Revisiting the Communicative Approach: The Tripod Construct

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Abstract
The Communicative Approach (CA) has been adopted in English Language-Learning contexts as the ultimate solution in English language teaching, following dissatisfaction with the structuralist approaches, grammar drills and audiolingualism (Liao, 2004; Hiep, 2007). The Communicative Approach promised rapid results in English language learning, however concerns have been voiced on a perceived decline in students' performance in writing proficiency, following the shift in focus to communication (Lakhwe, 2016; Maalouf, 2016). Thirty years after its implementation, calls were made to reevaluate the Communicative Approach based on case studies and results from ELL contexts (Bacha, 2016; Samra, 2016). Arguments provided that what may work in native contexts may not have the same impact in non-native learning contexts (Lakhwe 2016, Ghadi, Biddou and Boukanouf 2016). This case study seeks to identify the main tenets of the Communicative Approach in non-native contexts, and to recommend essential components to its application. The study is based on data collected from 198 students doing English communication skills courses and 45 participating English tutors in an English foreign language (EFL)university context, Lebanon. Findings suggest that performance remains the evidence of competence; however appropriate language performance is essentially reflective of a tripod model of CLT that incorporates correct linguistic application, appropriate sociolinguistic awareness and higher order strategic maneuverability.
Keyword: Communicative approach (CA), communicative language teaching (CLT), English language teaching (ELT), the tripod construct, non-native contexts

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Introduction
In the past thirty years, perspectives on successful language learning promoted a shift away from the long established grammar curriculum and traditional classroom practice, towards teaching for communication and communicative competence. Ellis (2016) addressed a number of criticisms that have been leveled on the focus on form (FoF) approach. Mastering grammar forms and structures was not perceived to prepare the learners well enough to use the language they are learning to communicate effectively with others (Ellis, 2016). In addition, traditional ways of language teaching reduced the process of language learning to an awareness of grammar labels and limited lexical assemblage.

In earlier literature, Segalowitz (1976) reported that second language learners who have achieved a fairly high level of grammatical competence in the language through grammatically organized classroom training remain unable to communicate with fluency and ease in sociolinguistic and cultural settings. According to Liao (2004), ministries of education in many EFL countries adopted the Communicative Language Teaching approach (CLT) based on their objectives of developing communicative abilities in learners. Introducing CLT was perceived to develop in learners greater competence in the use of English for communication and help them overcome earlier concerns on being "communicatively incompetent" (Liao, 2004, p.270). However, Lamie (2001) provides that the Communicative Approach placed more emphasis on obtaining fluency and correct pronunciation and less emphasis on learning grammar rules.

According to the British Council conference findings (2016), the Communicative Approach succeeded in making the students communicate, using the target language, even at a beginners' level, through advocating more emphasis on skills than systems and utilizing new syllabus design that targeted natural communication exchanges. In assessment, students were evaluated on the level of communicative competence rather than on explicit knowledge of the language (Lacorte, 2005). Another positive perception associated with adopting the approach was that CLT was expected to help tutors keep up with the developments in English language teaching according to Western standards.

However, as the study of grammar became marginalized, pupils started to find it increasingly difficult to develop attentiveness on how language works (Lakhwe, 2012). Moreover, according to Selinker (2006), Swain (2013) and Swain and Brooks (2014),certain grammatical inaccuracies were fossilizesince grammatical accuracy was not emphasized. Studies reported that students in Communicative Language Teaching classes developed classroom interlanguage; a language system that may satisfy basic communicative needs in the classroom but does not correspond entirely to the language systems used by native speakers of the foreign language(Selinker2006, Swain2013 and Swain and Brooks 2014).

To Teach or Not to Teach Grammar
Since the introduction of the Communicative Approach (CA), opinion was divided on its efficacy.Campbell and Wales (1970), Groot (1975), Habermas (1970), Munby (1978) and Searle (1969) have argued that communicative competence is the most inclusive language competence. From their perspective, communicative competence includes both grammatical competence and sociolinguistic competence. On their part, Alexander (1976), Johnson (1977) and Wilkins (1978) have suggested various combinations of emphasis on grammatical skills and

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on other communication skills but have not provided empirical data to support the suggested models.

