Communicative Language Teaching Approach in a Saudi Context: A Critical Appraisal

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Abstract

This research investigates impediments to the successful implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in Saudi English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. Going beyond typical discussions on teacher training and curriculum development, the study explores entrenched resistance stemming from traditional teaching methods among teachers and students. The examination system, emphasizing rote memorization and grammar, poses a significant obstacle to CLT's communicative goals. Sociocultural factors, including a conservative view of education and perceived threats to Arabic identity through English acquisition, contribute to the resistance. Conclusively, the research highlights the interconnectedness of these challenges, proposing that transforming English assessment methods could gradually reshape student perspectives and boost motivation for communicative language acquisition. The study advocates pragmatic solutions such as curriculum adjustments aligned with cultural norms, comprehensive teacher training, and adaptations to the testing system to evaluate real-life language use. These strategies aim to cultivate an environment conducive to CLT adoption in Saudi EFL classrooms, moving beyond theoretical considerations to actionable steps. The research underscores the need for ongoing exploration through future studies, assessing the long-term impact of these strategies on learner attitudes and language acquisition outcomes. It emphasizes a sustained commitment to refining language education practices in Saudi EFL contexts and beyond.

Introduction

Over the past decades, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has emerged as a transformative force in language education worldwide, marking a departure from traditional teaching methods. Originated in the late 1960s, CLT emphasizes communication over rote memorization of grammatical structures, recognizing that language proficiency extends beyond mere grammatical accuracy (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). This pedagogical evolution aligns with a broader global recognition of English as a language of globalization, prompting a significant shift towards fostering communicative competence among learners. CLT's multifaceted goals encompass not only linguistic proficiency but also the development of practical skills for effective communication in diverse situations (Savignon & Wang, 2003). In this context, CLT aims to equip learners with the ability to express themselves fluently, comprehend discourse, and engage in meaningful interactions, bridging the gap between classroom language learning and real-world language use.

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Representing a global trend, CLT has gained widespread acceptance in Middle Eastern and Eastern countries, where English's status as a globalizing force is particularly pronounced. Notably, Saudi Arabia stands out as a country keen on embracing CLT. The government's initiatives to revamp the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in Saudi Arabia involve aligning teaching methodologies with CLT principles and revising the TEFL curriculum to enhance students' language communication skills (Alkhirbash, 2023; Farooq, 2015). Despite these efforts, traditional teaching methods, such as the Audio-Lingual Method (ALM) and the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM), persist within Saudi EFL classrooms (Al-Mohanna, 2010). This persistence highlights a disconnect between the practices of English educators and government policies (Alharbi, 2022; Alharbi, 2021; Elyas & Picard, 2010). Even with investments in renovating schools, providing modern technological resources, and offering teacher training, students in Saudi Arabia still exhibit reluctance to actively participate in communicative language learning.

Research, however, has shown positive results regarding the use of CLT in Saudi schools, as it has been found to positively influence students' attitudes (Abdulkader, 2016; Al-Mohanna, 2010; Alrabai, 2018). In spite of this, more generally and in a Saudi context, these results revealed that a plethora of challenges still exist that weaken CLT learning, therefore weakening its effectiveness, too.

This paper aims to delve into the primary factors contributing to the challenges of implementing CLT in the Saudi educational landscape. Specifically, it comprehensively examines the challenges faced in adopting CLT within the Saudi context. The study focuses on the intricate influence of sociocultural characteristics and the examination system on the implementation of CLT in Saudi EFL classrooms. Furthermore, this paper also aspires to not only identify and understand these challenges but also to propose effective strategies to mitigate them. By doing so, it seeks to provide valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and stakeholders involved in language education in Saudi Arabia and similar EFL contexts.

Literature Review

CLT Definitions

CLT is defined by Widdowson (2007) as an approach where the language learning process requires not only knowing the grammatical rules, but also acquiring the ability to use language to communicate and interact in a meaningful social context. Moreover, Spada & Lightbown (2022) argued that communicative language teaching is an approach that draws attention to communicative activity within society, as opposed to learning grammatical rules. To them, to be fully effective, foreign language learning includes not only memorizing the structure and rules of grammar, but also the ability of language to help in social contexts.

For Littlewood (2014), communicative language teaching is devised of teaching strategies and concepts, adapted worldwide and ready to be implemented. CLT's main aim is to develop the ability of learners to communicate fluidly and meaningfully within society, suggesting CLT has more importance. This can be achieved through an interaction between a writer and a reader, in addition to finding meaning between a listener and a speaker. A wide array of meaningful communicative activities – which include but are not limited to simulations, role-plays, and games, for example – provide learners with opportunities to practice their language skills in a range of contexts (Anderson, 2020).

