Language Through Communicative Activities in Upper-Level Students (Case Study: "Turgut Ozal" High School Tirane)

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Abstract

This study focuses on teaching and learning the English language through communicative activities and real-life context. Well-known scholars present the communicative approach as an effective in the process of language acquisition. This study examines problems that students encounter the most and the obstacles to language acquisition, such as problems with idioms, vocabulary, and grammar. This study also analyses some of communicative activities and instructions how to make these activities parts of their lesson plan, such as role plays, interviews, discussion and group work that have as a main focus teaching the English language inductively. The students and teachers were asked at "Turgut Ozal" High School of Tirana to complete the survey questionnaire related to communicative activities. The students and teachers gave their opinions related to the challenges that students encounter to participate in these activities. The results of the survey show that how much the students want to participate and learn the English language through communication, to talk about topics of interest and real-life context.

Key words: Teaching, learning, communicative approach, role play, discussion, group work, and interview

Introduction

This study analyses the effect of communicative activities and tasks in the process of learning the English language. It focuses on the communicative principles, implementation, tasks that are given to students in order to achieve language acquisition. Another important factor pointed out is also the process of acquisition in itself. Considering the differences between the Albanian and English language, there are a considerable number of difficulties with idioms, collocations, grammar and so on. The focus of this study is the process of teaching and learning by using communicative activities, also to mention some of the difficulties that students encounter. The study will present some of the findings done by different scholars about teaching speaking through communication with high school students.The result of the study may encourage teachers to use methods that are student-centred, giving the students the opportunity to express their thoughts in the target language, self-correct and learn by their peer's errors, in order to be able to use the English language outside of the classroom. This study deals with the use of communicative activities in order to help students learn better the English language. These activities will help students learn in an inductive way with the focus on using English in a real-life situation rather than learning it in a traditional form.

Method of the Study

In this study, the qualitative and quantitative methods are both used. The qualitative method is used in terms describing the results of the questionnaire, the interpretation of the graphs and also by analysing the textbook focused on speaking activities. The qualitative method is used by collecting data, analysing and after that the findings are conducted. Based on this data the conclusions are made and recommendation for future studies as well.

Communicative approach

Teachers from different countries and in different periods of time tend to use different teaching methods according to their students' needs. The Communicative approach is one of the most used methods and it gives students the opportunity to use language in real-life situations.

According to Richard's the communicative approach is "Set of principles about the goals of language teaching, how learners learn a language, the kinds of classroom activities that best facilitate learning, and the roles of teachers and learners in the classroom" (Richards, 2006, p. 2).

The focus of this approach is that the students have the ability to use language in terms of communication, to learn how to use the language to reach their purposes, to learn to use it correctly according to the people that they are communicating with, or to know to write different types of texts.

Seheri presents some of the principles of this approach. It gives a strong emphasis on learning how to communicate by using the target language, the use of authentic materials to promote communication. Learners should focus on learning the process, and they should have intrinsic motivation. This approach is also focused on the personal experiences of students and in the way they use the target language outside the classroom. This approach has its focus on improving learners' communicative competence. Communicative competences can be divided into grammatical competence in terms of usage of grammar rules. The second one is sociolinguistic competence, to continue with discourse competence and the last one is strategic competence(Sreehari, Communicative Language Teaching: Possibilities and Problems , October 19, 2012).

Hamid claimed that this approach is not only focuses on the grammatical rules of the target language, but it focuses mainly on the way that learners choose to use these rules. Learners have to develop their communicative skills by relating the structures of the target language with communication outside the classroom. The communicative approach gives also teachers the opportunity to work with students meaningful tasks to create real-life situations (Hamid, anuari 1990).

Sociolinguistic level of a language is also important in this approach. In order to develop communicative skills, learners should also have knowledge about the culture and social norms of that country. Some of the activities are individual work, group work, role-play and discussion, and the teachers' role should be as a facilitator (Communicative Aproach to The Teaching of English as a second language).Tasks like this would help students learn the English language inductively.

