

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/26165> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

Author: Edisherashvili, Natalia

Title: Communicative language teaching in Georgia : from theory to practice

Issue Date: 2014-06-03

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 CHANGING FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING IN GEORGIA

“Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn” – this aphorism by Benjamin Franklin captures well the essence and importance of choosing the right approach in the teaching/learning process in order to achieve lasting and meaningful results. The language teaching that I was exposed to myself in my secondary school and university years, in the 1990s, was the type which focused on “teaching” rather than “learning”: teaching grammar rules, grammar forms, vocabulary lists and uninspiring texts about imaginary people, in imaginary contexts. It was coursebooks inherited by us, newly-independent Georgians, from Soviet authors that constituted the teaching material in those days. We had to memorize and recite word for word whole passages such as “The Working Day of an Engineer” by Bonk (1986), which was about a typical day of a model Soviet citizen, one ‘Comrade Petrov’. Later on, some coursebooks and texts, written by foreign authors, were also adopted for English language teaching purposes. *Intermediate English Course* by Gimson (1976), for instance. The very first text from this book, “Quiet Life”, which every first-year university student of my generation knew by heart, was somewhat more ‘progressive’ in a sense, in that it described the typical day not of a Soviet proletarian but of a middle-class Englishman, Felix Catt, living on Syberia Avenue, in a suburb of London.



Figure 1.1: Illustration of the text “A Quiet Life” from *Intermediate English Course* by Gimson (1976)¹.

Furthermore, the achievement level recorded for students of foreign languages was assessed based on how well one could remember and recite these texts, as well as on the ability to complete grammar and vocabulary fill-in-the-gaps exercises or to translate texts from English into Georgian and vice versa.

¹ Retrieved from <http://inenc.narod.ru/text11.htm> (accessed January 2014).

Consequently, grammar and vocabulary instruction constituted an end in itself rather than a means for communication, which is what it would have been in the case of Communicative Language Teaching, the method under research in the present study.

Such form-focused and grammar-driven approach to language teaching, as well as to its assessment, often resulted in the development of learners' memory capacity and recitation skills only. This did not worry most of language teachers in Georgia at that time, who would say: "The main thing is that learners learn grammar rules and vocabulary; they can always learn to speak *later*", or, "By memorizing things, learners remember language structures very well, which then they will be able to apply in speaking". So, mastering speaking and authentic communication skills were put off for later, and was left to learners to come to grips with on their own. Consequently, the vast majority of learners who were exposed to such 'language- rather than learning-centered' methods of language instruction (Kumaravadivelu, 2007: 83) "remembered" certain texts, grammar rules and vocabulary definitions; however, as far as communication skills were concerned, unfortunately, the '*later*' never came for majority of language learners who enjoyed no language learning opportunities outside school. Only those learners who had a chance to be "involved" in extracurricular language learning, through study abroad or travel opportunities, or who managed to have intensive exposure and access to authentic foreign language through the then scarce foreign broadcast media and information technology were able to actually 'learn' the target foreign language.

Here it should also be mentioned that, with the passage of time, understanding of what constitutes competence in a foreign language and the goal of language teaching/learning has also changed. In Soviet times, 'learning' a foreign language meant acquiring linguistic knowledge; language learners were mostly women aspiring to a career in language teaching or to translator positions, very popular professions for females at that time. Their eventual goal, then, was to pass on this body of knowledge to the next generation in the same way their own teachers had done. Indeed, the Soviet academic model placed more emphasis on linguistics and even philology as a subject for mass study than almost any other academic model in the world did. From this perspective, bearing in mind the foreign language teaching/learning aims of that context and the respect afforded to academic linguistic knowledge, we might tone down our critical attitude toward the types of approaches used in language teaching in those days.

However, in today's changed world, little practical use can be derived from knowing grammar rules and vocabulary lists or memorizing texts and the details of imaginary Soviet or British citizens' lives in a non-native language. Today, learners need to be able to act as 'global citizens', to be capable of communicating across borders, in real situations and for real purposes. Consequently, only methods that "involve" learners in the process of learning

and which make language use a means as well as an end of the study process may be claimed to be adequate and relevant to the contemporary individual. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is one of the most popular among such recent approaches, one which emerged as a result of the new economic and sociopolitical circumstances arising in the 1970s in the West, and has maintained its actuality and validity up to the present (Davies & Pearse, 2000: 193), being particularly prized in latter years by emerging economies which have been moving towards the Western model.

