

THE CHALLENGES OF LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN COMMUNICATIVE APPROACHES IN HIGHER EDUCATION



SCAN ME

Enes ISMETI 

¹ South East European University, Faculty of Languages, Cultures and Communication, enes.ismeti@hotmail.com

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to look at the difficulties students have when learning English as a foreign language in higher education. This paper reports on the results of an interview of 30 randomly selected students and four professors of the Faculty of Philology and English language department, respectively, at the University "UKSHIN HOTI" Prizren.

It is critical to provide learners with the best possible support in terms of a helpful learning environment and adequate and meaningful language experience when learning a second language. Furthermore, students of English language can work to enhance their English skills, making language teaching and learning more effective and relevant for both lecturers and students.

After identifying some of the challenges in English language learning and use in higher education in the Kosovar context, this study will attempt to address some of the critical issues identified and suggest some measures to deal with them more efficiently than what is currently being done. One of the first principles to consider when planning and designing English language programs is the need to identify the goals of teaching English in the sociocultural context in which the learning is taking place in no uncertain terms. Finally, this research has recommended overcoming these challenges and future research.

1. Introduction

Language is a vital communication tool. It is difficult to imagine a culture that does not use language. It sharpens people's minds and directs and governs their entire behaviors. It is responsible for advancing civilization and culture (Widdowson, 1975). In the case of the mother tongue, the child learns it quickly due to its favorable environment and extensive exposure. However, learning a second language requires conscious effort; in most cases, exposure to the second language is limited (Bose, 2007). Learning a second language is never easy. Learning English as a second language is even more difficult. (James, 1996.) English has long been recognized as a vital global language and taught as a second language in Kosovo for over two decades. English is taught as a second language in all Kosovar schools and is a required subject in both primary and secondary schools. From primary to tertiary education, mastery of the English language is now highly valued. As we all know, students spend

approximately 12 years in the elementary and secondary school learning English, and many of them are still unable to understand the language after graduation. As a result, several factors contribute to this failure.

As a result, it is critical to comprehend learners' perspectives and experiences in learning English as a second language to recognize the challenges and impediments they face in the EFL classroom. Weaving all that has been mentioned above, this research aims to look into the challenges students face when learning English as a foreign language.

2. Literature Review

The characteristic of communicative language teaching is that almost everything that is done is done with the purpose of communicative intent. Lindsay and Knight (2006) claim that CLT is not a method but an approach to teaching based on the view

that learning a language means learning how to communicate effectively in the world outside the classroom. In contrast to traditional methods, whose main focus was teaching the form of the language and the professor's main role in the class was that of the controller, where students were supposed to learn the forms of the language given by the professor, the main purpose of communicative language teaching is to engage the learners to negotiate meaning (Pinter 2006, p.59). The professor's main role in communicative language teaching is to facilitate learning and communication in the classroom, so in this role, his main responsibility is to create an opportunity and atmosphere for students to encourage speaking in the target language.

3. Methodology

The research was conducted at the University of Prizren "Ukshin Hoti" in Prizren, with four different classes and a group of four professors who teach English as a foreign language. Professors' interview questionnaires aimed to determine their attitudes and how they value the use of the communicative approach in their English classes. A qualitative method was used to conduct the research by utilizing the content analysis of an interview of 30 students from the University of Prizren "Ukshin Hoti". Purposive sampling was used to select 30 first-year students from this university. The respondents were from the Faculty of Philology and the English language department. The interview responses were examined and classified into four categories based on the students' difficulties in learning the four language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing). This study is a qualitative case study, as suggested by Yin (2012).

3.1. Research Participants

Creswell (2013) has recommended 4 to 5 sample size for a single case study. The researcher has selected four professors and 30 English students from the Faculty of Philology at the University of Prizren based on purposeful sampling. This purposeful technique can contribute to a better understanding of the study's key phenomenon and research problem (Creswell, 2013).

3.2. Research Instrument

The researcher has conducted semi-structured interviews, which was used to find out the attitude of the professors and students related to the learning challenges in EFL when the communicative approach is used and how it can influence their learning in general and how it improves speaking proficiency. The professors' interview was done to find out which language methods and techniques they use in the class and their attitude towards the communicative approach. It contained ten questions.

Secondly, the students' interview consisted of nine open-ended questions asking about obstacles in learning English as a foreign language, and there were 30 students.