Teaching the English language based on oral communication

Methods that have the focus on the communication use practical techniques and are out of the boundaries of a traditional way of a lesson hour. Teachers should help students to understand the language as a system, so the students can have the opportunity to use even their background knowledge in order to build new concepts.

Teachers should explain to their students that language cannot be learned by learning words by their literal meaning and standing alone, because as we mentioned before language is a system, may be words that have more than one meaning, figurative meaning, it may be phrasal verb or idiom. Also, a student should be aware of the social meaning of the words, like for example the cases and the specific words that the student has to use during a formal or informal speaking activity.

Form Kuivamaki work it is cited that according to Folse, a teacher should take into consideration some facts before planning activities that encourage communication:

The students, the objectives and their language proficiency.

The curriculum and the program of the school.

The themes.

The specific kind of activity and task. (Kuivamäki, 2015, p. 16).

Even that is often mentioned that the focus should be communication, does not that mean that the teacher should not give importance to grammar, like taking into consideration if a teacher is planning to have a discussion upon water resources, first the learners should have acquired the new vocabulary and also the grammatical part, like sharing their last time of vacation. They should know how to use the past tenses.

Kuivamaki mentions in his work as Folse cites that: "When teachers design an oral communication activity, class or teaching in general, they should make a distinction between fluency and accuracy" (Kuivamäki, 2015, p. 17).

What Folse is transmitting is that knowing in a perfect way the target language does not make a teacher a good teacher. a good teacher should have the ability to make the lesson interesting for the learners, to manage well the speaking activities and the teacher must be the focus on the activities promoting fluency rather than accuracy. Before designing such tasks a teacher should think about topics that they have prior knowledge or some pieces of information given by the textbook, the second is that they have enough time to prepare the task and the teacher should also have as a principle to ask questions that promote critical thinking not just text comprehension.

Problems that influence language acquisition

Let us consider some of the problems that students encounter learning a second language. First of all, a teacher should consider the fact that not all students are alike, they have a different way of learning, different memory, different background knowledge, etc.

In order to understand why some students learn better a second language than other students, it should be taken into consideration the aptitude, motivation learning strategies, and learning style.

Aptitude is considered to be as one the cognitive ability; it may be included from the phonetic acquisition to grammar.

Motivation is another aspect that makes a difference in learning a new language. Motivation may be considered as the willingness of doing something. Lack of motivation is one of the problems why the learners have a problem with language acquisition.

Learning styles are considered to be as the styles that students prefer to learn. Each student is different and each of them has a different way of learning. The problem that is encountered in language acquisition is if a teacher's style and strategies are according to their style. Learning strategies are considered to be actions that a learner uses in order to have an appropriate acquisition of that language, such may be writing new vocabulary, completing exercises related to grammar, and performing role plays (Benati, 2010, p. 528).

It is the responsibility of a teacher to teach, and give instructions on different strategies if a teacher doesn't do that, the students will have problems to acquire the second language. Students have difficulties in different components of a language, such as grammar, syntax, morphology, semantics, etc. Firstly, it is because of the lack of quality and quantity of the information input. The environment outside of the classroom offers more to a student compared with what the student has taken inside of the classroom. Secondly, the lack of interaction with a native speaker. It helps more than the practice of language with their peers.Thirdly the influence of native language phonemes, sound and stress affect the second language (Alessandro G.Benati, 2010, p. 531)

Interview, discussions, role plays and group work

6.1. Interview

A teacher should be very careful in explaining what an interview is, after showing the examples, and then it is very necessary that the teacher check their grammatical competence of how well students know to form questions.

After having the first step, the second one is to help students be organized about what they are interested to know. It is very important to make students understand their goal and stay focused on their goal during all interview.