The Georgian government, a few years after its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, started making efforts in the direction of transforming language teaching from an old-fashioned model, which no longer met the foreign language needs of Georgian citizens, into a more Westernized practice, focusing on real life language skills. The first official communicative National Curriculum for Foreign Languages (NCFL) was adopted in Georgia in 1997, a year when the still desperately impoverished and divided country had barely got over its existential threats. Attempts to bring language teaching in Georgia up to European standards can be perceived in that context as a demonstration of will on the part of the Georgian government to become a more integral part of Europe and the Western world as a more robustly independent state, by means of widely being seen to share those countries' norms and values. Thus, foreign language teaching gained far wider importance than merely linguistic, which also explains the high political and even ideological priority that has been explicitly accorded by politicians to language teaching and learning in schools in Georgia. Nevertheless, in 1997, little else was done beyond the official introduction of a language curriculum, the declared goal of which was transforming a grammar-based foreign language teaching into a communicative one.

As is evident from the literature, not to mention practical observations of the process, the introduction of change and reformation in the field of education is not an easy task to achieve. According to Heyneman (2010), "borrowing a policy is a very delicate matter and can even be counterproductive at times" (cited in Karakhanyan, 2011: 18). Among the things to be considered in case of the transfer of an educational policy from other countries into the local context, as claimed by Bache and Taylor (2003), are "the environment in which changes are planted", as well as the extent to which teachers can make sense of the reform (cited in Karakhanyan, 2011: 18). Frequently, rapidly-adopted changes copied from alien contexts might encounter many more challenges and barriers in a local context than one might expect. There is much evidence that CLT failed to achieve success in many EFL contexts, the reasons ranging from cultural norm incompatibilities and resistance on teachers', learners' as well as parents' part, to certain concrete practicalities of classroom teaching (Ansarey, 2012; Liao, 2000; Li, 1998; Ellis, 1996; Anderson, 1993). Another important factor to be considered in the process of introducing

innovation is the direction of the reform. As Karakhanyan (2011: 21) remarks, when a top-down approach is applied in the process of reformation, it should be expected that the changes will be “superficial” and many gaps will be left behind.

In the case of Georgia, the reform in language teaching was introduced from the top down, imposing the norms and practices of Communicative Language Teaching employed in the Western world upon language teachers and learners in Georgia, who had been used to totally different types of language teaching and learning paradigms. In the first iteration of Georgia’s reform of language teaching (in 1997), there was not much done in terms of helping implementers of the reform to come to grips with the necessary skills and knowledge to successfully implement the new methodology requirements in actual practice; not much account was taken of the practicalities of the local context either, and the situation in the ELT field remained Soviet methodology-driven, with no signs of communicative aspects of teaching being visible in actual practice at all (Tkemaladze et al., 2001: 112).

The top-down nature of the second wave of the language teaching change in Georgia was such that the then president, Mikheil Saakashvili, made the reforms in the country’s teaching of English a major theme of his speeches. This reformation has been ongoing since 2009, and has encompassed much more ambitious attempts than the first phase did. It has included attempts at further refining the National Curriculum for Foreign Languages, employing thousands of native-speaker teachers of English at secondary public schools all over the country, and making efforts to provide new teacher standards, teacher training courses and better school infrastructure (see 5.4). However, in order to prevent reform from failing or from having only a “superficial” effect on the situation, it is essential that the context of change, and factors inhibiting and facilitating the modernization of education, be carefully explored before reforms are undertaken (Karakhanyan, 2011: 21).

Chapter overview

In the remainder of this introductory chapter, the following areas will be dealt with: Section 1.2 discusses the main aims of the present study, and in Section 1.3 the concrete research questions for which this study seeks answers are presented. Study design and the methodology adopted are described in Section 1.4. Section 1.5 discusses the significance of the present study and finally Section 1.6 provides an overview of the structure of the whole dissertation.

