

Between the Past and Present: Effective Ways of Teaching English in Iraqi High Schools

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Abstract

The failure of Iraqi high school graduates in using English communicatively is the main focus of educators and curriculum designers. Teachers' preparation to teach language and methods of teaching used might be one of the reasons for this failure. This study investigates the difference between teaching English according to the traditional way before 2003 and the modern way of teaching adopted after that. Interviews were conducted with four Iraqi high school graduates, two of which graduated before 2003 whereas the other two represented the modern changes applied on both the curriculum and methods of teaching English after 2003. The results of the study showed that those changes were not suitable for the unique English education environment in Iraq which deals with English as a foreign language.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language (EFL), First Language (L1), Grammar Translation Method (GTM), Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Introduction

English language learning is a problem for Iraqi high school students. They start studying English when they are ten years old. When they graduate from high school, they already have eight years of studying the target language but they fail to communicate in real life situations. Before 2003, Grammar Translation Method was adopted in all educational settings. The curriculum was designed according to this method with fixed parts ranging in difficulty when students go from one stage to another. At the final three stages of high school, three literary texts would be added to train students for using language communicatively.

That way of teaching language proves to be fruitful in contrast with the new updates applied to the curriculum and the required method of teaching them after 2003. All the teaching materials were substituted by ones which are designed based on the communicative approach without considering the fact that this approach can never be applied in this particular environment because English is taught as a foreign language, classes has more than 50 students, and teachers were not trained to teach English communicatively.

The purpose of this narrative qualitative study is to describe the positive and negative sides of this change, and the effectiveness of both ways of teaching on learning English from the perspective of four students.

The study was led by the following research questions:

- How did you learn English in high school?
- What difficulties you faced in learning English?
- What changes in teaching should be taken to help students better learn English?

In approaching the interrelated questions above, the paper had several sections. The literature review section presents an examination of foreign language learning and classroom practices. The methods section describes the participants who were interviewed. The results and discussion section offers an in-depth analysis of how students view their learning on the light of the teaching they have received, and in what ways they think students' learning can be improved.

Literature Review

Iraqi Students and English as a Foreign Language (FL)

Iraqi students face a great difficulty in learning English. The first obstacle they have is that the classroom is the only place where they can practice it without any chance of being exposed to the original form of language. This restricted environment makes them feel that there is no need to learn it, and thus lose any motivation in giving any effort to learn it. With this limited exposure to the language there is also lack of equipment used to teach English. Schools have no laps and technology is never used. In addition to that, the teacher is the center of the teaching/learning process, which means that students' need are not taken into consideration.

With this unique environment, teachers have to think about the best method to teach the foreign language, putting in mind all of the points mentioned above and the size of their classrooms, which is highly affecting the teaching process.

EFL and the Grammar Translation Method (GTM)

The grammar translation method was widely used in the 19th century. Textbooks which are based on this method include lists of vocabulary and grammatical rules explanation (which is the case with English textbooks in Iraqi high schools before 2003).

There are three labels of GTM: original GTM, Weak GTM, and Strong GTM. The shared feature of all is the use of the mother tongue. A central feature of all three versions is the use of the learners' L1 to communicate information about the L2 system and L2 sentences or text. However, the versions differ in relation to the amount of required L2 output practice and focus on literal L1 translation.

The original GTM require four or five stage planning. First, stating the grammar rule, second, providing a list of vocabulary with a bilingual glossary, third, having students translate sentences into the mother tongue, fourth, having students practice grammatical drills in the FL and finally having students translate a passage from the mother tongue into the FL (Howatt & Widdowson, 2004).

Weak GTM is "commonly found in foreign language contexts where there is substantial negative washback from high stakes examinations based on the testing of comprehension, and grammatical and lexical knowledge." (Guilloteaux, 2014, p. 5). When following this adaptation of GTM, English passage or grammar rule is presented using the first language (L1), vocabularies are presented with their pronunciation, the teacher reads aloud or plays a recording of English passage sentences and students practice them by repetition, the teacher translates the passage or sentences into the L1. Iraqi high schools before 2003 followed weak GTM in teaching English. The amount of EFL presented is not a lot, but students do not have to translate and they can practice pronunciation. They master grammatical years because they study them for the whole six years of high school, and at their last two years they can read, speak and write about literary texts studied in addition to their textbooks.