Macaro and Masterman (2006) in a study at the University of Oxford correlated grammar knowledge with writing proficiency. In contexts where emphasis was on developing writing proficiency, grammar was perceived an essential skill.

In a recent conference on *Revisiting the Communicative Approach* (2016), researchers identified resurging concerns associated with learners' knowledge of the rules of the language and ability to apply the learnt grammar rules in communicative contexts. In addition, researchers debated whether it is still possible to maintain that the teaching of grammatical competence can be separated from the teaching of communicative competence. However, conference participants reported that since the shift in focus from accuracy to communication an obvious decline in the writing proficiency was noted in the performance of students at all levels, in non-native contexts (Maalouf2016, Samra 2016,Lakhwe 2016).

In following a Chomskyan paradigm, modern linguists generally perceive linguistic competence as referring exclusively to knowledge of the rules of grammar in a language and communicative competence as referring to performance. Kempson (1977) provided:

> A theory which characterizes the regularities of language is a competence theory; a theory which characterizes the interaction between that linguistic characterization and all other factors which determine the full amount of regularities of communication is a theory of performance.... A theory characterizing a speaker's ability to use his language appropriately in context, a theory of communicative competence, is simply a performance theory (pp.54-55).

In Chomsky's stronger claim (1965), competence refers to the linguistic system or grammar that an ideal native speaker of a given language has internalized, while performance isconcerned with the psychological factors that are involved in the perception and production of speech. From thisviewpoint, a theory of competence is equivalent to a theory of grammar and is concerned with the linguistic rules that can generate the grammatical sentences of a language.

Hymes (1972) rejected the strong version of linguistic competence that Chomsky (1965) adoptedand proposed a theory of competence that includes the language user's knowledge and ability to use rules of language in context. Hymes (1972) asserted that, "there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless"(p. 278). In their evaluation, Campbell and Wales (1970) argued that, "by far the most important linguistic ability is that of being able to produce or understand utterances which are not so much grammatical but more important, appropriate to the context in which they are made" (p.247).

Following these distinctions, the term "communicative competence" was used to refer exclusively to knowledge or capability relating to the rules of language use, and the term "grammatical or linguistic competence" to refer to the rules of grammar (Allen, 1978; Jokobovits, 1970; Palmer, 1978; Paulston, 1971; and Widdowson, 1971). However, the provided dichotomy did not end with mutually exclusive categories but rather fuelled further debate.

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Griffiths (2011) perceives the dichotomy between traditional and communicative approaches as 'ill-defined". She proposes that research needs to consider the underlying assumptions that relate to the teaching approaches and syllabi. Mangubhai, Marland, Dashwood and Son (2005) argue that in assessing communicative language teaching (CLT),there are significant differences between teachers and researchers' conceptions. Researchers and practitioners hold different opinions on the matter.

Upshur (1969) argued that grammatical competence is not a good predictor of communicative competence. In their research, Upshur and Palmer (1974) argued against teaching grammar, suggesting that to focus on grammatical competence in the classroom is not a sufficient condition for the development of communicative competence. Larsen-Freeman (2007) concurs, "gone are the days when English teachers made students parrot the rules of the language and use them in making sentences either in speech or in writing".

Widdowson (1978) explained that in normal conversation native speakers will focus more on language use than on grammar. This viewpoint was maintained in research that promoted communicative language teaching. However, according to Rivers (1973), Schulz (1977) and Paulston (1974), research on basic communicative skills tends to put less emphasis on other aspects of communicative competence such as knowledge of the appropriateness of utterances with respect to sociocultural contexts. In such contexts, emphasis seems to be focused on getting one's meaning across at the early stages of second language learning. From another angle, Savington (1972), Van EK (1976) and Palmer (1978) underlined that many of the communicative approaches do not emphasize grammatical accuracy.

