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EST reading instructional approaches at the senior secondary school level in Yemen: A case study

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Abstract

With the increasing use of the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach to teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), the Yemeni EFL secondary school curriculum has recently adopted the CLT approach. This qualitative exploratory case study aimed to examine whether or not the Yemeni English for Science and Technology (EST) senior secondary school classroom reading instruction is communicative-based instruction, as it has been labelled. The data were collected from reading classroom observations and were analysed in terms of student-teacher interaction patterns, as well as teacher and learner roles based on Richards & Rodgers' model (2001). The coding scheme used for coding the features of the initiation-response-evaluation method (IRE) and the communicative reading instructional method (CRI) was developed from previous studies. The findings showed that traditional IRE and teacher-as-director role were more extensively represented in Yemeni EST senior secondary school reading instruction than CRI. This finding contradicts the communicative label of the Yemeni English-language curriculum. The findings are discussed in terms of the alignment of the curriculum's designation as communicative with the actual implementation of EST senior secondary school classroom reading instruction.

Keywords: communicative language teaching approach (CLT), initiation-response-evaluation approach (IREA), communicative reading instructional approach (CRIA)

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1. Introduction

Despite the fact that reading skills are vital to the nation achieving its education and social targets (Kavaliauskienė & Anusienė, 2010; Almahedi, 2008), most students do not adequately master reading comprehension (Mourtaga, 2012). Instead, students develop memorisation and recall skills rather than comprehension skills such as analysis and interpretation.

Due to the importance of reading comprehension skills in both second and foreign language (L2/FL) contexts, it is assumed that English-language teachers will train their students to master this skill. Unfortunately, many English-as-foreign-language (EFL) teachers overlook this important aspect and focus either on asking students to read aloud and answer questions orally when they teach reading lessons or they ask students to translate new English words in the lesson into Arabic. Hence, students are simply encouraged to repeat verbatim ideas from the text (Bamatraf, 1997). Such practices result in students' failure to comprehend what they read (Yuill & Oakhill, 1991) because they reflect the traditional structural teaching instructional practices that focus on form rather than content. As the Yemeni English-language curriculum has been designed based on communicative language teaching (CLT) approaches that have replaced traditional structural instructional approaches (UNESCO, 2011; Hassen, 2009), the English for Science and Technology (EST) reading curriculum at the senior level of secondary schools should also be based on the CLT approach and, hence, classroom reading instruction should include CLT features.

Applying CLT instruction in reading classrooms will help learners to build up their language competence and help them comprehend and analyse the conveyed messages in the reading texts via productive student-student and student-teacher communication about the texts they read (Nunan, 2004). Applying the CLT approach to classroom reading instruction can help students overcome any reading comprehension problems they face, as this approach has been widely recognised in many contexts (Chang & Goswami, 2011). Within CLT instruction implementation, learners are trained to use higher cognitive and knowledge construction strategies such as analysis, interpretation and integration of a text's ideas in order to comprehend the ideas conveyed by the author. They do this while almost ignoring or paying less attention to the text's grammar and not focusing on memorisation skills, as encouraged in the traditional initiation-response-evaluation approach (IRE). This also helps learners to engage their higher and lower levels of cognition skills for text comprehension, from coding written information to analysing personal experience (Alavi & Nevisi, 2012). In other words, CLT reading instruction works differently to IRE reading instruction, which only builds low levels of cognitive skills.

This study aimed to investigate whether Yemeni EST classroom reading instruction at the senior level is based on the CLT approach or the IRE approach. This paper was a result of the challenges encountered by Yemeni EFL students, especially those at the secondary school level, in developing their reading skills, as identified and reported in several previous studies (Abdullah & Patil, 2012; Bamataf, 1997). These difficulties arise despite the communicative label given to the Yemeni English-language curriculum. To achieve the aim of this study, the features of both the communicative reading instructional approach (CRIA) and the traditional IRE approach were identified and discussed.

