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Effective Language Teaching Methods in Online Learning Environments: A Case Study of Virtual University of Pakistan

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Abstract

The higher education landscape is continually evolving by imbibing technology and artificial intelligence for facilitating students' needs, expectations and aspirations. While many institutions are adopting online frameworks for higher education, the online universities constantly need to reevaluate their systems to best facilitate students. One such re-evaluation is a need for language teaching programs offered by online universities. In this regard, this study aimed to explore students' perceptions about the best language teaching method in online settings. For this purpose, that data was collected from the students enrolled in Virtual University of Pakistan's BS English course Language Teaching Methods offered by the Department of English. The study included all students enrolled in the course. Qualitative data gathered through the Graded Discussion Board (GDB) i.e., 1190 posts were screened, coded and five themes were finalized. The findings of the study revealed that students preferred the communicative language teaching method. Moreover, they suggested its implementation at the university through collaboration projects, technological adaptation of latest applications and software and learner autonomy through a combination of both a/synchronous activities for improving their language skills.

Keywords: Language Teaching Methods, Online Learning, Virtual University of Pakistan, Communicative Language Teaching, Learner Autonomy.



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1. Introduction

In foreign or second language teaching and learning, teachers have always tried to adapt their teaching approaches according to the times and needs of students for the best classroom practices. While the emergence of multiple methods is spread over history with a focus to best facilitate students, in contemporary times, educators face the challenge to adapt these methods according to the technological needs of the times. Any language method must cater to student's need of learning a new language and the use of technology is a need in contemporary times. However, technology is not a new term for language teaching methods. While classical methods like grammar translation and direct methods did not focus much on technology, the audiolingual method relied a lot on the available technologies of the time. The audio-lingual method was in vogue in the 1950s and focused on radio and television programs as well as technical assistants like projectors. As the behaviorists theory became in vogue, linguistics was also influenced by the ideology that the process of learning to speak precedes reading and writing, therefore, audiolingual method also focused on the same and inculcated some of the behaviorist principles. It was by the end of the 1950s that the term instructional technology emerged and at that time it referred to including language laboratories or equipment like radio, television etc. for aiding second/foreign language learning. More teaching machines included recorded tapes or programmed texts. From the 1960s onwards the use of these resources was known as technological aids or auxiliary technological resources, and this became increasingly important in language teaching and learning.

Lado (1964) emphasizes how practical exercises for spoken language facilitate teachers to use audio lingual techniques in the classroom in an effective way. As the language teaching focuses on making students achieve the goal of real-life effective communication, the primary instructional techniques of audio-lingual methods were based on dialogue through imitating and memorizing spoken sentences. Therefore, this method popularized the use of visual aids which were a form of technology. In this regard Stack (1966) emphasizes upon the use of such resources for the production of speech sounds correctly.

From the 1960s onwards the methods that focused on the cultural environment of the target language in the classroom became more popular. It was in the 1970s that the communicative movement emerged which prioritized the use of language for communication. So, the audiolingual method slightly went to the background, losing its earlier prestige. Communicative teaching methodology was adopted for language courses and this approach also brought changes in the liberal sciences domains because it was based on Vygotsky's concepts which emphasized both upon communicative and social aspect of language acquisition. For Vygotsky (1977), as knowledge is internalized from social interaction, language must be learnt communicatively. However, it was Widdowson (1978) who laid the theoretical foundations of the communicative movement of language teaching. He distinguished between grammatical form and communicative use and stressed the significance of linguistic competence. Johnson (1982) believed that classroom practices must meet certain standards for communicative teaching and Carol (1980) proposed procedures for evaluating students' communicative performance in this regard. Ausubel (1980) outlined how meaningful learning involves a process which connects symbolically expressed ideas with the information that students already have. Thus, students aligned new knowledge with their existence knowledge framework.

By the 1970's, real-life materials like posters, magazines, newspapers, maps, photos, pictures, poems which were later called authentic material were very much in vogue. Carvalho (1995) finds the use of real life material significant in three ways: a) actual language usage exposure, b) access

to culture of the target language and c) input and stimulation for foreign language learning. The use of feature films was also considered an effective technology for communicative practices by that time (Carvalho 1995).