The last label is strong GTM which aims at demonstrating specific translation skills. Only, which is not related in any way to the educational environment in Iraqi schools.

EFL and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Communicative language teaching aims to “provide the students with the required abilities to communicate efficiently in the newly acquired language.” (Saz, Rodrigues, Lleida, Rodrigues, & Vaquero, 2010, p. 2). Doughty and Long (2003) offered a list of principles which “serves as a guideline for implementing communicative language teaching (CLT) practices” (Brandl, 2008, p. 7). Those principles are:

- 1- Use tasks as an organizational principle.
- 2- Promote learning by doing.
- 3- Input needs to be rich.
- 4- Input needs to be meaningful, comprehensible, and elaborated.
- 5- Promote cooperative and collaborative learning.
- 6- Focus on form.
- 7- Provide error corrective feedback.
- 8- Recognize and respect affective factors of learning.

Using CLT in language classrooms cannot be achieved by changing the curriculum only. It needs a skillful trained teacher who can help students handle the mismatch “that can arise between the cognitive interests and communicative needs” (Macaro, Graham, & Woore, 2016, p. 181) of students.

This approach was adopted after 2003 and used as the basis for the new curriculum. Although curriculum designers changed textbooks in all stages of primary and high schools but it seems that they did not have a solid plan to apply the new way of teaching. By changing the curriculum in such a rapid way they left the other elements (the teachers and the background of the student) of the teaching/learning process as they are creating by that a lame angles of the English teaching process. Teachers have to deal with the new curriculum, which is loaded with communicative activities, with their traditional training of teaching grammar rules. Students, on the other hand, are suffering more than before by having to construct sentences without knowing grammar rules or word categories.

Methods

Participant

Interviews are very helpful to investigate the perceptions and views of people (Briggs, 2007; Mfum-Mensah, 2009; Zakaria, 1997). One of the important ways of developing teaching and the curriculum used is by investigating views and beliefs of students, because learners' "cognitions about foreign language learning and teaching have a paramount influence on both teaching practices and curriculum design" (Borg, 2006; Horwitz, 2008). Four Iraqi participants were chosen to be interviewed in this study. Two of the participants were male and two are female. One female participants (Zainab) and one male participant (Ali) graduated from high school in 2000 and 2002. The other two participants, Bahja (female) graduated in 2015 and Qasim (male) is currently in his final year in high school.

Zainab was enrolled in the College of Education / Department of Arabic at the University of Baghdad, got her Master's degree in Linguistics, and she is now an instructor at the Department of Arabic. Ali graduated from the College of Education / Department of English at the University of Baghdad, and he is now a teacher of English at one of the high schools in Baghdad. Bahja was enrolled in the College of Arts / Department of geography at Al-Mustansiria University.

Those participants were chosen because they constitute two representative groups of the two different steps of teaching English in Iraqi High schools (i.e. before 2003 and after 2003). The researcher stressed the confidentiality of the study and that no personal information of participants will be used.

Procedures

Open ended questions interview was conducted to obtain the participants' perspective of how they acquire the foreign language and what suggestions they have to improve the way of teaching English in Iraqi high schools. Since the participants cannot use English communicatively, the researcher conducted the interview in Arabic, translated it into English, and then transcribed it. The interview took approximately half an hour with each participant by phone. The research was guided and organized by the following categories: learning pronunciation and the sounds of English, learning of

vocabulary, learning of grammatical rules, learning difficulties faced by Iraqi students.

Findings and Discussion

After examining the data, it was clarified that the participants' perception of learning English as a foreign language could be examined according to the following categories:

Learning Pronunciation and the Sounds of English

The first language plays a great role in English learning environment in Iraq. Students rely on translation and writing the English pronunciation of words in Arabic in order to be able to pronounce them. According to Avery & Ehrlich (1992) the sound system of L1 influences the students' pronunciation of English in at least three ways:

1. When the English sounds are different from that of the student's L1
2. When the rules of combining sounds into words are different in the learner's mother tongue.
3. When students transfer the rhythm of their first language into English.

Teaching pronunciation can be done in two ways with a great attention to be given to the effect of L1 as mentioned above: 'bottom-up' and 'top-down'. The 'bottom-up' approach is the traditional one. According to this approach, teachers present language sounds in isolation then move on to the formation of words. Goodwin (2005) calls this approach the "building block". The 'top-down' approach, on the other hand, focuses on the suprasegmental features like stress, and intonation.