Students should prepare questions related with the topic, without taking in consideration if their questions are cleared or not, after having all the questions they may have a classification of the questions, taking in consideration different aspects, like the number of questions or if the questions are naughty. Part of their questions should be informal ones, in order to start a conversation and make it friendlier. At the end of an interview, it is the part of open-ended questions that require from the students to give their own opinion. Interviewing helps students develop their critical thinking, students who are good at answering questions are good at asking questions.

A very important part of the interview is the manner, the way of greeting, speaking and standing. The purpose of the teacher while having an interview as classroom activity is not just to develop their language level, also to develop the way the students answer, the way they organize their ideas and the way students deal with emotions. Interviews are very important as they present real-life situations, taking in consideration a job interview if the student does not know the way it is organized, questions that may have to answer, manners; he is not prepared for the world of work and will not be successful. Allocated time for an interview depends on teachers purposes. Before a teacher plans to have an interview in order to make it successful should be focused on:

Administrative procedures and make the students clear the procedures at the very beginning.

A teacher should be focused on the validity of the interview, so focused on the questions.

A teacher should give importance to the best performance.

Also a very important one, to create a scale in order to help a teacher assess the interview and be reliable with the scoring (Brown, 2003).

The challenge that teachers encounter to make interviews as part of the lesson plan is, because it requires a lot of time and during this time a teacher is only focused on two students, while the rest of class is passive.

6.2. Discussions

Discussions are the most used methods that a teacher tends to use nowdays, especially with upper-level students. One of the main aims of the teachers is to promote critical thinking and to help students organize ideas. Also through discussions, students learn how to listen and appreciate others opinions seen from a different point of view. By discussion, students help each other learn better by completing each other's gaps in knowledge.

In order to have an effective discussion, there are some strategies that teachers need to know if they want the discussion as part of their lesson plan. First of all, a teacher needs to set objectives, to be clear in a way what students need to achieve by the end of the activity. Secondly, a teacher should give the students the topic in order that they may be familiar with the topic and if it is needed to have any extra material. Lastly, a teacher must be careful to give the new vocabulary and new concepts to students.

During the discussion, a teacher should encourage students to ask questions and to be very careful to involve all students, as not everyone is comfortable to express their thoughts in public. The group work is very productive in discussions, as for example, the class may be divided into two groups one group supporting the topic and the other group not supporting. A discussion is a great tool for assessing students about their speaking skills. (Brown, Language Assessment Pinciples and classroom practices, September 2003, p. 175)

6.3. Role plays

Teachers make as part of their teaching methods, the role plays in order to use the English language as in everyday life. Role plays can be organized in different forms by the teacher, beginning as from a simple dialog and students read aloud by roles, presentation, theatrics performance, a performance of different English songs and so on.While performing a role play in a target language, this makes students easier to practice that language without being interrupted and help also to be more flexible and more collaborative with their team members. This makes also them take responsibilities for their team members and for the result at the end, each student should be responsible in order that their work to be appreciated by the audience, that may be the teacher, other teachers, the principal, etc.

Taking into consideration the fact that this study is focused on upper-level students, role plays organized may be like theatrics role plays. It is very important that students like the character that is going to present. The very beginning of the role-play starts from the script. Students should understand the script, having a deep comprehension of the script and what they can add something that belongs to them, this develops their creativity too.

Role plays may be of a different level of difficulties may be on different lengths but in each case, students must be instructed to involve in the cultural aspects, not only about the target language but also on gestures and everything that has to do with nonverbal communication. (Brown, Language Assessment Pinciples and classroom practices, September 2003, p. 174).

There are a lot of benefits from role plays; first of all, students have a better language acquisition as they use language in real life context. They improve their reading and comprehending skills as they are working with the script, they improve their vocabulary, use language fluently without being interrupted, this make a student be more confident while they speak in the target language. Communication is not isolated with just only one aspect; it is focused on spelling, intonation and all the gestures in order that the message can be transmitted up to perfection. Secondly, they learn to work and give feedback to other team members help each other improve themselves. Lastly, role plays promote cultural exploration, using gestures in a way that will not create misunderstanding.