1.2 AIMS OF THE PRESENT STUDY

To provide empirical data with regard to the current situation in English language teaching and learning at secondary schools in Tbilisi the present investigation was undertaken. An exploration into the question how theory

meets practice, and to what outcomes the combination of the two leads, is the main goal of the present study. In general, education policy goes through several stages before reaching its ultimate target. Firstly, it needs to penetrate, and be accepted by, the actual implementers of the policy – teachers – and to be approved of and welcomed by the other category of immediate agents of the educational process – learners. Secondly, the policy needs to be actually applied in practice, and should thus have characteristics compatible with classroom realities. Thirdly, the success of a given education policy should ultimately be measured through assessing its effects on learners' knowledge. This is an approach which is adopted in the present work in order to evaluate Communicative Language Teaching situation in Georgia.

Thus, this dissertation comprises the four studies which look into different areas of Communicative Language Teaching in Georgia: they explore how language teachers and learners understand and how receptive they are to CLT, what the actual language classroom reality is, and how far the sum of all of these factors is reflected in the level of learners' communicative proficiency in English. The sequence of the areas that were explored one at a time in order to arrive at an understanding of the state of affairs of CLT in Georgia is graphically represented in Figure 1.2 below.

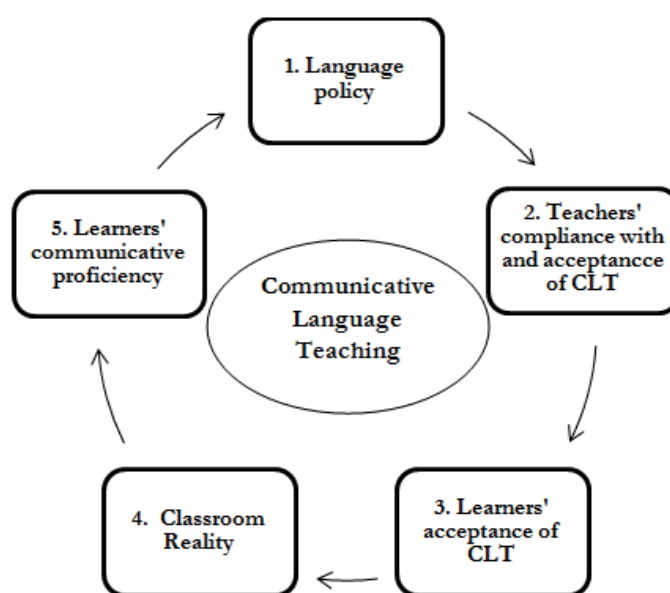


Figure 1.2: Areas involved in change implementation in foreign language teaching

The language policy component, as represented in Figure 1.2 above, is the very first component of the language reform process. The current National

Curriculum for Foreign Languages of Georgia is described in Chapter 6 in order to provide an official framework for foreign language teaching and learning in Georgia. The goals, nature and levels of achievement of the observed language teaching and learning process in Georgia and its outcomes are then discussed within and with reference to this framework. As for the research areas 2, 3 and 4 shown in Figure 1.2, they have been explored in much detail in the four studies presented in Chapters 7–10. They represent a separate pieces of research in their own right, consisting of their own introduction, methodology, results and conclusions sections (for more detailed information about the structure of the dissertation, see Section 1.5 below).

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Below are presented the summaries of the main research questions for each of the study. More detailed research questions can be found in the relevant chapters (Chapters 7–10).

Study 1 (Chapter 7)

- How aware are English language teachers of the official recommendations with regard to foreign language teaching in Georgia, and what is the reported level of compliance with these recommendations on their part?
- What are their attitudes towards CLT?
- What effect do school context and certain teacher characteristics have on the study results?

Study 2 (Chapter 8)

- What are English language learners' attitudes towards CLT at secondary schools in Tbilisi?
- What effect do school type and certain learner characteristics have on their attitudes?
- What is the level of discrepancy between learners' and teachers' attitudes towards this method?

Study 3 (Chapter 9)

- How communicative are English language classes at secondary schools in Tbilisi?
- What are the observed practical challenges that inhibit language teaching from having a communicative character?
- What effect do school type and certain teacher characteristics have on the communicative nature of English language classes?
- What are the discrepancies between what English language teachers theorize and what they actually practice in their language classes?