3.3. Data Analysis

According to Patton (2002), qualitative researcher should constantly methodically organize their data. He also suggests that a qualitative researcher reads the transcripts numerous times to get what the respondents are saying fully. Keeping all these notions in mind, the researcher followed Creswell's data analysis approach (2013). The researcher has developed a table to explain, classify, and interpret data. Finally, the researcher organized them into several themes described in the next section of the study's findings.

4. Result

This section investigates the findings of respondents' opinions on the difficulties they encountered while learning the four language skills. Respondents' general thoughts, observations, learning experiences, and recommendations for professors to improve their teaching efficacy and for other students to improve their language abilities based on their personal approaches.

4.1. Analyses of the Professors' Interviews

The first instrument used for the research is the interview with four EFL professors who work at the University of Prizren "Ukshin Hoti", in Prizren. The main aim of this interview was to find out which methods and techniques the Professors use to develop learners' speaking skills and attitudes towards the communicative approach and face the learning challenges for students.

Results/analyses of the Professors' interview:

Researcher: What skills do you consider the most important when teaching English as a foreign language? Why?

Professor 1 considers grammar the most important skill when teaching English as a Foreign Language. She believes that EFL professors should pay special attention to enabling their students to learn the form of the language. According to her, one can communicate in the language when he is grammatically well prepared.

Professor 2 emphasized speaking as the most important skill. He answered that they always try to create opportunities and encourage their students to express themselves and speak as much as possible during the lesson. This does not mean that other skills are not as important as speaking, but they consider communication the final goal in teaching the language.

Professor 3 said she focuses too much on enabling his students to learn as many new words as possible. She thinks one should first enrich his vocabulary and then try to speak and express himself. Professor 4 makes his students read too much during his classes. She thinks that through reading, learners can learn many things simultaneously, such as the correct pronunciation of the words, new vocabulary, face the grammatical structure of the sentences and memorize the information, which they can use to practice speaking skills like summarizing.

Researcher: What activities do you use to improve speaking skills?

Professor 1 said that she finds interesting topics together with the students, and then they are previously prepared for the discussion in the class. They are divided into groups, one of them with pro ideas and another one with contra attitudes.

Professor 2 usually organizes film watching. He claimed that students enjoy watching films in class and are very much motivated to talk, comment and discuss the film.

Professor 3 provides students with different topics. They are supposed to prepare power point presentations and present them in front of the class. The audience should listen to it, and then the professor encourages them to discuss the topic.

Professor 4 said that she usually follows the instructions in the books she uses as teaching resources. There you can find interesting role-play activities that allow learners to exchange ideas in the target language.

Researcher: How do you react when students make mistakes while communicating?

Professor 1 said that she does not tolerate when the students make mistakes and immediately tries to correct them. For her, students must always bear in mind not to make grammar mistakes while speaking.

Professor 2 claimed that he allows his students to express their ideas and then summarizes the errors on the whiteboard. Students are given extra time to discuss the errors and come back with their answers.

Professor 3 encourages learners to speak in the class and indirectly corrects their speaking. She considers that professors should attempt to teach different skills through real language communication and not worry too much about the eventual grammar mistakes.

Professor 4 said that she also immediately corrects the students when they make mistakes while speaking.

Researcher: How do you usually organize your classes (group, pair, individual)

Professor 1 answered that she prefers individual work and thinks that the professor should pay attention to each student

individually, give everybody extra time, and listen to them carefully. According to her, when students learn and work alone, they are more concentrated and learn things faster.

Professor 2 prefers group work. He likes the lively atmosphere when there is a lot of learning noise. He emphasized that learning the language happens when students interact with each other and share their opinions and ideas.

Professor 3 thinks that students learn better when they cooperate with their close friends. She says that students usually feel shy to express themselves in front of more people.

Professor 4 prefers to give tasks to the whole class and asks students to discuss and share opinions. She says the atmosphere is unfortunately shy because students do not usually say much.

Researcher: What is your role as the professor when students do the communicative activity?

Professor 1 said that she usually gives communicative tasks to be done in groups. In this case, she only monitors how the students perform and make them realize that she, as the professor, is always there to help them.

Professor 2 said that he often organizes presentations with his students. It is students' responsibility to prepare power point presentations and present them in front of classmates, and they should be careful to get the others' attention. In this case, the professor only stays passive and monitors learning.

Professor 3 gives a particular activity to the students, and they cooperate while the professor waits for them to complete the tasks and then present them in front of the class.

Professor 4 carefully selects each student in the group and gives a specific task. She monitors their work and does not interact or interrupt them.

