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## An Issue of Pedagogical Concern: Why does It Take So Long to Albanian Students to Develop English Communicative Fluency?

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### Abstract

Despite the early launch of English language teaching, officially at the third grade of elementary public schooling in Albania upward till university studies, communicative fluency of spoken English remains a noticeable struggle to Albanian students conducting academic programs in English. This paper will examine the causal factors that negatively add to this situation arguing that it is related to the irrelevant pedagogic philosophy of English teachers. This teaching approach is mainly driven by teacher – centred grammar translation method. Moreover, we argue that the most successful approach to be urgently pursued is the interactive communicative one. Once having ascertained and made the case of Albanian students finding hard to express themselves fluently and coherently in English, we emphasize and propose ways of utilizing interactive communicative approach in English language academic courses demonstrating that this is the sole approach to prioritize and fulfil effectively the students' linguistic needs and English communicative potentials.

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## 1. Conventional English Teaching Approach in Albanian Education

English language teaching has been subject to political and socio-economic developments of Albania over years. The earliest English language academic programs originate back at the demise of Russian language hegemony and Albanian-Russian diplomatic split in 1961. Immediately the linguistic vacuum of Russian foreign language was filled in by English language teaching. Although, communist regime did not have any political affiliation and openness into the Western English speaking space, yet English turned to be a safe foreign language to the communist propaganda of Hoxha's government. In addition, Hoxha's political inspirers Marx and Engels had written their political doctrines in English too (Graddol & Meinhof, 1999). This was another good reason to legitimize English teaching and translation of such masterpieces from English language. To put differently, English was asserted to be another useful instrument to further cultivate and pursue the communist ideology as prescribed by the Russian founding-fathers.

However, it should be mentioned that ever since its beginnings foreign language teaching in Albania was a challenging task encountering several problems. One of the disincentives to hinder the successful foreign language acquisition in the country was the Albanian language illiteracy itself prior to World War II. Albania lacked a long-standing tradition of standardised- written records and an abundance of written literature. This disadvantageous local factor explains the lack of teaching methods in foreign language; the role of the language teacher and students; the ultimate objectives of the teaching and learning process; the selective criteria in textbook and other class literature and above all on the authentic function of the foreign language proficiency. As a consequence with concern to English teaching approach it was only the grammar translation method as the only operational teaching approach because English was meant to be a harmless tool of political regime providing only original reading and translation of classic British authors like Shakespeare, Byron or Durham. Furthermore, these renowned names had treated mainly or partly Albanian history, people or cultural values, in some of their masterpieces which were a strong convincing argument to have sufficient knowledge of reading and understanding in English to work with the original writings in English or prepare loyal translations from English into Albanian. It is to be stressed the fact, that certainly English teaching and learning was not for authentic communication, conduction of foreign affairs with the Western English speaking world or for international educational purposes. Accordingly, the democratic changes of early 1990s and the openness of the country in view of the Cold War end, not by accident, - found foreign languages teaching totally unprepared for the urgent linguistic needs of isolated Albanians who were eager to travel, study and work abroad. Furthermore, the technological advances demanded command of English language in order to catch up with its rhythm of evolution.

Likewise other sectors, the higher educational one had to go through reformation processes and adjustments to meet the international curricula criteria as one of the conditional parameters in the broad framework of the European Union integration aspiration of Albania. In her article, academic Rajmonda Kecira took a special interest in the case study of a main public university in the Northern part of Albania, - Luigj Gurakuqi of Shkoder ( Rajmonda Kecira, 2013, p 79). She elaborates that the first department of foreign languages to be founded there was the English one from 1994-1995, to be followed by German language department in 1996-1997; the Italian department in 1998-1999; and the French one in 2006-2007 ( Kecira, 2013, p80). As Kecira puts in her study, it is clear that English department foundation was given priority at the early beginnings.

