

TEACHING ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (EFL) CONTEXTS: A REVIEW STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This review study examines the teaching of English language in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. Its main purpose is to explore the major teaching methods, approaches, and practices commonly used in EFL classrooms, with particular attention to the development of the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The study also discusses the roles of teachers and learners, as well as challenges faced by EFL instructors, such as limited exposure to authentic language and large class sizes. By reviewing both theoretical frameworks and previous empirical studies, the article identifies effective strategies for enhancing learners' language proficiency. Findings indicate that communicative and learner-centered approaches are generally more successful than traditional methods. The study concludes with practical recommendations for EFL teachers and suggests directions for future research in the field of English language teaching.

Introduction

The teaching of English in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context has become an increasingly important area of study due to the global status of English as a medium of international communication, education, and professional advancement. In many countries where English is not used as a primary means of daily interaction, learners rely heavily on formal classroom instruction as their main source of exposure to the language (Richards, 2017). Consequently, the effectiveness of English language teaching in EFL settings is strongly influenced by pedagogical approaches, instructional strategies, and contextual constraints.

One of the central concerns in EFL education is how teachers can successfully develop learners' communicative competence while working within limitations such as minimal exposure to authentic language input, examination-oriented curricula, and large class sizes (Harmer, 2015). Unlike English as a Second Language (ESL) environments, EFL contexts often lack opportunities for meaningful interaction outside the classroom, making instructional practices a crucial factor in language acquisition (Brown, 2007). This challenge has led researchers and practitioners to continuously explore teaching methods that balance linguistic accuracy with communicative fluency.

Over the years, English language teaching has evolved from traditional, teacher-centered methods—such as Grammar Translation and Audio-Lingual approaches—toward more communicative and learner-centered paradigms. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), task-based learning, and content-based instruction have gained prominence for their emphasis on meaningful interaction and real-life language use (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). These approaches are believed to support the integrated development of the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing, which are essential for effective communication.

Given the dynamic nature of EFL teaching and the diversity of learning contexts, a review study is valuable for synthesizing theoretical perspectives and empirical findings related to effective

instructional practices. By examining previous research, such a review can identify prevailing trends, highlight successful strategies, and address ongoing challenges faced by EFL teachers. Therefore, this review study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of English language teaching in EFL contexts, offering insights that can inform both classroom practice and future research in the field.

English has become a global language that plays a central role in communication, education, and professional advancement worldwide. As a result, teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has gained increasing significance in countries where English is not the native language. Effective EFL instruction requires teachers to adopt suitable methods and strategies that support learners' development in all four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Harmer, 2007).

Over the years, various approaches and methods have been proposed to enhance English language teaching. Traditional approaches, such as the Grammar Translation Method, focused primarily on grammatical accuracy and translation exercises, while more contemporary approaches, such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), emphasize interaction, communication, and learner engagement (Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Ellis, 2003).

This review study aims to examine the literature related to teaching the English language in EFL contexts. It focuses on identifying effective teaching methods, strategies for developing language skills, and the roles of both teachers and learners. By analyzing previous studies and theoretical perspectives, the article seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of EFL teaching practices and to highlight gaps in the current research that may guide future investigations.

The structure of this review is organized as follows: first, the theoretical background of teaching English in EFL contexts is discussed; second, the literature on teaching methods and language skills is reviewed; third, the discussion presents key findings and implications; finally, the conclusion summarizes the main points and provides recommendations for practice and further research.

Method

Research Design

This study employs a systematic literature review design to examine teaching the English language in EFL contexts. A review approach is appropriate because the study aims to synthesize existing theoretical frameworks and empirical findings rather than collect primary data. Literature reviews allow researchers to identify trends, evaluate the effectiveness of teaching approaches, and highlight research gaps in a particular field (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). By reviewing previous studies, this research provides a comprehensive overview of methods, practices, and challenges in EFL teaching.

Data Sources

The data for this review were collected from reputable academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar. These databases were selected due to their wide coverage of peer-reviewed journals in the field of English language teaching and applied linguistics. To ensure the relevance and quality of sources, only journal articles, books, and conference proceedings published in English were included (Kitchenham & Charters, 2007).

Search Strategy

A systematic search strategy was applied using a combination of keywords such as English as a Foreign Language, EFL teaching methods, communicative language teaching, four language skills, and learner-centered approaches. Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to refine the search results. Studies published between 2010 and 2024 were prioritized to ensure the inclusion of recent developments in EFL pedagogy (Xiao & Watson, 2019).