6.4. Group work

Grouping students on different tasks have a lot of benefits, some of the benefits are like students reach a higher academic achievement through group works, it improves their collaborative skills, help them take responsibilities, help to develop their critical thinking and problem-solving skills, help students make decisions, empower the individual and learn how to communicative softly for reaching a common purpose (Effective Use of Group Work, 2010).
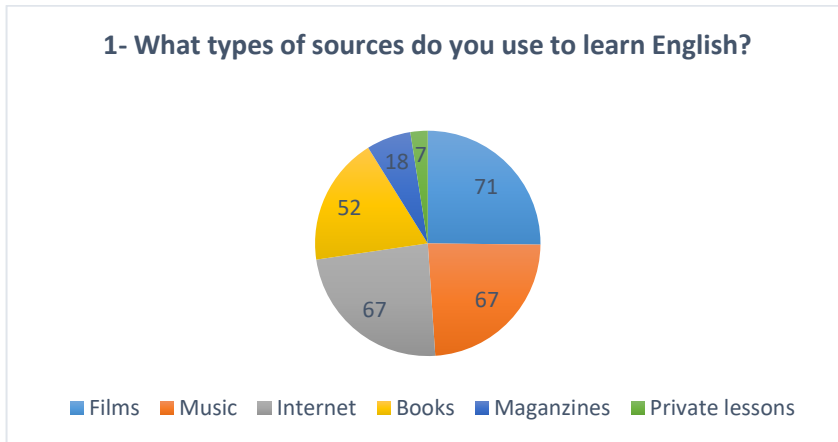
Burkel cited in his work that there are several numbers of advantages in using group work such as groups can find and resolve more quickly the tasks given rather than an individual, students by working in groups become more creative. Another advantage is also that students probably remember more a topic that has been discussed rather one just be told by the teacher. By working in groups students learn by doing and have responsibilities, this makes them be focused and not distracted during the lesson. Students become better by working in groups, they appreciate their team members' critics and they try to improve themselves. And the last and most important one that they learn how to work in groups, they know the strengths and limitation of the groups and help each other in order to achieve the best (Burke1, 2011).

There are also some challenges that teacher encounter when grouping students, such as the difficult management of the classroom, students may talk loudly, another disadvantage is that students start to discuss in a native language. For the students who are not talkative, may be difficult to express their thoughts in a group. The last one is that not all members are involved equally while completing a given task.

A task given as a group work might be problem-solving tasks, solving exercises, preparing timelines, sharing experiences, creative tasks, like cooking something, creating a poster, etc. It is very important that the teacher explains the task properly

in order not to become misinterpreted, make clear the procedures, time limitation if it will be as an assessed task and how it will be assessed.

The survey was conducted related to communicative activities, the survey was done through questionnaires. The participants were four English teachers of "Turgut Ozal" high school and with 84 students of the 10th and 11th grade, from four different classes. There were 42 females and 38 males from the age of 15-18 years old. The classes were chosen randomly. The questionnaires for the students and teachers were directly connected with the topic. Each of the participants was given a paper in which the aim of the research study was explained. The main goal of the survey was to understand better the methods used in a classroom, the student's needs and challenges in order to facilitate the process of learning. L

1- What types of sources do you use to learn English?

Films ■ Music ■ Internet ■ Books ■ Maganzines ■ Private lessons

Let us see the students answers about the survey questions.

