Title:

Shifting paradigms: from a communicative to a context-based approach

Authors:

Huw Jarvis (principal author) and Sirin Atsilarat (co-author)

Bio Data

Huw Jarvis (principle author).

Over 20 years' experience of working as an EFL/ESL practitioner.

Publications in several peer-reviewed journals including; *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, *ReCALL* and *The British Journal of Education Technology*.

Presenter as a featured speaker at several international conferences.

Member of the Higher Education Research Centre at the University of Salford

http://www.edu.salford.ac.uk/her/herc

   Sirin Atsilarat (co-author).

2 years experience of working with computers as an EFL/ESL practitioner

Full-time member of staff at the British Council, Bangkok, Thailand.

Qualifications:

1) Huw Jarvis (principle author). Postgraduate qualifications

Royal Society of Arts Certificate in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL).

International House Hastings, UK.

Royal Society of Arts Diploma in TEFL. Waltham Forest College, UK.

MA in Education Technology and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). University of Manchester, UK.

2) Sirin Atsilarat (co-author).   Postgraduate qualifications

MA in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). University of Salford, UK.

Abstract:

This paper offers a critical examination of the communicative approach (CA) with specific reference to a study of the teaching and learning experiences of a group of Thai university practitioners and students. It is argued that although the fundamental tenets of the approach have served the profession well, it is now time to consider an emerging alternative paradigm in the form of a context-based approach (C-bA).

Introduction

The communicative approach has dominated English language teaching, it has firmly established itself on a worldwide basis and there are good historical reasons for this. That the purpose of language is communicative competence, and that communicative functions and notions set in situations are an integral aspect of the equation, although once radical, seems patently obvious to practitioners today. Hymes' (1971) redefinition of Chomsky's (1965) view of language competence, and the work of Wilkins (1976), Van Ek and Alexander (1975) and the Council of Europe, have served us well in providing a starting point for defining and subsequently developing the CA. Language was no longer seen as abstract grammatical rules, but of having applications in social contexts and as such it is not just about 'grammar' but also about functions and notions. Nowadays, it is difficult to imagine any practitioner, anywhere, arguing against this. A large number of us implement the CA in our everyday practice, and in parts of the world where this does not yet occur there is pressure to move in this direction. For many it is thus no longer an alternative to, but rather it is a replacement of, its audio-lingual or grammar translation predecessors.

However, whether, after a quarter of a century of dominance, the CA, which comes from and was originally based in a western context, still offers the most valid paradigm, is open to question.

Let us begin by clarifying the terminology used in this paper. By paradigm, we refer to a pattern which is used to make sense or meaning from our experiences as language teaching practitioners and/or researchers. By approach we will take Lewis' (1993: 2) definition of "an integrated set of theoretical and practical beliefs, embodying both syllabus and method...." The terms CA and communicative language teaching (CLT) are both used in this paper but by the CA we will be referring to the more theoretical, and by CLT to the more practical beliefs; together these beliefs and practices constitute a paradigm which dominates the profession.

The CA as the dominant paradigm

Over the years, the CA has been critically and extensively discussed. In the mid 1980's Swan's two influential articles (1985a and 1985b) were probably the first to question many of the assumptions of what was then still a newly emerging approach. However, his conclusions that the approach is "likely to be seen as little more than an interesting ripple on the surface of twentieth-century language teaching" (1985b :87) was premature, it has had a massive impact, it is still largely with us and it has, to date, evolved but not been replaced. Thompson provides a powerful defence of the CA by arguing that its critics have misconceived the role of grammar teaching, the primacy of speaking, the ways in which pair work and role plays are used and the demands made on the teacher. Significantly, however, Thomson (1996 :14) acknowledges that the approach is not the final answer, "the next revolution in language teaching is already underway", but adds that an alternative will need to build upon the CA, "whatever innovations emerge, they will do so against a background of changes brought about by CLT, and will need to accommodate or explicitly reject those changes. Certain of them are too important to lose…" Our proposed alternative, as will become apparent, acknowledges these important changes and seeks to build from them.