Researcher: What do you think about the communicative approach?

Professor 1 considered communicative activities very crucial for language learning. However, she thinks that students usually find it challenging to perform the task, and it decreases their motivation.

Professor 2 found the communicative approach the best method to enable students to manage speaking skills. According to him, students are happy when they produce something in the target language and enjoy the classes.

Professor 3 said that communicative activities are not motivating, and students hesitate to participate. In this case, only good students express their ideas and contribute to the task. Moreover, she thinks that students prefer when they learn the rules of the language, and they should be exposed to real language only at higher levels.

Professor 4 claimed that the communicative language approach enables learners to be active participants and helps them learn the language for communication.

Researcher: How do you increase students' motivation?

Professor 1 answered that she usually organizes different games to motivate and encourage students to participate in learning. She emphasized that games are usually fun for students, and they have the opportunity to speak English while playing.

Professor 2 motivates students through different communicative activities. He said students are highly motivated when discussing a topic in the target language. They appreciate their language level only when they can express their ideas in English.

Professor 3 said her students feel very bored when learning grammar forms. In order to motivate them, she answered that she tries to teach grammar forms only through real communication and avoids the classical way of teaching grammar.

Professor 4 usually invites native language speakers into the class, and students have the opportunity to talk and discuss different topics. They also are faced with the original accent and pronunciation of the words.

Researcher: Do you organize free activities outside the class to improve learners' speaking?

Professor 1 answered that she often organizes conversation clubs where students propose different topics and discuss them. The main aim during these meetings is to say something about the topic and not worry about grammatical mistakes since the main focus is on improving fluency.

Professor 2 goes out with his students once a month for a coffee, where they stay together and chat. The professor says that students are looking forward to such a meeting, and there are many opportunities for them to speak in English in a different, more relaxing atmosphere.

Professor 3 often goes sightseeing with the students where they have the opportunity to see many different things. During the visit, the professor plays the role of the tourist guide, so the students learn much new vocabulary. In this case, the professor makes students use English as the main language of communication.

Professor 4 answered that she does not use any special activities. She tries to organize the lessons based on the professor's manuals which contain different communicative activities.

Researcher: What language do you use during the lesson?

Professor 1 said that she gives the instruction and explanation in Albanian, and they use English while doing the task. She claimed that students find it very difficult to communicate in the target language. She believes that students should learn the form of the language in the classroom and be able to understand it. It is their

ability how they will manage to use the language in real situations.

Professor 2 answered that he never uses any other language except English. Moreover, he claimed that students are supposed to communicate in English. If any of the students use another language, he/she will be nicely punished. According to him, in the beginning, they have many difficulties and are usually stuck, but later they become very fluent and look forward to having English lessons.

Professor 3 had a similar attitude as the second professor. She uses English with her students even outside the classroom, and she added that she opened a conversation group on Facebook where students chat with each other, contribute, and always say something in the group to improve the language.

Professor 4 answered that most of the time, he tries to explain, organize, and teach in English except when he explains or compares grammar rules. However, she complains that students usually hesitate and feel a kind of shy to participate. In fact, only outstanding students are eager to take part, while the others usually listen and are afraid to say anything because they think their language is not at a good level.

Researcher: How active participants are the students during the lesson?

Professors 1 and 2 said that they organized the lesson in a way that everybody participated equally in the classroom. The students are given a task and have enough time to complete it; afterwards, they are supposed to perform when everybody says something.

Professors 3 and 4 said they pretend to make their students active participants. Generally, all of them contribute to the lesson and learn new things, but talkative students are usually more dominant.

4.2. Students' Findings

The second instrument used for the research is the interview with 30 EFL students who study at the University of Prizren "Ukshin Hoti" in Prizren. This section examines the findings of respondents' opinions on the difficulties they had while learning the four language skills. Respondents' general opinions, remarks, learning experiences, and recommendations for teachers to improve their teaching efficacy and for other students to improve their language abilities based on their personal approaches have been provided.

4.2.1. Students' Language Learning Challenges

Speaking Challenges Encountered by the First Year English Language Department Students

This part presents the findings from the respondents' perspectives on the challenges they faced in learning the four language abilities to speak, listening, reading, and writing.