Figure 1. In order to understand the sources that students use to learn the language from their response the results were that 71 students prefer to learn the English language through films, 67 students prefer to learn by music, 67 students use the internet as their source of information, 52 students prefer to learn by books, 18 students learn from magazines and 7 students from private courses.
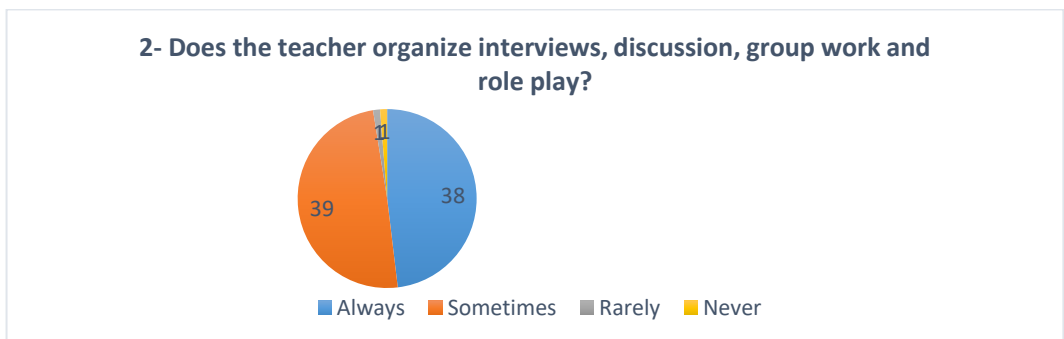

2- Does the teacher organize interviews, discussion, group work and role play?

■ Always ■ Sometimes ■ Rarely ■ Never

Figure 2. Students claimed that discussion, interviews, group work, and role play were part of their lesson, 39 of the students claimed that the teachers organize sometimes these activities, 38 of the students claimed that the teachers always organize these types of activities, 1 student claimed that rarely the teacher does and also just one student claimed that the teacher never organizes such activities.
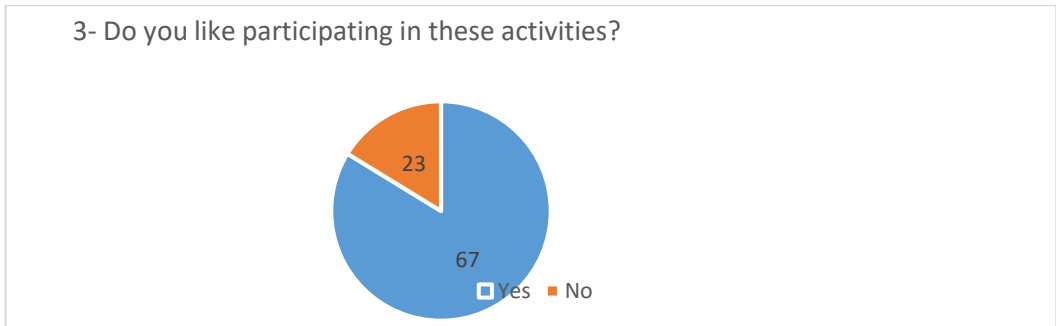
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3- Do you like participating in these activities?

Figure 3. The results of the questionnaire present that 67 students like to participate in communicative tasks and 23 of the students claimed that they do not want to participate in these tasks. The teacher's perspective is also very important, the graphs present their responses.

4- How often do you organize interviews, role plays and discussion part of your lesson plan?

0	4	0	0
Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never

Figure 4. Through the teachers` point of view that they were asked to answer a question about the frequency that they organize communicative activities such as, interviews, role plays, and discussions. All four teachers claimed that they sometimes organize these activities.
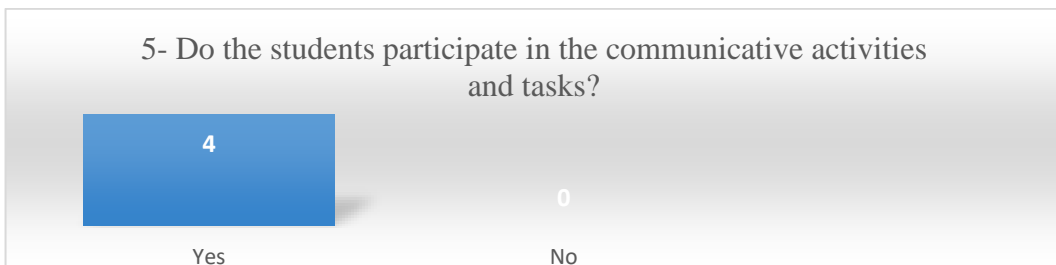
5- Do the students participate in the communicative activities and tasks?