CLT in a Saudi Context

In 1927, The Saudi educational system introduced the English language into teaching institutions. Further, in 1958, the study of English was made mandatory by the government within public schools, which included secondary education, as well as intermediate levels (Al-Subahi, 2001). As a result of this change, most educational institutions taught the English language through a range of methods that were easily understandable to most students, including audio-lingual and grammar-translation methods. Despite this, there was a distinct lack of focus on those learners who already possessed a high level of spoken English. Approaching the new millennium, therefore, the Ministry of Education (MOE) received criticism from private organizations for the country's poor learning outcomes regarding English language education. Al-Jarf (1999) revealed that although a considerable amount of time (seven years) was spent by students in these public schools, their language skills were not at a level deemed satisfactory, particularly their ability to communicate in English.

Underperformance was found due to a poor curriculum, students' perceived lack of motivation, and the questionable effectiveness of the educators' traditional practices (Al-Jarf, 1999; Al-Subahi, 2001; Alharbi, 2022; Fallaj, 1998; Khan, 2011). As a result, a Communicative Language Teaching approach was called to respond to the aforementioned problems (Alrabai, 2018). consequently, in 2000, the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia decided to implement action to revise the current English teaching practices, taking into consideration research recommendations and Saudi learners' poor English-speaking levels, to build an effective strategy. This included revising the English curriculum document of 1987, which was composed by the English Department in the Directorate of Curriculum (DDC) and updating textbooks (Al-Hajailan, 2006). These changes were implemented to attain an overall goal: improving language for communication purposes, as detailed in Article Number 5 of the Policy of Saudi Education (Ministry of Education, 2019).

As part of the new curriculum, the ministry released a series of textbooks, titled "*English in Saudi Arabia.*" Designed locally to cater to students' needs, they were created by a specialized committee at MOE (Al-Hajailan, 2006). It is important to note that these learning resources were based on CLT principles as the authorized teaching methodology. MOE also kept in place English teachers' in-service training, and many were sent abroad, to countries such as the US and the UK, in order to learn best teaching practices, specifically with regard to Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) (Al-Hazmi, 2003).

During the period between 2008 and 2009, MOE announced and implemented an important amendment project: the English Language Development Project (ELDP) – in essence, a partnership of the government and foreign companies, with the aim of devising practical English modules. This partnership was between British and American institutions, such as Macmillan, McGraw Hill, and Oxford University Press. Important EFL and ESL materials were created, with a focus on establishing a new curriculum based on CLT, which was tailored via textbooks for students within Saudi Arabia (Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013). The aim was to drastically improve the English curriculum, which was a goal that went hand-in-hand with recent international developments that concerned TEFL; and because English was recently recognized as a global language for business, technology, science and internet. Another aim was to improve the communicative competence of learners via role-play, games, and group work. Moreover, the modules also focused on English culture, believing this to be an important factor when it came to successfully teaching a foreign language (Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013).

Three-day in-service training programs were also held for teachers across Saudi Arabia, whilst schools were equipped with modern technology, including projectors, with the direct aim of facilitating both language learning and teaching. In 2009, MOE announced that the English language must be taught in public schools, for at least two classes a week, beginning from grade 4 at the elementary level. Their reasoning was that starting language learning from a young age would bear more positive results. Despite these measures, hesitation amongst students and teachers remained, which went against TEFL's aim, as assigned by the Saudi MOH.

In 2016, Saudi government launched the National Transformation Program 2020, which set the country targets for 2020. Shortly afterwards, the government's most important policy was released: *The Saudi Vision 2030* (Saudi Arabian Government, 2016). This affected the future of EFL in Saudi Arabia. Vision 2030 defined two factors – namely, the roadmap and the planned methodology– in relation to the Kingdom's plans to take developmental and economic action. The *Saudi Vision 2030* was defined by Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman Al-Saud, Vice President of the Council of Ministers and Chairman of the Council of Economic and Development Affairs, as follows:

All success stories start with a vision, and successful visions are based on strong pillars. The first pillar of our vision is our status as the heart of the Arab and Islamic worlds […]. The second pillar of our vision is our determination to become a global investment powerhouse […]. The third pillar is transforming our unique strategic location into a global hub connecting three continents: Asia, Europe, and Africa. Our geographic position between key global waterways makes the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia an epicentre of trade and the gateway to the world. (Saudi Arabian Government, 2016, line 3-9)

The prince's statement clearly shows that the English language has become essential for Vision 2030, since English proficiency is crucial when it comes to improving foreign relationships, boosting trade, and working to improve the economy. It is unsurprising, therefore, Saudi EFL researchers are advocating for educators to improve their students' English. This is achieved by encouraging an array of communicative and authentic activities, such as group work, role playing, and language learning games (Alrabai, 2018).

