

Effectiveness of Communicative Language Learning Activities on Students' Communicative Competence

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Abstract

This quasi-experimental study investigated the effectiveness of communicative language learning activities (CLLAs) in developing college students' communicative Competence (CC) as opposed to the traditional approach. The study respondents were second-year college students of a local higher education institution in North Cotabato, Philippines. The control group was taught using the traditional approach, while the experimental group was exposed to CLLAs. The piloted CC test was then used for the pretest and posttest of both groups. Scores obtained from the tests were then analyzed using a t-test. The investigation findings revealed that the CLLAs are effective in improving the communicative competence of the students. The study recommends the use of communicative language learning activities, specifically at the tertiary level, to achieve communicative goals in language classes. This paper provided language pedagogical implications and recommendations.

Keywords: Communicative competence, language teaching, communicative language teaching (CLT), communicative activities, quasi-experiment

Introduction

The advent of technological innovations and economic development has helped accelerate globalization. This has enabled people from various borders and cultures to interact, communicate, and exchange information. With over 7,000 languages across the globe (Eberhard et al., 2020; Finegan, 2008) English language dominates and has become the lingua franca or bridge language for international communication. Additionally, the English language is now predominantly used in education, politics, business, and international relations (Patel, 2016; Rao, 2019).

In the Philippines, communicative competence (CC) in the English language is of paramount importance among language learners. This is because the teaching and learning of almost all other subjects or disciplines are in English. Moreover, the ultimate goal of teaching and learning a language is to develop language learners' communicative competence (Koosha & Yakabi, 2013). Similarly, the Philippines' English language education aims to develop the learners' CC (K to 12 Curriculum Guide- English, 2016; and Purposive Communication Syllabus-CMO 20

series of 2013). This can be achieved using communicative approaches to teaching, such as communicative language teaching (CLT).

Despite extended years spent attending English courses, many English language learners in the Philippines do not demonstrate CC. They have difficulty deciphering discourses and struggle with expressing themselves in English. Based on the worldwide study of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2019), participated by 79 countries, the Philippines scored lowest in reading comprehension in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA, 2018), which sought to examine the knowledge of students in reading, science, and mathematics.

Javid, Al-thubaiti, and Uthman (2013) conveyed that the mediocre development of CC is a repercussion of the difficulties that confronted language teachers in operating communicative language teaching. Some of the challenges include overcrowded classes, availability and accessibility of materials, time constraints, students' disinterest in learning English, and many more. Additionally, Wu (2009) also identified challenges in CLT implementation based from students, educational systems, and the approach itself. Some of these are grammar-focused tests and instructional contents, declining proficiency in English, insufficient cultural knowledge and communicative materials, and passive learning attitude.

Several studies explored the language teachers' perception, understanding, and implementation of communicative language teaching (Rahman et al., 2018; Mulaudzi, 2016; Rahman & Asmari, 2015; Jafari, Shokrpour, & Guetterman, 2015). Quite a few researches investigated the labyrinths on the practices and teachers' knowledge of CLT. However, most of these studies barely offer language teachers an intervention or remediation for developing learners' CC, particularly in the Philippine setting, considering the identified setbacks or difficulties.

This study is timely and significant in the field of applied linguistics, more notably in language teaching, for it attempted to provide language teaching methodologies/techniques that could improve language learners' CC. Moreover, this study sought to provide language teachers, practitioners, students, and administrators tools to address Filipino students' CC development constraints by designing communicative language learning activities. Thus, this paper specifically aimed to investigate and evaluate the effectiveness of CLLAs in developing the CC of the students. Subsequently, this paper would offer ESL learners opportunities to maximize language use and production and help language teachers facilitate or realize the communicative goals of language programs or courses. Also, instructional material (IM) developers could improve IMs using the CLLAs to offer more selections of communicative materials for language classes.

Framework of the Study

Communicative Language Teaching

CLT is a theoretical model that has been dominating in English language teaching (Celce-Murcia, 2002). Richards and Rodgers (2001) regarded CLT as an approach instead of a method, and so do several linguists and language teachers. The development of language learners' communicative competence is the goal of CLT. According to Brown (2007), CLT is the response to the traditional approach in language teaching that highlights rote learning and "structurally (grammatically) sequenced curricula"; Finocchiaro and Brumfit (n.d., as cited in Brown (2007), asserts that learning takes place in a CLT environment "through the process of struggling to communicate."

