



RESEARCH PAPER

Navigating the Pedagogical Shift: Implementing Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the 21st-Century Secondary Classroom in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The introduction of 21st-century skills into English Language Teaching (ELT) has caused a controversial tension between classical structuralism and 'modern' Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). This qualitative case study seeks to explore and understand this phenomenon in Sialkot, Pakistan in secondary schools. Through semi-structured interviews with six teachers and six students, the case study describes the case of 'pedagogical hybridity' as teachers' alternating CLT and Grammar Translation Methods (GTM) depending on students' test needs versus students' engagement needs. Most importantly the case study presents as a 'novel' contribution the idea of 'digital paradox' in that students' eagerness to learn English as a global language has been complicated by the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) as teachers consider educational technology 'digital defiance' and thus, a barrier to student learning. The current research indicates that the absence of coherent systemic curriculum restructuring in which students' oral language skills rather than rote written skills are valued, the 21st-century classroom will continue to exist as a paradox rather than a reality.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), 21st Century Skills, Secondary Education, ELT in Pakistan, Educational Technology, Artificial Intelligence in Education

Introduction

In the context of the 21st century, English has developed from a foreign language to a language of international integration, trade, and technology for the entire globe. As a result, the teaching of language has undergone a shift from the teaching of grammar and morphology to the teaching of language in context. In Richards and Rodgers (2001) and Al-Khamisi and Sinha (2022), Communicative Language teaching (CLT) has started to become the focus of attention where language is viewed as a tool to Communication that is achieved through the integration of language skills.

Nonetheless, the challenges of implementing CLT in developing contexts, and more specifically in Pakistan, are numerous. While on paper there is an attempt at change, the Pakistani education system is often still chained to the Grammar Translation Method, in part due to large student to teacher ratios, exam influenced teaching (washback) and a lack of paving funds (Zafar, 2008). In addition to the foregoing, the 21st century classroom presents a new unknown: the addition of Information and Communication Technologies and Artificial Intelligence. As Gloriez (2022) states, the use of digital technologies specifically in the context of CLT can provide much needed flexibility and real-world contexts for language use, albeit at a cost. That cost is the necessity of new skills for the teacher.

This study aims to explore how CLT influences secondary schools in Sialkot to study the interface of policy and practice. Modern communicative pedagogy poses challenges for the teacher and the learner in the context of ICT. This study investigates how the teacher and the learner perceive the challenges and how the learner adapts to the changes.

Literature Review

The Evolution of CLT

The rise of Communicative Language Teaching Method began towards the end of the 20th century in response to the rigidity of the Audio-Lingual Method and the Grammar Translation Method. Hymes (1972) introduced the term communicative competence, arguing in favor of and differentiating communicative competence from Chomsky's linguistic competence. In this case, learner-centered approaches within the classroom require the instructor to act as a facilitator instead of a simple knowledge repository (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Nunan, 1989).

CLT in the Pakistani Context

The implementation of CLT within the Pakistani context has certainly been slow. Teachers, while recognizing the need to foster fluency in communicative skills, are often compelled by the educational system to return to the Grammar Translation Method in order to prepare students for standardized tests that are primarily reading/writing based (Abrejo et al., 2019). Large class sizes, the absence of authentic contexts for language use, and the lack of communicative environments have been cited as primary reasons for what has been called a "bilingual scaffolding" (Zafar, 2008) model where the foreign language and the national language (Urdu) are used to a great extent for classroom instruction.

Technology and the 21st-Century Classroom

The classroom environment has always included physical spaces, but now, the classroom also extends to virtual spaces. Rustamov and Mamaziyayev (2022) state that contemporary language teaching ought to use technology as a communication tool in its teaching methodology to simulate authentic communication. The recent emergence of technology has the potential to improve and also hinder classroom practices in relation to academic honesty. In this case, AI can improve learning through customizing content, but there are concerns over a lack of authentic student effort and the challenges of academic integrity in learning.

Material and Methods

The study employed a qualitative multiple case study design that allowed the researcher to explore in depth the participants' lived experiences and perceptions. This gave the researcher the chance to study CLT in the midst of its real-life circumstances (Creswell, 2014).

