

Teacher Perceptual Comparisons toward Two Specific Communicative and Whole Language Dimensions in ESL Instruction

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Abstract

The task of this study was to update the literature on current communicative and whole language dimensions implemented at the collegiate level with the comparison of teachers' perceptions about communicative language teaching (CLT) to their perceptions about whole language (WL) teaching. The results indicated that collegiate ESL teachers highly and/or moderately supported the communicative approach in the field of ESL. Furthermore, they showed more substantial agreement with and favoring of the communicative approach in comparison to the whole language approach for the most part of ESL teaching. It was distinctly clear that they adhered closely to communicative language principles for their ESL instruction rather than to whole language principles although there were just several exceptions with no significant differences between the teachers' perceptions about those two teaching approaches.

Introduction

The term "communicative" is generally accepted to mean geared to the competence (Hymes, 1972) and expectations of those participating in the learning process. In other words, a communicative approach is based on negotiation between all the parties concerned. A communicative approach has been applied to new methods, materials, and even syllabi for language teaching and learning (Pica, 1988). No longer tied to a single true method, language teachers are free to follow research and theory, develop their own personal set of working hypotheses about language acquisition, and choose their methods based on the teachers' own goals and personal hypotheses.

Whole language, on the other hand, has a major tenet which holds that language is best learned in authentic, meaningful situations in which language is not separated into parts, but remains whole. It is derived from the careful analysis of observations of students learning to read and write (Goodman, 1986; Rich, 1985). A central finding is that students learn to read and write optimally under conditions similar to those of learning to speak and listen (Johnson & Stone, 1991) - from whole to part in contextually meaningful and purposeful settings.

Whole language grew out of a paradigm shift in education (Strickland & Strickland, 1993). Over the past twenty years, the paradigm in education has begun to shift away from a behaviorist philosophy that employs a transmission model of teaching and learning toward a philosophy that employs a transaction model (Goodman, 1986; Strickland & Strickland, 1993; Weaver, 1990). As a result, secondary and post-secondary teachers are changing their teaching strategies (Freeman & Freeman, 1989) as their thinking shifts from a transmission paradigm to a transaction paradigm, much the way many elementary teachers have changed their practices.

The differences between the transmission and transaction models of education may be illustrated by contrasting a traditional perspective and a whole language perspective, including differences in teacher's role, a student's view of learning, literacy, reading and writing, skills, group, and physical environment, etc.

Because theory and research indicate that both communicative language teaching (CLT) and whole language (WL) teaching are effective approaches for second language instruction for all levels, and because many ESL and bilingual teachers are familiar with the approaches, it is puzzling that the implementation of whole language in ESL classes appears to occur less frequently than the

implementation of the communicative approach in ESL classes. A part of this puzzlement could be that ESL teachers do not view second language English instruction in terms of or as function of the whole language philosophy. It is possible that second language English teachers perceive their efforts as more closely tied to the philosophy of communicative competence.

In an effort to gain a better understanding which approach would be perceived as useful and effective for collegiate ESL instruction, this task was to compare these two specific teaching approaches, communicative and whole language approaches, for the recovery of ESL teachers' ideas at the post-secondary level. With the direct comparisons of teachers' perceptions about communicative language teaching (CLT) to their perceptions of whole language (WL) teaching, this study explored the dimensions of two instructional approaches, CLT and WL, with the survey items written in matching pairs.

Method

1. Population and Sample

All of the subjects for this study were selected from the total population of ESL and bilingual instructors teaching English as a second language at colleges and universities in the states, which make up the Big 12 Conference. These instructors were engaged in English language instruction in contrast to educating and training teachers in ESL methods. This study was designed for the ESL instructors at the post-secondary level teaching English for language minority students, for example, the ESL students attending English Language Programs (ELP) or Intensive English Language Programs in Big 12 two-year and four-year colleges and universities. The collegiate ESL institutions included in this survey study were identified with a directory of "Intensive English and Oriented Programs in the United States" (Institute of International Education, 1992). Due to the old version of a directory (1992) as well as the small number of ESL instructors at each two-year campus, a contact of every two-year college was needed with letters, faxes, or e-mails to ask whether they had ESL/bilingual programs for language minority and foreign students or not. With these kinds of efforts, about 47 two-year colleges had been identified to have ESL/bilingual programs in the Big-12 States, about another 40 colleges had been identified to have no ESL programs, and the others gave no responses. On the other hand, in the case of four-year universities, due to the larger number of ESL instructors compared with two-year colleges, the ESL instructors at the twelve research universities which make up the Big 12 Conference were selected as the four-year study population. The number of colleges selected in this study was determined by ESL instructor size into a percentage of the study population in order to mirror two divisions within the post-secondary educational system that corresponded to the two-year and four-year institutional population distribution. The population for this study included 249 subjects composed of a fairly even balance in the number of instructors between 47 two-year colleges (125 subjects) and 12 four-year universities (124 subjects).