CLT advocates that grammatical accuracy may be developed later as long as the intended message can successfully get across. According to Widdowson (1983, as cited in Lasala, 2013), language learning should not be limited to the acquisition of linguistic forms but also

the acquisition of the ability to use them for communication. In the language teaching-learning process, learners are regarded to have active participation. CLT is a learner-centered approach. Thus, teachers serve as facilitators during the communication process and enhance language learners' motivation in learning the target language (Savignon, 2004). However, traditional/ classical learning, like deductive methods, is direct and deduces general concepts to specific ones (Prince & Felder, 2006). Additionally, Elison (2010), Davtyan (2014), Rodríguez González et al. (2016), Saumell (2012), and Slavin (2010) claimed that classical methods like the deductive method are less motivating to students during the learning process according to educational psychologists' perceptions.

CLT employs communicative activities and task-based instructions that maximize language use and production. Communicative intent in authentic and real-world communicative tasks/situations is the main intention of CLT activities. Correspondingly, in their experimental study, Losada et al. (2016) opined that authentic tasks and materials significantly and positively contributed to the development of textual, grammatical, oral, illocutionary, and sociolinguistics competencies of the learners, which are some of the sub-skills of communicative competence.

Literature Review

Communicative Competence

Dell Hymes (1972), a sociolinguist, coined the term communicative competence (CC). In reviewing the history of CLT since the 1970s, Savignon (2004) readdressed the concept of CC as the ability in expressing, interpreting, and negotiating meanings which involves contact between two or among people, and therefore, should not be construed as a static concept, but a dynamic one. Canale and Swain (1980) identified four dimensions of communicative competence. First is *grammatical competence*

that refers to the information on the linguistic rules of language and the skill to comprehend and convey denotative meanings of utterances accurately. Second is *discourse competence*, which refers to the ability to manipulate linguistic forms and meaning in producing language with coherence and cohesion to attain several purposes. Thirdly, *sociolinguistic competence* refers to the skill to achieve communicative goals in several social situations. Last is *strategic competence*, which denotes the language user's degree of mastery of the communication strategies in verbal and non-verbal forms.

Improving Communicative Competence Using Communicative Activities

Issues on ESL/ EFL learners' lagging development of communicative competence despite long years spent in language classes have been attempted to be addressed by various researchers. In her quasi-experimental research, Chaundhury (2015) used language-based activities (LBA) to develop the communicative competence of ESL undergraduate students. The study was conducted in one academic year and came out with desirable results. According to Chaundhury (2015), the outcome obtained from the data analysis showed that the language-based activities significantly improved students' communicative competence in the experimental group. It could be concluded that those communicative activities are vital in developing learners' communicative competence since they provide a genuine or authentic experience of the functional or communicative aspect of language in the actual context of communication.

Similarly, Owen and Razali (2018) confirmed that the development of CC, more specifically the speaking ability is more likely to happen by engaging in language practice through communicative activities. Further, according to Ismaili and Bajrami (2016), in language teaching, communicative activities are more efficient in developing language

skills than the traditional methods. However, a study by Shoomossi and Ketabi (2007) argued that non-authentic materials also bear value as authentic materials do, especially to learners whose proficiency in receptive skills is low. Further, the research of Kienbaum et al. (2014, as cited in Losada et al., 2017) suggests that learners who are exposed to either communicative tasks or non-communicative tasks develop a parallel level of communicative competence.

The same is true to the experimental research of Abu Bakar et al. (2019) in their attempt to improve the oral communicative competence of Malaysian learners of the English language. In 12 weeks, Project-based Learning (PjBL) activities were used as an intervention during instruction. PjBL is rooted in constructivism, in which students accomplish a particular project over some time while exploring or constructing knowledge. They have concluded in their study that PjBL activities effectively and significantly improved the Malaysian English language learners' oral communicative competence. Also, such activities perfectly suit teaching learners of the English language whose proficiency is low. Also, English language communication opportunities are made available in every collaborative or group presentation (Shanthi & Rao, 2015; Habók & Nagy, 2016).