Table 1. Speaking Challenges and Explanations among the Students of English

TOTAL RESPONDENTS	CHALLENGES	EXPLANATIONS
20 respondents	They were hesitant to speak English with their professors and peers inside and outside the classroom.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Afraid of making grammatical errors. Embarrassed by their limited linguistic skills. Had a negative physical reaction (smirk and pout). Speaking stutteringly or hesitantly.
5 respondents	They were self-conscious about their ability to communicate.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Preliminary negative assumptions about proficient speakers' attitudes toward them, such as that they are not intelligent, incompetent, or dull.
5 respondents	<p>Difficulty communicating in a fluent manner.</p> <p>In their conversations, they mixed various languages with English.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unacquainted with several words in English.

Listening Challenges Encountered by the First Year English Language Department Students

Table 2. Listening Challenges, Explanations and Effects among the Students of English

TOTAL RESPONDENTS	CHALLENGES	REASONS	EFFECTS
20 respondents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They were unable to comprehend what their lecturers were saying properly. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The lecturers spoke too quickly. Uncertainty about the meaning of words. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Misunderstood the intent and instructions of their lecturers. Responded incorrectly or did not respond at all.

6 respondents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inability to follow part of a conversation or discussion with their classmates. Unable to remember a specific word from a radio conversation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unacquainted with the themes of dialogue or debate. The speaker used idioms that were difficult to understand. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Speakers were asked for clarification.
4 respondents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> During conversation, unfamiliar with connotations and denotations of certain words. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uncertain on how to respond or reply to the speakers. Unwilling to ask speakers to repeat or explain specific words.

Reading Challenges Encountered by the First Year English Language Department Students

Table 3. Reading Challenges, Explanations and Effects among the Students of English

TOTAL RESPONDENTS	CHALLENGES	REASONS	EFFECTS
16 respondents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unable to comprehend passages and language completely. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many new terms were encountered. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reading comprehension and fluency were hampered.
14 respondents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reading passages and text took a long time. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Came across with many unfamiliar words. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> English and bilingual dictionaries were frequently used.

Table 4. Writing Challenges and Explanations among the Students of English

TOTAL RESPONDENTS	CHALLENGES	REASONS
25 respondents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing an essay took a longer time. • Unacquainted with the subject matter. 	<p>Pre-writing stage</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having concerns coming up with ideas for essay outlines. <p>Writing stage:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Used simple English to form sentences mentally. • Using English and bilingual dictionaries as well as an internet translator on a regular basis. <p>Revising stage:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To guarantee that sentences and paragraphs were structured logically and consistently. • To ensure grammatically acceptable and understandable language.
5 respondents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faced difficulties in writing academic essays. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Synthesis, paraphrasing, and citation of several sources were required. • Not being exposed to academic writing in primary and secondary school.

4.2.2. Students' General View and Comments on English Language Teaching and Learning

This section presents the results of the respondents' opinions, suggestions and remarks on English language teaching and learning, specifically their professors' teaching methods.

Professors' Teaching Approach

Table 5. Students' Views on Professors' Teaching Approach

TOTAL RESPONDENTS	VIEWS
27 respondents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disagreed with lecturers who insisted on using only English in class.
3 respondents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lessons from professors were not interactive.

Student's Suggestions to Improve the Teaching and Learning of English

Table 6. Students' Suggestions to Improve the Teaching and Learning of English

TOTAL RESPONDENTS	SUGGESTIONS
4 respondents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When mentoring and instructing students be more patient.
18 respondents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lessons should be more innovative and not solely based on textbooks.
4 respondents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> During lessons, lecturers should offer new vocabulary.

Students' Suggestions to Improve Speaking and Listening Skills

Table 7. Students' Suggestions to Improve Speaking and Listening Skills

TOTAL RESPONDENTS	VIEWS
20 respondents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use Skype, Facebook, Snapchat, or Messenger to communicate with native English speakers or friends who have an excellent command of the language. Watch English documentaries and films. Before giving a presentation, practice speaking in front of a small group. Practice speaking English with lecturers and friends on a regular basis.

Students' Suggestions to Improve Writing Skills

Table 8. Students' Suggestions to Improve Writing Skills

TOTAL RESPONDENTS	SUGGESTIONS	BENEFITS
15 respondents	Every day, practice writing. When mentoring and instructing students, professors should be more patient.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruct students on how to express themselves verbally. • Instruct students how to use effective language and appropriate word selections. • Use dictionaries and other means of learning to learn new vocabulary and synonyms.