Computers (mainframe and microcomputers) were in vogue in the second half of the 20th century and the use of technology as it is used in contemporary times laid its foundations in teaching and learning (Otto, 2017). Language teaching methods also continued evolving accordingly. In contemporary times, the latest technologies which are called information and communication technologies are very much in vogue for teaching language. The language teaching transitioned from face-to-face classrooms to online platforms. Initially, CALL which stands for computer assisted language learning became very popular and computers were used as an aid in face-to-face classrooms (Healey, 2016). Then MALL became popular which stands for mobile assisted language learning. This is how the technology gradually incorporated itself into the language learning processes. The contemporary time is obsessed with the generative artificial intelligence (AI) applications for teaching language, some of which include Google Translate, ChatGPT, spin bot and Gemini. These technologies have helped replace human teachers because they can also inspire, analyze, reflect and discern (Kern, 2024). Therefore, the need to adapt language teaching methods to the technological personal learning environments of the students is very important. In this regard, this study explores how the language teaching methods can best be adapted to the online learning environments and how students perceive that. The study was conducted in an online university (Virtual University of Pakistan) and the students' perceptions were explored about which teaching method for foreign or second language best facilitated them in a fully online learning environment.

1.1. History of Language Teaching Methods

The evolution of language teaching methods reflects the changing views and research on language acquisition theories of learning and goal of language acquisition. Language teaching methods have evolved from the traditional grammar translation methods to the most recent ones. e.g., communicative language teaching, task-based language teaching and content and language integrated learning. The grammar translation method, which was a teacher centered method, emphasized upon new vocabulary and grammar rules primarily. Its strengths included the emphasis on learning grammatical structures through deep learning, but it had some shortcomings, for example, it did not emphasize speaking and listening activities and somehow encouraged rote learning and lack of interaction. After the grammar translation method, the most famous method was the direct method which underscored speaking and listening, oral communication and no translation. In this way, it was unlike the grammar translation method and did not encourage the use of native language for instruction. The teachers and students were supposed to communicate in the target language only. Unlike the grammar translation method, it emphasized grammar teaching inductively and focused on contextualized learning. While its strengths included speaking and listening centeredness, it was a challenging method for beginners because the use of native language was not encouraged. After the direct method, from the 1940s to 1960s, the audiolingual method was in vogue. It focused on the principles of behaviorism by emphasizing upon reinforcement and repetition. The memorized dialogues and drills were part of this method to develop habit formation and correct pronunciations and automatic speech patterns. This was also a teacher-centered method like the grammar-translation method and the teaching took place in a highly structured and controlled manner, which was one of its weaknesses. However, its strength was the focus on accuracy and fluency of pronunciation and basic language skills (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Another method which gained popularity in the 1960s and 70s was the silent way.

In this method, the teacher acted as a guide by speaking as little as possible. In this way, the students were facilitated to take charge of learning rather than getting instructions from the teacher. This method made use of colored charts and expected students to take responsibility for their own learning through active engagement. The method was good in a way that it developed student autonomy but could also cause frustration to the students who were in real need of teacher guidance. Communicative language teaching, which emerged in the 1970s is popular to date and focuses on communication in real life context through student-centered and task-based learning using authentic materials. This method focuses on both accuracy and fluency as well as encourages interaction and real-world communications. However, it is difficult to implement this method to large classes. Task based language teaching can be called a sub-method of communicative language teaching because it specifically focuses on real world tasks, for example, solving a problem or planning a trip. It is also a learner-centered method because it makes learners work in dyads or groups to complete the assigned task and through the task focuses on meaning by emphasizing the pre-task cycle and post-task stages of learning. Like communicative language teaching, this method can also be difficult to use in large classrooms, but it promotes practical real world language use and encourages critical thinking which is a strength of this model (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Content and language integrated learning emerged in the 1990s and integrates subject matters like history, mathematics, science with language learning. Through this method student focus both on content and language learning simultaneously. While this method develops both cognitive and linguistic skills in academic contexts, it is criticized for the fact that it could be difficult for students to learn content and language simultaneously.

1.2. Language Teaching Methods Online

With the advent of online universities language teaching also opened doors for online teaching especially with the advent of the 21st century (Psoinos, 2021). However, more than one-century research-based methods could not directly be employed in online teaching. Therefore, the adaptation was a slow process. While initially, all methods were not experimented in the online learning environments, COVID-19 necessitated for all teachers to shift their teaching to online modes of communication (Sumard & Nugrahan, 2021). Therefore, more research about the utilization of these methods was done. While many teachers discussed the best software available for teaching online e.g., zoom and Google meet for teaching online, only a few research studies discussed the best utility of any of these methods in online learning environments.

1.3. Context of the Study

Virtual University of Pakistan is the first fully online university of Pakistan which is based on information communication technologies and serves the students that come from diverse backgrounds all over Pakistan. It provides affordable education and aims at providing equal access to all the students irrespective of their socio-economic or cultural background. It uses asynchronous mode of teaching for most of the courses while occasionally using synchronous mode where required. The university has its own learning management system called LMS. LMS includes multiple activities that the students can attempt by logging into LMS. Some of these activities include assignments, quizzes, discussion boards and exams. Through these elements Virtual University facilitates a great number of students as distance does not remain a barrier for all those who are in need of tertiary education.