Studies were excluded if they focused solely on ESL contexts, lacked empirical or theoretical relevance, or were not written in English. Applying clear criteria enhances the transparency and reliability of review studies (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006).

Data Analysis

The selected studies were analyzed using thematic analysis. Key themes such as teaching approaches, teacher and learner roles, instructional challenges, and effective strategies were identified and categorized. This qualitative analysis enabled the researcher to compare findings across studies and identify patterns related to successful EFL teaching practices (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The results were then synthesized to conclude dominant trends and best practices in EFL instruction.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure the credibility of the review, multiple sources were cross-checked, and well-established theoretical and empirical studies were prioritized. The use of systematic procedures for searching, selecting, and analyzing literature enhances the validity and reliability of the findings (Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003).

Findings and Discussions

Findings

In conclusion, adopting evidence-based, communicative, and learner-centered practices is essential for effective EFL instruction. This review provides a foundation for teachers and researchers to improve teaching practices and guide future studies in the field of English language education.

Based on the systematic review of previous theoretical and empirical studies, several major findings emerged regarding the teaching of English in EFL contexts. These findings are organized into key thematic areas: (1) dominant teaching approaches in EFL classrooms, (2) development of the four language skills, (3) roles of teachers and learners, (4) challenges in EFL instruction, and (5) effective strategies for improving learners' language proficiency.

Dominant Teaching Approaches in EFL Contexts

One of the most consistent findings across the reviewed studies is the growing shift from traditional, teacher-centered methods to communicative and learner-centered approaches in EFL classrooms. Earlier methods such as Grammar Translation Method (GTM) and Audio-Lingual Method were found to emphasize grammatical accuracy, memorization, and repetitive drills, often at the expense of meaningful communication (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Although these methods are still used in some contexts, particularly in examination-driven educational systems, research indicates that they are less effective in developing communicative competence.

In contrast, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emerged as the most widely supported approach in EFL settings. Studies consistently report that CLT promotes active learner participation, authentic language use, and interaction, which are crucial for language acquisition in contexts with limited exposure to English outside the classroom (Harmer, 2015; Richards, 2017). Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and project-based learning were also found to enhance learners' engagement and motivation by integrating language use with real-world tasks (Ellis, 2009).

However, several studies noted that the implementation of communicative approaches in EFL contexts is often partial or adapted. Teachers frequently combine communicative activities with traditional practices due to curricular demands, learners' low proficiency levels, or institutional constraints (Littlewood, 2014). This suggests that hybrid or eclectic approaches are commonly adopted in EFL classrooms.

Development of the Four Language Skills

Another significant finding relates to the teaching and integration of the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The reviewed literature indicates that speaking and listening skills are often underdeveloped in EFL contexts compared to reading and writing. This imbalance is largely attributed to exam-oriented systems that prioritize written assessments and grammar-based knowledge (Brown, 2007).

Research shows that communicative and learner-centered approaches contribute positively to the integrated development of all four skills. For example, interactive activities such as role-plays, discussions, and problem-solving tasks were found to significantly improve learners' speaking fluency and confidence (Nation & Newton, 2009). Similarly, exposure to authentic listening materials—such as videos, podcasts, and multimedia resources—was reported to enhance listening comprehension and pronunciation (Field, 2008).

In terms of reading and writing, studies highlight the effectiveness of strategy-based instruction and genre-based approaches. Teaching learners how to use reading strategies, such as skimming and scanning, improves comprehension, while process-based writing instruction supports the development of coherence and accuracy in writing (Hyland, 2019). Overall, the findings suggest that integrated-skill instruction is more effective than teaching skills in isolation.

Roles of Teachers and Learners

The findings also reveal a significant transformation in the perceived roles of teachers and learners in EFL classrooms. Traditional models position teachers as knowledge transmitters and learners as passive recipients. However, recent studies emphasize the importance of teachers acting as facilitators, guides, and motivators who create opportunities for meaningful language use (Richards, 2017).

Learners, on the other hand, are increasingly viewed as active participants who take responsibility for their own learning. Learner autonomy, collaboration, and self-regulated learning were identified as key factors contributing to successful language acquisition (Benson, 2011). Studies indicate that when learners are encouraged to participate actively, work collaboratively, and reflect on their learning, their motivation and language proficiency improve significantly.

