



Historical Evolution and Implementation Failure: The Persistent Disconnect between Communicative Policy and Traditional Practice in Libyan ELT

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a historical analysis of English Language Teaching (ELT) in Libya, following its development from the early Grammar Translation Method (GTM) to the official endorsement of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and the political ban (1986). The paper explores the significant gap that exists between these communicative curriculum requirements and the actual teaching environment, discovering that older approaches, most notably GTM, remain extensively used. Because of this shortcoming, students are unable to attain authentic communicative performance. This methodological stalemate is attributed to several significant, interconnected restrictions. These include systemic resources constraints (for example, 31% of schools lack language laboratories), institutional shortcomings (a highly centralized, top-down administration structure), and significant deficiencies in pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) and teacher professional development (CPD). Additionally, deep-rooted cultural opposition that places a higher value on instructor authority and memorization hinders implementation, which is consistent with GTM's methodology and occasionally causes students to see communicative activities as little more than amusement. Systemic improvements are necessary for the national reform measures intended for the 2020–2026 timeframe to be successful. Recommendations include requiring that the university syllabus adhere to reform criteria, prioritizing targeted CPD, possibly using Action Research models, to develop the required PCK, and switching to a bottom-up approach to increase teacher autonomy. To encourage independent learning, other strategies are also recommended, such as extensive reading (ER).

Keywords: *GTM, CLT, Pedagogical Content Knowledge, Cultural Resistance, Curriculum Reform, ELT, and Bottom-Up Approach.*

1. Introduction

English is taught as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Libya, where its mastery is critical for engagement in technology, business, scientific advancement, and higher education (Owen, Razali, & Elhaj, 2019). However, Libya's education sector is marked by instability and a highly centralized, top-down management structure (Elabbar, 2011; Esgair, 2018). This situation is further complicated by Libya's deeply rooted conservative and Islamic culture, which significantly shapes expectations for both teaching methodologies and learning outcomes (Elabbar, 2011; Owen et al., 2019).

The teaching of English in Libya started back in the 1940s, with the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) becoming the primary approach. This method focused mainly on translation and memorizing vocabulary (Owen et al., 2019). Unfortunately, this progress faced a major setback due to significant political changes. A top-down decision led to a seven-year ban on all foreign language instruction in schools, lasting from 1986 to 1993/1994 (Elabbar, 2011; Owen et al., 2019). Many consider this time a "disastrous mistake" for the education system (Owen et al., 2019, p. 464).

Following the reinstatement of ELT and the subsequent adoption of modern approaches like Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Orafi & Borg, 2009; Owen et al., 2019), this paper investigates the evolution of English teaching methodologies in Libya historically. It aims to document the profound disconnect between official pedagogical intent (the introduction of CLT and Task-Based Approaches) and instructional reality (the enduring reliance on GTM and Audio-lingual Method variants).

This gap persists due to multiple compounding constraints. A systemic lack of resources and institutional challenges make the use of communicative methods in the classroom essentially impracticable. Importantly, teachers have to contend with large classes (sometimes 70 students per room), which require lecturing and non-interactive methods (Elabbar, 2011, p. 135; Pathan et al., 2016).

Furthermore, GTM remains widely prevalent because it aligns with a long-standing Libyan cultural emphasis on repetition and memorization, a skill deeply valued in the context of learning the Qur'an (Omar, 2019). Accordingly, this conflict between conservative practice and progressive policy eventually leads to EFL students who are knowledgeable in English grammar but not in communication (Omar, 2019).

1.1. Research Objectives

The purpose of the paper is to provide a historical analysis of English language teaching (ELT) in Libya and to document the profound differences between mandated communication policies (CLT and task-based approaches) and enduring instructional reality (GTM and ALM variants). Its objective is to identify the primary systemic, institutional, professional and cultural factors contributing to the failure of communication policy implementation. Ultimately, the research seeks to propose strategic institutional and pedagogical reforms needed to overcome methodological inconsistency and achieve the goals of the national educational transition.

1.2. Significance of the Research

Understanding the historical trajectory and constraints affecting Libyan English as Foreign Language University Teachers (LEFLUTs) is crucial (Elabbar, 2011). Research indicates that despite official policy in favor of communication methods, the classroom practices of many LEFLUTs demonstrate limited pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) and a failure to align practice with theory (Elabbar, 2011). The persistence of these traditional practices, influenced by a mix of institutional difficulties and cultural considerations, highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions (Elabar, 2011), such as continuing professional development (CPD) programs built around models such as action research (Elabar, 2011).