1.1 Communicative reading instructional approach (CRIA) and initiation-response-evaluation approach (IREA)

A communicative reading instruction classroom is a learner-centred interactive classroom that includes new patterns of teacher and learner roles in the process of learning, compared to the roles reflected in the traditional structural IRE classroom (Chang, 2011; Ozsevik, 2010). In the CRIA, learners are supposed to be actively engaged in different activities using English as a means of communication in accomplishing a task and achieving the desired learning objectives. Such activities are designed

based on the collaborative approach rather than the individualistic approach to learning. In addition, learners are active participants in and contributors to the process of language learning. In view of this, it can be argued that the communicative reading classroom can be described as having a dynamic feature (Ozsevik, 2010). CLT is reflected in different classroom instructional approaches, such as the task-based instructional approach (TBI), the content-based instructional approach (CBI) and the cooperative language learning approach (CLL). Tasks in a communicative reading classroom are designed to encourage meaningful negotiations among students, as well as students and teachers, via the use of authentic materials. In such a learning environment, teachers act as facilitators while learners are actively involved in the interpretation, expression and negotiation of classroom reading activities (Savignon, 2002).

TBI is based on the creation of meaningful communication and interactive tasks among learners, such as jigsaw, information gap, problem-solving, decision-making and opinion exchange (Pica et al., 2009). Conducting such tasks takes place through a task cycle (Willis, 1996), which includes: 1) a *pre-task phase*, which works as students' schemata preparation in which the teacher pre-teaches his/her students new vocabulary and phrases for the task's theme and objectives, and gives them enough time to complete the task; 2) *the task cycle*, in which students carry out the task either in pairs or groups and they read the text using their language while the teacher only monitors and encourages them to be confident, explorative and spontaneous speakers. Students then prepare a report and discuss with the rest of the class how they completed the task while the teacher comments and provides feedback; and 3) *post task and language focus,* in which students compare their task outcome with others, focusing on the meaning of the language. Such a task cycle shows almost the same or closer picture of the communicative reading instructional practices, which are characterised by a learner-centred educational philosophy (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

On the other hand, IRE represents a teacher-student-teacher flow of interaction in the classroom where "I" refers to the teacher who INITIATES the lesson or the task or asks question, "R" refers to the student who RESPONDS to the teacher and "E" refers to the teacher who EVALUATES the student's answer and provides feedback (Ozemir, 2009). It is assumed that in a typical IRE classroom, reading instruction is initiated by the teacher, who usually initiates a topic and poses several questions to students or assigns a task. Then, students respond to those questions and receive an evaluation or feedback from the teacher about their answers. Teachers use terms such as "correct", "wrong" or "well done" without providing any chance for interaction, conversation, discussion or alternative perspectives (Bloome et al., 2004). The traditional IRE approach is represented by a teacher-centred classroom in which the teacher is a director in the classroom, as is the case in the traditional grammar-translation teaching method (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). IRE is criticised for the dominating role assumed by the teacher (e.g., they are responsible for interaction, as well as directing, guiding and motivating students and helping them achieve the desired goal) in the learning process, which limits student participation to short answers (Nagaraju et al., 2013). Such an approach limits the emergence of more sophisticated learning practices, such as the formulation of more complex responses and opportunities for learners to ask questions and explore their meaning (Lee, 2007; Bloome et al., 2004; Cullen, 2002). Classroom instruction that adopts this approach is superficial as the teacher takes on an incomparably authoritative position. However, a modification could take place in the "E phase" in which the teacher could provide opportunities for interaction and discussion by reconstructing learners' responses and initiating discussion (O'Connor & Michaels, 2007).

2. Methodology

This study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. Which approach—CRI or IRE—does Yemeni classroom reading instruction reflect?
2. What learner and teacher roles are reflected in Yemeni reading instruction?

A revised version of Sidek's model (2010), which is itself a revision of Richards & Rodgers' (2001) language teaching model, was used as a theoretical framework. This model suggests that language instruction can be analysed in terms of three levels: 1) *approach* (second language theories and language learning); 2) *design* (teaching materials); and 3) *procedure* (L2/FL classroom practices). For the purpose of the current study, the procedural level was the only applicable level. For this study, teacher and learner roles were analysed based on this model while the teacher-learner classroom interaction pattern was analysed based on a review of past studies.