Challenges in Implementation of CLT in Saudi Arabia

Among several challenges, educators' lack of knowledge pertaining to CLT has been regarded as the root cause of a failure to adopt CLT in Saudi EFL classrooms. In addition, it accounts for the prevalence of traditional teaching methods (Al-Mohanna, 2010). However, misconception of CLT principles might not always the reasons behind teachers' resistance to the communicative approach. For example, Abdulkader (2016) conducted a mixed-method study, where she obtained data from thirty-five teachers from Saudi Arabia, all of whom were studying (for their MA or Ph.D.) at the United Kingdom. All the participants had received extensive and professional in-service training in CLT. Abdulkader (2016) examined their attitudes, specifically in relation to the effectiveness of CLT when applied within a Saudi EFL classroom. The study reported an interesting finding: a majority of the participants failed to use CLT, in spite of their clear understanding of its value and principles. This may originate from the need of educators to implement teaching methods of a traditional nature due to centralised written examinations, not simply misconceptions regarding CLT. This revealed that there is a negative exam washback – one that contradicts not only the in-service teacher training programs, but also those practices that uphold the curriculum's primary objectives (Alqahtani, 2021).

In addition, studies have pointed out various other challenges and strategies adopted by Saudi teachers who had not received CLT training (Alofi & Almalki, 2022; Farooq, 2015). These studies have examined how

leaners' strategies are affected by English tests. They also showed concern Saudi students' practice of memorization and rote learning the content to pass examinations (Khan, 2011). It was also emphasized to find out methods how Saudi EFL learners should develop the ability to converse fluidly and competently instead of memorizing the content (Alharbi, 2021; Elyas & Picard, 2010).

Research Methodology

Research Design

A critical appraisal method was chosen for this study on CLT implementation in Saudi EFL classrooms. This method involves conducting a comprehensive analysis of relevant literature, synthesizing findings from diverse sources, and critically evaluate the existing body of knowledge on the topic. The review encompasses studies conducted between 2006 to the present to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter over time. Since it is only a critical appraisal for a definite period, it does not claim to be exhaustive but rather seeks to extract significant trends from a sampling of the literature to contribute to the ongoing understanding of CLT implementation.

Sampling & Data Collection

Data collection primarily involved searching academic databases such as Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and ERIC using keywords such as "Saudi Arabia," "English language teaching," "communicative language teaching," "EFL classrooms," "examination system," and "curriculum," "challenges", and "strategies for CLT implementation". Additionally, relevant educational websites, government publications, and reports were accessed to gather comprehensive information on the topic. In addition to database searches, the review process involved manual searching of bibliographies in relevant works to identify additional sources that contribute to the understanding of CLT implementation in Saudi EFL classrooms. The focus of the review was primarily on theoretical discussions and empirical studies discussing the challenges, strategies, and outcomes of CLT adoption. The initial literature search was conducted in summer 2022, with updates and additional searches conducted periodically to ensure inclusivity of relevant studies.

Data Analysis

The resulting corpus of literature deemed appropriate for review consisted of a diverse range of sources. For the analysis, this corpus was categorized into different thematic areas, including theoretical discussions of CLT, challenges in implementation, curriculum alignment, examination systems, and strategies for successful CLT adoption. For each work reviewed, a systematic approach was followed, organizing them chronologically within each thematic category. Summary notes were made on theoretical and conceptual discussions of CLT implementation, prominent themes were identified and recorded, and similarities and trends across works were tracked and categorized into thematic groups. The findings were then organized and presented in a structured manner to provide insights into the current state of CLT implementation in Saudi Arabia and propose recommendations for future research and practice.

It is worth noting that literature from other educational contexts and related disciplines, which have influenced the understanding of CLT implementation, were cited throughout the discussion. These sources are considered complementary and serve to enrich the discussion and provide additional insights into CLT implementation in Saudi EFL classrooms.

Results

Discrepancies with Incorporating TEFL's Objectives within a Saudi Context

The discrepancy regarding the purpose of ELT– namely, between the curriculum designers and policy-maker on one hand, and the opinions of teachers, students, and school administration on the other, is the largest problem in the Saudi context (Farooq, 2015). According to the curriculum designers and policy-maker, the main objective of ELT within schools is to improve students' levels of communication. As such, these parties offer teachers training programmes, support them when it comes to incorporating CLT, and further develop communicative textbooks. However, students, school administrators, and teachers believe that knowledge transmission is ELT's main goal.

