doubt a paramount factor in the process of teaching a foreign language. Many authorities emphasize the importance of time in learning a foreign language.

Dubin et al (1986: 32) assume that "the time available for the acquisition of the target language is a key factor ".

Because of the limitations of time, teachers at this stage find themselves lagging behind the application of their weekly or annual plans. Due to the many occasions during the school year, a lot of time is wasted now and then. This is exactly what Mathews (1985: 203) emphasizes when he states that " in secondary schools the teaching time is lost for variety of reasons, and it would be unwise to adopt a textbook which provides too much material for the teaching hours available”.

In this stage pupils have 5-6 periods weekly. Each period lasts for 45 minutes including the time allotted for checking absentees or checking pupils' homework. So a considerable portion of the teacher's time in the classroom is wasted. Moreover, each unit of Book 8 presents different activities like: dialogues, reading comprehension passages, pronunciation, spelling, and the time allotted for discussing the home reading activity represented by the tale “Merchant of Venice”. So the time given to present, explain and practise the material on functions is really not enough.

During the teaching period, teachers do most of the activities of the textbook, giving only inadequate time for learners (pupils) to practise the use of functions. Pupils often depend on memorizing the given functions. These formulas pile up to the extent that the pupil finds himself lost amidst a variety of language functions. So by all considerations, the time given for covering this new material is not enough for digesting it by the pupils.

The time limitation is not an imaginary thing but has been reported by most teachers of “English” whom the researcher has interviewed about this point. Not only this, but the researcher himself has taught the material in the sixth preparatory stage for more than ten successive years which gave him a full conviction that teachers of English are in no position to give their pupils enough time to practise the material. Because the communicative material in book 8 forms a basic portion of the whole material, this portion does not receive its due share of practice on the part of the learner

VIII. A Description of the Test

One major tool used in the present study is a test based on the functional-notional points included in Book 8. The test

comprises (10) items which appear in most of the units of Book 8. This test is based on the functional material of the Book.

The test has been given to a random sample of (30) pupils of the sixth preparatory stage who have just joined a course in English in order to prepare themselves for the final examination in English, i.e., the Ministerial Examination. To motivate those pupils to respond seriously to the test's proceedings, they have been informed by their teacher to answer the question to the best of their knowledge of the material. He would not receive any blank paper. So

the sample's responses were supposed to be representative of the material learned by those pupils during their study of the subject for the year 2006-2007. The pupils in the sample have come from different secondary schools in the Governorate of Najaf as it has been stated before.

These items of the test include questions about different language functions like: introduction, leave taking, suggestion, apologizing and others. These will appear in the appendix at the end of this paper.

The time given for answering the (10) items was one hour, which was enough as the researcher thinks. The testees had been furnished with the suitable conditions for the test like putting them in an air-conditioned room. The vigilants (the researcher and the teacher) tried to make

the whole testees feel at ease. So the testees were expected to do their best in answering the questions given.

IX. An Analysis of Pupils' Responses

In the end of the test time, the test papers were collected and then corrected by the researcher. The responses of the testees showed the following results:

Item (1): This item is about introduction. Only (6) out of (30) responses were correct. Pupils' responses show that they were not able to distinguish between formal introduction and personal introduction. (5) Responses show that these pupils do not distinguish between “may” and “my”, so they used “my” instead of “may” producing something like: My I introduce.....? (10) Pupils were confused that they could not distinguish between introduction and invitation, and this is embodied by using the expression: would you like me my friend.

Item (2): This item is about seeing people off. Only (11) responses out of (30) were correct. Some pupils confused seeing off with greeting by using expressions like: Good bye- Hello.

Item (3): This is about invitation. (6) Responses were correct. Some pupils confused invitation with suggestion and preference.

Item (4): This item is about suggestion. (5) Responses were correct. (6) pupils repeated the expression: I suggest you to go

instead of using the correct formula: I suggest you go ..., (10) pupils used: I suppose go.

Item (5): is about disagreement. (15) Responses out of (30) were correct. (3) pupils used a form of apology by saying: “I can’t come”. There are (6) responses which were eccentric like the expressions: I see the winter is bad; No it is very cold; or No, thing that is the summer.

Item (6): It is about location. (8) Responses were correct. (15) Pupils used eccentric expressions like: Go Street, take the traffic light, Go down to the traffic, Go start, take the left or take the traffic.

Item (7): This item is about asking for permission. (8) Responses were correct. (22) Pupils did not respond to this item. Some of the eccentric expressions used are: Please go out, excuse me can you excuse me I leave, can you get let me to go and I promise to leave.

Item (8): This item is about prevention and inhibition. (8) Responses were correct. Some of the eccentric expressions are: I wond you, this dangerous to go, I prevent you that dangerous, do not going there and I prevent in that.