Enhancing learners' communicative competence is the aim of language learning and teaching. Learning is fostered when real communication is involved in using interactive activities. For example, communicative activities in the form of language games motivate and help learners to utilize the target language and share information through interaction with other interlocutors in meaningful contexts and, therefore, maximize language educational effect (Dewi et al., 2016; Wang, 2010). Efrizal (2012), who engaged in classroom action research, also concluded that communicative activities develop communicative competence and CLT improves motivation and speaking

skills. Further, a mixed-methods study of Ahmed et al. (2014) that included almost 300 students from various schools in Malaysia shared similar results in which communicative tasks improved students' speaking skills.

Hypotheses

The following are the null hypotheses as reflected from the objectives of the study:

Null Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference between the control group's pretest and posttest scores.

Null Hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference between the experimental group's pretest and posttest scores.

Null Hypothesis 3: There is no significant difference between the experimental and control groups' gain scores.

Methodology

This study employed quasi-experimental research design, the pretest and posttest control-group design in particular. Moreover, this study used and randomly selected natural or intact groups or classes. There were 33 college students in the control group and 36 college students in the experimental group.

This study used the researcher-made communicative competence (CC) test and the communicative language learning activities (CLLAs) as study instruments. Four professors of the graduate school who held doctorate degrees in applied linguistics validated both the instruments. The test consisted of 40 questions on linguistics, discourse, sociolinguistics, and strategic competence that were at the same time based on the topics included in the material. The CC test was piloted to 40 college students and underwent a reliability test using Cronbach's alpha. The Cronbach's alpha value of the CC test was 0.83, which is considered acceptable (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). The CC

test was utilized to measure the respondents' communicative competence level before and after the treatment of the study.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical considerations stipulated by Grady (2006) were observed to the utmost extent during the entire conduct of the study. These ethical considerations were deemed crucial in doing this research to avoid ethical controversies such as, but not limited to, falsification of data and fabrication. Thus, consent and other necessary documents were secured for the conduct of the study. All participants were informed about the research and were aware that they could withdraw from participating without any liabilities or prejudice.

Data Gathering Procedure and Analysis

Using the CC Test, a pretest on both the control and experimental group was administered. The conduct of the three-hour instruction per session for two months or equivalent to a total of 24 hours of instruction to both groups with similar topics took place. The traditional approach to teaching was employed in the control group. In contrast, the CLLAs that served as the treatment of the study were utilized in the experimental group. Lastly, a posttest was administered to both groups using the same CC test, and all the data or scores from the pretest and scores of both groups were tallied, summarized, and interpreted.

Subsequently, t-tests were employed via SPSS 16.0 to perform the statistical analysis of the data.

Results and Discussion

Pretest and Posttest

Control Group

In the control group, the traditional approach to classroom instructions was employed where it was purely lecture or teacher-dominated. The data in Table 1 show that the average posttest score is significantly higher than the average pretest score, with a mean difference of 4.91. The control group's standard deviation of 4.20 and 3.38 for the pretest and posttest, respectively, indicate that the pretest scores are more dispersed than that of the posttest scores. Furthermore, the mean scores of the pretest and posttest were analyzed using paired samples t-test.

The statistical analysis reveals that there is a highly significant difference between the two measures ($t = 12.138$, $df = 32$, $p\text{-value} = .000 < 0.01$), and that the observed improvement scores on the CC test are statistically significant, which also means that the first null hypothesis of the study is rejected. It can be argued that non-authentic materials like the ones used in this group, the traditional approach, also bear value as authentic materials do, especially to learners whose proficiency in receptive skills is low (Shoomossi & Ketabi, 2007).

Table 1

Test of Significant Difference between the Pretest and Posttest Scores of the Respondents in the Control Group Using Paired Samples T-test

VARIABLES	Mean	%	Standard Deviation	Mean Difference	t	df	p-value
Pretest Score	19.03	47.57	4.20				
Posttest Score	23.94	59.85	3.38	4.91	12.14**	32	.000

** - highly significant at 0.01 level

The researchers employed a traditional approach in the control group within two months with one meeting each week. The traditional approach employed deductive methods, which were direct and deduced general concepts to specific ones (Prince & Felder, 2006). Each session in the control group started with the presentation of learning objectives and a quick check of students' background/prior knowledge on the topics. Subsequently, topics such as the communication process, communication barriers, globalization through communication, language register, academic presentation, and public speaking were discussed. Formative assessments in paper-and-pencil tests were then used to measure the students' extent of understanding or competence on each topic. The evaluation results served as the basis whether the lessons were successful or have to be retaught. Moreover, the researchers observed that students in this group were inactive and disinterested in the class since there was not much engagement between the students and the teacher, and students were less involved in the discussion. This is consistent with the findings of Davtyan (2014), Rodríguez González et al. (2016), and Slavin (2010) that educational psychologists perceived traditional approaches like the deductive method less motivating to students during the learning process.