VU's BS English (with a specialization in Applied Linguistics) is a four-year degree program. This program focuses on advancing both academic and professional knowledge to the students of applied linguistics who can apply it to the practical problems related to language teaching and

learning in their context. The main emphasis is on developing knowledge and skills that can be utilized in diverse professional environments after they graduate. Therefore, the program employs both theory and practice to embed them with best of knowledge about the theories and best practices of applied linguistics around the world and in Pakistan. English remains a second language as the students come from diverse backgrounds mainly from the four provinces which include Punjab, Sind, Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. All four provinces have different provincial languages while the national language remains Urdu. Simultaneously, English is used for official purposes in Pakistan. Therefore, the program focuses on the applied aspect of English linguistics while making students aware of how the linguistics of any language work and how the practical problems of a language are dealt with.

1.4. Language Teaching Methods Course (ENG 513)

This study relates to the course Language Teaching Methods (Eng 513) which is a part of the BS English program. It is important to have a look at the course contents of this course. The course covers all language teaching methods that were in vogue in the past and are the most relevant ones to date. Beginning with discussing language as a system, discourse and ideology, the significance of language teaching methods from ancient times to date is discussed in the beginning. Then, the grammar translation method, direct method, audio lingual method, total physical response method, silent way, community language learning, suggestopedia, whole language, multiple intelligences, neurolinguistics programming, competency-based language teaching, natural approach, cooperative language learning, content-based instruction, task-based language learning, and post-method all are discussed in detail. The aspects that how these methods can be applied to the Pakistani context and what are their strengths and weaknesses are also discussed for students' facility. Therefore, the students of this course who had read all these methods were asked to post their opinion on the discussion board about the language teaching method that would be most applicable to teaching online. As the students were themselves online students, their opinions in this regard are significant and this is how this research contributes to the existing scholarship.

1.5. Statement of the Problem

While a lot of studies are available on language teaching methods, there is hardly any scholarship available about which language teaching method best suits online learning environments as language has not been exclusively taught by online universities in a way that language has been taught in person throughout the world. A lot of studies in this regard relate to face-to-face classrooms and not to online classrooms. Most of the studies that are available about language teaching online focus more on online methodologies like synchronous and asynchronous language learning and the community of inquiry networks and less on the methods that are used for language teaching and learning as mentioned above in the course contents of Eng 513.

This study aims at exploring the opinions of the students of BS English at Virtual University of Pakistan about the language teaching method that they deem best suitable for themselves in online learning environments. The study also aims to explore how the method that the students consider best could best be adapted to an online learning environment. Therefore, this study contributes to the body of literature by exclusively focusing on adapting those language teaching methods to an online learning environment that were earlier used in face-to-face teaching and learning of language only.

1.6. Research Objectives

Following are the objectives of this research study:

1. Which language teaching method best facilitates English language students online?
2. How can that method be utilized through an online language teaching platform?

1.7. Research Question

The paper sought to answer the following research questions:

1. Which language teaching method according to the students is best for online teaching?
2. How can communicative language teaching be best adapted for online teaching of English language?

2. Literature Review

In this section, the research studies that explore the best practices of using language teaching methods in online settings and the technologies that facilitate language learning will be outlined.

2.1. Technologies that Facilitate Language Learning in Online Settings

While online education can take asynchronous, synchronous and blended modes, there are some technological aspects that facilitate language teaching in online learning environments (Psoinos, 2021). One of them is screen sharing which becomes the context or the virtual learning environment in online learning. It is through screen sharing that teachers can display coursebooks, browser interface, PowerPoint slides and conduct daily sessions. Similarly, polls can be used for multiple choice questions or for yes, no options. Polls stimulate the schemata of the students and can be used to start a discussion before reading a text, summarizing or concept check of the students. Polls can also be useful to know whether students have addressed instructions or just to stir up things in a session. Similarly, there are breakout groups which help divide students into small groups or large groups. Students can be sent to breakout groups, and they can generate a discussion over there. Simultaneously, the teacher can monitor their activity by joining different pairs or groups in the breakout groups. An example for such groups is zooms breakout rooms. In this way, the teacher's talk time decreases while peer work increases. There are also white boards and annotation tools which can be used by online learning for teaching language. The whiteboards can zoom in and out, can have a pointer, a highlighter or text box for inserting shapes etc. This is how these whiteboards replace the whiteboards in face-to-face classrooms. Whiteboards could provide a canvas for learners on which they can experiment and interact with materials as in face-to-face classrooms and teachers can use a whiteboard as an outlet for low attention span of the learners.