Participants and Sampling

The area of research was the Sialkot district of Pakistan. Purposeful sampling technique was employed to sample:

- Teachers (n=6): Female English teachers from public and private secondary schools with between 4 and 18 years of teaching experience. Education qualification varied from M.A. English to M.Phil.
- Students (n=6): Female students from 9th and 10th grades, aged 14 to 16, who were recruited based on their consent and willingness to take part in the study.

Data Collection and Analysis

In regard to pedagogical strategies, use of technologies and motivating, participants were allowed to respond in a general sense and to this end, the data were obtained by means

of semi-structured interviews. The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis. To determine the different dimensions of CLT and student engagement, the data were coded.

Results and Discussion

The review of semi-structured interviews indicates a complicated educational arena defined by a policy ideal versus a policy lived. The results are structured according to the following three thematic dimensions: The Dissonance of Pedagogical Hybridity, The Digital Paradox, and The Affective Gap.

The Dissonance of Pedagogical Hybridity

While the teachers claimed to support the CLT approach to teaching, it appears they engaged in what dison calls a “pragmatic retreat” to GTM. Teachers exclusively described the phenomenon of code-switching as a survival strategy, not as a conscious pedagogical decision.

T1 expressed the tension of this situation in the following terms:

“We want to speak English, but when I see the blank faces of students, particularly the rural ones, I have to switch. If I do 90% English, the class is lost. So, I translated the concepts I just explained. Its a double effort.”

Such a situation makes the student learning experience uneven. Teachers T3 and T4 claimed to use discussion methods, they themselves admitted that they switch to Urdu to discuss these so as to avoid the loss of conceptual understanding when students prepare for the exams. The increasing gap between what the teachers claimed their teaching methods were and what the students actually experienced in the system of education is captured in Table 1.

Table 1
Reported vs. Enacted Pedagogical Strategies

Participant	Stated Preference	Actual Classroom Practice (Self-Reported)	Rationale
T1	CLT / Interactive	60% English / 40% Urdu (Translation)	Student comprehension levels
T3	Activity-Based	GTM & Rote Learning	Examination washback
T6	Digital/Project-Based	Lecture Method	Lack of time/resources

The Digital Paradox: AI as Facilitator and Disruptor

The incorporation of 21st century instruments has been a contentious topic. The data shows a clear rupture between the consumption of digital communication and the production of language via AI. Educators perceived AI as not only a resource, but as an adversary of academic dishonesty. T1’s commentary illustrates a novel variant of pedagogical angst particular to the current century:

“When I assign an essay, they give the title to the AI... and I get a professional, error-free assignment. I am bound to give marks to the AI, not the student. There is no struggle, and therefore, no learning.”

In contrast, students (S2, S6) perceived technology not as a form of academic dishonesty, but as a critical crutch in the presence of absent teacher guidance. S5 articulated, “The teacher explains the rules, but I use apps to actually hear how the words sound.” This implies that students are leveraging technology to fill the void of genuine aural input in the classroom.

The Affective Gap: Motivation vs. Opportunity

A disconnect came to light where student motivation and the school's "communicative space" were concerned. Despite the fact that 40% of student participants indicated strong instrumental motivation (learning English as a tool for their preferred future career), they described a classroom "Silence of Anxiety." This silence is a consequence of a lack of psychological safety more than anything else. Student S4 explained:

"I want to speak, but the environment isn't there. If I speak wrong, I fear the reaction. Inside the class, we mostly listen. Outside, we speak Urdu. Where is the space for English?"

Such a silence contradicts Teacher T2's claim that she "encourages participation." The data suggest that what teachers perceive as "encouragement" (e.g. asking questions in random order) students perceive as "interrogation" and as a result raise their affective filter and restrict free compensation.

Table 3
Student Motivation and Classroom Participation

Participant	Motivation	Classroom Experience	Barriers to Participation
S4	High instrumental motivation (career-focused)	Desire to speak English but fear of judgment from peers/teachers	Anxiety, lack of psychological safety
S1	Motivated by learning English for career growth	Hesitation in speaking, desire for more interactive activities	Limited opportunities for active participation
S5	Motivated by the need for language skills in future	Active use of digital tools for language practice	Lack of real-life interaction and aural input

Discussion

It is well understood the results of this study demonstrate the challenges of applying CLT in the context of secondary schools in Pakistan. Teachers are supportive of the principles of CLT as Nyamayedenga (2020) reported, but face challenges in their context. This study corroborates a Zafar (2008) a study which pointed out the pedagogical paradox of a "flow" of discourse in Pakistani classrooms which advocates for the principles of communicative competence but is restricted in their pedagogical implementation by a dominant fixation on the "correctness" of language.