2. Instrument

For this survey research there was a basic instrument (see [Appendix](#)) which provided the data to be analyzed. The instrument consisted of the following three sections:

1. one was the personal information section served to provide an accurate description of the respondents,
2. another was the communicative vs. whole language condition section designed to measure the ESL instructors' conditional perceptions regarding knowledge of communicative/whole language, preferences for communicative/whole language, and frequency of use in communicative/whole language, and
3. the last one was the communicative vs. whole language perspective section to measure the ESL instructors' perceptions about those two teaching dimensions with the consideration of concepts, instruction, and student-learning relative to ESL education.

The survey was further modified and refined for validity through a panel study as well as a pilot test implemented by the researcher. Modifications of the earlier one were based on the participants' responses as well as their recommendations through the panel and pilot studies. Items were evaluated based on their ability to find out features, to correlate with the corresponding items in each of those three conceptual, instructional, and student-learning perspectives, and to specify unique information.

3. Statistical Analysis

When coding the data, the researcher coded all positive items as follows, except for just one negative item in matching-pairs (No. 4) as reverse: Strongly Agree (**SA**) = 5, Agree (**A**) = 4, Undecided (**U**) = 3, Disagree (**D**) = 2, and Strongly Disagree (**SD**) = 1. The negative item of No. 4 in matching-pairs in the communicative and whole language perspective section was recorded in the following manner: 5=1, 4=2, 3=3, 2=4, 1=5. In this way, all scale items were summed to give overall positive scales. In order to describe the

relative values of the elements of the two teaching approaches, the researcher set the highest constraint with the mean score of 4.50 because the highest responses by the instructor group were around here, and also she set the lowest constraint with the mean score of 2.50 with the same reason. After this, she divided that (4.50 - 2.50) into the five constraints with the same variance of .40 in order to get the moderate positive (3.30 - 3.70), the higher and highest positive (above 3.70), and the lower and lowest positive (below 3.30).

All descriptive statistics were reported for the sample, survey items, and the summed scales in order to explore collegiate ESL instructors' perceptions toward the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach and also to explore their perceptions toward the whole language (WL) approach with the regards to conditional, conceptual, instructional, and student-learning dimensions relative to ESL instruction. T-tests were conducted with the statistical analysis package "SPSS" (Norusis, 1983) in order to carry the communicative versus whole language comparisons.

Results and Discussion

The researcher limited her geographical population to the seven states (Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Texas) which make up the big-12 conference. The recent formation of this athletic conference added Texas to the original group of six. Universities in college athletic conferences typically share their intellectual pursuits. At this point, it is important to establish a baseline of information on the recently formed, "ESL conference."

1. Personal Information

The most active respondents in this study came from the states of Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas and the survey returns from two-year and four-year colleges and universities were similar. Most respondents were female, about 45 years old, and held a Master's degrees. They had taught ESL classes ranging from 11 to 20 students and had an average ESL teaching career of 11 years which was about two-thirds of total their teaching careers of 15 years.

2. Conditions of Communicative vs. Whole Language in ESL

The instructor group's responses to condition items (understanding, preference, and frequent use) for the CLT approach were in a greatly positive direction with all means of above 4.00, whereas the responses to understanding, preference, and frequent use for the WL approach had high, moderately, and low ratings, respectively. There were significantly larger perception values in support of the CLT approach with all of the T-tests significant $< .001$. All CLT values about conditional perceptions were substantially higher than those of WL.

3. Perspectives of Communicative vs. Whole Language in ESL

In the area of conceptualization (items 1 - 6), the instructor group did not make a strong association between ESL instruction and the WL approach because the scores for WL items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and the total fell below the stated criteria of 3.30. Moreover there was a relatively favorable view of CLT as a powerful conceptualization of ESL curriculum. All CLT item values and the total score were significantly higher than those of WL except one item comparison regarding integration of language arts (item 6). The scores for item 6 showed no significant difference in conceptualizing those two approaches.