Psoinos (2021) also discusses the raise hand option in zoom and other interactive software of the type. Students can raise hands in the way they used to raise hands in face-to-face classrooms. This also implies classroom etiquette for respect and talking which is no longer a challenge in online sessions. The online platforms also facilitate sharing files and resources which results in circulation of knowledge and interactivity between course participants and can be helpful for language learning. The recording aspect, which might involve some ethical issues as well, facilitates because recordings can be listened to after the session ends and can help students who have memory issues. For example, if a student has missed a lesson, s/he can listen or watch a session recording and take notes accordingly. The discussion boards are also a very important part for language learning because the participants synchronously post at these forums, and they can be used for both formal

and informal assessment. The discussion boards enhance the level of interactivity among course participants which enhances learner autonomy. Through autonomy, critical thinking of language students can be enhanced. Collaborative tools like wiki can make students work in pairs and groups, create a wiki page which facilitates them summarize the main ideas, create course glossary or make tips for specific tests etc. The co-constructed material e.g., presentation slides or session notes create a repository of materials for shared use. To sum up, Psinos (2021) highlights how technological tools aid language teaching in online settings by replicating face-to-face classroom and teaching strategies.

2.2. Grammar Translation Method

A study by As'ari et al. (2021) investigates the implementation of the grammar translation method in digital learning environments for the improvement of reading comprehension of students. This study focuses on students' responses about the implementation of the grammar translation method for the improvement of reading comprehension in digital learning environments using a quantitative method. The data was collected through a questionnaire and observation of 10 students' performance who were studying in the first semester at Suryakencana University. The results show that the grammar translation method is effective in enhancing the reading comprehension of students in digital learning environments in spite of the fact that it is a classical method. Students had a positive response about the use of the method for the improvement of comprehension skills of the target language.

2.3. Audio-Lingual Method

A study by Barona-Oñate et al. (2019) applied audio lingual method with the support of e-learning for improving listening comprehension skills of 58 students of level A2. The students were divided equally into experimental and control groups. The 29 students that got the treatment performed much better in their listening comprehension skills. Therefore, the usefulness of using the audiolingual method in e-learning environments has been established by Barona-Oñate et al. (2019).

2.4. The Silent Way

Dorn (2021) employed the silent way approach in online settings. The researcher applied the silent way three times in the semester and found it highly positive. The session objectives were achieved by the students and the method kept the students engaged undeniably. The approach to teaching English for academic purposes with the silent way method was found very successful. The researcher was of the view that the principles on which the silent way was based were meant for face-to-face teaching, but the approach had a lot of potential to be further explored and adapted to online settings. Online activities can be designed to cater to different learning styles and promote collaboration. The kinesthetic aspect can also be replicated in online settings according to him. However, which applications and software can best facilitate, needs more research. Through color coding and identification of patterns, collaborative activities can be created for teaching online through the silent way.

2.5. Communicative Language Teaching

Taridi et al. (2024) find a favourable relationship between communicative language teaching and e-learning. Their study emphasizes service quality, student satisfaction and trust in services offered to them through e-learning. They underscore to keep the context in mind while implementing such methods to effectively meet the needs of the learners. Hieu et al. (2022) find several benefits and challenges in the implementation of CLT to online teaching. Some of the benefits include real-life

communication, student centredness, and learner autonomy. Some of the challenges include less focus on reading and writing in comparison to speaking and listening and difficulty for students with low competency of the target language. They also highlight the role of teacher's belief in and comprehension of CLT to best implement it to online settings.

3. Research Methodology

The goal of the research was to understand students' perspectives about the best teaching method in online settings as they were studying in an online university enrolled in a BS English (Applied Linguistics) program. This study aimed at examining how students interacted and engaged with teachers and their fellows for learning the English language. The study used a qualitative method. Students' formal discussion posts were analyzed through a thematic analysis for this study.

3.1. Data Collection

The data for this qualitative study was primary. For this purpose, the textual posts or responses of the students were collected and analyzed. Some quantitative aspects like the frequency of posts were also kept in mind while analyzing the opinions of the students.

Students posted their opinions on the Graded Discussion Board which is embedded in the Learning Management System (LMS) of Virtual University of Pakistan. This discussion board is a course specific discussion board and is graded hence entitled as graded discussion board. The opinions were collected in the first half of the semester Fall 2024 and examined right away while they were still studying the course but had covered the pre-mid part of the course which consisted of teaching methods syllabi.

3.2. Population and Sampling

The total population of this study was the number of students enrolled in the course Eng 513. The course consisted of 1500 students out of which 1190 posted their opinions to the discussion board (see Fig 1).