1.3. Research Questions

This research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How has English language teaching (ELT) evolved in Libya, and what is the gap between official communication policies (like CLT and TBA) and traditional classroom practices (such as GTM and ALM)?
2. What are the primary systemic, institutional, professional (PCK/CPD), and cultural factors contributing to the failure of communication policy implementation in Libyan ELT?
- 3- How does methodological inconsistency affect students' communication skills, and what strategic institutional and pedagogical reforms are necessary to achieve the goals of the national educational transition?

1.4. Methodology

The paper utilizes historical analysis and critical review based on existing literature and data.

2. Historical Context of ELT in Libya

The teaching of English in Libya began in the 1940s, primarily under the administration of the British in the northern areas (Owen, Razali, & Elhaj, 2019). Early materials like Basic Reading Book and Basic Way to English established a precedent for methods that heavily relied on the Grammar Translation Method (GTM), prioritizing translation and vocabulary memorization (Owen et al., 2019).

2.1. Shifts toward Structural Methods

By the 1960s, there was external assistance from organizations like UNESCO aimed at developing the educational system and training teachers (Barton, 1968, as cited in General People's Committee of Education, 2008). In the 1970s, new curricula, such as Further English for Libya, were introduced, explicitly adopting the Audio-lingual Method (ALM), emphasizing structure and form (Owen et al., 2019). However, even when ALM was the officially intended method, GTM often resurfaced as the common instructional method by the early 1980s (Owen et al., 2019).

2.2. Political Disruption and the Foreign Language Ban (1986–1994)

A politically motivated, top-down decision resulted in the suspension of all foreign languages instruction across educational levels between 1986 and 1993/1994 (Owen et al., 2019; Elabbar, 2011). This period is frequently described as a "disastrous mistake" for the education system (Owen et al., 2019, p. 464). When English teaching resumed in the mid-1990s, the process occurred slowly, often relying on old materials, and teachers struggled to return to their expertise (Owen et al., 2019).

2.3. The Communicative Reform Era and Future Policy

In the early 2000s a new curriculum, English for Libya (Garnet Education), based on the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Owen et al., 2019; Orafi & Borg, 2009) was adopted. This curriculum intended to promote the functional use of language and integrate all four core skills (LSRW) (Owen et al., 2019). Despite the official policy shift toward communicative approaches, CLT has met with "resistance and conflict" in its actual implementation within Libyan classrooms (Abukhattala, 2014; Orafi & Borg, 2009).

Following this curriculum shift, the Libyan educational sector commenced planning a major national public education reform focusing on transformative strategies slated for the 2020–2026 period (Elabbar, 2017). Bridging the current educational system into the preparation phase is the main goal of this reform (Elabbar, 2017). The timeline for transformation includes a preparatory phase scheduled for 2020–2022 for key education figures, followed by a general transformation strategy planned for 2023–2025 for the rest of the educators (Elabbar, 2017). According to Elabbar (2017), these reform strategies aim to achieve several specific curriculum goals:

- a- Establishing a core curriculum for new students starting from the 2026/2027 academic year, which explicitly includes English language along with reading, writing, mathematics, science, technology and Islamic studies.
- b. Creating a complementary curriculum that includes courses in social studies, music, art, history, and physical education.
- c- Implementing gradual modifications to currently enrolled students to facilitate classroom interaction, shared work, and adoption of technology.
- d- Mandating that the university syllabus meets the reform preparations in terms of content knowledge, the forging of languages, and the use of technology.

3. Analysis of Dominant Methods in Practice

The persistence of teacher-centered methodologies, particularly GTM, is a critical theme in Libyan ELT literature, particularly at the university level (Omar, 2019; Elabbar, 2011).

3.1. The Durable Strength of GTM

The Grammar Translation Method (GTM) continues to be widely employed by Libyan teachers (Omar, 2019; Owen et al., 2019). GTM is characterized by a focus on explicitly teaching grammar rules, memorizing vocabulary in the native language (L1), and translation, creating a teacher-centered classroom (Omar, 2019; Mart, 2013, as cited in Omar, 2019).

This reliance on GTM is not accidental. Omar (2019, p.531) notes that GTM is perceived by many teachers and students as the "best way of teaching" because it aligns with a long-standing Libyan cultural emphasis on repetition and memorization, a skill deeply valued in the context of learning the Qur'an (Omar, 2019). Elabbar (2011) adds that there are two primary justifications for using the GTM in the Libyan EFL context: the first reason is many Libyan EFL instructors were themselves taught using the grammar translation method during their education. The second is that learning styles of the students, which were affected by their lack of teacher interaction.