Much of the debate has focused on issues of cultural appropriateness for Asian learners (Anderson, 1993; Ellis, 1996; Rao, 2002; Sano et. al. 1984) and a number of issues have recently been raised in the Asian EFL Journal (Yoon, 2004; Jin, 2004). Many works have identified problems of implementing the approach within specific contexts, but all ultimately support an adapted version which takes into account local conditions. Many authors implicitly or explicitly follow Holiday's distinction between a narrow interpretation which comes from, and is best suited to, a western European base, and a broader version which, "has within it the potential to adapt to all types of classroom context, provided it is informed by local knowledge.", (Holiday, 1994: 3) – a useful distinction, but one which nevertheless views context as secondary to the dominant paradigm, rather than the defining characteristic of an alternative. More recently Kumaravadivelu's work (2001) attempts a shift in perspective the by identifying limitations associated with CLT methodology and arguing for a focus on particularity, practicality and possibility within a postmethod paradigm. However, the proposed postmethod condition, despite its significant contribution to the study of methodology, has also been seen as adapting but ultimately maintaining the dominant paradigm. Bell (2003: 326), for example, has characterised postmethod as a "… more holistic, redefined communicative language teaching..."

The study

Background

Thailand has, over many years, embraced the CA and it is today official government policy; the most recent manifestation of this has been its educational reform bill of 2003 which places a strong emphasis on learner-centred approaches. There is clear evidence that such trends are by no means unique to Thailand, they have, for example, been reported in Korea (Li, 1998) and in China (Yu, 2001) and are without doubt taking place throughout the whole of the Asia Pacific region and beyond. The driving force for change seems to be based on the notion that traditional methods have failed and are wrong, whereas the CA will succeed and is right.

Aims, Methods and Participants

The aim of this study was to examine practitioner and student attitudes towards CLT and to consider whether the CA paradigm is still the most appropriate. The method was based on a case study of forty English language teachers and eight hundred students at the Language Institute, Dhurakijpundit University, Bangkok, Thailand. The case study uses two types of postal questionnaire, one for teachers (Appendix 1) and the other for students (Appendix 2). The teachers distributed and collected the student questionnaires in class towards the end of the academic year.

Appendix 1 investigates practitioner conceptions of CLT, their previous experience of it and its classroom implementation. Seventy two percent of the teachers reported not being exposed to CLT as students, but 57% had received some training in it (Appendix 1, questions 5.1 and 5.2). All the teachers were Thai nationals with teaching experience varying from less that 1 year (20%) to more than 10 years (15%). The investigation of student learning styles, their attitude to the teacher and teaching, including the use of materials, is documented in Appendix 2. This was originally written in Thai in order to receive accurate answers from all students irrespective of their level. All participants were teaching or studying on the English component of a first year foundation course, this component consisted of three hours' input per week per semester. Students came from a range of academic subject backgrounds including engineering, hotel and tourism, accounting and business and management; these other subjects were taught and studied in Thai. The English students were grouped according to level (based on an internal placement test). Their course book was the True Colours series (Maurer and Schoenberg, 1998) which had recently replaced the Headway series of which Headway Intermediate (Soars and Soars, 1996) was by far the most widely used. There was thus a tradition within the institution of using course books, which would explicitly claim to adopt a CA.

Limitations

There is no attempt to measure what people say with what actually occurs and further more qualitative approaches would offer additional insights. Although all the questionnaires were anonymous, it may be that some of the replies are likely to reflect what the teachers and students think the researcher wants to read rather than their real feelings. It is recognised that a few of the questions tend to be loaded and/ or misleading. In particular Appendix 1 question 3, fourth column on the use of role-plays - the explicit teaching of structure does not actually negate the use of role-plays as is suggested here; or question 3 eighth column, it would be difficult to envisage any teacher anywhere disagreeing with the notion that tasks should be meaningful and purposeful! Such limitations are fully acknowledged and reflect the fact that this data was originally gathered for a dissertation on an MA in Teaching English as a Foreign Language, by the co-author of this paper with no previous research experience. However, despite the limitations, it is felt that the data does offer some valid insights and raises some real issues, which go beyond the specificity of this study.

Results and discussion

Of the forty questionnaires sent to teachers, thirty-seven were returned; of these thirty-seven, two teachers failed to get the responses from the students in their class. Some of the other teachers did not receive 100% return rate from students due to absenteeism etc. The data analysis is thus based on 655 student responses and 37 returned teacher questionnaires in total.

Teachers

In response to question 1, which asked for a definition of CLT, the vast majority (81%) of respondents covered language as communication. These definitions more or less match the notions discussed in the introduction. In response to question 2, every single teacher

reported that they use CLT in their teaching. These two questions confirm that the CA is *the* dominant paradigm and that the efforts from the Thai government to promote it have largely been successful in the sense that most practitioners recognise the defining characteristic of the approach and attempt to implement it. Question 3 explores a number of conceptions and misconceptions about CLT in practice. A great deal of data is generated from Likert attitude scales of this type, and space does not permit us to enter a detailed discussion of everything; however, several issues are worth highlighting.