Graded Discussion Board (ENG513)

Title	Total Marks	Weightage	Status	Messages	Un-marked	View	Edit	Result
Teaching Methods	5	2	Close	1190	0	View	Edit	

[New Topic](#)

[Back](#)

Fig1: *Number of Responses*

In this way the sampling for this study is purposive sampling although it is a qualitative study.

3.3. Ethical Aspects

The posts were analyzed for research purposes and the role numbers, or any other data of the students, were kept confidential. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by removing any identifiable information from the screenshots that have been used for this study. Pseudonyms were assigned to each student whose quotes are used in the form of English alphabets i.e., A, B, C, etc.

3.4. Data Analysis Method

Thematic analysis is a method in qualitative research which identifies the patterns or themes as emerged in selected data, to analyze and reports them accordingly (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Miles et al., 2014). Through this process, a researcher analyzes the data for exploration of themes (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Based on the thematic analysis approach of Braun and Clarke (2006), three

steps were used for data analysis i.e., familiarization, analysis (coding) and theme development (generating, reviewing and naming) as shown in Fig 2.

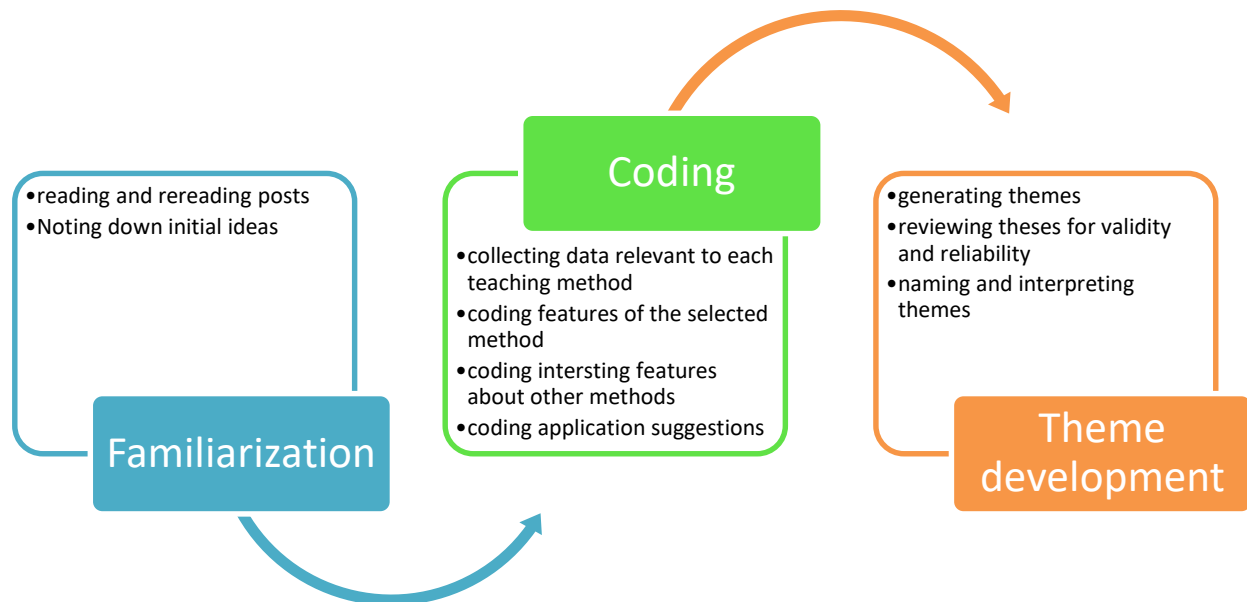


Fig 2: Data Analysis Process

First of all, all of the students' posts were read thoroughly. They were initially marked by the researcher herself. After that they were reread for identifying recurring themes or patterns or topics that were used in the discussions. These discussions were grouped together based on the themes, patterns and topics. In this way, the first step familiarization with the data was completed. In the second step of analysis coding was done by assigning labels to the clusters classified according to the methods mentioned by the students. Coding was done and the codes were organized into broader themes. For the third step themes were labelled and ordered. This method helped provide a deeper perspective about students' opinions and helped collect nuanced opinions based on both their emotions as well as learner opinions while they went through the language teaching methods on which the Graded Discussion Board was based.

4. Results

A total of 1190 responses were analyzed for this study. 95 % of the students opted for the communicative language teaching method as the best method for teaching language only. Only 5 percent of students opted for other methods which included audio-lingual method, Socratic method, eclectic method, grammar translation method and task-based language learning.