For the instructional group of items (7 - 17), seven of the item comparisons (Items 7, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15) and the total score produced significantly higher perceptual scores of instruction for the CLT approach in comparison to the WL approach. Items of 8, 10, 16, and 17 showed no significant differences in the instructional perceptions between the two approaches. There were four powerful perceptions of CLT that were also significantly higher than for WL: Cooperative learning, discussion, functional activities, writing process steps, and speaking and listening skills were more productively completed with the CLT approach in contrast to the WL approach. Item 17 dealing with paper and pencil tests was given low ratings for both CLT and WL approaches. Being in the moderate range (3.30 - 3.70), the CLT approach was given significantly higher ratings for grammar instruction with spelling and punctuation skills (item 9), work place literacy instruction (item 14), and for study skill instruction (item 15), in comparison to the WL approach. Content learning (item 8), English reading achievement (item 10), and portfolio assessment (item 16) for the CLT approaches were in the moderate range, however they were not significantly different with those for the WL approach.

For the student-learning group of items (18 - 27), there were six items and the total score for CLT that were considered high (means > 3.70) and were significantly greater than the counterpart perceptions for WL. These perceptions of student-learning in CLT focused

on student involvement (item 19), social development (item 20), persuasion (item 22), reading and writing about authentic literature (item 23), risk taking (item 24), and problem-solving (item 25). The CLT item, No. 21, receiving moderate, also significantly higher ratings included student responsibility. Student achievement of English literacy (item 18) and everyday writing (item 26) were given moderate ratings for CLT, however they showed no significant differences between the two approaches. One item, No. 27, regarding student everyday reading of literature showed a significance in favor of the WL approach.

Conclusion

The comparison of communicative versus whole language perceptions by total ESL instructor group showed that, in general, instructors' perceptions about the communicative approach were greater than their perceptions about the whole language approach. Their perceptions about the communicative approach showed distinctly positive trends with significantly higher ratings when compared to the whole language approach except for the following seven items with no significant differences:

1. integration of language arts,
2. content learning,
3. reading achievement,
4. portfolio assessment,
5. paper and pencil tests,
6. student achievement of English literacy, and
7. student everyday writing.

An exception was item 27 regarding student everyday reading of literature that showed the superiority in WL in comparison to the counterpart of in CLT.

It was obvious that the total instructor group viewed their ESL teaching more substantially relative to the communicative approach than to the whole language approach. They showed the superiority of the communicative approach with their higher responses in conceptualizations, with their higher responses in instructional as well as student-learning perceptions, and with their higher estimates of knowledge, preference, and frequency of use in the communicative approach than in the whole language approach.

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Appendix - Survey Questionnaire

PART 1: PERSONAL INFORMATION

Please give information about **yourself** for each of the categories below.

1. Gender: MALE FEMALE
2. Age:
3. School: 2-YEAR COLLEGE 4-YEAR COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY
4. What is the average class size that you teach?
5. Highest degree held: BA/BS MA/MS Doctorate
6. Field your most recent degree is in: (Check one)
 - o _____ Education
 - o _____ English
 - o _____ Linguistics
 - o _____ Other (Please specify):
7. Total years of teaching experience:
8. Total years in ESL teaching:
9. Do you have ESL teaching experience abroad? YES NO
10. Do you have prior public school teaching experience? YES NO
11. Do you have teacher certification or endorsement for ESL instruction? YES NO
12. Have you taken any whole-language instructional courses? YES NO
13. Have you taken any communicative language instructional courses? YES NO
14. Have you taken any courses in the area of college teaching? YES NO
15. Name of the professional journal important to you.

PART 2: COMMUNICATIVE VS. WHOLE LANGUAGE DIMENSIONS

Please read each pair of statements in this section. Before responding to the statements, you will decide whether you agree or disagree with the statements. For this questionnaire, the following five responses are prepared.

- Strongly Agree (SA)
- Agree (A)
- Undecided (U)
- Disagree (D)
- Strongly Disagree (SD)

Please **circle** the most appropriate answer for each question.