Item (9): This item is about non-necessity. Only (4) responses were correct. (10) Pupils did not respond. There are some eccentric expressions like: I think that shirt, was not necessity to

buy, I-non necessity and I was not see to nessier. This function was confused with the expression of opinion.

Item (10): This item is about disagreement with others' preferences. (9) Responses were correct. Some of the eccentric expressions are: I do not thing, I like 7 up but I like a pepsi.

X. The Problems of Using the CLT Approach in Teaching the Foreign Language

The most outstanding problems ensuing from using the CLT approach can be stated as follows:

- 1- Krashen (1987: 4) emphasizes that a lot many books on methodology are based on what seems to work in the classroom, but they are not field-tested. So is the case with Book 8.
- 2- CLT tends to promote fluency over accuracy, and there is the fear that the learners will lose accuracy at the expense of fluency.
- 3- One of the principles of CLT is that the teacher speaks less than his pupils, but in actual practice, we notice that the reverse is true. The teacher hardly gives enough time to his pupils to practise the daily communications. As a result, the learner does not get adequate opportunities to practise the language.

4- In most situations, especially in Iraq, the learner does not use the foreign language outside the classroom. The teacher is the only person to communicate with, while the CLT approach insists that the teacher should be given the minimum time to speak.

5- The classroom context is used to create activities to teach learners how to react in real world situations, and not to fake real world situations. This view is supported by Littlewood (1981: 44) who considers a classroom as an artificial environment for learning and using a foreign language.

6- The teacher can not decide which functions are most useful for his students, and as a result, there will be a problem of how to sequence these functions in his daily or annual plan of teaching.

7- The learner is aware of the artificiality of any language function that takes place in the classroom. This is what Wilkins (1974: 83) assures.

8- Widdowson (1989) emphasizes that the sole communication on functional considerations while ignoring form altogether is a mistake. Just relying too heavily on rules of grammar often lead to dissociation from any consideration of appropriateness, relying too heavily on using language appropriately can lead to a lack of necessary grammatical knowledge and of the ability to compose or decompose sentences with reference to it. Schmitt (2002:7) supports the above argument when he states that a communicative approach helps learners to become fluent, but it is insufficient to ensure comparable levels of accuracy.

9- There is a gap between what the teacher wants his pupils to learn and what they themselves actually want to. This is evident of what those pupils say or write. (Ibid: 11). In agreement with this view Larsen-Freeman (1986) believes that there are no reliable ways of knowing what learners have learned at the end of any lesson, and what they will retain in

the long term. This point is really supported by the responses of pupils to the items of the test in this research.

10- Normal conversation does not give the speaker enough time to think about the use of rules (Krashen, 1987:6). Because of this problem accuracy may be lost at the expense of appropriacy.

11- The learner may be involved in what he is saying that he does not attend to how he is saying it. On the other hand, performers may be so concerned with conversation that they can not speak with any real fluency. (Ibid: 16-17).

XI. The Problems Explored Through the Test

In addition to the problems stated in (X) above, there are the following problems of CLT approach which are based on the information elicited from the responses of the sample included in this study. These problems are:

1- Learners of sixth year preparatory schools face difficulty in recalling the exact formula of a certain function.

2- There is confusion between the different functions as had been stated in point (IX) above.

3- Learners face the problem of understanding or comprehending what they are exactly required to do in the instruction. The vocabulary used in some instructions seems to be unfamiliar for some pupils.

4- The difficulty of using the suitable pronouns when responding to instructions. Pupils seem to have no mastery of using the English pronouns properly.

5- Although the items of the test were only (10), the testees took a rather long period of time to answer the test. They took about 70 minutes to finish the task, though they left some items without giving any answer. So when learners are put in real life situations, they are expected to hesitate,

and fail to perform effectively, and they may produce incorrect and confused expressions.

6- As learners understood the given instructions at different levels, they are expected to misunderstand each other when they are called on to act certain functions or perform in daily situations.

XII. Findings and Recommendations

The following findings and recommendations can be stated on the basis of the analysis and observations in this study.

A .Findings:

These include:

1- In spite of some awkward responses of the learners, they show some kind of development towards achieving an ability to communicate in the foreign language. An investigation of pupils' responses in the test proves that.

2- The time allotted for covering the functions in Book 8 is not enough. A lot many functions have been presented in comparison with the time available for the teacher.

3- The eccentric expressions produced by some pupils support the concept of "interlanguage" introduced by Selinker (1972) as Corder (1981: 2) refers to that. Richards and Schmidt (1992: 27) define interlanguage as a type of language produced by second or foreign language learners who are in the process of learning a language. This language is different from the native speaker's language and the foreign language.

4-Learners are not given adequate opportunities to practise the different functions presented by Book 8. And as a result we cannot expect the

learners to perform adequately when they are exposed to real daily conversations.

5-The lack of authenticity makes pupils feel that they are just performing mimic acts of communication.