4	0
Yes	No

Figure 5. All four teachers claimed that students always participate in these activities.

Result of the Study

84 students and 4 teachers of "Turgut Ozal" High School of Tirana took part in the survey and interview. The results of the survey according to students perspective were that first of all they prefer and find entertaining to learn the English language inductively. Students claimed that discussion, interviews, group work, and role play were part of their lesson, and the teachers organize such activities very frequently. Most of the students like to participate in these activities and, some of the reasons of students that like to participate were that by participating in these activities thay have the opportunity to know each other and build relationships inside the classroom. Communicative activities encourage students to do new things and improve themselves when they are talking in front of the audience. Some other reasons were that communicative

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activities are entertaining and give the opportunity to learn about culture too. Some other reasons were that communicative tasks help develop student's critical thinking, build confidence.

Seeing from a teachers' point of view, the teachers were asked about the frequency that they make part of their lesson plan communicative activities; all four teachers asked that sometimes they organize these communicative activities. Four teachers claimed that students participate in these activities but some of the difficulties that they encounter are first of all to deliver ideas, the organization of thoughts, dictation so choosing the right words to express their thoughts and respecting time limitation. Students also find difficulties with public speaking; sometimes they read in a mechanical way and do not use non-verbal communication. Lack of fluency and vocabulary skills are a challenge too.

Disscusion of the Result

Students answers were mostly they like communicative activities but also they list some of the difficulties that they encounter to participate in these activities were sometimes their classmate's bad behavior, problems with public speaking, and problems with English and organization of ideas. Some other difficulties were shyness, afraid of not being listened, lack of creativity, emotions, and interaction with other members of the group. 67 out of 80 students claimed that they would like that the teacher organizes communicative activities as that helps that they know each other better, they feel encouraged to do new things, improve their speaking skills, are entertaining. Some other reasons were that these activities help them improve their public speaking skills, built confidence, and are less tiring.

According to the teachers' perspective, 3 out of 4 teachers claimed that the exercises of the textbook were enough and one of the teachers claimed that some more extra materials are needed. All the teachers claimed that grouping students help them learn better and they organize often group work. While during the interviews, and role plays they claimed they sometimes they organize, while a discussion is always a part of their lesson. According to the teachers, the students like to participate in these activities. Some of the challenges they encounter are to deliver and organize their ideas, dictation, and timing. Some other challenges are talking problems before the audience, lack of fluency, vocabulary skills, fear of competitiveness, and fear of being judged.

Recommendations:

It is very important that students learn and practice it in meaningful tasks and real-life situation, so the teachers should always organize communicative activities such as discussion, role plays, and interviews.

Teachers should be very careful when organizing communicative activities. They should choose topics of their interest and authentic tasks.

Conclusion

The data collected by the survey shows that students like to have part communicative activities such as interviews, role plays, and discussions part of their lesson. Students claim that through these types of activities they practice the English language and learn it better and in an entertaining way. Students think that these activities help them be more socializing and help them speak without fear and emotions in front of an audience. As a result, they will be more confident. These activities are very important because it promotes critical thinking, require creativity and learn more about culture and places of different countries.

Students claimed that they encounter difficulties in participating in these activities such as the bad behavior of their friends such as the noise, and if they do not take their responsibilities on a given task. Problems with public speaking and shyness were very common. Problems related to language such as vocabulary, and dialect. Some other difficulties of the students are lack of creativity, the way of organizing ideas and respecting time limitations.

Teachers also claimed that communicative activities were part of their lesson plan and have the main focus. Students like to participate in these activities and some of the challenges were public speaking, delivering ideas, timing, lack of fluency, fear of competition and fear of being judged.

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