Study 4 (Chapter 10)

- How close does English language learners' actual communicative proficiency in Tbilisi come to the communicative language requirements outlined in the *National Curriculum for Foreign Languages*?
- What effect do school type and learner characteristics have on learners' actual communicative proficiency in English?

1.4 GENERAL APPROACH TO THE PRESENT STUDY

To answer the research questions, and given that certain research questions necessitated both qualitative and quantitative data analyses, a mixed-method design was adopted in the present study. As claimed by Haladyna et al. (1991), “[To] judge the value of an outcome or end, one should understand the nature of the process or means that led to that end” (1991: 6). Hence, secondary school learners' communicative proficiency level in Tbilisi was not explored in isolation in the present study; rather, the whole chain of components leading to the end goal of Communicative Language Teaching has been thoroughly investigated. Since teaching and learning are constructs which occur interactively in the classroom, both teacher-related and learner-related investigations were undertaken in the present study.

A number of choices were made with regard to the study context as well, which I decided to restrict to the capital of Georgia, Tbilisi only. There were several reasons for this; first, innovation and policy change diffusion largely starts out from the capital city, and the outcome in terms of achieved success was accordingly expected to be best visible in Tbilisi; second, it was expected that enough variation could be detected within the capital only, and that proceeding with language teaching and learning situation investigation in the regions, outside the capital, would affect the depth and feasibility of the present study. Also, to keep the research focused, it was decided to look into the situation at the secondary schools only, and restrict the study to a particular age range within secondary schools (for more discussion see Section 7.2.1).

Methodological choices were also made with regard to making the study context even more specific: most significantly, as the official language policy in Georgia applies to public as well as private schools, both types of secondary schools were included in the study. Further differentiation was made with regard to school locations: centrally-located as well as peripherally-located schools in the capital city were approached. The graphical illustration of the whole research design – the research context, research areas, as well as research tools and the amount of data obtained – is provided in Figure 1.3 below.

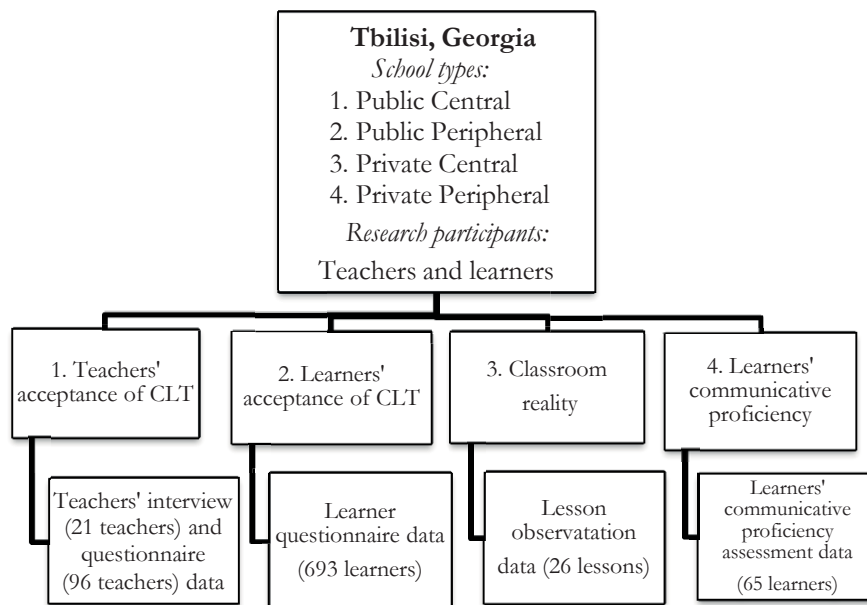


Figure 1.3: Research context, areas studied and the obtained data

More information about the research methodology employed for each study area presented in Figure 1.3 above can be found in the corresponding dissertation chapter. Also, to better illustrate the study context, which applies to all the empirical research presented in chapters 7–10 of this dissertation, a map of Tbilisi, with the participating schools marked on it, is presented in Figure 1.4 below:

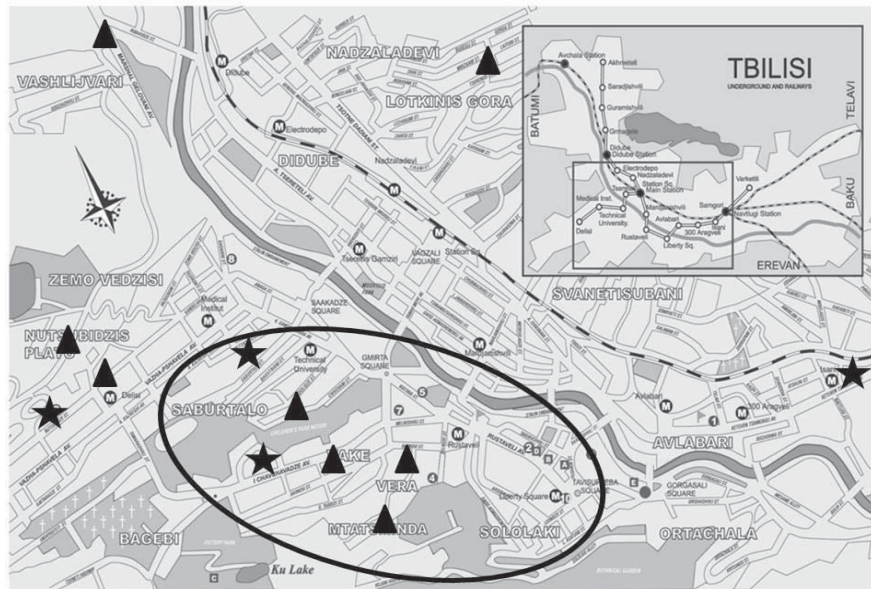


Figure 1.4: Map of Tbilisi and locations of the schools of the present study²

Consequently, the results of all four studies were analyzed against varying context-related, as well as teacher- and learner-related, external factors. Thus, in each analysis chapter, the general tendencies are explored first, which are then further broken down into the different school types (the four school types) as well as being considered in terms of teacher and learner characteristics. This approach proved to be useful, as a number of differences were revealed as a result of including the external factor as a differentiating variable, leading to a more accurate and informative output.

1.5 PREVIOUS RESEARCH AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PRESENT STUDY

Since the area which the present dissertation explores, Communicative Language Teaching in Georgia, and the related theory and practice officially starts in 1997 (Tkemaladze et al., 2001:18), not much previous research is available in this regard, whether focusing on theoretical or on practical aspects. In the process of a review of literature for this study, whereas a plethora of resources was available that discussed CLT in other countries, little was available discussing CLT in a Georgian context. The only research dealing with

² Map has been retrieved from: <http://www.besttbilisihotels.com/images/Tbilisi%20map%2002.jpg>. The central part of Tbilisi is marked with a circle on the map. Triangles stand for public and stars for private school types (accessed December 2013).

CLT and language teaching in Georgia was an empirical study undertaken by a group of five Georgian researchers in 2001 with the support of the Georgia branch of the British Council and the Ministry of Education of Georgia, entitled *Teaching and Learning English in Georgia 2001: A Baseline Study* (Tkemeladze et al., 2001). This study was of the utmost importance, as it was the first of its kind, exploring the state of affairs in foreign language teaching and learning in the post-Soviet period, coming four years after the first Communicative Curriculum for Foreign Languages was introduced in Georgia in 1997.

Nevertheless, with regard to the above mentioned study, it can be argued that the history of the reform at that time, stretching merely from 1997 to 2001, had been too short for CLT measures to have had a real impact on the situation of language teaching and learning in Georgia. Also, many more efforts aimed at transforming the post-Soviet language teaching model in Georgia into a more modern, communication-oriented experience were undertaken in the first decade of the 2000s, and this effort still continues today. No other investigation of developments in the English Language Teaching (ELT) field in Georgia has been conducted since then, and many policy decisions and novelties with regard to foreign language teaching in Georgia in the years since the publication of Tkemeladze et al. have been either copied wholesale from other Western contexts or were made on intuitive grounds. Thus, in acknowledgement of the urgency of further research being undertaken in order to investigate how things have further developed since the second, stronger wave of language teaching reform that took place in Georgia in 2009, the present study was conducted. It is hoped that the findings of this investigation of Communicative Language Teaching in Georgia will provide a certain degree of continuity with the previous research and that these findings may serve as a basis for future research to be conducted in the area of language teaching and learning in Georgia.