The first approach was followed in Iraqi high schools before 2003. Both participants who graduated before 2003 stated that they were exposed to the sounds of English language at the fourth stage in high school not earlier. It seemed that the earlier the one graduated the better he learned. That is what the researcher noticed when he interviewed all the participants. The older high school graduate in this study, which is female, said that her teacher used to give them comparisons of conflicting sounds in two groups of words and write the sounds symbols between two slants.

When teaching sounds and pronunciation, my teacher writes the word.. and writes the specified sound besides it between two slants. In this way, the teacher explains the new sound... the strange sound... or the omitted sound. But as far as how we learn those sounds, we used to write the sound in Arabic... because that makes us remember it.

Although teachers might think that writing in Arabic might suspend the process of learning, I think that using L1 will help students compare between the two languages and lead to more learning. Ali had a completely different experience with speech sounds. He said:

I did not learn them in class. I depended on myself. The teacher prepared a fascicle with an explanation of all the required sounds and I studied them. The summary provided in the fascicle was so organized which made me like studying English and pursue my study in the English Department.

I think that was the first sign of declining in teaching English in Iraq. Ali was a good student, and he had an internal motivation to study English, but what about other students? Starting from the end of 2002, fascicles started to take a prominent position in the teaching process, which means decreasing the efforts of teaching. Since teachers are the only symbol who can be followed by students, then the existence of fascicles stole away the only possible source of actual language.

The situation was not better after 2003. With the new curriculum, teachers found themselves scattered between the large numbers of activities. The Directorates tried to have teachers enrolled in training programs but according to their limited budgets they ended up with a very limited number of teachers in those trainings who are mainly from Baghdad, leaving up schools in other areas which are in urgent needs of such trainings. According to the new curriculum, the top-bottom approach should be used. Textbook have CDs which have pronunciation activities modeled by native speakers but schools have no labs or CD players to play them. In addition to that, electricity is not sustainable and programming cut of power lasts for several hours. Qasim said when he talked about studying pronunciation:

I know that there should be recorded extracts to be played in the classroom, because there is a small icon of a cassette beside some drills in the textbook. We'd love to hear something in the class but my teachers always skip those drills. We work on exercises about speech sounds in class, and usually the teacher gives us the correct answers in order to memorize them in case they'll come in the test. He tries to make us talk but only we, clever students, will do because we know the grammar rules already and we practice language with some relatives who are abroad or using the computer.

Bahja seemed to have a bad experience with English classes. Her teacher have them work on exercises at home and then discuss their answers in class. She said:

I never thought about hearing words or sentences in the CDs accompanying the textbook. I only wished to UNDERSTAND what is going on (laughing). If the teacher bothered herself to see if students get the meaning of words... or know how to write... I think I could have been able to know certain number of English words at least!

I am sure that Bahja's teacher is struggling as much as her students. In other research project, I worked with a group of teacher on a survey about the effectiveness of the English curriculum, and after the survey I noticed that almost all of them do not use the Teacher's Guide because they do not know how to modify the activities to fit their educational environment. Many of them do not even plan their lessons! Their education advisors set by their Directorates seem to be interested in active teachers who can manage the curriculum and have plans for all of their lessons and do not meet with those teachers who do not know how to write a lesson plan.

Learning of Vocabulary

Learning vocabulary needs time. The only merit of adopting a communicative curriculum is that students get to know a large number of words, if taught successfully. One of the problems of vocabulary learning in the case of the traditional curriculum in Iraqi high schools is that they are taught out of context, as stated by Zainab:

Teachers will write a list of the new vocabularies after explaining the reading passage and providing the meaning in

Arabic. Even with Kipps, Oliver Twist, and Merchant of Venice... teachers will give us lists of words and synonyms to memorize. But the words that I remember till now... I remember whole sentences. The words which I memorized as out of context lists are forgotten completely... I don't remember any of them. But those that I learned as part of sentences I can recall them now.

Learning of Grammatical Rules

A number of models emerged for teaching grammar. There is the "generic PPP model (Present-Practice-Produce)" (Batstone & Ellis, 2009, p. 194), Scrivener's (1994) ARC model (Authentic Use-Restricted Use-Clarification), Harmer's (1998) ESA model (Engage-Study-Activate), and Van Patten's (1996) model, which suggests that grammar can be learned through Processing Instruction, "where students are led to attend to problematic grammatical structures through structured input activities". (Batstone & Ellis, 2009, p. 194).