Caroll (1978) suggests that native speakers of a language are more tolerant of second language learners' "stylistic failures" than of their grammatical inaccuracies. Without some minimal level of grammatical competence in the second language, it is unlikely that one could communicate effectively with a monolingual speaker of the language. From this perspective, grammatical competence should be perceived as an essential component of communicative performance.

Munby (1978) perceives that the study of communicative competence should focus minimally on the relationship and interaction between regularities in grammatical competence and regularities in sociolinguistic competence. A language user should be able to use correct language in appropriate applications. Van EK (1976) stated that the general objective for second language programmes is that "the learner should be able to survive (linguistically) in temporary contacts with foreign language speakers in everyday situations" (pp.24-25). This view underlined basic requirements for a foreign language learner.

In a review of approaches to language teaching, Bax (2003) called for the abandonment of communicative language teaching on the basis of its inability to deliver the promised outcomes. On the other hand, Liao (2004) contends that the communicative approach is the best method of teaching a foreign language.

Hiep (2007) proposes that because of the broad theoretical positions on which the communicative approach is based, different interpretations of the communicative approach

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resulted in different positions ranging from advocacy to rejection. From a more recent perspective, Hunter and Smith (2012) challenged the assumption that there was ever a whole, distinct or unitary CLT. They perceive CLT as a succession of methods that chart the progression from pre-communicative stage to diverse communicative applications.

Recently, the teachers of English have begun to involve their pupils in grammaring rather than explicit grammar teaching (Enos, 2010; Akakura, 2012). Grammaring has been proposed to include the procedural knowledge in using language rather than the declarative knowledge of its systems. Demonstrating knowledge of grammar rules within a communicative context started to reclaim interest within the EFL teaching context.

Thirty years after the implementation of the Communicative Approach, views remain divided as to whether or not communicative competence is the optimal method for teaching and learning English, and whether or not the notion "communicative competence" includes that of "grammatical competence" as one of its essential components.

The purpose of this paper is to revisit, through a case study, perceptions associated with English language applications and projected in the teaching and learning of English, by tutors and learners, in one EFL context.

Methodology

The study concerns 198 students doing English communication skills courses in an EFL university context in Lebanon. The students undergo a placement test and are placed in English communication skills courses of different levels, based on their attained results in the placement test.

At the time of the study, which lasted for four months, the English faculty at the university were involved in a research that identified the difficulties that students face when learning English in non-native contexts. Opinion was divided on the most appropriate method for teaching EFL.

The study involved the 6 English communication skills course tutors working with the 198 students as well as 39 part time English faculty members. The English communication skills tutorials followed the communicative language teaching approach (CLT) where the focus was on language and communicative functions and notions. The syllabus included imparting and seeking factual information in English, getting things done and socializing. Topic areas encompassed personal identification, familiar setting, travel, food and drink, home and roles.

Student groups relied on the course textbooks that provided the communicative components. The teaching methodology involved pair and group work, communicative activities and teaching functional language. The criteria for evaluating this group's performance included classroom presentations and group work, efforts to communicate, amount of communication, comprehensibility and suitability, naturalness, poise and semantic accuracy. In addition, there was an end of semester written final exam that students needed to pass to be able to progress to the following level.

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The data comprised of students' continuing assessment records, end of semester studentgrades and tutor interviews. It is noteworthy that despite the course objectives of adopting the communicative approach in teaching communication skills courses, the end of semester exams included a separate grammar component which is allocated 15 out of 50, in addition to 10 marks allocated to reading comprehension, 5 marks allocated for vocabulary and 20 marks for writing.
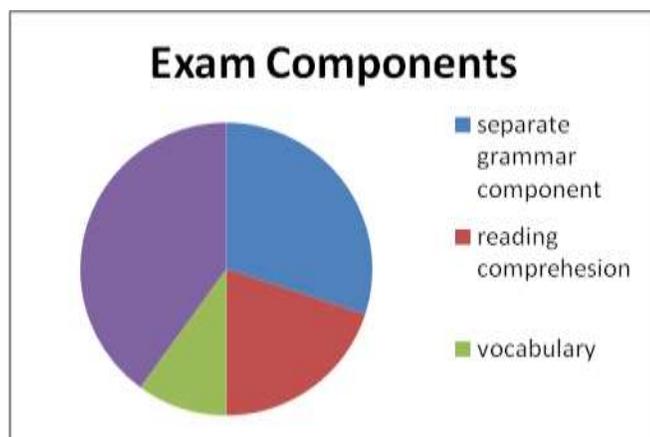