Statements (n = 37)	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Dis-agree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
1.Teaching should focus on **fluency** rather than **accuracy.**	6	40	30	24	0
2. The **students** should be the centre of knowledge transmission. The **teacher** should be their facilitator.	40	50	10	0	0
3. The teacher should strongly encourage the students to learn by themselves through struggling to communicate.	3	65	16	16	0
4. The teacher should spend a lot of time on role play/ games/ group and pair work instead of explicit teaching structures.	13	49	32	7	0
5. The lesson should focus mainly on speaking skills.	4	32	32	32	0
6. The teacher should not correct the students' mistakes at all unless they cause communication breakdown.	16	33	19	32	0
7. The students should be exposed to authentic language and material all the time.	14	50	22	14	0
8. Language tasks should be meaningful and purposeful.	43	50	7	0	0
9. CLT is an effective approach for your students.	6	65	18	11	0

Table 1 Opinions about CLT

Statement 1 (S1) indicates that whilst many would place fluency above accuracy, this controversial conception (arguably *mis*conception) is by no means universally accepted. The vast majority (S2: 40%+50% = 90%) of practitioners see students as being the centre of knowledge transmission and a clear majority (S3: 3%+65% = 69%) believe in an inductive approach through "struggling to communicate" which is presumably seen as being achieved through use of role play games etc. (S4: 13%+49% = 62%). The notion that CLT places speaking above other skills (S5) is by no means universally accepted and views on error correction are varied (S6). The role of authentic material is widely recognised (S7: 14%+50% = 64%) although the "all the time" assertion is clearly a debatable point. Seventy one percent (S9: 6%+65%) reported that CLT is effective for their students. Part 1 generally indicates an understanding of what CLT is and an endorsement of many of CLT's central tenets.

Part 2 explores issues surrounding its implementation. In response to question four 100% reported finding problems when implementing CLT in their classroom. The problems, as the table below indicates, are varied but mainly relate to the level of students, to their responsibility and to their learning styles. Class size, the time period of lessons and, to a lesser extent, the demands of the examination system are also significant. When asked to elaborate on problems or offer other limitations the vast majority focused on their students and reported that their level or their learning style (shyness) made CLT difficult to implement. A number of teachers identified the deferential nature of Thai society as a hindrance. This data suggests that it is not so much that teachers do not understand CLT, or do not have access to materials, but that context constrains implementation.

Percentage	Problems
83%	1. The students' English proficiency level is too low.
83%	2. Class size is too big.
69%	3. Time is limited.
56%	4. The students' responsibility is low.
50%	5. The students are not comfortable with CLT.
39%	6. The examination format is not totally CLT-based.
25%	7. The students need accuracy rather than fluency.
22%	8. Material does not facilitate CLT implementation.
20%	9. You are not clear what CLT expects you to do.
16%	10. You are not ready to give up your authoritative role.
3%	11. You mind if your students question or challenge your knowledge.

Table 2 Problems implementing CLT

The most problematic issue indicated in the two parts of the questionnaire is, on the one hand, a clear understanding and widespread endorsement of CLT and its effectiveness (part 1) and on the other hand, a universal recognition of problems with implementation (part 2). Such problems have been reported elsewhere (see for example Karavas-Doukas, 1996) and are apparently still evident today.

Learners

As with the data generated from the teacher's questionnaire, space does not permit a detailed discussion of all the data; however a number of significant issues are worth highlighting. Part 1 of the questionnaire (Appendix 2) explores learning styles and asks students to indicate whether certain statements are true or false for them. In contrast to the teachers who reported mixed views, the vast majority of students (74%) expressed a preference for accuracy over fluency. Many students (50%+) reported a learning style where loss of face, shyness and a reluctance to question the teacher are important factors and there is an overwhelming preference for a deductive teacher-centred learning style. Such views clearly raise questions about the relevance of some of CLT's central tenets.

n = 665	True	False
Your needs (fluency or accuracy)		
1.You prefer "accurate English" to "fluent but ungrammatical English"	74%	26%
Your personality		
2. You will loose face, feel very embarrassed and afraid of being called stupid by your peers and teacher if you make a mistake or ask a question in the classroom.	57%	43%
3. You are shy and you don't like speaking in front of the class.	50%	50%
4. You believe that it is impolite to disagree with your teacher even though you may have a good reason.	51%	49%
Your interaction to your teacher		
5. You prefer to listen and believe your teacher and follow the textbook rather than learning through struggling to communicate by yourself.	81%	19%
6. You prefer your teacher to explain the content explicitly giving you examples.	93%	17%
7. You are not satisfied if the teacher does not correct your errors	70%	30%