In the past, teachers in Iraqi high schools write grammar rules on the blackboard and explain them using example. Zainab said explaining this point:

My teacher use Arabic when writing grammar rules... that is why we learn them and can apply them when trying to create examples with the limited vocabulary we have.

Whereas Bahja and Qasim will ask their older siblings to review the grammar rules again and again because their teachers do not explain them thoroughly. Since the curriculum is loaded with reading passages, exercises of using words and meaningful sentences, and dialogues, teachers can hardly find the time to explain in details grammar rules. And when they teach them that will be for the sake of the test specifically.

Learning Difficulties Faced by Iraqi Students

During the interviews, the participants mentioned several problems they have faced when learning English. Ali said:

I was struggling with the long /i:/ sound... we don't have such a sound in Arabic... in addition to that, there are other variations which makes me commit mistakes in pronunciation like /i/ or the schwa sound..err... they are all difficult, I mean English sounds. I hope that teachers pay more attention to that and teach them in contrast to the equivalent sounds in Arabic. I think this is the only way Iraqi students can learn them effectively.

Zainab has the same problem with vowel sounds. She explained:

One of the most difficult aspects of English for me was vowel sounds. Generally, the sounds we study in the fourth grade and up are so much. I think if they divide those sounds and teach us small groups starting from the early stages of secondary school until the final years of high school will result in great success rather than giving them all together... and students find it difficult to master them. Another thing which might help students, in my own point of view, is providing schools with sound labs.

Qasim and Bahja said that they noticed the description of sounds at the end of their textbooks but their teacher did not happen to explain them to students. Qasim added that they are learning pronunciation and how to say words by paying attention to the teacher only.

Grammar rules were difficult for all the participants of this study. Bahja said:

I can say certain phrases and sentences in English,... but those I memorized from certain situations... and I can hear them regularly... like greetings... or saying my name.. but if you ask me about their tense I am not sure I can answer, ... or if you like me to say a sentence in certain tense I cannot do that.

Ali and Zainab said grammar rules are best to be taught the way they learned it. But they suggested adding “context” to the teaching process in addition to explaining the rule according to GTM. Generally.

Conclusion

Although GTM results in little oral proficiency, yet it suits the case of Iraqi high school English classes because in any way students cannot practice English outside the classroom. So the expectation of GTM for the student “to go abroad and immerse themselves to become a fluent speaker” (Brandl, 2008, p. 2) applies to the specific educational environment in Iraq. The effectiveness of this method of teaching was inferred by the interviews conducted with all participants of this study, although they represent two different periods in the history of teaching English in Iraq. This study is of a great benefit to English teachers and curriculum designers because it attracts their attention to factors they might not be aware of concerning the

effectiveness of the new curriculum in improving students' foreign language skills. My suggestion is that they review the curriculum, reduce it in a way that fits the specific educational environment in Iraqi high schools, and manage to train all teachers to teach it, or make them follow the traditional GTM method which is, in my point of view, suitable to the environment in question.

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بين الماضي والحاضر: أساليب فعّالة في تدريس اللغة الأنكليزية في المدارس الإعدادية العراقية

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الملخص

إن فشل طلبة المدارس العراقية الإعدادية في استخدام اللغة الأنكليزية للتواصل هو مركز اهتمام التربويين ومصممي المناهج. من الممكن أن تكون تهيئة المدرّسين لتدريس اللغة وطرائق التدريس المتّبعة هي من أسباب هذا الفشل. تتقصى هذه الدراسة الفرق بين تدريس اللغة الأنكليزية وفقاً للطريقة التقليدية قبل عام 2003 وحسب الطريقة الحديثة للتدريس التي اتّبعت بعد ذلك. أجريت مقابلات مع أربعة خريجين من المدارس الإعدادية العراقية كان اثنان منهم قد تخرجوا قبل 2003، اما الاثنان الآخران فهما يمثلان التغيرات الحديثة التي طرأت على المنهج وطرائق التدريس ما بعد 2003. بيّنت نتائج الدراسة أن التغيرات التي اتّبعت حديثاً لا تتناسب مع البيئة التعليمية في العراق والتي تُدرّس فيها اللغة الأنكليزية كلغة أجنبية.