I. Conceptual Perspective

1. Good ESL instruction is virtually synonymous with communicative instruction. SA A U D SD
2. Good ESL instruction is virtually synonymous with whole-language instruction. SA A U D SD
3. A communicative perspective represents a very powerful view of ESL curriculum. SA A U D SD
4. A whole-language perspective represents a very powerful view of ESL curriculum. SA A U D SD
5. Communicative perspective is the most progressive instructional approach in the field of ESL. SA A U D SD
6. Whole language is the most progressive instructional approach in the field of ESL. SA A U D SD
7. One negative aspect of a communicative instruction perspective is that it "waters down" the ESL curriculum somewhat. SA A U D SD
8. One negative aspect of a whole-language instruction perspective is that it "waters down" the ESL curriculum somewhat. SA A U D SD
9. Curriculum integration can be best accomplished with a communicative approach. SA A U D SD
10. Curriculum integration can be best accomplished with a whole-language approach. SA A U D SD
11. Integration of the language arts is most efficiently accomplished with a communicative perspective. SA A U D SD
12. Integration of the language arts is most efficiently accomplished with a whole-language perspective. SA A U D SD

II. Instructional Perspective

1. Cooperative learning, discussion groups, and functional activities are easier to promote in a communicative ESL classroom. SA A U D SD
2. Cooperative learning, discussion groups, and functional activities are easier to promote in a whole-language ESL classroom. SA A U D SD

3. In ESL programs, content learning is best accomplished with a communicative approach. SA A U D SD
4. In ESL programs, content learning is best accomplished with a whole-language approach. SA A U D SD
5. Grammar, spelling, and punctuation are best taught in a communicative ESL class. SA A U D SD
6. Grammar, spelling, and punctuation are best taught in a whole-language ESL class. SA A U D SD
7. Writing process steps of pre-writing, drafting, revising, and editing are most productively handled in a communicative classroom. SA A U D SD
8. Writing process steps of pre-writing, drafting, revising, and editing are most productively handled in a whole-language classroom. SA A U D SD
9. English speaking proficiency is more easily achieved in a communicative class. SA A U D SD
10. English speaking proficiency is more easily achieved in a whole-language class. SA A U D SD
11. Work place literacy skills are efficiently promoted in a communicative ESL class. SA A U D SD
12. Work place literacy skills are efficiently promoted in a whole-language ESL class. SA A U D SD
13. Learning skills are best developed in a communicative ESL classroom. SA A U D SD
14. Learning skills are best developed in a whole-language ESL classroom. SA A U D SD
15. A portfolio assessment approach is best done in a communicative ESL classroom. SA A U D SD
16. A portfolio assessment approach is best done in a whole-language ESL classroom. SA A U D SD
17. Paper and pencil tests are very effective in a communicative ESL classroom. SA A U D SD
18. Paper and pencil tests are very effective in a whole-language ESL classroom. SA A U D SD

III. Student-Learning Perspective

1. Student achievement of English literacy is most productive in the context of a communicative approach. SA A U D SD
2. Student achievement of English literacy is most productive in the context of a whole-language approach. SA A U D SD
3. Student involvement is best promoted in a communicative ESL classroom. SA A U D SD
4. Student involvement is best promoted in a whole-language ESL classroom. SA A U D SD
5. Student social development is best promoted in a communicative ESL class. SA A U D SD
6. Student social development is best promoted in a whole-language ESL class. SA A U D SD
7. Student responsibility to learn is best promoted in a communicative ESL class. SA A U D SD
8. Student responsibility to learn is best promoted in a whole-language ESL class. SA A U D SD
9. Student power to persuade is best promoted in a communicative ESL classroom. SA A U D SD
10. Student power to persuade is best promoted in a whole-language ESL classroom. SA A U D SD
11. ESL students should read and write about a wide variety of materials. SA A U D SD
12. ESL students should read and write about high quality, authentic literature. SA A U D SD
13. Students are more willing to take risks in a communicative ESL class. SA A U D SD
14. Students are more willing to take risks in a whole-language ESL class. SA A U D SD
15. Students become more proficient in problem solving in a communicative ESL class. SA A U D SD
16. Students become more proficient in problem solving in a whole-language ESL class. SA A U D SD
17. Students should write every day in a communicative ESL classroom. SA A U D SD
18. Students should write every day in a whole-language ESL classroom. SA A U D SD
19. Students should read literature every day in a communicative ESL classroom. SA A U D SD
20. Students should read literature every day in a whole-language ESL classroom. SA A U D SD

Please record your preference for communicative and whole language ESL teaching.

1. As an ESL teacher I prefer the communicative perspective. SA A U D SD
2. As an ESL teacher I prefer the whole-language perspective. SA A U D SD