Table 3 Students' learning styles

Part 2 of the questionnaire was designed to explore student opinions about key CLT assumptions (numbers 8-14) in relation to teaching. It was felt that the Thai translation allowed all students to reflect on these assumptions even if they had no perceived direct classroom experience of them. A number of specific findings are worth noting. Questions 8 and 9 show that a majority do not recognise the notion of the teacher as a "facilitator" and the student as "generator of knowledge", nor do they accept an emphasis on a student-based struggle to communicate (though this question with its explicit exclusion of grammar and lexis is admittedly ambiguous). These responses support the views of many teachers who identified lack of student comfort with aspects CLT. Other answers in this section seem to contradict some of those reported in Part 1. For example, 66% approve of role-play, games etc. and yet many have indicated desire for work on accuracy and a shyness to speak.   With authenticity, it is interesting to note that one of the most problematic tenets of CLT that "the native speaker is best" has been endorsed by 84% (23%+61%) of the learners.

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Knowledge transmission (Roles of Teachers and Learners)					
8. English you learn from the lesson should be mainly generated from you and your peers as the students are the centre of the knowledge transmission, the teacher is a facilitator helping the students to generate information.	2.5%	20%	26%	43%	8.5%
9. The teacher should force you to learn by yourself through struggling to communicate, listen, speak, read and write without enough grammatical and lexical knowledge.	1%	3%	11%	47%	38%

Process or Product					
10. The teacher should spend a lot of time on language tasks such as role play/ games/ group and pair works instead of teaching grammar and vocabulary.	21%	45%	23%	9%	2%
11. The teacher should focus on speaking skill. Listening, reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary are secondary.	26%	45%	16%	12%	1%
Authenticity					
12. The teacher should use authentic material all the times.	26%	53%	18%	3%	0%
13. The teacher should use language that has the same speed, same accents, slang etc as native speakers.	23%	61%	6%	10%	0.1%
14. The teacher should engage you to practise meaningful and purposeful language tasks.	25%	58%	16%	1%	0%

Table 4 The teacher and teaching

Despite teachers' commitment to CLT and their struggle to implement it, the response to question 15 shows that 69% of students did not recognise any of the items in Part 2 number 3, 8-14 as actually occurring in their classrooms. Of the minority, 31% of students who recognise items 8-14 as occurring, the largest number of responses (19%) indicated item 10; language tasks through role plays instead of teaching grammar and vocabulary as occurring most. The smallest number (3%) identified number 13 as occurring and we have already commented on the native speaker issue.

In response to question 17, a total of 82% reported having learnt English "well" on their course, and in response to question 18, 71% reported differences between their university

experience and their school experience of learning English. If, for the majority, CLT is perceived as not, or at best partially, being achieved, what might account for this response? The limitations of question 19 give no meaningful answer to this but we might speculate that perhaps it is the use of more communicative text books as compared to secondary schools. The final question (20), despite being open-ended, provided an overwhelming uniformity in responses. Ninety percent commented that they felt too shy to speak and express opinions.

The combined responses from teachers and learners raise issues which question the validity and the viability of a number of the central tenets of CLT. All teachers understand and claim to use the approach and yet all have problems with its implementation. Furthermore, many students have indicated a preference for a certain learning style, which is fundamentally incompatible with CLT. Previous responses to problems of this type have been to adapt CLT to local conditions in order to make it more relevant. Perhaps this is because it is seen as the lesser evil to the historical alternatives of audio-lingualism or grammar translation. But such a response attempts to reconcile the contradictions within CLT but fails to question the value of the paradigm itself. It is perhaps a fear of going backwards has hindered alternatives which might take us forward.