Figure1.End of semester exam components

Findings

In looking at students' performance in the separate component scores of the final exam assessment, we find that where the grammar grade was low, the writing component grade was also low. Based on the assessment scores, three performance groups emerged. Group A included 48 students who weregood performers. Group B included 82 students who were labeled as average performers. Group C included 68 students who were labeled as below-average performers.

	Reading	Vocabulary	Grammar	Writing
Tier A (good performers 48 students) Reading and Vocabulary scores similar to grammar and writing scores	4.5/5	2.5/2.5	2/2.5	4.5/5
Tier B (middle group 82 students) Reading and Vocabulary scores better than grammar and writing scores	3/5	2.25/2.5	0.5/2.5	1.75/5

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Tier C (poor performers 68 students) Reading and Vocabulary scores similar to grammar and writing scores	0.5 /5	0. 75/2.5	0. 5/2.5	1.5 /5

Figure2.End of Semester Results

For Group A, high reading and vocabulary scores were correlated with high grammar and writing scores. For Group B, reading and vocabulary scores were better than grammar and writing scores. For Group C, low reading and vocabulary scores were correlated with low grammar and writing scores.

Where performers were exceptionally good (Group A) or exceptionally below average (Group C), their competence or incompetence was reflected in all assessed areas. However for Group B, performers did better in reading and vocabulary components than in grammar and writing components. For students in Tier B, competence in reading and vocabulary skills did not extend to grammar and writing scores.
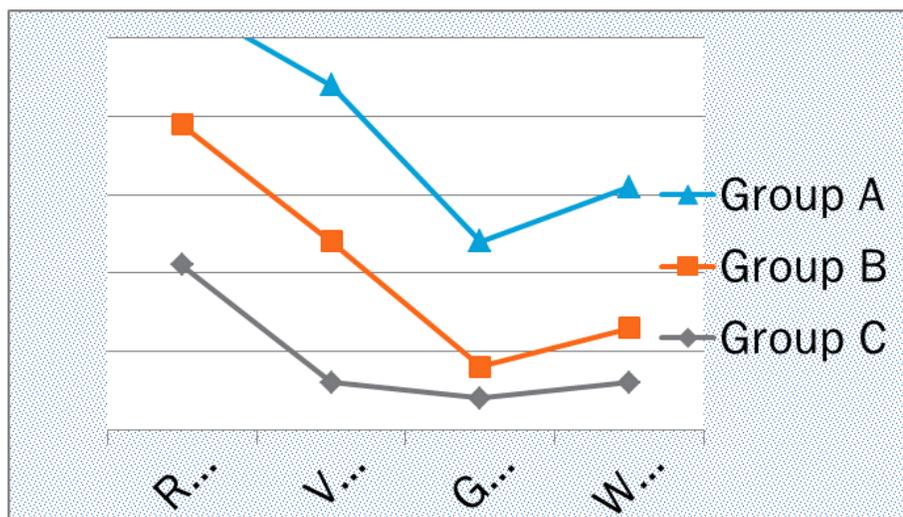

Figure3. Results revealing three achievement groups

Following the attained results, interviews were conducted with tutors to gain insight from tutors' perspective. On opinion whether the grammar or the communicative approach served better the learners' needs in EFL contexts, 9 tutors out of the 45 English tutors surveyed replied that they prefer to separate grammar instruction to make English language rules clearer to their students. They perceived that knowledge of grammar rules is crucial in order to help students express themselves accurately in spoken and written communication. In their sessions, grammar instruction included labeling lexical categories, introducing rules of syntax and morphology, drilling sentence grammar as well as semantics and phonologic exercises.According to these tutors, grammar competence is a crucial component in any teaching and learning approach to English in a non-native context, to compensate for the limited

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opportunities of practice. Tutors underlined that at the beginner level, a foreign language learner will most likely be unable to devote much attention to the task of how to use language until he or she has mastered some of the grammatical forms that need to be used. Therefore, it is important to adopt the position that foreign language learning will proceed more effectively, when grammatical usage is not abstracted from meaningful context. The tutors however, expressed dissatisfaction with the sociolinguistic models of interaction, contained in the syllabi, which are mostly focused on native speakers' contexts. The participating tutors underlined the importance of using the learnt language in an appropriate manner and with fluency.