Fig 3: shows the interface of GDB i.e., opinions in the posted form:

Student's Message:

For online language teaching, the "Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)" method is particularly effective due to its emphasis on real-world communication and student engagement. Unlike traditional, grammar-heavy methods, CLT focuses on interactive learning, which is essential for keeping students motivated in an online setting.

One of the key strengths of CLT is its focus on developing functional language skills. By using authentic materials (e.g., news articles, podcasts, videos), learners practice language in contexts they will encounter outside the classroom, whether in travel, work, or social interactions. In an online setting, this method fosters meaningful exchanges between students and instructors, which helps them develop both fluency and confidence.

Online tools such as video conferencing platforms, discussion boards, and interactive quizzes align well with CLT principles, offering opportunities for role-playing, group discussions, and collaborative tasks. These tools enable real-time communication, where students can engage in task-based activities (e.g., giving presentations, problem-solving in pairs), which mirrors the dynamic interaction of a face-to-face classroom. Additionally, feedback is immediate, and instructors can use diverse forms of assessment—oral, written, or visual—to gauge learners' progress.

Furthermore, CLT encourages student autonomy and critical thinking, which is important for online learners who often have a more flexible, self-paced learning environment. By incorporating peer interaction, whether through group chats or peer-reviewed assignments, students can benefit from collaborative learning, an aspect that's harder to achieve in purely teacher-centered approaches.

In conclusion, the communicative approach is best for online language teaching because it integrates technology with active, student-centered learning, making the process both practical and engaging. This method prepares learners for real-life communication, which is the ultimate goal of any language acquisition process.

☐ Excellent (100%)
☒ Very Good (75%)
☐ Good (50%)
☐ Satisfactory (25%)
☐ Poor (0%)

Re-MarkBlock Message

Student's Message:

The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method is highly effective for online language teaching. It focuses on developing learner's communicative competence essentially their ability to use the language in their real life context. CLT is particularly well suited for online learning because of its emphasis on the interaction and practical language use, which are essential for keeping learners engaged and motivated in a virtual environment.

CLT prioritizes functional language skills over rote memorization or rigid grammatical structures. In an online classroom, where spontaneous communication can feel challenging, CLT encourages natural language use through activities role plays simulations, and discussions. For example students might practice language skills by stimulating real world scenarios, such as ordering food in restaurant, discussing travel plans or resolving problem. This focuses on real life language use gives students an immediate sense of accomplishment and relevance, making the lessons feel practical and motivating.

Another advantage of CLT for online teaching is its adaptability to digital tools. The online environment offers a variety of resources like videos, audio chat functions and interactive apps that can be used to create dynamic, communicative experiences. Language teaching can use breakout rooms for pair and group activities. CLT also supports differentiated learning, allowing teachers to tailor tasks to individual proficiency levels and learning styles even in a group setting. CLT approach helps to build confidence in students. CLT's emphasis on interaction, relevance, and adaptability makes it one of the best approaches for online language teaching.

☐ Excellent (100%)
☒ Very Good (75%)
☐ Good (50%)
☐ Satisfactory (25%)
☐ Poor (0%)

Re-MarkBlock Message

Student's Message:

The objectives of the students, their level of skill, and the teaching environment all influence the "best" language teaching strategy for online learning. Nonetheless, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which frequently incorporates aspects of Task-Based Learning (TBL) and Blended Learning, is a particularly successful strategy that shines out for online instruction. Let me explain:

1. TBLT, or task-based language teaching:

Real-World Situations: TBLT encourages students to actively use the language rather than passively absorbing grammar rules by emphasizing real-world tasks (such as drafting an email, placing an order at a restaurant, or giving a presentation).

Student-centered: It places a strong emphasis on student participation by assigning tasks to be completed either alone or in groups. This method aids in their acquisition of useful language skills.

Motivation: Finishing a task is satisfying and demonstrates the use of language in a practical context, which can be very inspiring for students.

2. Blended Learning: Flexibility: Students can view instructional videos, study materials, or finish exercises at their own leisure thanks to online learning's asynchronous capabilities. This is particularly helpful for revisiting material or strengthening language acquisition.

Live contact: Teachers can correct errors, lead discussions, and mimic real-life contact during live, synchronous sessions (such as video conferences) that help students practice real-time communication.

3. Gamification and Interactive Components: Learning can be made enjoyable and interesting by using games, tests, flashcards, and interactive materials (such as language apps or software like Duolingo or Quizlet). Through entertaining challenges and immediate feedback, these interactive components support learning when combined with TBLT.

Why These Techniques Are Effective Online:

Participation and Personalization: The absence of direct in person assessment forces online language learners to form authentic bonds with motivation. Techniques that incorporate social and interaction components such as blended learning and TBLT aid in doing this.