2.1. Data collection and coding

With an emphasis on classroom observation of English-language teaching classroom practices (Hassen, 2009; Ozemir, 2009) and the process of audio taping the lessons (Mercer et al., 2009), the current study used classroom observation as a means of data collection. EST Yemeni senior secondary classroom reading practices were observed and audiotaped using two observation sheets and a Sony walkman recorder as instruments. The recoded data were transcribed verbatim and then the reading-related statements were coded and transferred as numbers on to the observation sheets. The observation sheets covered teacher and learner roles. The data were collected from six EST senior secondary school reading classes, with three reading teachers (two classes each) in three secondary schools. The codes used for coding the IRE and CRI instructional approaches are presented in Table 1, while those used for coding the teacher and learner roles are given in Table 2. The teacher role was coded based on Richards & Rodgers' (2001) coding patterns of the teacher role as catalyst or director, while the learner role was coded based on Richards & Rodgers' (2001) coding patterns of the learner role in terms of learner grouping patterns when completing the task, either as an individual task or as pair/group task.

Table 1: Coding the characteristics of CRI and IRE instructional methods.

CRI approach adapted from Sidek (2010)	**IRE instructional approach adapted from Walsh (2011)**
Student-centred classroom. Comprehension of the reading passage is based on cooperative interaction among students and between teacher and students.	Teacher-centred classroom. Comprehension of the reading passage is based on presenting ideas that the learners have built individually from the reading passage.
Background knowledge of the learners is highly triggered as they read the text.	Learners take their cues from the teacher; they answer questions and respond to the prompts provided by the teacher.
Skills activated while reading include interpretation, prediction, illustration and clarification.	Skills activated while reading include memorisation, recall and repetition of information from the reading passage.
Reading is a process of constructing meaning from a text through the use of bottom-up and top-down L2 theories.	The teacher constantly assesses the correctness of students' answers through evaluation and by providing feedback.

Table 2: Coding teacher and learner roles.

Examples of reading statement	Teacher role	Examples of reading statement	Learner role
Read the text. What is the main idea of each paragraph?	Director	Read the text. And then describe the Air?	Individual task
Read the text and discuss how do you see the public hospitals compared to the private ones	Catalyst	Read the text. Discuss with your partner what other Arabic scientist do you know? And in what way they are important.	Pair/group task

3. Findings

3.1 CRI and IRE methods as reflected in the Yemeni reading classroom

The findings showed that the classroom constructs the teacher as an instructor who constantly evaluates and corrects students' answers. Most of the time the learners take their cues from the teacher; they answer questions and respond to the prompts provided by the teacher. In addition, the lower-level cognitive skills, such as remembering and recalling information and memorising vocabulary, are motivated in the class.

On the other hand, the IRE teacher-student interaction pattern is a traditional pattern for classroom discourse, where the teacher usually asks a question as an initiation and the students respond to the question. The teacher then evaluates the students' responses (van Zee & Minstrell, 1997). An example of such a phenomenon is outlined below.

Example 1

Teacher: Ok, go to the next paragraph and read silently.

> **Detecting and measuring acidity and alkalinity.** *The litmus test: litmus is a vegetable dye that is used to test the acidity of solutions. Litmus paper is soaked in this dye. It is green, but when put in…*

Students *silently read the above paragraph while the teacher writes on the board several points, multiple choice questions and fill-in-the blanks questions in order elicit answers from the students.* E.g.:

- Litmus is a vegetable (plant, dye, dress) / It is used to (change, balance, test) the acidity of solution / It is (green, black, white).

Teacher: OK, now let us start: Litmus is a vegetable…?
Student: Dye.
Teacher: Yes, correct, "dye". Second, it is used to…?
Student: Test the acidity.
Teacher: Yes, correct. Then it…What is its colour?
Student: Green, teacher, green.
Teacher: Yes, correct, "green". Its original colour is green. But when we put it in an acid solution, its colour turns to…?
Student: Red.
Teachers: Yes, red. And it turns to blue colour if a solution is...What if acid turns to red and if it…turns blue?
Student: Alkali.
Teacher revises the questions with the students while the answers are still on the board and the books are open in front of the students.