In addition, the reluctance of Saudi students to actively participate in class continues to impede the successful implementation of CLT (Al-Mohanna, 2010). To combat this, students need to be encouraged to become active participants within classrooms, to engage in negotiation and interpretation of meaning with their instructors and peers, as opposed to simply being passive listeners (Richards, 2006). To Richards & Rodgers (2001), these new roles, which are radically different from those found within traditional settings, will only be achieved should there be an "[…] emphasis in communicative language teaching rather than mastery of language forms," (p. 76). So, the critic's contention is that the roles of students will not always fall into place with CLT principles. Ever since CLT was adopted in 2000, "[…] the philosophy of [the] Saudi

Arabian educational system is [still] contradictory to the essential nature of the Communicative Approach" (Abu-Ras, 2009, p.183). As such, Saudi teachers still use a vast range of traditional teaching methods (Abu-Ras, 2009; Al-Mohanna, 2010; Bakarman, 2004), including those who are trained, to a high degree, when it comes to using CLT (Abdulkader, 2016).

This conflict, which prevents the successful adoption of CLT in Saudi public schools, could be seen as evolving from two aspects: first , the Saudi sociocultural-related factors, which are seen in the traditional outlook towards education and the status of the English Language within a Saudi Context' second , the current EFL examination system in Saudia Arabia which mainly focuses on testing students' linguistic competence and structural knowledge of the language, rather than communicative abilities, hence entire examinations system contradicts the purpose of English language teaching. These aspects are discussed in detail in the following sections.

Sociocultural Characteristics of Saudi Learners

The sociocultural elements of the Saudi context outline challenges relating to the effective implementation of CLT, offering an explanation for the issues of conflict in relation to the TEFL's purpose in Saudi Arabia. These factors could, potentially, have an impact upon all members that compose the educational system: school administration, students, and teachers. Yet, the discussion within this paper will be on the learners, as it is this group who are the most significant beneficiaries within educational systems. However, in every context, whether formal or informal, learners are always accustomed to social and cultural patterns, all of which influence learning processes and help to determine students' roles. This may well negatively affect the impact of activities, specifically CLT activities.

In addition, learners within the Saudi academic culture are often passive, relying on their teachers; (Alrabai, 2018; Alrashidi & Phan, 2015); they are prevented from taking control of their own learning (Richards, 2006). Following on this, Khan's (2011) study explored the various challenges experienced by Saudi eighth graders attempting to learn English. It was found that, in an educational environment, 85% of the participants favored taking notes and listening as their traditional method of studying, as opposed to active participation. For this reason, this section explores how two sociocultural components, namely the traditional belief of education in Saudi Arabia, and the status of English Language within Saudi Arabia, influence students.

The Traditional belief of Education in Saudi Arabia

Generally speaking, the traditional view of education is a highly important factor, impacting upon Saudi schools' implementation of CLT, as it influences students' learning styles in addition to their roles. Traditionally, the major role of education in Saudi Arabia is to transfer knowledge (Al-Mohanna, 2010; Alseghayer, 2011); while the role of students remains to focus on learning strategies in the Saudi informal education system, which is a component that has shaped the country's learning of the English language (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). In Saudi Arabia, the informal education initially began within traditional Qur'anic schools or *alkatateeb*, which focused on assisting students to memorize and read the Qur'an. Within this context, teachers were the sole source of knowledge; as such, students relied on them, repeating their words in order to memorize verses from the Qur'an. This practice continues to this day, making the learners, in effect, dependent on their teachers (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014).

There are instances where even educators, trained in the principles of CLT, tend to fall back on traditional methods in the classroom. During collaborative workshops focused on CLT practices, though some teachers express hesitancy in fully adopting CLT due to ingrained habits and perceived challenges in changing established teaching techniques. Alharbi (2022) reinforces this observation by stating that EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia rely on traditional methods because they provide more time for drilling, but unfortunately, these methods do not offer ample opportunities for students to communicate in the target language. The clash between the expectations of a communicative approach and the entrenched practices of traditional methods remains evident.

Students' learning strategies have thus been influenced by an inherited and traditional view of education. Indeed, studies have attested to the fact that Saudi learners tend to learn by repetition and memorizing, consequently lacking the necessary critical thinking skills (Al-Mohanna, 2010; Alharbi, 2021; Farooq, 2015). Students in classrooms are mostly conditioned to learn through repetition and are often seen struggling with the spontaneity required in communicative language activities. As a direct result, these traditional attitude towards learning prevents the successful implementation of CLT within EFL classrooms (Alharbi, 2022; Farooq, 2015). In Asian EFL context, Hu (2005) also discussed the learning strategies of Chinese students, suggesting a failure to promote CLT activities and a misalignment with learner-centred approaches.

Traditional teaching methods, then, can be seen as discouraging students from actively engaging in class, therefore causing language anxieties (Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013). Littlewood (1999) shared this viewpoint: "[It is most likely for a] foreign language classroom to create inhibition and anxiety," (p. 93). As a result of their linguistic weaknesses, and coupled with their poor development of communicative skills, EFL students

are self-conscious and do not participate for fear of making errors. During speaking activities in classrooms, students often exhibit heightened anxiety, particularly when asked to perform in front of larger groups. Yet, it is important to note that anxiety affects students of all abilities. To lend credence to this point, the results from a recent study indicated that eight out of nine interviewees, all of whom possessed a high degree of English fluency and decent grades, reported experiencing at least some anxiety. One student, for example, commented the following: "I can speak English well, as my teacher says. However, I hate to be involved in interactive activities… I become shy of the attention that my speech may attract". (Alharbi, 2021, p. 12). This echoes the findings of Alrabai (2014), who found that students of all abilities suffer from nervousness, supports this surprising finding.