Out of the 45 English tutors surveyed, 36 tutors confirmed that they used integration in teaching grammar. 20 tutors responded that they use some integration in teaching grammar and 16 tutors confirmed that they use substantial integration in teaching grammar within the communicative approach. However the 36 tutors agreed that the communicative approach must respond to the learner's communicative needs. In this integrationists' view, communicative competence may be regarded as one in which there is a synthesis of knowledge of basic grammatical principles, knowledge of how language is used in social context to perform communicative functions, and knowledge of how utterances and communicative functions can be combined to be compatible with the requirements of the interaction. In addition, tutors thought that exposure to realistic communication situations is crucial if communicative competence is to lead to communicative confidence. The tutors confirmed that from their experience of working with EFL students, competence in grammar needed a further sociolinguistically appropriate level of production. In addition, the tutors mentioned that the more competent students usually find ways of overcoming "difficulties" in the target language.
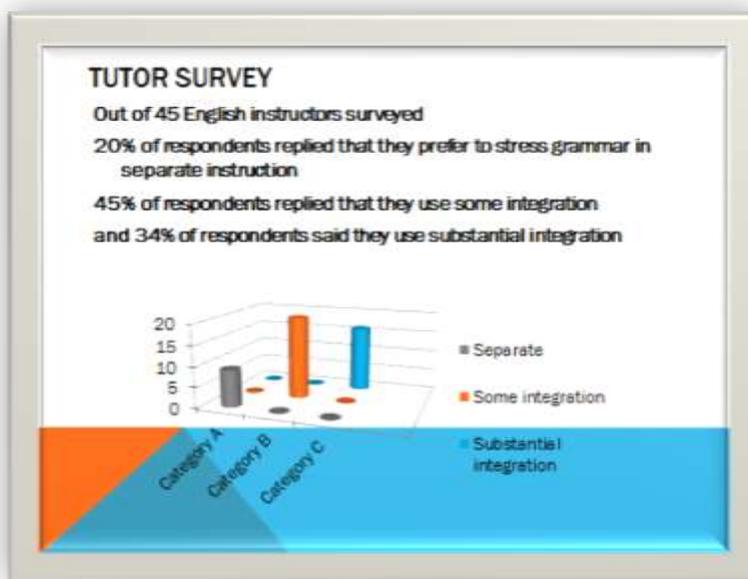

*Figure 4.*Integrating or separating grammar

In a follow up to their responses, the researcher asked tutors how do they integrate grammar with tasks. The 36 tutors that used integrationreplied that they integrate grammar in an ecclectic approach. Four tutors explained that they derive grammar from the text. Nine

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elucidated that they choose the texts that illustrate specific grammar items and twenty-three reported that they highlight the grammar items that are required for the task at hand.