However, this methodological preference detrimentally influences students' ability to use English communicatively, as they acquire knowledge about the language rather than the skill to use it in real-life communicative settings (Omar, 2019; Diaab, 2016).

3.2. Resistance to Communicative and Task-Based Approaches

While CLT is the theoretical model underlying recent curricula, its widespread implementation faces significant barriers (Orafi & Borg, 2009; Elabbar, 2011):

1. Cultural and Belief Conflicts: CLT fundamentally challenges the traditional Libyan pedagogical culture (Abukhattala, 2014). The traditional role of the teacher is that of the "sole repository of knowledge," where the student is expected to be a quiet recipient (Orafi & Borg, 2009, p. 249). Communicative activities are frequently met with resistance; for instance, some students interpret role-playing activities as mere entertainment rather than genuine learning opportunities (Orafi & Borg, 2009).

2. Implementation difficulties: Due to systemic limitations, teachers often find CLT or task-based approaches (TBA) impractical (Orafi and Borg, 2009; Pathan et al., 2016). Among the problems are:

a- Class size: Large classes (sometimes as many as 70 students per room) require lectures and non-interactive methods, making small group work or personalized feedback impossible (Elabbar, 2011, p. 135; Pathan et al., 2016).

b- Lack of resources: Teachers often lack basic facilities and resources, such as language laboratories, projectors, Internet access and adequate reading materials (Elabbar, 2011; Pathan et al., 2016). For example, a study by Pathan et al (2016) of Libyan schools showed that 31% lacked language laboratories, 20% lacked computer laboratories, and 37% lacked audio cassettes/CDs.

3.3. Methodological Knowledge and Generational Practice

Teaching methods are also fragmented due to generational differences and lack of professional development (Elabbar, 2011).

1. Generation gap: The suspension and subsequent resumption of ELT created a divide between the old generation teachers (OGT) and the new generation teachers (NGT) (Elabbar, 2011). A study by Elabbar (2011) investigating this supposed division found that the simple hypothesis of a generational split in practice (NGTs using modern methods, OGTs using traditional ones) did not hold true. While some teachers claimed to use up-to-date methods, the descriptions of their lessons showed otherwise (Elabbar, 2011).

2. Lack of Professional Development: Many university lecturers are hired without sufficient pre-service or in-service training, leading to inadequate PCK, which is necessary to implement modern instructional approaches (Elabbar, 2011). A prevailing belief exists among some teachers that they are already "skilled enough to teach" and therefore do not require further knowledge or Continuing Professional Development (CPD) (Elabbar, 2011).

4. Contextual and Institutional Influences on Method Evolution

Due to institutional structure, a lack of resources, and ingrained cultural norms, Libyan English as Foreign Language University Teachers (LEFLUTs) encounter a variety of challenges (Elabbar, 2011).

4.1. Centralized Management and Lack of Autonomy

The political environment fosters a centralized, top-down approach to educational management (Esgaiar, 2018; Elabbar, 2011). This centralized control creates a "psychological" barrier, where teachers report feeling controlled by department heads regarding curriculum and book selection, sometimes being forced to teach from specific published books or old PhD theses, which necessitates them modifying the materials in practice (Elabbar, 2011). Furthermore, the educational environment suffers from poor motivation and collaboration among teachers, which is made worse due to the centralized approach (Elabbar, 2011).

4.2. Teacher Professionalism and Knowledge

Deep-seated cultural and professional beliefs further inhibit methodological reform. According to Elabbar (2011) many university lecturers are hired without sufficient pre-service or in-service training, leading to inadequate Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK). He adds, there is a widespread cultural perception that university instructors, particularly those with advanced degrees, are naturally qualified and don't need additional training or professional development (CPD).

Elabbar (2011) states that addressing these deficiencies requires continuing professional development (CPD). The process has been defined as "any process or activities that provides added value to the capability of the professional through the increase in knowledge, skills and personal qualities necessary for the appropriate execution of professional and technical duties, often termed competence" (Rodrigues, 2004, p. 11). Additionally, CPD is not limited to a particular paradigm, as it "can be structured and organized in a number of different ways, and for a number of different reasons" (Kennedy, 2005, p. 236). This variety in structure and organization highlights the potential for designing localized, effective development programs.

In addition to needing improved teacher training, the national reform plan recognizes the need for ongoing CPD for administrators and the provision of modern teaching aids to ensure successful implementation (Elabbar, 2017).