Studies have further explored how anxiety negatively impacts upon students' participation in the CLT classroom, in additional to the root causes of the problem. For example, Al-Zubeiry (2012) and Abu-Ghararah (1993) affirmed that students' willingness (at intermediate school) to perform in communicative activities varies, depending on the size of their audiences. So, students will avoid participating in role-plays when their audience is large, but will feel more comfortable performing in front of one person only, such as their teacher. These phobias and feelings of anxiety have been created by the value the educational system places on preserving traditional learning views. Aljumah (2011) found that this mode of learning severely affects the effectiveness of students' oral work within classrooms.

Status of the English Language within a Saudi Context

The status of English in social circles is an additional sociocultural factor which hinders the effectiveness of the communicative approach in Saudi English classrooms from being fully effective. It has been the long-standing belief of some Saudi communities that the acquisition of the English language is undesirable, especially for young people, in spite of its status as a global language. This is due to their view that the English language is a direct threat to Arabic, as it could further erode Saudi culture and identity (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). The Saudi students have expressed concerns about introducing English at an early age, claiming that it could negatively affect their mother tongue. They believe that learning English too early might shift their focus away from Arabic, which is crucial for maintaining their cultural identity (Alharbi, 2021). This example vividly illustrates the deep-rooted apprehensions students harbor regarding the potential impact of English on their native language.

This perspective aligns with the broader societal view that considers English as a potential threat to Arabic. Opposition to incorporating English teaching in primary education further substantiates this viewpoint, as evidenced when the Ministry of Education attempted to introduce English at an early stage (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). Arabic is the official language in Saudi Arabia, which means that the English language is only spoken by foreigners, although most are encouraged to learn Arabic. For example, it is commonplace for foreign medical practitioners working n Saudi Arabia to study Arabic in order to communicate with their patients (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). It is further important to note that students also believe that English is, in effect, useless socially , as it will have no bearing on their lives outside of academia (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). Hence, most students lack the motivation to learn English effectively; they only need to learn English for examination purposes. Therefore, adopting a communicative approach to learn the English language remains difficult.

EFL Examination System

Another reason for the discrepancy, particularly with regard to the function of ELT across Saudi classrooms, can be attributed to the manner the English is assessed in the Saudi educational system. In order to understand how this could impact the successful implementation of CLT, it is necessary to provide an overview of the Saudi EFL assessment. This section comprises two parts: (1) an overview of the examination system, and (2) the outcome of these written examinations on CLT adaptation within classrooms. Both are presented to gain an insight into the failure of the implementation of communicative activities within the Saudi EFL classrooms.

Overview of the Saudi Examination System

Across Saudi Arabia, the examination system evaluates students annually. There are 100 marks for every subject, divided into 50 marks for each semester in the academic year: 30 (for the written final examination), 10 (for the mid-term examination), and 10 (for homework and participation). The General Directorate of Curricula at the English language department at MOH, designs the format of the written mid-term and final English examination papers. Once circulated, this becomes a guide for teachers, as it incorporates both mark distribution and examination content for schools (both secondary and intermediate) (Ministry of Education, 2018). Additionally, in their final year of secondary school, it is compulsory for students to complete a General Aptitude Test (i.e., Qiyas). Universities regard this as a prerequisite for study. In this test, there is a spoken section that tests the students' language fluency and ability. It includes a plethora of questions on, for example, matching and reading comprehension. Purely quantitative, the second section evaluates students' mathematical knowledge (National Center for Assessment in Higher Education, 2014).

Outcome of Examinations on CLT Adaption within Saudi EFL Classroom

A wide range of studies have revealed that language assessment both positively and negatively affects the process of teaching and learning a language, which is well-known as the 'washback effect' (Cheng, 1997; Hughes, 2003). The washback effect of exams can be defined as follows: exams in language learning usually impact the way teachers teach and the way learners learn the language. It is often argued that the main purpose of Saudi English teaching is to improve communicative language competence; however, the written exams, like guided compositions, grammatical cloze tests, fill in the blanks, comprehension tests, and writing correct grammatical form, mainly focus on testing the students' linguistic competence, which is the "structural knowledge of the language" (Al-Mohanna, 2010; Alrabai, 2014). Hence, the examinations system in Saudi Arabia contradicts the purpose of English language teaching.