Very interestingly, Pata provides a historical chronicle of the very first contact of Albanians with English language driven by historical legacy and sympathetic political influence of the powerful English speaking states like the USA and the UK ever since the genesis of Albanian infant state. For instance, Kapo points at the support England gave to the Albanian government on 2 October 1920 with respect to Albanian membership into the League of Nations (Kapo, 2011, p 41). In addition, the official acknowledgment of Albanian government of the 1944 was sympathetically backed by the World War II powers; the USA, the UK and the Soviet Union.

Unfortunately, this friendship with the English speaking world was interrupted in 1945 when Hoxha the head of communist government in Albania decided to pursue the Russian political orientation instead of the democratic system inquired by the English speaking (USA, UK) powers. It was not until the restoration of diplomatic relations in view of political regime changes in 1990 that Albanians restored diplomatic contact with the English speaking powers. In particular, membership of country in international organizations required usage of English as the official language of such new political developments and reform. In concrete terms, in 1991 Albania became a member of the CSCE (Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe); in 1995 in the Council of Europe; in 1992 in the North Atlantic Union Council and in 1994 the signing of the Peace Agreement (Kapo, 2011, p44). Moreover, the Stability Pact for

South-eastern Europe gave further impetus to conducting economic negotiations, regional security collaboration within the region by means of one common language - English.

Immediately as a response to this regional and global dynamics and supremacy gained by English as a foreign language, higher educational institutions placed emphasis to English teaching and preparation of qualified English language teachers by establishing departments of English language in all public universities of Albania. To illustrate, the former pedagogic institute of Elbasan turned into a university in 1991 founding the English department as part of Faculty of Humanities ('Aleksander Xhuvani' University website <http://www.uniel.edu.al>). In Korca city, the former Institute was granted the status of a university by setting among others the Faculty of Education in 1992-1993 encompassing academic programs on English language teaching, pre-school teaching (<http://www.unkorca.edu.al/en/content/faculty-education-and-philology>). Lately, at the university 'Ismail Qabej' of Vlora the Faculty of Humanities was established on 5 December 2007 offering bachelor study programs in general English teaching to prepare elementary and secondary English school teachers ([http://univlora.edu.al/?page\\_id=5073](http://univlora.edu.al/?page_id=5073)).

As far as English teaching approach is concerned, it is obvious that at their early days these fragile departments did not have a well-elaborated platform of contemporary foreign language teaching, updated literature and research literature on English for specific purposes and its aims. This conclusion can be drawn for certain for as explained above foreign language learning and teaching used to be under the total influence of political regime. Moreover, during the 50 years of communist totalitarianism a great vacuum of scientific knowledge had already been created by the lack of information dissemination and cooperation with any other international university. Thus, it is indisputable that the only foreign language teaching approach applied was the grammar translation; definitely communicative English teaching approach was beyond thinking because Albanians were isolated and would never use English in authentic situations and purposes.

## 2. Attributes of Communicative Approach in English Teaching-Learning

While isolated and suppressed Albanians were satisfied merely with translation and reading of British masterpieces, the British applied linguists themselves decided that the Situational Language Teaching approach had run its course of action; focusing only on acquisition of accurate sentence structures could not be the scope of English teaching anymore by late 1960s (Richards, J.C and Rogers, 2001). They argued that there was no more significance to place importance on utterance accuracy in improvised meaningful situations but rather to use language for authentic communication. This shift has been defined by both American and British as an approach rather than method whose scope is, I quote Richards, "to make communicative competence the goal of language teaching and develop procedures for the teaching of the four language skills that acknowledge the interdependence of language and communication" (Richards, 2001). Littlewood identifies the main principle underlying communicative learning theory which to him is the communication principle in itself followed by the meaningful task principle; the third principle is that of the meaningfulness language ( Littlewood, 1981).

In order to better understand and realize differences, Richards (2006) explains the attributes of communicative language competence as opposed to the concept of grammatical competence. To Richards, communicative competence comprises such aspects of language knowledge as following (Richards, 2006):

- Knowing how to use language for a range of different purposes and functions
- Knowing how to vary our use of language according to the setting and the participants
- Knowing how to produce and understand different types of texts Knowing how to maintain communication despite having limitations in one's language knowledge.