Experimental Group

The experimental group received the treatment of the study in which communicative language learning activities were introduced. It was generally student-centered, where most

of the time students in each class were doing the CLLAs. The data in Table 2 illustrate that the average posttest score is higher than the average pretest score, with a mean difference of 12.78. The standard deviations of 3.65 for the pretest and 2.79 indicate that the pretest scores of the respondents in the experimental group were more spread than their posttest scores. Furthermore, the mean scores of the pretest and posttest were analyzed using paired samples t-test.

Subsequently, the pretest and posttest mean scores were analyzed using paired sample t-test and generated a highly significant difference between the pretest and posttest scores ($t = 26.177$, $df = 35$, $p\text{-value} = 0.000 < 0.01$). The result implies that the second null hypothesis of the study is rejected since there is a significant difference between the experimental group's pretest and posttest scores. It also indicates that the CLLAs employed in this group are remarkably effective in improving students' communicative competence. This substantiates Efrizal's (2012) findings that communicative competence is developed through the use of communicative tasks: students' speaking skills and motivation also significantly improved using communicative language teaching. Further, a mixed-methods study of Ahmed et al. (2014) that included almost 300 students from various schools in Malaysia shared similar results in which communicative tasks advanced students' speaking skills.

The experimental group was exposed to the communicative language learning activities

Table 2

Test of Significant Difference between the Pretest and Posttest Scores of the Respondents in the Experimental Group Using Paired Samples t-test.

VARIABLES	Mean	%	Standard Deviation	Mean Difference	t	df	p-value
Pretest Score	19.08	47.71	3.65	12.78	26.18**	35	.000
Posttest Score	31.86	79.65	2.79				

** - highly significant at 0.01 level

for two months, with one meeting each week. The said CLLAs paved the way for the practice of the English language in a natural context of communication. Communicative activities allow language learners to use authentic language and deal with real-world tasks rather than artificial ones (Brown 1994). Also, communication opportunities using English are provided in every group presentation with these communicative tasks (Shanthi & Rao, 2015; Habók & Nagy, 2016). Further, Widdowson (1983, as cited in Lasala, 2013) views that language learning should not be limited to acquiring linguistic forms and acquiring the ability to use them for communication.

Each lesson had a preliminary activity and assessment activity. Some of the preliminary activities included were a debate, on-spot-dialogue, devil's advocate, picture analysis, and video presentation. These activities were used to set the communicative atmosphere of the class, activate prior knowledge, and prepare the learners for the lessons. On the other hand, assessment activities were paper presentation, impromptu speech, writing a letter, story analysis, and role-play. These activities were employed to determine the extent to which learners understand the lesson.

These activities were selected according to the following criteria: first, they must be aligned with the communicative language teaching (CLT) or must require students to make use of the target language in an authentic context of communication; second, they must be relevant

to the lessons or topics in the worktext; lastly, they must be suitable to college students in that the students will not get bored or frustrated in doing the activities.

All classroom instructions in the experimental group adopted the communicative language teaching approach, where the teacher facilitated the activities in the class. It was highly student-centered (Savignon, 2004), where each lecture or teacher talk was a fraction of the allotted time. Most of the time was spent on the preparation for and presentation of activities. The teacher began each lesson with a preliminary activity, informed the students of the guidelines and rubric, gave students ample time for the preparation, monitored the class and responded to the queries of students during the preparations, asked students to perform or present their outputs, evaluated the outputs or performances of students using the rubric, and provided students with feedback or comments including their scores. A similar sequence was also used to conduct assessment activities done at the end of the lesson. In activities that required students to speak unrehearsed, the researchers observed that some students struggle to express themselves orally in English. Moreover, it was also evident that students were active and more involved in the class. This observation conforms with Finocchiaro and Brumfit's (n.d.) as cited in Brown (2007) comment that in language classes using CLT learning takes place "through the process of struggling to communicate."