Therefore, students and teachers resist the CLT approach and focus on the structure of the English language, as opposed to learning how to use the language communicatively. In other words, the examinations system in Saudi Arabia is not aligned with the aim of the Saudi EFL teaching and learning. Al-Mohanna (2010) and Alrabai (2018) have lent credence to this, as they pointed out how English exam papers reinforce memorization as an effective learning strategy among Saudi learners, who believe that this strategy can help them to pass exams with high grades without understanding the language itself.

Compatibility between Language Testing and Curriculum

The MOE regulates both the examination system and the written curriculum for the English language. Despite this, studies point out the lack of compatibility between the English written curriculum and what is tested (Al-Mohanna, 2010; Alkhirbash, 2023; Alrabai, 2018). Steffy and English 1997, as cited in Nkosana (2010) demonstrate this point using the three main curricular contents that underpin teaching Saudi Arabia's teaching: namely, the written, taught, and tested. They argue that negotiating the correct balance between these contents would be the most successful way of making teaching practices more effective. They advocate that the written curriculum should be synchronized with the one that is taught and tested. The relationship between the three curricula, in addition to the ways in which they influence one another due to constructive feedback, is presented in Figure 1 (Steffy and English 1977, cited in Nkosana, 2010, p.27).
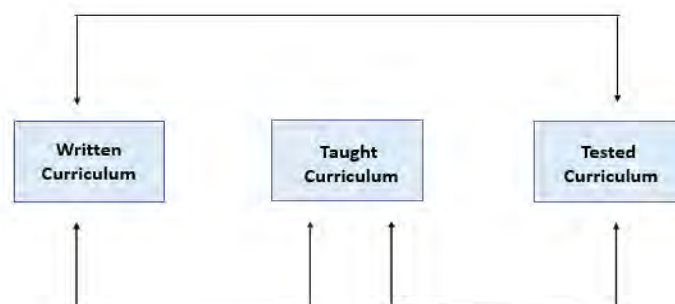

Figure 1: *The Relationship Amongst the Three Main Curricular Contents.*

Steffy and English 1997, as cited in Nkosana (2010) argue that an unsystematic relationship, in all likelihood, may occur if compatibility does not exist between the aforementioned curricula. In this regard, Alseghayer (2011) and Elyas & Picard (2010) argue that this unsystematic relationship is typical within the Saudi context, in which tested content highly impacts the taught curricula, while the written curricula has limited outcomes on what is taught. Such an examination washback effect on English teaching and learning is both multi-faceted and complex. In order to explore the CLT's feasibility inside the Saudi EFL classroom, Hughes (2003) suggests that the examination system impacts upon three critical aspects in any educational system: *the participants* (teachers and students, school administration), *the process* (teaching and learning processes), and *the product* (learning outcomes). The subsequent sections will delve further into these three aspects, providing a more in-depth exploration of how high-stakes exams exert influence students' learning motivations, shape teachers' instructional approaches, changing curriculum and influence the overall learning outcomes within Saudi EFL classrooms.

The Participants

The attitudes of learners and teachers (the participants), in addition to their roles towards their learning and teaching of the English language, have been greatly impacted by language tests (Hughes, 2003). The concerns pertaining to Qiyas as well as school examinations have already been expressed. It is therefore important to note that examinations are the only way of assessing students' progress; particularly the written exams, which are perceived as a factor that prevents CLT from being successfully implemented in Saudi EFL classrooms, and can also influence both the motivation and roles of stakeholders of English teaching and learning in Saudi Arabia (Alofi & Almalki, 2022; Elyas & Picard, 2010).

Students wish to score high marks, particularly in the secondary school examinations, to gain entry into the university and secure a decent future. Even in the English classes, due to a low level of motivation, the emphasis is on grades and not on language acquisition. A multitude of research projects conducted in public schools in Saudi Arabia have agreed with this viewpoint, specifically that the aim of Saudi students is to only memorize the topics that will appear in the examination (Alsagoafi, 2021; Alseghayer, 2011; Siddiqui & Asif, 2018). Any communicative activities or interactive sessions that emphasize the use of language in real-life scenarios, get negatively affected as students showed resistance. They frequently inquire only what is going to be on the test, so that they can ignore the topics that will be omitted from examination, and consider all communicative activities as irrelevant. They prioritize rote memorization over active participation, and view exams as the ultimate measure of their language proficiency. Moreover, a majority of exam questions test only the English language's structural and grammar based aspects, which further lowers students' motivation to participate in communicative and interactive activities (Alsagoafi, 2021; Khan, 2011). They are less willing to work on their language fluency or communicative abilities.