Richards highlights the crucial distinction between the previous focus of English language teaching which was upon grammatical competence and the current communicative teaching approach. In the first, the learning process was purely mechanical process (Richards, 2006). Grammatical accuracy was given priority and accentuation through application of error analysis during memorization of assigned dialogs. Students were taught through a deductive approach of practicing the given grammar rather than searching the rule out from an assigned exercise. In more concrete terms, Richards goes through the specific features underlying a *structural –situational approach* syllabus where students are exposed to a listening sample dialog which will be rehearsed either individually or in chorus under the vigilance of the teacher for any pronunciation error (Richards, 2006). Further drilling is offered by laboratory

exercises as an integral part of this structural (situational – UK) syllabus of English teaching. In a nutshell, the syllabus implementing situational language teaching approach consisted of the three Ps cycle- presentation, practice and production.

The late 1970s put into big question the grammar centred- language teaching approach hence, paving the way to communicative competence- focused approach of language teaching. This turning shift did not occur in a vacuum; instead it was a follow up reaction to the social-political and economic developments undergoing Europe be the Eastern and the Western block. The need to use English for real communication, economic partnership, educational collaboration and international commerce or foreign policy revealed the weakness of the traditional situational teaching approach; to be filled in by the communicative teaching approach and setting a syllabus driven by priority on communicative competence. I argue that one of the most beneficial added values of the communicative teaching approach is its main concern on developing fluency in real language use. Again citing Richards, (2006, p12) “fluency is the natural language use occurring when a speaker engages in meaningful interaction and maintains comprehensible and ongoing communication despite limitations in his or her communicative competence”. Moreover, I argue that the hectic dynamics of events underlying Albanian and even global political, economic and cultural changes of these days demand English linguistic competence to be utilized rather than mechanical repetition of assigned situations in vacuum rather than in a real functional usage of English in practice. In order to guarantee rapid acquisition of linguistic fluency, the teaching materials and all activities in class will be driven by the *linguistic authenticity dimension*.

This real world dimension value was emphasized by Clarke and Silberstein in their 1977 publication (p, 51) maintaining that ‘since language is a tool of communication, methods and materials should concentrate on the message and not in the medium. The purposes of reading should be the same in class as they are in life’. This is a most fundamental beneficial attribute of the communicative competence and fluency based English teaching approach that by placing emphasis on real world scenarios it urges the English teacher to consult with reading literature and class materials extracted from all life aspects such as economics, medicine, technology, computing, business, commerce, diplomacy and humanities in general.

Narrowing the scope of study to the Albanian case of English language teaching, unfortunately the importance and priority to CLT approach has been inexistent for 50 years and therefore, this language teaching approach constitutes extremely great values to the Albanian context in particular as compared to the rest of Europe where it has originated since 1970s. In addition, given the linguistic eagerness of Albanians is reasonable after 50 years of isolation and firing desire to become part of European family. They demand a productive English teaching approach to deal with this new world stretching in front of them. The teaching approach, the class materials and the scope of the teaching-learning process in itself must reflect the activities and tasks of the surrounding environment. This real life dimension of language teaching has been tackled explicitly by Osgood quoting “Linguists will find the basic principles of their science in the universality of the human” (Osgood, 1957). His statement reveals and highlights the natural function of language as an instrument which reflects every aspect of mankind, every social phenomenon and event, every field of life to its highest complexity makes the subject matter of linguistic explanation and its subject matter of study and research. Consequently, in the following section, I will provide specific recommendations on how to utilize successfully the communicative language teaching approach in Albanian higher education driven from the natural functional usage of language – to reveal the daily and professional life phenomena.