An alternative paradigm

Jacobs and Farrell (2001) comment that, "When a paradigm shift takes place, we see things from a different perspective as we focus on different aspects of the phenomena." The paradigm shift proposed here, as Bax (2003: 280-281) has argued, is to see that aspects CLT are now having a negative effect due to misplaced priorities on what the teacher should do, which draws attention away from the context of teaching and learning. Our proposed alternative paradigm focuses on placing context above everything else and is illustrated in the diagram below.

| Includes assumptions about "correct" teaching methods, materials and learning styles | Teaching methods, materials and learning styles stem from and are specific to local and national contexts |

Paradigm

The communicative approach

A context-based approach

Shift

Language is concerned with communicative competence and this includes structures, functions, notions and situations.
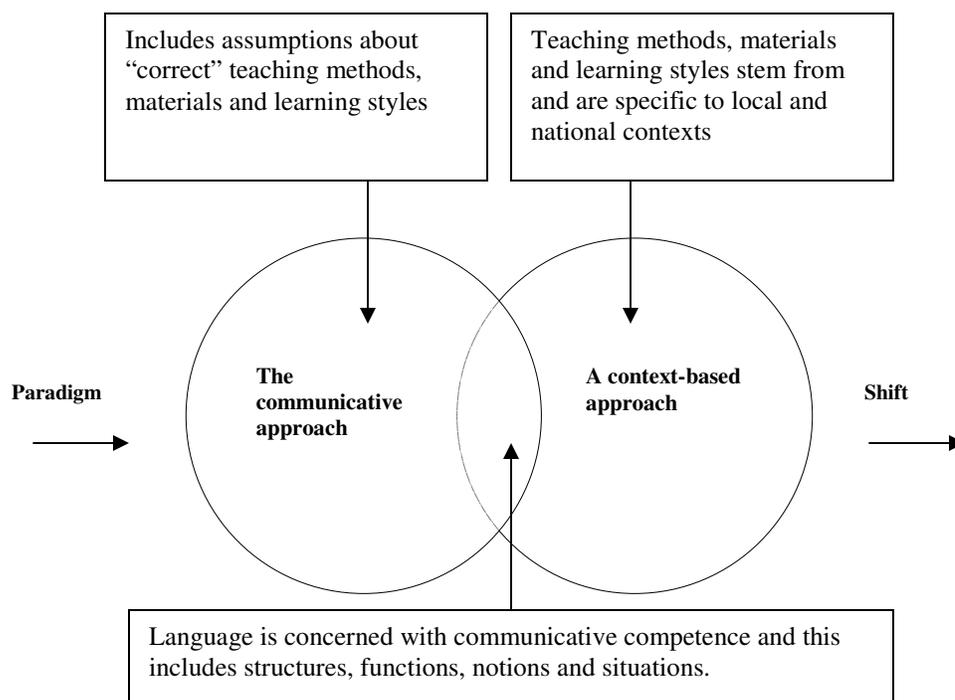
Diagram 1 The replacement of a CA with a C-bA

The alternative does not negate the view that language is about communication, but it does question the universal validity of the CA. With the C-bA comes a view of methodology as being only one of several factors in language learning and teaching and that other methods and approaches which are often dismissed as "traditional" and "old-fashioned" may be equally valid. The educational framework for a C-bA is that language learners learn best in teaching and learning environments that are harmonious with their learning styles and expectations - this is greatly influenced by culture. National educational goals need to reflect this and not uncritically adopt approaches which raise as many questions as they seek to answer. This case study suggests that teachers recognise problems with CLT implementation particularly in relation to learner expectations. The challenge is surely for practitioners to work with these expectations and styles rather than try to fit them into an inappropriate model; a C-bA, it is suggested might offer a more realistic framework.

Conclusion

The CA has been a useful paradigm, which is why a C-bA alternative needs to build on it and from it. However, it is historically set in the last quarter of the last century. An era which viewed English as a *foreign* or *second* language will perhaps inevitably tend to export so-called "enlightened" approaches for teaching, together with assumptions about learning. The move to no longer view English as a foreign or second language but as a global language provides further support for a C-bA. If language belongs to the majority of non-native speakers just as much as it does to the minority native speakers, then their experiences, in their specific contexts, should greatly influence its delivery. The export of at times inappropriate, unworkable and culturally-loaded teaching approaches is thus replaced with the primacy of context. An emerging debate which began with Bax's article and has been further developed here – whether we ultimately see things from a different perspective and a new C-bA paradigm emerges, only time will tell. Further research, discussion and dissemination is clearly needed and the question of practical implementation of a C-bA is perhaps the next major challenge for the ELT profession.