Language proficiency tests such as LOBELA, TOEFL, and IELTS exert significant influence on Saudi students who take these examinations. LOBELA, for instance, is a high-stake examination in Saudi Arabia, which profoundly impacts both educators and learners. Students face constant pressure to excel in this assessment, as it directly shapes their career prospects and access to employment opportunities (Alqahtani, 2021). Likewise, teachers and educators find themselves compelled to tailor their instructional strategies and educational materials to help students navigate the challenges posed by these tests. As a result, the teaching methodologies, curriculum assessments, and attitudes of teachers are intricately linked to the demands of these tests. They strive to meet students' expectations by adequately preparing them to succeed in these examinations (Hazaea & Tayeb, 2018).

As an exception, a few Saudi EFL teachers do make appropriate exam preparations and modifications in their teaching methodology, since they are concerned by the way language is taught in schools (Abdulkader, 2016; Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). In line with this, Farooq (2015) explored the practice and attitude of one hundred Saudi English teachers and found that a majority prepared their pupils for examination by changing content of a communicative nature in the textbooks and placing more emphasis on features that are structural, which means there is far less emphasis on the communicative features. Abdulkader (2016) contended that these preparations result from the pressure that teachers receive on a daily basis. These pressures result from the school administration, parents, and students. In some cases, students' performance is partially based on the annual evaluation of the teachers, so it is in their interest to motivate their pupils to excel (Alsagoafi, 2021).

The roles and attitudes of the participants could affect their behaviour within the classroom, which, in turn, influences the educator's approach to teaching and the choice of activities (i.e., process of teaching). Indeed, with regard to the teacher's choice of activities on offer, it has been proven that examination has a direct effect on teaching content (Shohamy, 1996). The exam questions are more based on vocabularies that are out of context, grammatical rules, comprehension, reading, and composition. As a result, students are likely to ask their instructors to help them gain these skills. For example, in their respective studies, Abdulkader (2016) and Alseghayer (2011) revealed how Saudi EFL teachers' practices demonstrated that grammatical rules were high on their list of priorities, whilst oral skills warranted the least amount of concern. What is more, educators were found to have dedicated the final two weeks of term to preparing students for their examinations, which was achieved by giving them past papers to work on, in order to familiarize them with varying content (Alseghayer, 2011).

The Curriculum

Another washback effect is that testers and evaluators often advocate for curriculum adjustments to meet the test needs (Alqahtani, 2021). Al-Hinai & Al-Jardani (2020) demonstrate an example where the emphasis is shifted towards teaching core subjects to enhance students' performance. Testing can sometimes lead to a narrowed curriculum, focusing solely on highly examinable areas while neglecting other course content (Spratt, 2005). Additionally, when modifying teaching content in terms of depth or intensity, educators must also consider adjusting class durations. This adjustment often involves allocating extra time to exam-focused classes, particularly for high-stakes tests like the TOEFL. Spratt's (2005) findings also refer to the study conducted by Andrews, Fullilove, & Wong (2002) which found that language teachers spend a significant portion of class time to include published test-based content in the curriculum. In some instances, administrators introduce supplementary teaching materials to assist test-takers in improving their skills in areas where they struggle to achieve high grades (Shohamy, 1996).

The examination, aside from having a direct impact on the content of the lessons, further impacts upon the teaching methodology. Indeed, teachers alter this, in order to match the examinations that students must take (Ahmad & Rao, 2012). Traditional teaching approaches, such as ALM or GTM, are often used by teachers to enable the teaching of structural features of English (Al-Mohanna, 2010). These empower teachers to, in essence, do their job: designing an appropriate curriculum and preparing their students accordingly for important examinations.

The Product

Finally, it is also important to examine how the adopted learning techniques positively impact the learning outcomes (i.e., product). In a more general sense, students are willing to adopt processes which enable them to attain decent scores in examinations that are grammar-based (i.e., rote learning or memorization for students and traditional teaching methods for teachers). As a result, the learning outcomes of English education within Saudi Arabia improve linguistic competence, but do not place an equal emphasis on the communicative aspect (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). A number of studies have revealed that, within a classroom setting, teachers focus on improving the writing and reading skills of their students. For example, their grammar, and speaking and listening skills are often overlooked (Al-Mohanna, 2010). Furthermore, Abdulkader (2016) and Al-Hajailan (2006) reported that Saudi teachers are sometimes obligated to ignore some textbook activities, most of which focus on speaking or listening skills. As a consequence, they concluded that their findings reveal that not enough attention is given to both speaking and listening activities, as these cannot be tested within examinations of a written nature. Moreover, the habit of some educators to ignore communicative activities can be attributed to the examination purpose (Abdulkader, 2016; Al-Hajailan, 2006).

There occurs a divergence between two factors – firstly, the nature of the language examination system and, secondly, the purpose of teaching EFL in Saudi Arabia educational institutes – causes a further contradiction in CLT's adaptation in Saudi Arabia. What is more, these findings, specifically relating to exam washback reported in Saudi Arabia, support other studies that looked into issues within various other EFL contexts, including Pakistan (Ahmad & Rao, 2012) and Hong Kong (Cheng, 1997).