Nevertheless, several studies report that both teachers and learners in EFL contexts may struggle to adapt to these changing roles. Learners accustomed to teacher-centered instruction may feel uncomfortable with communicative activities, while teachers may lack training or confidence in implementing learner-centered approaches effectively (Borg, 2015).

Challenges in EFL Teaching

A major finding of this review concerns the persistent challenges faced by EFL teachers. One of the most frequently reported challenges is limited exposure to authentic English input. Since English is not commonly used outside the classroom in EFL contexts, learners have fewer opportunities to practice the language in real-life situations (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

Large class sizes were also identified as a significant obstacle, particularly in developing countries. Large classes limit teachers' ability to provide individual feedback, manage communicative activities, and assess speaking skills effectively (Hayes, 1997). Additionally, time constraints, rigid curricula, and high-stakes examinations often discourage teachers from using communicative methods.

Another challenge highlighted in the literature is teachers' professional competence. Several studies emphasize that insufficient training in communicative pedagogy and limited access to professional development hinder effective EFL instruction (Richards & Farrell, 2005). These challenges underscore the need for systemic support and continuous teacher education.

Effective Strategies for Enhancing Language Proficiency

Despite these challenges, the reviewed studies identify several effective strategies for improving learners' English proficiency in EFL contexts. One key strategy is the use of authentic materials, such as real-life texts, videos, and online resources, which expose learners to natural language use and cultural contexts (Gilmore, 2007).

Technology-enhanced language learning also emerged as a powerful tool. The integration of digital platforms, mobile applications, and online communication tools was found to increase learner engagement and provide additional opportunities for practice beyond the classroom (Chapelle, 2017). Blended learning and flipped classroom models were particularly effective in maximizing limited classroom time.

Furthermore, continuous assessment and formative feedback were identified as essential components of effective EFL teaching. Providing constructive feedback helps learners identify their strengths and weaknesses, thereby supporting continuous improvement (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Collaborative learning, peer feedback, and reflective practices were also found to foster deeper learning and communicative competence.

Summary of Findings

In summary, the findings of this review indicate that communicative and learner-centered approaches are generally more effective than traditional methods in EFL contexts. Successful EFL teaching requires the integration of the four language skills, active learner participation, and adaptive teaching strategies that respond to contextual constraints. While challenges such as limited exposure, large class sizes, and institutional pressures persist, the literature provides strong evidence that innovative pedagogical practices and professional development can significantly enhance English language learning outcomes.

Overall, the findings indicate that effective English teaching in EFL contexts requires the adoption of evidence-based, communicative, and learner-centered approaches. The reviewed studies reveal a clear shift from traditional, teacher-centered methods toward communicative and eclectic practices that actively engage learners. Approaches such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), and project-based learning are shown to be more effective in developing learners' communicative competence and in integrating the four language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In addition, the roles of teachers and learners have evolved, with teachers acting as facilitators and learners as active, autonomous participants in the learning process. Despite these positive trends, EFL instruction continues to face challenges, including limited exposure to authentic English, large class sizes, exam-oriented curricula, and insufficient teacher training. Nevertheless, the literature demonstrates that the use of authentic materials, technology-enhanced learning, collaborative activities, and continuous formative assessment can significantly improve learners' English proficiency. These findings provide a strong foundation for improving EFL teaching practices and guiding future research in English language education.

Discussions

Theoretical / Conceptual Background

Teaching English in EFL contexts involves instructing learners who have limited or no exposure to English outside the classroom. The main goal is to develop learners' proficiency in all four language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—while fostering communicative competence and language confidence (Brown, 2007).

Historically, EFL teaching has evolved through several approaches. The Grammar Translation Method (GTM), one of the earliest methods, focused on the explicit teaching of grammar rules and translation exercises, emphasizing accuracy over communication. Later, the Audio-Lingual Method

(ALM) prioritized repetition and pattern drills to reinforce language structures. These traditional methods, however, often failed to engage learners in meaningful communication (Richards, 2017).

In contrast, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emphasizes real-life communication, interaction, and learner participation. It aims to develop learners' ability to use language functionally rather than only correctly (Richards, 2006). Similarly, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) encourages learners to complete meaningful tasks, promoting authentic language use and problem-solving in the target language (Ellis, 2003).