Students' Suggestions to Improve Reading Skills

Table 9. Students' Suggestions to Improve Reading Skills

TOTAL RESPONDENTS	SUGGESTIONS	BENEFITS
25 respondents	• Read the news in English, journal articles, story books and magazines.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newspapers deal with a wide range of subjects and issues. • Assist students with speaking and writing exercises by providing materials.

5. Conclusions

The main goal of this research was to shed light on whether the communicative language teaching has an effect on enhancing speaking skills and overthrowing learning challenges in English as a foreign language.

From the results, we have found out that the main aim was to find out the professors' attitudes towards the communicative approach, what skill was the most important for them in their teaching and how they organize their classes. Unfortunately, half of the professors still organize their teaching in a traditional way, focusing too much on grammar skills and believing that language can be learned only if the students know the form of the words. Such professors also value reading and organize the lessons in a frontal way where everybody equally reads and says in the class. Luckily, some professors believe they should enable their

students to communicate in the target language. They teach the language based on communicative language principles. For example, they give students opportunities to express themselves either in pairs or in groups, students are highly motivated, there is a lively atmosphere in their classroom, they discuss actual and exciting topics, and they do not worry too much about grammar mistakes, but instead value students' fluency.

Moreover, to prove this, three research questions were raised. The first research question was how does the communicative approach affect improving speaking skills? Based on the outcomes of the study, it can be determined that while teaching the language, professors use different methods and techniques to achieve as better results as possible. Since speaking is one of the most important skills, we tried to analyze whether the communicative approach positively affects it. Based on the

students' questionnaire results, we have assumed that they enjoy learning when their professors organize different communicative activities and make them work in groups.

On the other hand, learners feel bored when professors use the traditional way of teaching and pay too much attention to grammar. When professors organized the lesson based on the principles of the communicative approach, the students were active participants and contributed to the task. Whereas, during the classes, which were done in the traditional way, students did not enjoy them and did not have the opportunity to cooperate and use real language. The next research question was how communicative language teaching increases learners' motivation. Based on the findings, it may be concluded that professors should always bear in mind that learners' motivation is very important for continued learning. Therefore, professors should carefully plan and organize the lessons, which will enable learners' real language use and enjoyment while learning to keep them motivated and eager to learn. The research shows that learners are very motivated when professors organize communicative activities, such as presentations, discussions, and role-plays. Those lessons are very productive, and much communication happens. Based on professors' interviews, we have seen that professors in higher education use different methods and techniques. They are divided into two: the ones who organize their teaching more in the traditional way and those who pay more attention to improving students' communication. Some professors used a lot of communicative activities and claimed that learners enjoy the lessons and achieve tremendous results, especially in their speaking abilities. On the contrary, some professors used more grammar-oriented lessons and complained that learners usually feel bored and not so much interested while learning. It was revealed that teaching speaking skills is a vital part of English language learning. The ability to interact and communicate in the English language undoubtedly and professionally contributes to the student's success in school and each phase of life later.

Furthermore, students' interviews were an attempt to investigate the challenges of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to first-year university students in the Faculty of Philology (Kosovo). The researcher discovered that learners are having difficulties in their EFL classrooms after conducting semi-structured interviews. This research has provided solutions for dealing with these issues.

6. Conclusions

English is a global language that must be learned by many, and speaking is one of the skills that requires a great deal of practice to acquire. By improving students' speaking ability, many opportunities will be created for them. Learners will have the

chance to perform speaking activities in the contexts of everyday life, and the societal and cultural norms properly in every communicative occurrence.

Evidence gathered from the research shows that EFL professors share a positive attitude towards the use of CLT in overthrowing learning difficulties in EFL learning, specifically in speaking skills. They consider the usage of CLT as an essential component of language learning. By bringing CLT into the English language classes, students will be more courageous and willing to learn the English language since their preferences are considered and appropriately esteemed. Moreover, this research proved that if we effectuate the use of CLT in EFL classes, it will benefit the students to learn the lesson's content. Therefore, if students hope to advance in the English language, it is essential to improve their oral production and communication skills in English by participating in CLT activities inside and outside the classroom.

In this manner, they can enhance their speaking ability and communication skills by listening to media and seeking more opportunities to speak English in real situations. The findings of the earlier studies mentioned support the issue of teaching strategies. As a result, it becomes visible that teaching should constantly change, adapting to learners' needs. As learners progress, so do their difficulties in achieving higher levels of intellectuality and proficiency. Considering the discussion of strategies and techniques regarding English Language acquisition may lead to better expectations and teaching and learning. The implementation of these methods would improve learning quality and teaching effectiveness.

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