4.3. Perspectives on Educational Resources

This conflict between traditional and modern practice is also reflected in the selection and application of instructional materials. While many Libyan EFL teachers fully advocate for using authentic materials (materials produced for native speakers, like newspapers or films) (Belaid & Murray, 2015), the Internet is reported as the most accessible source for obtaining these materials, followed by printed sources (Belaid & Murray, 2015). Despite positive attitudes toward authenticity, the official curriculum syllabus is the main written document intended to provide information on the aim, content, and recommended sources for English courses (Esgaiar, 2018).

5. Future Directions and Pedagogical Implications

The persistence of traditional teaching styles (GTM, lecture) despite official policy mandates for communicative methods continues to hinder the development of communicative competence among students (Orafi & Borg, 2009; Omar, 2019). The 2020–2026 reform initiative offers a comprehensive attempt to address these systemic issues.

1. Bottom-Up Methodological Shift: To overcome the top-down control that restricts teacher autonomy, the national reform plan specifically recommends providing spaces in the teachers' books to enable teachers to develop activities and utilize ground-up activities (Elabbar, 2017). This proposed policy shift emphasizes engaging motivated teachers and educators to foster a strong base for creative students, teachers, and High Quality staff (HQs) to participate in ongoing development procedures (Elabbar, 2017).

2. Institutional Alignment: Beyond schools, the success of the long-term reform hinges on universities adapting their programs, as the university syllabus will be required to meet the reform standards related to content knowledge, technology use, and language instruction (Elabbar, 2017).

5.1. Extensive Reading (ER) and Vocabulary Acquisition

Extensive Reading (ER) is recognized as a novel approach in the Libyan context (Alahirsh, 2014). A study by Alahirsh (2014) investigating the effects of individualised ER demonstrated its effectiveness in incidental vocabulary acquisition among university students. According to Alahirsh (2014) the key findings supporting the potential of ER include:

1. Effectiveness and retention: The experimental group exposed to ER learned significantly more target words than the control group, and word knowledge remained intact nine months later.
2. Continuity of reading: Continuity and quantity of reading correlate strongly with vocabulary gains, suggesting that reading at least one graded book per week facilitates sufficient word repetition for emergent vocabulary growth.
3. Strategy use: Among students practicing ER, guessing from context and using book's glossary to discover unknown word meanings were the most common strategies. Glossary use showed a strong relationship with incidental learning.

5.2. Technology-Enhanced Learning

The Flipped Classroom Model, which integrates technology to promote active, autonomous, and collaborative learning, has been suggested as an alternative strategy (Braiek, 2018; Al-Harbi & Alshumaimeri, 2016, as cited in Owen et al., 2019). Technology integration is noted as being particularly important in Libya, where many schools and universities have resource deficits (Pathan et al., 2016).

5.3. Teacher Development Needs

The persistence of traditional teaching methods highlights the critical need for improving teacher capabilities through continuous professional development (CPD) and training, which are essential for aligning teachers' beliefs and practices with modern communicative goals (Elabbar, 2011). Research indicates that models like Action Research are viable for CPD in the Libyan context, and implementing focused CPD programs is necessary to enhance teachers' professional capabilities, contributing to the "increase in knowledge, skills and personal qualities" required for effective teaching (Rodrigues, 2004, p. 11).

Additionally, the government plan emphasizes the need for administrators to have access to modern teaching aids and ongoing CPD to support the implementation of transformative educational strategies (Elabar, 2017).

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

The historical development of English teaching methods in Libya reveals a constant tension between external pedagogical trends (ALM, CLT, TBA) and internal institutional and cultural inertia (GTM predominance) (Owen et al., 2019; Orafi and Borg, 2009). Enduring reliance on GTM stems from centralized educational control, severe material and resource shortages, limited teacher training (PCK/CPD), and teacher authority and cultural preference for memorization (Elabar, 2011; Omar, 2019). This gap between policy and practice ultimately leads to EFL learners who are knowledgeable about English but lack communication proficiency (Omar, 2019).

To successfully navigate future methodological evolution, several systemic reforms are imperative:

1. Change in bottom-up approach: Demands for curricula that are centralized and top-down should be abandoned by policy makers. Adopting a bottom-up approach to development, giving more autonomy to teachers and basing future plans on classroom realities are some of the recommendations.
2. Prioritize continuing professional development (CPD): To address serious gaps in teachers' pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), it is important to use targeted CPD—possibly using models such as action research.
3. Address institutional deficiencies: To improve the quality of ELT provision, measures to reduce overcrowding should be implemented as well as regulations on infrastructure, resources and ongoing evaluation.

These actions are needed to create an environment in which theoretically successful communication approaches can actually flourish, thereby increasing the overall communication proficiency of Libyan EFL learners.

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