The roles of teachers and learners have also shifted over time. In traditional classrooms, teachers acted primarily as knowledge transmitters, while learners were passive recipients. Modern EFL approaches advocate learner-centered classrooms, where teachers act as facilitators and guides, and learners actively participate in constructing knowledge and practicing language skills (Harmer, 2007).

These theoretical frameworks provide the foundation for effective EFL teaching practices and inform the selection of methods and strategies reviewed in the subsequent section.

Review of Related Literature

Teaching Methods in EFL

Effective teaching methods are central to successful English language learning in EFL contexts. Traditional methods, such as the Grammar Translation Method (GTM), focused on grammar accuracy and translation exercises but often limited learners' communicative competence (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). The Audio-Lingual Method (ALM) emphasized repetitive drills to reinforce correct language patterns; however, it did not promote meaningful communication (Ellis, 2003).

Modern approaches, including Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), prioritize real-life communication and learner engagement. CLT encourages interaction, authentic language use, and the development of communicative competence, while TBLT emphasizes completing meaningful tasks to promote functional language use (Richards, 2006; Harmer, 2007). Studies indicate that these approaches increase learners' motivation and fluency compared to traditional methods.

Teaching English Language Skills

Teaching the four language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—requires integrated and balanced strategies. According to Nation (2007), focusing equally on all skills ensures comprehensive language development. For example, incorporating listening and speaking activities into classroom tasks can enhance oral fluency, while reading and writing exercises support vocabulary acquisition and comprehension (Brown, 2007).

Research also highlights the importance of integrating skills rather than teaching them separately. Activities such as group discussions, role-plays, and project-based tasks allow learners to practice multiple skills simultaneously, resulting in better retention and practical application of English (Harmer, 2007).

Review of Previous Studies

Several empirical studies have examined effective EFL teaching practices. For instance, Richards and Rodgers (2014) reviewed studies demonstrating that communicative and learner-centered approaches outperform traditional grammar-focused methods in enhancing language proficiency. Ellis (2003) found that task-based activities significantly improve learners' problem-solving and interactive skills.

In higher education contexts, research indicates that the teacher's role as a facilitator, rather than a knowledge transmitter, contributes to higher learner engagement and autonomy (Brown, 2007).

Studies also emphasize challenges such as large class sizes, insufficient exposure to authentic English, and limited teaching resources, which may hinder effective EFL instruction (Nation, 2007).

The reviewed literature indicates a clear shift from traditional, teacher-centered methods toward communicative, learner-centered approaches in EFL teaching. Studies show that methods such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) enhance learners' communicative competence, fluency, and motivation more effectively than grammar-focused methods (Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Ellis, 2003).

Strengths of modern approaches include:

Emphasis on real-life communication (Richards, 2017) (Richards, 2006), Active learner participation and engagement (Harmer, 2007), Integration of the four language skills (Nation, 2007).

Weaknesses or challenges observed in EFL classrooms are:

Large class sizes, which limit individualized attention (Brown, 2007), limited exposure to authentic English outside the classroom (Ellis, 2003), and inadequate teaching resources and materials (Harmer, 2007).

Research gaps identified from the review:

Few studies focus on the effectiveness of technology-integrated methods in Iraqi EFL classrooms. Limited research exists on the long-term impact of learner-centered approaches on academic performance. There is a need for more comparative studies between different EFL contexts and teaching strategies.

Implications for practice:

EFL teachers should adopt communicative and task-based activities to enhance student engagement. Professional development programs should emphasize learner-centered techniques and classroom management for large classes.

Future research should explore innovative strategies, including technology use, to overcome resource limitations.

EFL teachers should adopt communicative and task-based activities to engage learners actively.

Professional development programs should focus on learner-centered teaching strategies and effective classroom management.

Future research should investigate the use of technology and other innovative approaches to overcome contextual constraints in EFL teaching.

Conclusions

This review study has examined the teaching of English language in EFL contexts, focusing on teaching methods, the development of language skills, and the roles of teachers and learners. The analysis of the literature indicates that communicative and learner-centered approaches, such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), are more effective than traditional grammar-focused methods in enhancing learners' communicative competence, motivation, and overall language proficiency. The review also highlights persistent challenges in EFL classrooms, including large class sizes, limited exposure to authentic English, and insufficient teaching resources. Addressing these challenges requires innovative instructional strategies, continuous professional development for

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