Example 2

Teacher: Ok. Look at these six animals in the pictures (seta in Arabic). Ok, now do you think these animals are the same? No, they are not the same. Today we're going to talk about animals—unusual animals which are more different than these. These animals are usual animals. What does "unusual animals" mean?

Student: Different.

Teacher: Yes, strange animals. Today we're going to know how these animals are different from unusual animals in different ways. Open your books. We have the title "Rama the Cama". Now we are going to know about Rama the Cama. We are going to know who is Rama. Rama here is a name like Khadega, Swsan, Ahalam and Suad. Now, we're going to know who Rama is, then we say it is cama. Cama: is it like these animals?

All students: No, no, no.

Teacher: Read only the first paragraph to say who is Rama. Who is Rama? Read only the first paragraph.

*Students read silently while the teacher writes several multiple choice and fill-in-the-blanks questions on the board (see Appendix 29)***.**

Teacher: The scientists divided animals into what: families or classes?

Student: Families.

Teacher: Lions, tigers and (cats, monkeys, dogs) are the same family. Who is from the same family?

Student: Cats.

Teacher: It is the first family, the cat family. Now who is in the same family as wolves and jackals: snakes, bees or dogs? Look at the pictures to find out the answer.

Student: The dog family.

Teacher: The dog family. This is the second family. Now, is it possible or impossible to crossbreed between animals from the same family? For example, here I have lion and tiger, ok; is it possible or impossible to crossbreed between them?

3.2 Learner and teacher roles as reflected in the Yemeni reading classroom

Table 3: Analysis of learner role.

Teacher	Observations	Individual tasks (in frequency)	Pair/group tasks (in frequency)
	1	11	2
1	2	25	1
	3	23	3
2	4	34	0
	5	27	5
3	6	18	1
Overall total of each type (in frequency)	Six classroom observations	138	12
Overall percentage (%)		92%	8%

Table 4: Analysis of teacher role.

Teacher	Observations	Teacher role as a director (in frequency)	Teacher role as a catalyst (in frequency)
1	1	26	0
	2	47	2
2	3	31	3
	4	41	1
3	5	27	4
	6	33	3
Overall total of each type (in frequency)	Six classroom observations	205	13
Overall percentage (%)		94%	6%

4. Discussion

4.1. CRI and IRE methods as reflected in the Yemeni reading classroom

Although many innovative reading teachers are trying to create communicative reading classes as a shift from IRE instruction, unfortunately, the typical reading classroom does not lead to a meaningful exchange of information. The classroom constructs the teacher as an instructor who constantly evaluates and corrects students' answers. Sometimes, students do not even realise their mistakes or understand why their answers are correct (Goodmacher & Kajiura, 2010). Goodmacher and Kajiura (2010) state that CRI uses features of the CLT approach. Reading teachers should use a collaborative reading instructional approach to motivate students to work in pairs and small groups. By doing so, learners can learn from each other since they become reciprocal sources for each other. In the communicative classroom, reading should not be reduced to a list of comprehension questions; students should be involved as much as possible in a number of socially interactive tasks. Moreover, reading should not be as linear as reading magazines and newspapers (Chandler, 2002). Transforming an L2/FL reading classroom into a communicative classroom is conducive to developing students' language competencies. CRI should be based on communication and interaction in order to exchange information and it should avoid the manipulation of forms, translation formats, the use of L1 and practice of the typical list of comprehension questions. A communicative-based reading classroom will engage learners in the learning process and make them more active readers. Thus, there are multiple benefits from sharing knowledge and learning. Communicative-based reading instruction starts with working out any new vocabulary through interactive tasks that activate learners' background knowledge; these tasks encourage learners to work together during the class to discover and find out the meaning of any new vocabulary from a text. They do not have to read the entire text to ascertain the main idea; they need only to examine portions of it. Following this, as homework, students should carefully read for details. The last step lies in encouraging a communicative classroom environment in which students analyse and generalise the main idea and moral of the text in relation to their own lives (Chandler, 2002). The denotation of every individual letter in *ACTIVE* reading instruction has been interpreted as follows: A=activate prior knowledge; C=cultivate vocabulary; T=teach for comprehension; I=increase reading rate; V=verify reading strategies; and E=evaluate progress (Anderson, 1999). However, non-interactive/individual L2/FL reading classroom instruction does not help learners to build up their higher intellectual levels (Gokhale, 1995). It is only when learners engage in pair/group reading tasks and when they discuss the information in the text throughout the reading process that they foster their critical thinking skills and increase their interest in reading.

