



Beyond the Textbook: Can Dogme ELT Improve Communicative English Language Teaching in Libya?

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Abstract

This critical review research paper discusses the potential of using Dogme ELT to improve communicative English language teaching in Libya, where the classrooms still mostly textbook based and teacher centered. Adopting a narrative review approach, the paper connects related literature selected on the basis of relevance to the main principles and teaching practices of Dogme ELT and their applicability to the Libyan EFL context. Based on the Communicative Language Teaching and constructivist theory, the review discusses how Dogme ELT emphasizes conversation, learner interaction, and emergent language rather than reliance on in advance planned materials. The reviewed literature indicates that this approach has the potential to enhance learners' speaking skills, confidence, classroom engagement, and communicative competence. In the same time, the paper identifies several challenges to implementation in Libya, including large classes, examination oriented assessment practices, and limited teacher preparation. The paper came to a conclusion that Dogme ELT should not be viewed as a replacement for textbooks but rather as a complementary pedagogical approach that can support more interactive, learner centered, and meaningful English language learning in Libyan classrooms.

Key Words: Dogme ELT, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Libyan EFL Context, English Language Teaching (ELT)

1. Introduction

English is a global language, and speaking is the most significant skill to convey the message and communicate appropriately in the different fields of life. Educators have always endeavored to search for the most appropriate method to implement in the classroom for effective learning and teaching. However, classrooms work either with teacher-centered or student-centered ways. The use of traditional methods has received criticism because of not making an environment in the classroom to develop critical thinking and problem solving skills. Therefore, there has been a move from teacher-centeredness to student-centeredness in classroom instruction.

Teacher centeredness refers to communication of knowledge to students in learning environment in which the teacher has the main responsibility (Mascolo, 2009). The ability to communicate in EFL contributes to the success of the learner in educational purposes and

systems and success in every phase of life consequently. Therefore, it is essential that language teachers pay a good attention to teaching speaking. Rather than encouraging students to full memorization, providing a rich environment where meaningful communication takes place is desired.

Later the communicative Language Teaching Approach (CLT) focused on the practice of target language through interaction with teachers and learners. It focuses on fluency, while accuracy is under-valued, and it gives little attention to grammar and context. Nevertheless, English language students have used most of the renowned methods for conversation but their speaking skill is still not up to the needed level, and they still lack vocabulary and grammar (Yanti & Nurhidayah, 2022). The speaking skill has not been focused much if it is compared to reading and writing, which are the main foci; very slight or no systematic consideration has been paid to speaking or listening (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

This research paper explores the incipient use of Dogme ELT within the Libyan EFL context. where English language teaching remains largely textbook-driven and teacher-centered. In this regard, some key questions guide the discussion: What is Dogme ELT, and how is it conceptualized within current language teaching theory? Furthermore, how does Dogme ELT differ from traditional textbook-based instruction that dominates almost all Libyan classrooms? These questions are essential for understanding the theoretical and pedagogical foundations of the approach and its departure from conventional practices.

In addition, the study investigates the practical relevance of this approach to the Libyan context by asking:

- a). What does existing literature suggest about the potencial of Dogme LT for Libyan EFL classrooms?
- b). can it help develop learners' speaking fluency, interactional competence, and classroom engagement in environments that are often constrained by exam oriented curricula and limited communicative practice? Addressing these two questions will help evaluate whether Dogme ELT can serve as a viable alternative or complementary approach to enhance English language teaching in Libya.

2. Theoretical Background

This section presents the theoretical foundations that underpin the study. It reviews the key concepts and learning theories related to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Constructivist Theory of Learning, and the emergence of Dogme ELT, providing the conceptual framework for examining the potential of Dogme ELT in enhancing communicative English language teaching in the Libyan EFL context.

2.1 Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was considered as a major innovation in language teaching in England in the 1970's. This is because CLT refers to a language teaching methodology which emphasizes developing learners' communicative competence in the second language. Since the CLT focuses on communication in the classroom and is against traditional language teaching methods, the emergence of CLT was considered a revolution in

language teaching methodology. The main goal of CLT is to develop communicative competence which focuses on both learners' linguistic knowledge and their communicative skills (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). CLT is an approach of language teaching. Nunan (1988) points out that the main characteristics of CLT are: 1) it focuses on developing the four skills; 2) learning through interaction in the target language, and 3) providing opportunities for learners to practice the language.

Cook (2001), suggests that in communicative classrooms the teacher is not a dominant, controller or a guide of the students most of the time. but, the teacher takes a step back and delegate responsibility for the activities to the students, making them to create their own dialogues in pairs and groups language learning by practice.

2.2 Constructivist Theory of Learning

Constructivism is a theory of learning and meaning making that lets people create their own new understanding based on the connection between their prior knowledge and believe and the concepts and knowledge with which they interact (Resnick& Glaser, 2016).