Again, concerns were voiced on the inappropriateness of the texts in preparing learners for encounters that they may face in an EFL context. Tutors explained that they needed to emphasize grammar rules because of the limited opportunities of practicing the taught language would not allow the students to notice the rules from communicative exchanges only.
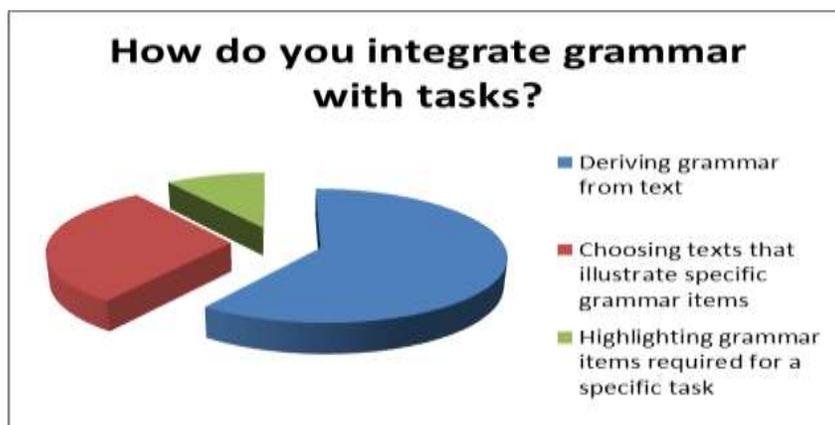

Figure 5.Integrating grammar with tasks

In the follow up interview, the below questions were also discussed:
1.   What is the ultimate goal of ELT in non-native contexts?
2.   Is writing a primary component of teaching ELT in a non-native context?
3.   Can we teach language in a ELL contexts without teaching grammar?
4.   How can we include grammar in ELT and avoid the apprehensions of old school prescriptivism?

In response to question one, there was a consensus that the ultimate goal of English language teaching in non-native contexts is to prepare learners to use English with fluency and accuracy. In relation to question 2, all tutors perceived writing as a primary concern in teaching English in a non-native context. Tutors provided that end of semester assessment has about half of the grade allocated to the writing component (20 out of 50). Theydefended grade allocation on the basis that most universities conduct writing assessment for applicants and use the results for short listing candidates for interviewing.

As for the third question, tutors explained that their teaching methods provide both opportunities of practice and grammar scaffolding. In responding to question 4, tutors explained that they focus in the lessons on everyday vocabulary and use visual aids to prompt communication. They also confirmed that they pay particular attention to the accuracy of pronunciation as well as conformance to grammar rules.

In a further question on the adequacy of material, 20% of the tutors responded that the material are useful; 38% perceive that it needs customization to students' needs and 42% consider the material as inadequate.

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Discussion

Evidence from tutors' responses confirms that there is an overemphasis in many integrative theories on the role of communicative functions and social behavior options in the selection of grammatical forms. There is also a lack of emphasis on the role of factors such as grammatical complexity and areas of similarity to the learner's first language. The adopted communicative language teaching model in the context of the case study is primarily focused on the communicative functions of the language that are modeled from the native speaker's context of use.

Grammar is targeted to support the correct application of the language in both integrationist and separate approaches in the classroom. In integrating grammar into learning tasks, language rules are highlighted as they emerge from the tasks, or in anticipation of what will be encountered in the lesson. It remains within the syllabus design realm to cater for grammar complexities or draw on similarity to the learner's first language. In addition, Liao (2004) proposes that further difficulties encountered by the EFL tutor relate to the size of the classroom and the incompatibility of the grammar based tests.
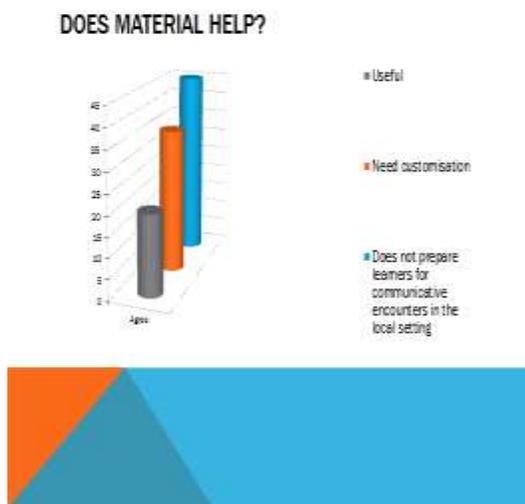