### **3. Suggestions for the future**

#### *3.1. Highlight of the importance of English language as a daily life tool*

English departments of public universities must highlight the importance of English language as a tool to daily life, and professional life in its full spectra. The departments are the first academic bodies to emphasize the significant practical importance of English language competence for real communication rather than the theoretical study of theoretical conventions merely on paper. Since building up and strengthening human capital in English teaching is predominantly the responsibility of higher educational institutions, English departments have to design in their curricula courses oriented by communicative fluency competence of language. Only by implanting this approach from the roots, there will be a chance to graduate English language teachers who can successfully teach and apply later on the communicative teaching techniques and strategies. The departments of English language are the sole responsible

institutions to prepare future language teachers and as such it is crucial to implant this functional usage notion of English language teaching-learning at the very beginning to the future teachers. Only by dealing with the problem at the roots will there guarantee of a rapid feedback and positive outcome in terms of implementing effectively the communicative approach of teach after a half- a century lack of tradition.

### *3.2. Enhancement of scientific cooperation on English teaching approaches*

Albanian academics must acknowledge the prominence of sharing scientific knowledge among national and international co-partner departments. All universities public and private must enhance cooperation in sharing scientific literature on contemporary academic debates on English language teaching. This information dissemination and collaboration demands stronger ties of professional relationship between public and private universities aiming to catch up with the same rhythm of new tendencies in English teaching all over the country. In particular, the trainings, workshops and scientific meetings have to shatter the differences between generations of English teachers, hence including in their scope the previously graduated teachers whose teaching approach was mainly based on classic grammar-translation method. The target group of trainees must be in particular the previous generations whose academic knowledge and teaching practice is based on models of situational –structural approach or even worse on the grammar –translation method. This target group of previous teachers constitutes a huge amount of the present teaching staff in high schools and secondary or elementary schools of Albania, thus their reintegration in the current academic discussions and findings on recent English teaching productivity must not be neglected. However, it does not mean that these formerly graduated English teachers during totalitarian communism do not hold any teaching value to be exchanged; quite the contrary they have to be given credit and respect for the immense contribution having made to the body of literature on English teaching and for having borne the burden of arranging the higher educational reform and adjustments from communism to the contemporary period. Yet, they have to accept the need for life long-learning and updating with the most recent teaching breakthroughs and findings that better meet the current needs of learners.

### *3.3. Priority placed on class materials tailored for building communicative fluency*

Class materials and any other linguistic literature which is tailored for building the communicative fluency competence must be given special priority by the academic staff and researchers in the English teaching domain. There is an urgent need for accurate and elaborate observation and evaluation of the quality of the English textbooks used in public schools all over the country. This minute observation by linguistic experts will aim at identifying the authenticity and freshness of the textbook in high schools and other lowers education cycles. Moreover, it must check the uniformity of the textbooks at national scale level, that is to verify that English teachers in high schools in rural and suburban areas of Albania perform and apply the same approach of standards related to freshness and needs relevance of the class literature likewise the standards of public schools in big urban areas. Guarantee the same standard quality of English language teaching all over the country is another great concern to be considered since Albanian social and economic development is by now characterized by huge discrepancies of development patterns between the centre and the periphery. At least, by this linguistic uniformity the educational aspect of development will not have to suffer from huge vacuums of developmental patterns between regions as compared to the core of the country. All efforts must be put into approaching the English teaching to its functional usage for real communication in real world. English must be taught as a professional tool to gain access into the competitive job market. Only by emphasizing the function of English language to perform international jobs in international labour market, Albanian students and prospective teachers will truly better match with the professional expectations of language teaching and learning in the west in line with the Bologna Charter criteria as well.

### *3.4. Usage of authentic case studies through courses on English for Specific Purposes*

In order to practically teach and learn English through authentic case studies there grows the need for more English for Specific Purposes literature and courses. This latter automatically leads to cross- disciplinary academic research

and textbook publications with academic staff in tailored disciplines. For instance, in order to construct a communicative competence course in Business English the assigned English lecturer should consult and share knowledge with the head of business department of the relevant institution. Once having ascertained the linguistic and content-based needs of business students as diagnosed by the business department staff, the language lecturer will have to boost scholastic cooperation with the expert of the field in order to guarantee relevant and adequate linguistic potentials to students in that field. Similar to the Business English Case, the communicative fluency can be built up for any other professional domain.

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