Although the Ministry of Education claims that the Yemeni English-language curriculum is a communicative-oriented curriculum, a recent study by Hosam (2012) found that the majority of English-language teachers in Yemen still use the traditional method for teaching reading, i.e., the grammar-translation method in which they only pass on grammatical rules to learners and translate every single word in the reading text. Such practices show that English-language teachers in Yemen have not yet fully grasped the purpose of teaching reading, which is to enable learners to comprehend the reading passages. Instead of teaching reading comprehension skills, teachers teach reading passages for the purpose of testing and learning the language forms; but not training the students on the reading comprehension skills. Hosam (2012) argues that applying CRI methods will enable English-language teachers in Yemen to achieve their goals in an efficient manner, helping them to exert less effort and also activate learners' potential abilities. The aim of teaching reading comprehension in Yemeni secondary schools, therefore, is to teach strategies that enable learners to interact communicatively with a variety of texts (O'Neil et al., 1999). However, current reading instructional comprehension practices in Yemeni schools show that reading teachers ignore the communicative aspects of the curriculum; they concentrate on asking students to read aloud and answer questions orally while teaching reading or translating new English words into the learners' first language (Bamatraf, 1997). This overemphasis on teaching pronunciation sometimes produces students who can decode and pronounce words but fail to comprehend what they read (Yuill & Oakhill, 1991). In addition, such classroom practices contradict the curriculum's label as a communicative-based curriculum. A communicative-based curriculum should be reflected in actual classroom instruction, practices and discourse in terms of interaction between teachers and learners.

On the other hand, the IRE teacher-student interaction pattern is a traditional pattern for classroom discourse, where the teacher usually asks a question as an initiation and students respond to the question. The teacher then evaluates the students' responses (van Zee & Minstrell, 1997). However, past studies have found that this pattern can be practised in different forms, which adds to the skills gained by learners (Molinari et al., 2012; Nassaji & Wells, 2000). These studies claim that the IRE interaction pattern can be extended beyond the pattern of student response evaluation into the use of the third step, the evaluation step, to initiate sequences in the interactive classroom and encourage students to express their perspectives and develop their reasoning skills. Changing such a pattern is fully in the hands of the teacher as s/he is responsible for posing the questions and selecting a particular type of question. The types and ways of questioning influence how students construct their scientific knowledge (Chin, 2007). Researchers have produced different categories for teachers' questions; for example, Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) categorise them as "authentic" and "inauthentic"; Graesser and Person (1994) classify them as "short answer" and "long answer"; and Nassaji & Wells (2000) categorise them as "questions for known information" and "questions for negotiation". Short answer questions typically require a single word or phrase and do not place much cognitive demand on students; these include answer concept completion, verification questions and the recall of information from the text. Long answer questions, on the other hand, usually involve several sentences and display students' reasoning and misconceptions. Open-ended (long answer) questions should be used more frequently in classrooms in order to give learners more opportunities to construct their scientific knowledge (Erdogan & Campbell, 2008; Graesser & Person, 1994). However, questions about grammatical rules and vocabulary meaning are reflected in the short questions category and these questions do not allow for any type of discussion in classroom discourse. When O'Connor & Michaels (2007) criticise the IRE pattern, they do not mean that the IRE interaction pattern should be totally abandoned from classroom instruction. Instead, they note that the IRE classroom interaction pattern has a place within the curriculum when revising or summarising previously learned information and ideas at the beginning or the end of a new day or lesson. However, adopting this pattern for classroom interaction can be practised in a collaborative way when the teacher reformulates students' answers and provides them with the opportunity to agree, disagree,

justify, re-explain and discuss their answers, and this step is called the re-voicing step (Hall & Walsh, 2002).