☐ Excellent (100%)
☒ Very Good (75%)
☐ Good (50%)
☐ Satisfactory (25%)
☐ Poor (0%)

Re-MarkBlock Message

Fig 3: Responses on GDB Interface

Five themes were finalized from the codes selected. Following are the themes:

1. Collaboration and Interaction using Technology
2. Learner-Centered Learning and Autonomy
3. Focus on Fluency Rather than Correctness
4. Effective Implementation Required
5. Other Methods

The first three themes relate to the communicative language teaching method. The fourth theme compiles codes related to effective implementation of the method. Fifth theme ensures that diversity of their opinion is not forsaken in a qualitative data analysis and other methods selected by them i.e., audio-lingual method, Socratic method, eclectic method, grammar translation method and task-based language learning are discussed.

5. Discussion

The first research question of the study aimed to explore students' perceptions about the best teaching method for learning English as a second language in online settings in a Pakistani context.

How that method could be best appropriated by Virtual University was the focus of the second research question of the study. Themes 1,2,3 and 5 contribute to the first research question while theme 4 contributes to the second research question.

Out of the multiple teaching methods that students studied in the course Eng 513, 95% considered communicative language teaching method best for an online university. Most of the students preferred the communicative language teaching method because it provided room for collaboration and interaction using technology which is an integral part of online learning.

5.1. Collaboration and Interaction using Technology

Students were familiar with the concepts of asynchronous and synchronous language learning because most of the online universities are based on either or both of the methods. Therefore, they emphasized upon the need for collaboration through synchronous sessions as well as interaction through activities which can be conducted asynchronously. Technology in both ways helped students work innovatively and best facilitated them. Students can participate in online discussion boards synchronously which will help improve their speaking skills and continue working on their reading and writing assignments in asynchronous modes. They can also listen to lectures asynchronously as Virtual University facilitates them with recorded video lectures that they can watch at their own pace and time.

5.2. Learner-Centered Learning and Autonomy

The communicative language teaching method is also adaptable to the learning styles of students. In this way, it promotes learner autonomy, and many students expressed that because of their preference for CLT, they could work autonomously. This autonomy is also related to the use of technology because online learning environments provide tools that encourage independence, for example, language learning applications and access to multiple websites e.g., dictionary, grammar checkers and other websites providing study materials and lectures like YouTube. One of the students (A) mentioned that the instructors should assign language projects to the students for promoting autonomy in their study:

Instructors can assign a "language project" where students research and present on a topic of their choice in the target language. This promotes self-study, enhances vocabulary, and allows students to practice speaking in a structured, supportive environment (A).

5.3. Focus on Fluency Rather than Correctness

The students were in great favor of the communicative language teaching method because it focused more on interaction and real-life communications in comparison to memorization methods. Many of them believed that interaction is particularly important for online learning universities because the interactive tools and real-life communication can help students interact in ways that would develop fluency in communication through the use of English language rather than focusing on correctness of expressions. In this regard, they gave examples of group chats like WhatsApp and Skype which were also used at Virtual University of Pakistan as per need. Also, Google meet has a chat section which is used by students during sessions. The students were in great favor of chat because, according to them, chat was a valuable source. it facilitated with their writing practice as well as immediate feedback. They could clarify misunderstandings in real time through chat. Thus, communicative language teaching provided a variety of learning styles and had the capacity to make learning more enjoyable for students through enhancing their motivation. Student B was of the view:

The chat function is also a valuable resource, as it enables written practice and immediate feedback, allowing students to clarify misunderstandings in real-time (B).

Student C appreciated communicative language teaching method because it had the capacity to facilitate multiple learning styles:

This variety of formats appeal to different learning styles and make learning more enjoyable, fostering an environment where students feel motivated to participate actively (C).

While discussing students' autonomy and student-centered learning as well as the flexibility of communicative language teaching method, the students were of the view that this method is full of adaptability and can tailor instruction according to personal learning needs. To achieve this, teachers can design activities which can be aligned to learners' learning styles, interests and motivation. Thus, a learner centered approach can be achieved which can bring into effect student centricity through their active participation in the course activities for language development. In this regard, student D said:

One of CLT's strengths is its adaptability, which allows for tailored instruction based on individual learning needs. Teachers can create activities that align with each student's language proficiency, interest and goals (D).

Students were also positive about communicative language teaching because they found it a supportive method for the online environment because online platforms provide less formal learning in the way that students do not have the fear of making mistakes while learning language. Particularly, in an asynchronous environment they have the opportunity to correct themselves or their works through multiple revisions or cross checking by using any of the relevant software. This enhances their confidence in submitting those assignments after taking reasonable time and careful review as well as discussion with the peers.