6-The presentation of new functions influences previously presented functions. This is detected from the testees' responses.

7-The presentation of a certain function is not supplemented with the suitable social rules which operate to determine what is appropriate and what is not appropriate in a given situation.

8-The instructions given to the learners to respond to a certain function are rather difficult to learn owing to some unfamiliar vocabulary or structures.

B. Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the previous findings.

1-Because the different formulas need memorization on the part of the pupils, they should be presented in smaller doses, i.e., the material can be divided, for instance, on three years starting from the fourth secondary school. In so doing the learners can succeed in controlling these different functions.

2-Teachers should try to create situations in which the learner is motivated to respond to them. They should try to create an atmosphere similar to real conversational situations.

3- Pupils should be given more freedom to move inside the classroom and to exchange views with their peers .The teacher can give the notion and then the different language functions follow.

4- Teachers should train their pupils on oral instructions. The present situation in our schools depend only on the written form whether in given quizzes by the teacher or in the monthly, mid-year and final examinations.

5-Practising the given function in the classroom is very important, and teachers should always be instigators of such practices.

6-Only competent teachers should be allowed to teach pupils at this stage owing to the difficulty of the material.

7-Efficient teachers can be delegated to countries where English is spoken as a native language especially to Britain or America. If this is a costly suggestion, they can be delegated to neighboring countries where there are institutes run by native speakers of English. The delegates can take courses there in order to improve their abilities in using the language of communication. If possible these institutes can be opened in Iraq when the security status becomes better.

8-The present textbooks should be supplemented by real life daily conversations in order to be practiced by the learners.

Adhering to the present textbooks in our schools may not give the opportunity to the learners to improve their level of proficiency in English.

9-One or two periods a week in the present programme in English can be dedicated for conversations only .No other activities should be presented during these periods.

10-The listening comprehension activity should be activated in our secondary schools. Learners should be trained and encouraged to engage in active processes of listening for meaning.

11- The units of books: 6, 7, and 8 should be abridged in order to dedicate the surplus time for practice by pupils.

12-learners should always be exposed to films which contain English daily conversations in which the actors speak the language slowly, and then gradually they are exposed to speeches with a normal speed until learners get the desired proficiency in the foreign language communications.

13-Learners should be encouraged to practise the language even at their leisure time or at home. They can also communicate with their peer pupils or even they can talk to themselves as if in soliloquy.

14- There should be a kind of balance between the materials that improve appropriacy and those which improve accuracy.

Appendix

The test

Read the following instructions and answer as required in the brackets according to the material you studied in Book 8:

1. How do you introduce your friend Jack to George?
2. Your neighbors will leave to Cairo next week. What do you say to him? How would he respond?
3. Invite your classmate to a party. How would he refuse?
4. Your brother feels sick. What do you suggest for him?
5. Joseph thinks that winter is a nice season. Disagree with him.
6. Someone wants to get to the petrol station. How do you tell him the way? Use (traffic lights – left – right)

7. You work in an office. Ask your boss to give you a leave.
8. Prevent your friend from going near to the machine. Use (dangerous).
9. Samir bought a new shirt. Show non-necessity.
10. Jack likes 7up. Disagree with his preference.

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الخلاصة :

تناول هذا البحث أهم المشاكل التي يواجهها طلاب الصف السادس الإعدادي في مادة اللغة الانكليزية والناجمة عن تطبيق المنهج التخطيبي في تعليم اللغة الأجنبية ويركز البحث على أهمية تعلم لغة التخاطب اليومي في تعلم اللغات الأجنبية حيث إن هناك إجماع من قبل أكثر المتخصصين في مجال التعليم على ضرورة إعطاء أهمية خاصة لهذه الطريقة في تعليم اللغة الأجنبية مع الحاجة إلى عدم إغفال أهمية تدريس اللغة كمجموعة من التراكيب القوا عديّة التي لا غنى للمتعلّم عنها.

ولعل من ابرز هذه المشاكل هو عدم ممارسة المتعلمين للغة التخاطب كون إن الصف هو المكان الوحيد الذي يمارسون فيه استخدام اللغة الأجنبية وان التطبيقات محدودة وغير حقيقية ويخلص البحث إلى أهمية توزيع هذه المادة اللغوية على ثلاث سنوات دراسية ابتداء من الصف الرابع الإعدادي ثم الخامس والسادس. كما توصل البحث إلى أهمية الممارسة المستمرة من قبل الدارسين وذلك من اجل إحكام السيطرة على الصيغ المختلفة المستخدمة في لغة التخاطب كالاعتذار والاقتراح وتقديم النفس وهذه الممارسة يمكن إن تمتد إلى خارج الصف حيث يستطيع الطالب إن يمارس استخدام اللغة مع زملاءه أو حتى مع نفسه في صيغة مناجاة النفس.