4.2. Learner and teacher roles, as reflected in the Yemeni reading classroom

Table 3 shows a huge gap between the two types of learner roles: individual readers and collaborative readers (8% and 92%, respectively). Such findings suggest that the individual reader role is emphasised more than the role of readers working in groups. This implies that the learner role does not conform to the CLT pattern, which emphasises the need for pair/group-based reading activities in the classroom. In CLT, emphasis is placed on learners' societal role in the classroom learning community. However, the IRE pattern, in which the learner is passive and the classroom is teacher-centred, is highly reflected in EST senior secondary school classroom reading instruction. This finding is in line with the findings of past studies in the Yemeni context (Hassen, 2009; Murshed, 2002). However, given the selected Yemeni curriculum, labelled as a communicative curriculum and which intends to promote students' communicative competence, the communicative instructional practices were not explicitly and vigorously reflected in classroom practice since they reflected the IRE pattern. Thus, this finding contradicts the curriculum's emphasis on building Yemeni learners' communication competence. Moreover, from CLT and socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1975) perspectives, reading tasks designed for pairs/groups foster learners' processing of the text information via interaction and collaboration. However, the findings did not provide any empirical evidence that such classroom practices reflect this collaborative, interactive and communicative-based pattern.

The findings in Table 4 show that Yemeni teachers of reading behave as directors (94%) when conducting their reading classes more often than they act as catalysts (6%). These findings indicate that such teaching practices do not reflect the CLT approach as it is labelled. As such, it is assumed that reading classrooms at the secondary school level in Yemen are mainly a teacher-centred setting. Teachers greatly emphasise the explicit explanation of grammar rules and words' meaning in English and Arabic, as well as the evaluation of the correctness of students' answers. Such instructional practices conform to IRE, a non-communicative instructional approach that falls within structural/behaviourism theory. While O'Connor & Michaels (2007) assume that the IRE classroom interaction pattern is applicable for revising or summarising taught materials as well as when initiating or closing a lesson or a unit, however, such practices is almost represented at the entire reading classroom of interest in the current study. Erdogan & Campbell (2008) suggest using long authentic questions within the IRE pattern to help students construct information; however, such questions were essentially neglected and most questions asked were intended to train students to memorise the text. This could be due to the exam-oriented education system in Yemen, in which students have to sit a high-stakes national exam that determines their eligibility for admission to university. In regards to EST senior secondary school students, the main goal of teachers is to prepare students to perform well on this norm-referenced test in which students have to individually process the reading texts.

5. Conclusion

The current study aimed to examine whether the communicative instructional approach is reflected in Yemeni EST senior secondary reading as it is labelled in the curriculum documents. The findings indicated that the Yemeni EST reading classroom at the senior secondary school level is still greatly grounded in structural instructional approaches, in which the individual processes information in the reading classroom through IRE interaction patterns. Such classroom reading instruction trains students

to de-contextualise vocabulary and grammatical rules through the use of L1, thus resulting in learners' high reliance on their teachers and and an inability to approach the material independently using the necessary reading comprehension skills (Kinsella, 1997). To conclude, reading classrooms should help students in building up the required reading comprehension skills for success in their studies during and beyond the secondary school level. This can be achieved by incorporating CLT characteristics into the curriculum in a holistic manner. In doing so, the reading curriculum for Yemeni EST senior secondary schools has to be designed based on socio-cognitive and socio-cultural theories, which are the foundational principles of the CLT approach (Mohammed & Sidek, 2015).

6. Recommendations

The findings indicated that there is a misalignment between the EST senior secondary school curriculum label as a communicative curriculum and what the curriculum actually stipulates and promotes in teaching reading comprehension. Ozsevik (2010) assumes that EFL teachers do not have enough experience in applying the CLT approach to classroom reading instruction. Therefore, further studies should focus on the perception and preparation of Yemeni reading teachers concerning the actual principles of communicative classroom instruction. Bearing in mind that reading comprehension is an active process (Anderson, 1999), learners should be provided with a collaborative teaching foundation in which they can build towards higher levels of cognitive skills (Gokhale, 1995).

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