Overall, the strengths that were discussed by the students for the selection of the communicative language teaching method include the focus on communication, student centered learning, real life language usage, linguistic and cultural considerations and best fitness for online platforms.

5.4. Effective Implementation Required

The second research question probed how CLT is best for online learning and how it can be adapted to university online systems. In this regard, the students referred to the availability of tools that facilitated synchronous communication through video conferencing e.g., zoom and Google meet which are frequently used at the Virtual University of Pakistan. For asynchronous language learning, Virtual university already provides a learning management system. The graded discussion board was a part of the same learning management system. However, the students also emphasized the need to be facilitated with smart boards or interactive whiteboards and language learning programs like the ones provided by Duolingo and Babbel etc. They also highlighted the need to incorporate virtual reality and augmented reality which is very much in vogue in the Western world. However, the university still needs to make best use of it for facilitating students for teaching language through communicative language teaching method. They also referred to some online language exchange platforms like hello talk and tandem, the models can be appropriated to the university system to facilitate language students. While students already appreciated Virtual University for providing timely feedback which is a core component for communicative language teaching, they also highlighted the need of designing the latest methods and constantly evaluating and adapting them according to the needs of the students. Student E

listed the following as effective online tools that need to be adopted by the university for communicative language teaching method:

Video conferencing (Zoom, Google Meet)

Interactive whiteboards (Smart Boards, Google Jamboard)

Language learning platforms (Duolingo, Babbel)

Virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) tools

Online language exchange platforms (Tandem, HelloTalk) [E]

Some students particularly emphasized on the use of gamification which can facilitate the communicative language teaching method, and it needs to be adapted by the Virtual University of Pakistan. Student F beautifully summed up how the communicative language teaching method can be tailored to the students' needs by the university: "By integrating CLT, TBLL, and technology-enhanced tools, online language teachers can create immersive, interactive, and effective learning experiences."

5.5. Other Methods

Only 5 percent of students opted for other methods which included audio-lingual method, Socratic method, eclectic method, grammar translation method and task-based language learning. Other methods fall under theme five as the results of the study demonstrate. Some other methods were also highlighted, for example, the audiolingual method was mentioned by quite a few students because the speaking and listening aspects need more consideration by the instructional design. Student F was of the view that:

Structured repetition and drills are basic building blocks of skills in audiolingual method which can easily be delivered through online platform or tools. Students are able to practice patterns by repeating after a recorded lesson to memorize language structures (F).

Socratic method was mentioned for inculcating better critical thinking skills:

Socratic approach involves asking open-ended question to stimulate critical thinking and discussion. It works well online where teachers can use video chat and discussion boards to create a stimulating interactive environment (G).

Similarly, task-based language learning was mentioned as a separate method although it forms a part of the communicative language teaching method that encompasses it. For example, a student (H) posted:

Task-Based language learning offers a flexible, student-centered, and collaborative approach, making it perfect for online language instruction. By harnessing technology and incorporating real-life tasks, educators can create an immersive language learning experience (H).

Some students considered grammar-translation method effective because English was a foreign language for them, and they were at a very basic level in need of translating the target language into their first language. Only 5 students mentioned the eclectic method which actually can serve as the best method for any situation and platform. For example, student I was of the view that:

In the end, an eclectic approach to language teaching offers a flexible and powerful solution for online study. By combining the best factors of different techniques and methods and technology, online language teachers can create attractive and customized knowledge to empower second language learners to acquire their target language (I).

Overall, the majority found CLT the best teaching method in online settings and they gave substantial reasons and modalities to adopt and implement it at the Virtual University of Pakistan.

6. Conclusion

This qualitative study explored students' perceptions about the best language teaching method in online settings. The findings revealed that students had a preference for the communicative language teaching method, and they suggested its implementation at the university through collaborative projects, technological adaption of latest applications and software and learner autonomy through a combination of both asynchronous activities for improving their language skills. They had a high opinion about the chat facility for certain software for paving way towards learner autonomy of expression as CLT focuses more on fluency and less on correctness. However, they also highlighted the need for the incorporation of the latest technologies like interactive whiteboards, virtual reality, language exchange programs and some features of language teaching software like Duolingo. The university needs to add these functions to improve its language teaching methods. Some other methods were also highlighted, for example, audio-lingual method was mentioned by quite a few students because the speaking and listening aspects need more consideration by the instructional design of Virtual University of Pakistan. The results of the study are significant as the sample size was large, however, the study recommends implementing communicative language teaching as well as eclectic methods and report practice based results that may benefit online universities around the world.

Conflict of Interest

The authors showed no conflict of interest.

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