*Figure 6.*Tutors' views on the material

All tutors confirmed that there is some attention to grammatical usage within the adopted communication approach. The assumption that grammatical complexity should be considered in the process of specifying the grammatical forms and communicative functions can be related to an earlier assessment of learners' needs. Areas of grammar, phonology, morphology might not be served well by an organization based on communicative functions alone. Johnson (1977, 1978) and Morrow (1978) have pointed out that it seems unlikely that a syllabus organized along communicative lines can be organized equally well along grammatical lines. The sequencing of grammatical forms should be informed mainly by theories of language (Chomsky 1965, Halliday 1973), language acquisition (Bates 1976; Bloom 1970;Krashen 1982), and psycholinguistic (Fodor, Bever and Garett, 1974;Slobin 1971). Those functions whose appropriateness conditions are more universal, or at least more similar to those that hold for the learner's native language and culture, may be introduced before those functions that have more idiosyncratic appropriateness conditions.

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Conclusion

In ELL contexts, learners do not have enough exposure to hypothesize and test language rules; hence the communicative approach may not work on its own.Mangubhai, Marland, Dashwood and Son (2005) advocate that teachers integrate into communicative approaches additional features not normally mentioned in second language literature. Lam (2015, p.293) proposed that, "salient issues emerging from the analysis of literature include advocacy of an eclectic approach".

Communicating in a foreign language needs to succeed in sustaining conversation at sociocultural and interpersonal levels. The foreign language application needs to be correct as well as compatible with the context of the interaction. It should involve authentic and not text book contrived language to serve as a model for the learner that can be used in future encounters. As such, the communicative approach that we envisage is an integrative one in which emphasis is on preparing foreign language learners to understand and apply aspects of linguistic as well as sociolinguistic competencies and to be able to draw on strategic competence in case of communication breakdown. In cases of limited opportunities of practice, the syllabus must provide models for potential linguistic and sociolinguistic exchanges to support learning the foreign language.

Following the findings of this case study, our view on a communicative competence model is that such model must incorporate a tripod construct with three essential competencies: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. At the most basic level, learners' needs must be specified and targeted, with respect to grammatical competence, that is the levels of grammatical accuracy that are required in oral and written communication.

At the second level comes sociolinguistic competence and learning needs. Description of the communicative needs of a given group of foreign language learners is needed which would highlight both the factors particular to the learners and also the factors particular to the speech community in which the foreign language is used.

Lexical and stylistic considerations work at this level to aid successful communication in social setting. Foreign language learners need to acquire an adequate level of appropriateness for their communication in the foreign language as well as knowledge of the sociocultural rules bearing on appropriateness. Knowledge of what a native speaker is likely to say in a given context is an important component of foreign language learners' competence.

The third level required for a successful communication is strategic competence. At this level, the compensatory communication strategies are to be used when there is a breakdown at one of the other levels. These compensatory strategies can be transferred from the first language epository of interactions and procedures.

With respect to syllabus organization, if a communicative approach to foreign language teaching is adopted, then principles of syllabus design must integrate aspects of both grammatical competence and sociolinguistic competence. In relation to grammatical competence, Savington (1972) found that college students may not develop grammatical

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accuracy in the course of their second language programme if emphasis is not put on this aspect from the start (1972, p. 60). As for sequencing skills in the syllabus, Davies (1978), following his review of a number of studies of adolescent and adult second language learners, suggests that receptive skills should be emphasized at the early stages of introduction classes but the production skills should not. In addition, ELL texts should be incorporated into foreign language classroom syllabus instead of wholesale transfer of texts from native contexts that may or may not be appropriate to the learner's context. In addition, the explicit statement of grammatical rules, sociocultural rules, discourse rules and communication strategies, including verbal communication skills and non-verbal elements of communication like gestures and facial expressions, need to be incorporated into any successful foreign language teaching model.

From what has preceded, grammaring or the procedural knowledge of using grammar in context, needs to become an essential component of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and replace the declarative approach to grammar in EFL. Grammaring needs to be integrated in classroom communication, as a process that reflects the three major components of the tripod model of CLT.

Performance remains the evidence of competence; however appropriate language performance is essentially reflective of multiple layers of grammatical, sociolinguistic and strategic competencies. The tripod model of CLT incorporates correct linguistic application, appropriate sociolinguistic awareness and higher order strategic maneuverability.

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