Table 3

Test of Significant Difference between the Gain Scores of the Control Group and Experimental Group Using Independent Samples t-test

GROUP	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean Difference	t	df	
Control Group	33	4.91	2.32				
Experimental Group	36	12.78	2.93	7.87	12.29**	67	.000

** - highly significant at 0.01 level

Gain Score Result

The gain scores of both the control group and the experimental group were further analyzed to determine the progress of the respondents from the outset and the completion of the experiment.

Table 3 shows that the average gain score of the experimental group is higher than that of the control group having a mean difference of 7.87. On average, respondents in the experimental group where the treatment or CLLAs were utilized had higher gain scores than those in the control group where the traditional approach was used. Communicative activities are elements of communicative language teaching (CLT). As Ahmad et al. (2014) opined, an interactive learning environment is created when the CLT approach is called upon and could provide opportunities for learners to use the target language in authentic contexts. Researches have also shown that when learners are actively involved in the learning process, teaching is most effective.

Moreover, Wang (2010) and Dewi et al. (2016) asserted that communicative activities like language games, role plays, and simulations which are some of the activities used in the experimental group, could motivate and help students utilize the target language and exchange information through meaningful interaction with peers and teachers; therefore, make the most of language education effects.

The standard deviations of 2.33 and 2.93 for the gain scores of the control and experimental groups respectively, indicate that the gain scores of the experimental group are more dispersed than the control group. Moreover, these average gain scores were analyzed using a t-test for independent samples to determine if there exists a significant difference between the gain scores of both groups. The result of statistical analysis indicates a significant difference between the gain scores ($t = 12.289$, $df = 67$, $p\text{-value} = 0.000 < 0.01$). Moreover, the result also indicates that the third null hypothesis of the study is rejected

since there is a statistically significant difference between the gain scores of the control and experimental group. Additionally, this indicates that both of the communicative competence of the respondents in the control and experimental group statistically and significantly improved. It is indubitable that it is the score of the experimental group that remarkably improved compared to the control group. It can, therefore, be said that communicative language learning activities could better develop the communicative competence of language learners. This corroborates the findings of Ismaili and Bajrami (2016) and Asrobi et al. (2013) that communicative activities are more efficient than the traditional approach.

Moreover, Chaundhury (2015), in her quasi-experimental research, claimed that communicative activities like language-based activities are vital in developing communicative competence. Further, Abu Bakar et al. (2019) conducted experimental research and claimed that communicative activities like project-based learning activities used as teaching strategies could significantly improve communicative competence, particularly oral communicative competence. However, it is imperative to note that scaffolding is of vital importance in utilizing communicative activities to support or facilitate students' learning or engagement. Al-Bulushi and Al-Issa (2017) claimed that though some teachers do not have a positive attitude in CLT, they still believe that language skills can be improved in a playful environment where learners are required to communicate and interact authentically.

Conclusion

This study's communicative language learning activities, such as debate, paper presentation, role-play, letter writing, simulations, and the like, facilitated CLT utilization in language classes. CLT provided language learners avenues to the functional aspect of language, where they could practice expressing themselves, interpreting discourses, and negotiating meaning in the English

language. In view of the current study's findings, it can be concluded that the level of communicative competence in the control group taught using the traditional approach and the experimental group exposed to the CLLAs improved significantly. Moreover, the experimental group obtained a higher increase of CC level compared to the rise of CC level in the control group. Furthermore, it can be concluded that the communicative language learning activities employed in the language instructions in this study were effective in developing the grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence, or the students' communicative competence.

Recommendations

In the light of the study's findings, language teachers and learners may consider the use of CLLAs to achieve communicative goals in their classrooms. Also, a series of studies may be undertaken to verify the effectiveness of communicative language learning activities in other groups of language learners or contexts like EFL students and ESL students in Education courses and related fields. Further, a similar experiment may be conducted in a more conducive classroom environment and with more availability of teacher-made communicative materials. Finally, the rapid development of technology may be taken advantage of in transforming and designing communicative language learning activities into digital forms and other platforms to facilitate computer assisted language learning (CALL) and mobile assisted language learning (MALL) to benefit more language learners.

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