These are very interesting findings of this study as it relates to technology. Unlike most writings in CLT which ascribe the place of technology as an enabler to the teacher's role in CLT (Gloriez, 2022) where participants of this study in the teaching role considered AI as a disruptor of authentic assessment of learning. This seems to imply the classroom of the 21st should be designed not with a focus on the technology itself, but with a focus on redefining assessment of learning to a formative one especially in areas such as oral discourse which tends to be "plagiarized" by AI tools.

There seems to be a disconnect between what teachers do and what their students perceived. Although students (S1, S5) reported a reluctance and lack of confidence to participate in the discussions that the teacher stated was encouraged, this seems to point to a very high "Affective Filter" (Krashen) in the classroom. The comfort with the use of Urdu (S4) suggests that using an English medium of instruction for teaching should be more effectively scaffolded in order to ease the classroom anxiety.

Table 4
Results Summary

Theme	Sub-Theme	Key Findings	Quotes
The Dissonance of Pedagogical Hybridity	Pragmatic Retreat to GTM	Teachers oscillate between CLT for engagement and GTM for exam preparation.	T1: "We want to speak English, but when I see the blank faces of students from

			rural backgrounds, I have to switch."
	Code-Switching as Survival Strategy	Code-switching (mixing Urdu and English) used to ensure comprehension and facilitate exam preparation.	T1: "It becomes a double effort, switching between languages to ensure clarity."
The Digital Paradox	AI as Facilitator	Students view AI as a tool for language practice and support.	S5: "I use apps to actually hear how the words sound."
	AI as Threat to Academic Integrity	Teachers see AI as a threat to authentic learning and assessment.	T1: "When I assign an essay, they give the title to the AI, and I get a professional, error-free assignment."
The Affective Gap	Motivation vs. Opportunity	Students are motivated to learn English but lack the opportunities to speak due to classroom constraints.	S4: "I want to speak, but the environment isn't there. If I speak wrong, I fear the reaction."
	Anxiety and Psychological Safety	Anxiety about making mistakes limits student participation and speaking confidence.	S4: "Inside the class, we mostly listen. Outside, we speak Urdu. Where is the space for English?"
Teacher Beliefs and Practices	Teacher Perceptions of CLT vs Exam Pressures	Teachers believe in the value of CLT but are constrained by exam-focused education systems.	T2: "We know CLT works, but with large class sizes, I have to focus on exam content."
	Professional Development Needs	Teachers need more practical CLT training to bridge theory with classroom realities.	T5: "We're never given enough training on CLT. We focus on exam preparation, and there's no time for speaking."
Student-Centered Learning Spaces	Desire for Interactive and Student-Centered Learning	Students express preference for interactive, communicative activities but report limited opportunities in class.	S1: "I feel more confident when I work with my friends in a group."
	Reliance on Urdu for Comfort	Students rely on Urdu for understanding, hindering the use of English in the classroom.	S4: "The reliance on Urdu for comfort suggests a need for better scaffolding in English-medium instruction."

Conclusion

There appears to be an ideal 21st-century CLT classroom still to be developed within the theoretical conceptions of Pakistani educators but the model still remains to be fully developed in practice. The approach continues to be an "eclectic hybrid," integrating exam preparation with varying degrees of communicative activities.

Recommendations

- **Teacher Training:** Professional development workshops must move beyond theory to demonstrate *how* to manage large classes using CLT techniques.
- **Curriculum Reform:** Assessment systems must evolve to grade oral proficiency and listening skills, incentivizing teachers to prioritize these over rote writing.
- **Controlled Technology Use:** Schools should develop policies for AI integration that encourage critical thinking rather than passive copying.
- **Creating Micro-Environments:** Schools should establish English-only zones or clubs to provide the "environment" students explicitly claim is missing.

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