Furthermore, the methodological approach adopted in the present study, looking as it does into theoretical as well as practical aspects of language teaching in Tbilisi, allows me to derive information with regard to the situation in terms of Georgian learners' communicative proficiency in English, but also to gain insight into the factors that have been conducive to the final results obtained. Such an approach facilitates the provision of better-informed recommendations with regard to what needs to be changed and what further efforts need to be undertaken to contribute to the goal of better achieving in actual teaching practice the theoretical aims presented in the language policy documents. It is hoped that these recommendations will eventually be reflected in an improvement of the overall status of Communicative Language Teaching in Georgia as well as in improved communicative proficiency by Georgian learners.

Also, since the research tools *per se* did not specifically focus on English language teaching, but rather bear a general character, they could be applicable to similar future studies conducted with regard to the situation for other foreign languages as well as in the contexts of other countries, particularly those with a post-Soviet or at least post-communist background.

1.6 DISSERTATION OVERVIEW

The present dissertation consists of two parts: the introductory chapters (Chapters 2-6) provide theoretical and contextual background to the second, analysis-based part of the dissertation (Chapters 7-10). Below follows an outline of how the remainder of this dissertation is organized.

Chapter 2 is about the general history of language teaching – about various language instruction methods, their underlying theories, procedures and goals. In this chapter, CLT is presented as one of the approaches to language teaching that have arisen historically. Chapter 3 focuses on CLT only, describing in detail its history and theoretical basis. The information presented in this chapter was essential for developing suitable research tools, which, as they were aimed at investigating the application as well as the effects of CLT, had to be based on clearly-identified CLT principles. Hence the research instruments used in this study – interviews, questionnaires and observation forms – closely follow the sections presented in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 is about modernizing CLT and the role that information technology can play in this regard. Chapter 5 places foreign language teaching into a Georgian context and deals with developments in the field since Soviet times up to the present day. Developments in the area of technology-enhanced teaching in Georgia are also touched upon in this chapter. In Chapter 6, the National Curriculum for Foreign Languages, adopted in 2009 and subsequently revised in 2011, is discussed in detail. This is important in order to have a point of reference and framework against which requirements for language teachers as well as learners in Georgia can be measured, and the levels of achievement defined.

Chapter 7 is the first of the data analysis chapters of the present dissertation. It focuses on language teachers as the main implementers of language methodology change in Georgia, whose role is believed to be key to the success of the process of reform implementation. This chapter explores teachers' familiarity with the communicative curriculum requirements, their understanding of theoretical underpinnings of CLT as well as their attitudes towards this method. Chapter 8 delves into the attitudes of learners, who are the other agents of the study process, and whose evaluations are believed to matter very much as far as the language teaching method that they are exposed to is concerned. Whereas the analysis in Chapters 7 and 8 deals with theoretical aspects of communicative language teaching, Chapters 9 and 10 explore the more practical side of the situation, which is most important to determine the

efficiency and degree of success of CLT adopted as an official language teaching method in secondary schools in Georgia. Chapter 9 investigates the actual classroom reality at twelve secondary schools in Tbilisi. Thus, Study 3 (Chapter 9) sheds light on what works and what does not work in actual practice at secondary schools in Georgia. Being a follow-up to teacher and learner interviews and questionnaire surveys, it also allows for the possibility of comparison between what teachers and learners say with what they actually do in the classroom and reveals the possible discrepancy between the two. Finally, Chapter 10, the last of the four analysis chapters measures the end-product of all the efforts made at the theoretical as well as practical level: it reports the results of Georgian learners' communicative proficiency, which is measured against the requirements and standards presented in the National Curriculum for Foreign Languages of Georgia.

Finally, Chapter 11 summarizes the results and draws conclusions on the basis of the findings obtained. It also places the present investigation in a theoretical framework, and provides practical recommendations with regard to what needs to be changed and what further efforts need to be undertaken in order to make the success of Communicative Language Teaching more evident at all secondary schools in Tbilisi.