Appendix 1

Teacher Questionnaire

<u>Part 1</u>: Conception of Communicative Language Teaching

1. Briefly define CLT (one or two sentences)

_____

_____

2. Do you use CLT in your teaching? Please put √ .

☐ YES   ☐ NO

3. Please put √ in a column that matches your opinion most.

Statements	Strongly agree(%)	Agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
1. Teaching should focus on **fluency** rather than **accuracy**.					
2. The **students** should be the centre of the knowledge transmission. The **teacher** should be their facilitator.					
3. The teacher should strongly encourage the students to learn by themselves through struggling to communicate.					
4. The teacher should spend a lot of time on role play/ games/ group and pair work instead of explicitly teaching structures.					
5. The lesson should focus mostly on speaking skill.					
6. The teacher should not correct the students' mistakes at all unless they may cause communication breakdown.					

7. The students should be exposed to authentic language and material all the time.					
8. Language task should be meaningful and purposeful.					
9. CLT is an effective approach for your students.					

Part 2 CLT Implementation

4. Have you experienced any problems when implementing CLT in your classroom?

☐ YES   (please go to 4.1 and then to 5)   ☐ NO   (please go to 5)

4.1 If yes, please tick √ any problems that you find relevant to your situation.

O The students are not comfortable with CLT.

O The students need accuracy rather than fluency.

O The students' English proficiency level is too low.

O You are not ready to give up your authoritative role.

O You mind if your students question or challenge your knowledge.

O The students' responsibility is low.

O Class size is too big.

O Time is limited.

O Material does not facilitate CLT implementation.

O The examination format is not totally CLT-based.

O You are not clear what CLT expects you to do.

From 4.1 please feel free to use the space below to give any further explanation for the above choice(s)

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Please use the space below to identify any other limitations that prevent you from successfully implementing CLT.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

5. Please answer by putting a √ in the boxes.

	Yes	No
5.1 When you were a student, your English teacher(s) used CLT.		
5.1 You have received CLT training.		

6. Your course name is:_____

7. I am ☐ Thai   **I have** ☐ less than 1 year **teaching experience.**

☐ Other Asians   ☐ 1-5 years

☐ American   ☐ 6-10 years

☐ European   ☐ more than 10 years

Appendix 2

Student Questionnaire

<u>**Part 1**</u>: Your Learning Styles

	True	False
Your needs (fluency or accuracy)		
1. You prefer "accurate English" to "fluent but ungrammatical English"		
Your personality		
2. You will loose face, feel very embarrassed and afraid of being called stupid by your peers and teacher if you make a mistake or ask a question in the classroom.		
3. You are shy and you don't like speaking in front of the class.		
4. You believe that it is impolite to disagree with your teacher even though you may have a good reason.		
Your interaction to your teacher		
5. You prefer to listen and believe your teacher and follow the textbook rather than learning through struggling to communicate by yourself.		
6. You prefer your teacher to explain the content explicitly giving you examples.		
7. You are not satisfied if the teacher does not correct your errors		

<u>**Part 2**</u>: Teacher and Teaching

3. **Please put √ in a column that matches your opinion most.**

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Who gives the knowledge (Roles of Teachers and Learners)					

8. English you learn from the lesson should be mainly generated from you and your peers as the students are the centre of the knowledge transmission, the teacher is a facilitator helping the students to generate information.				
9. The teacher should force you to learn by yourself through struggling to communicate, listen, speak, read and write without enough grammatical and lexical knowledge.				
Process or Product				
10. The teacher should spend a lot of time on language tasks such as role play/ games/ group and pair works instead of teaching grammar and vocabulary.				
11. The teacher should focus on speaking skill. Listening, reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary are secondary.				
Authenticity				
12. The teacher should use authentic material all the times.				
13. The teacher should use language that has the same speed, same accents, slang etc as native speakers.				

14. The teacher should engage you to practise imeaningful and purposeful language tasks.					

15. In part 2, from question number 8-14, can any statement describe the ways your teacher teaches you?

☐ Yes (please go to 16 and continue to the end) ☐ NO (please go to 17 and continue to the end)

16. Please tick the box or boxes which matches the ways your teacher teaches.

Statement no.	%
8	
9	
10	
11	
12	
13	
14	

17. Do you think that so far you have learned English very well on this course?

☐ YES   ☐ NO

18. Is your present English class similar or different from your previous English class in secondary school?

☐ Similar   ☐ Different

19. Please put √ in a column that matches your opinion towards things you like and dislike and problems you have encountered in secondary schools and your present English class..

Things that are compared	similar	different
Things you like		
Thing you dislike		
Problems you have encountered		

20. From 19 Please describe things you like and dislike including problems you have experienced in detail.

_____

_____

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