Discussion

Strategies for Successful CLT Implementation in Saudi EFL Classrooms

In response to the challenges associated with implementing Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in Saudi English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, a set of practical strategies can be employed. One crucial aspect is the modification of the curriculum to incorporate communicative tasks that align with the cultural norms and values of Saudi learners. Activities such as role-plays, debates, and collaborative projects can be integrated to encourage interaction, negotiation of meaning, and real-life language use (Alsagoafi, 2021; Siddiqui & Asif, 2018). A vital step toward successful CLT adoption involves providing comprehensive training programs for educators (Abdulkader, 2016). Professional development initiatives should focus on enhancing teachers' understanding and application of CLT principles. Workshops, seminars, and ongoing support can facilitate the transition from traditional methods to CLT, with an emphasis on practical strategies for creating an interactive and communicative classroom environment. To further support CLT implementation, modifications to the testing system are necessary. This includes integrating communicative assessments that evaluate students' ability to use English in real-life situations, aligning the testing system with the communicative goals of CLT (Alharbi, 2022; Alharbi, 2021; Alkhirbash, 2023; Hughes, 2003). This adjustment can encourage learners to focus on practical language skills such as speaking and listening, fostering a holistic language proficiency.

In the process of curriculum modification, it is crucial to ensure cultural sensitivity by aligning with Saudi cultural values (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). Topics, themes, and materials should be selected to resonate with students' cultural background, making the learning experience more relevant and engaging. This approach contributes to a positive attitude toward communicative language learning. Parental and community involvement also play a significant role in overcoming resistance to CLT. Awareness programs can be launched to educate parents and the community about the shift towards CLT in language education, emphasizing its benefits in a globalized context (Alharbi, 2021; Farooq, 2015). Fostering a supportive environment that encourages students to actively participate in communicative activities requires collaboration among educators, parents, and the broader community.

A gradual implementation approach can facilitate a smoother transition to CLT. Starting with the phased introduction of communicative tasks and activities into the existing curriculum allows for ongoing assessment and adjustment based on feedback from students and educators (Elyas & Picard, 2010; Siddiqui & Asif, 2018). This adaptive approach helps overcome resistance and encourages a sustainable shift to CLT.

Continuous evaluation and adaptation are essential components of successful CLT implementation. Establishing a system for regular feedback collection from teachers, students, and administrators enables the identification of challenges and success stories. This feedback informs ongoing adjustments to the curriculum, training programs, and testing systems, ensuring continuous improvement (Richards, 2006). The integration of technology and authentic materials into the curriculum is also crucial for enhancing the communicative learning experience (Alofi & Almalki, 2022; Savignon & Wang, 2003). Multimedia resources, online platforms, and real-world materials reflecting current language use can capture students' interest and demonstrate the practical applications of language skills. These practical strategies collectively aim to overcome the challenges associated with CLT adoption in Saudi EFL classrooms, fostering a communicative and engaging language learning environment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, implementing Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in Saudi EFL classrooms necessitates comprehensive strategies addressing sociocultural factors and reshaping the examination system. The clash between traditional pedagogical approaches, typified by the Audio-Lingual and Grammar-Translation Methods, and the sociocultural traits of Saudi learners, including their traditional educational perspective and perceptions of English, forms a substantial barrier to seamless CLT integration. The current examination system, emphasizing rote memorization and grammar-focused evaluations, significantly contributes to resistance against CLT (Al-Mohanna, 2010; Alrabai, 2018; Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). To overcome these challenges and promote CLT adoption, practical strategies emerge. Curriculum modifications are essential, embedding communicative tasks reflecting Saudi cultural norms. These activities foster active participation, meaning negotiation, and interpretation, fostering a shift to interactive language learning experiences (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). A robust training program for educators is imperative, equipping them to adeptly implement CLT principles (Abdulkader, 2016) and emphasizing transformative, student-centered methodologies (Richards, 2006). Recalibrating the examination system is pivotal, moving from grammar-centric to communicative competence assessments, aligning with CLT objectives (Alrabai, 2018; Siddiqui & Asif, 2018). Ongoing research and evaluation are crucial to gauge changes in learner attitudes and language acquisition outcomes over time (Alkhirbash, 2023).

These strategies can provide a foundational framework for addressing challenges, yet the need for continuous research persists. Acknowledging language education's dynamic nature, future studies should explore the practical ramifications of implementing proposed strategies. Longitudinal studies will offer nuanced insights into the sustainability and enduring impact of changes on language acquisition outcomes in the Saudi EFL context (Alofi & Almalki, 2022). Commitment to such research ensures continual refinement and adaptation of language teaching methodologies in Saudi Arabia.

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