Two important concepts support the idea of constructed knowledge. The first is that students use the previous knowledge to build new understandings. Many scholars agree that learners acquire good knowledge before beginning formal education. With this previous knowledge and previous experience, learners modify their existing knowledge through new learning experiences (Phillips, 1995). The second concept is that learning is an active rather than a passive process. Where, the learner evaluates his/her knowledge in light of what he/she encounters in the new learning environment. In doing so, learners remain "engaged throughout the process; they apply current understandings, note relevant elements in new learning experiences, judge the consistency of prior and emerging knowledge, and based on that judgement, they modify their knowledge" (Phillips, 1995, p. 10).

In constructivist classrooms, social interaction is crucial to learning because higher mental functions such as reasoning, comprehension, and critical thinking emerge from social interactions and are then internalised by individuals (Magdalena, 2016). Traditional models and structures for teaching and learning do not produce the desired outcome in all the times; therefore, constructivist-teaching strategies were developed as an alternative (Dangel et al., 2004). One important aim of education is to teach students to become autonomous, independent and self-regulated learners capable of learning to learn.

2.3 Emergence of Dogme ELT

Dogme Language Teaching (Dogme ELT) is a new creative approach (Richards & Rodgers, 2014), methodology, or a movement (Meddings, 2004) for teaching and learning the target language, that was originally suggested by Thornbury (2000, 2005, 2009, 2013) in a number of papers and studies. Thornbury (2000) pointed out that Dogme ELT is a communicative approach for L2 that depends on various types of face to face interaction between the teacher and the learners and the learners themselves during the classroom practices. It does not follow any predetermined and conventional instructional course books, lesson plans, syllabi, or even technological advancements. Thornbury (2009) made the principles of Dogme ELT as interactivity, learner engagement and empowerment, authentic interaction, scaffolded

conversation, and least use of light materials if at all. Dogme ELT, in essence, has tried to virtually centralize the language instruction around the needs, and interests of language learners themselves through chains of authentic interaction in a nonthreatening classroom that does not adhere to preset materials that can be outdated or less inspiring and encouraging for the learners. Meddings and Thornbury (2002), argued that detaching L2 classrooms from boring, demotivating, and old fashioned coursebooks can enhance learners' enthusiasm and augment their eagerness to participate in conversations with classmates and their own teacher.

3. Concept of Dogme ELT

Dogme ELT is a communicative language teaching approach that emphasizes interaction, learner-generated content, and spontaneous use of language over pre-planned materials. It focuses on creating meaningful dialogue in the classroom, where learning emerges naturally through communication rather than textbook-driven instruction.

3.1 Definition

Dogme ELT is considered to be both a methodology and teaching movement whose proponents challenge a perceived a complete reliance on materials, coursebooks and the grammatical syllabus. The Dogme approach focuses on conversational communication in the classroom. Dogme Language Teaching (Dogme ELT) is an innovative learner-centered methodology and a movement for teaching the target language that primarily focuses on face-to-face interaction between teacher and learners and among the learners themselves (Thornbury, 2009) without using any preplanned and established instructional materials, syllabuses, or preset activities.

As an emerging teaching approach, Dogme is proposed to protest against the complete reliance on course books and technologies in language teaching and is compatible with a conglomerate of contemporary teaching approaches. According to Dogme, language teaching should not rely fully on teaching materials rather should focus on communicative activities that could satisfy students' actual needs and interests.

3.2 Core Principles

Dogme was developed based on the compatible idea (Nguyen & Hung, 2020), absorbing the core of several contemporary teaching approaches and methods such as communicative language teaching (CLT), total physical response (TPR), Suggestopedia (SP) etc. Thornbury and Meddings (2009) proposed three basic principles of Dogme: the materials-light principle, the conversation-driven principle, and the principle of focus on emergent language.

3.2.1 The Conversation-driven Principle

Dogme is greatly influenced by the CLT. Based on similar views of language learning, they both attach importance to the cultivation of communicative competence. CLT holds that the main role of language is to interact and communicate (McMeniman, 1992), and only activities containing real language communication can promote learning. Similarly, Dogme believes that language develops through social communication and real interaction, which is mediated through dialogue. Dialogue is not a product of learning but it is a necessary condition for learning and is the center of language learning (Nguyen & Hung, 2020). Dogme and CLT are

slightly different in the design of the dialogue content. CLT believes that activities involving an “information gap” should be designed in a dialogue to get new information from the other person. Dogme emphasizes the authenticity of dialogue, believing that the content of dialogue should be determined by students according to their own needs rather than designed and controlled by teachers. Dialogue manipulated by students themselves could motivate them and promote the emergence of natural language (Meddings & Thornbury, 2009).

3.2.2 The Materials-light Principle

Both TBLT and Dogme emphasize the importance of learners’ needs and interests. TBLT believes that learning is a process of satisfying the internal needs of an individual, and these needs would work as learning motives and cannot be predetermined by teachers or teaching materials (Richards, 2001). In addition, Dogme supports the teaching view of TPR (i.e. the humanism teaching view) and believes that language classrooms preferred to be student-centered for the overall development of human beings (Richards, 2001). Dogme emphasizes the central position of learners in teaching activities, advocates the principle of light teaching materials, and believes that the complete reliance on teaching materials and the textbooks will restrict the creative development of teachers and students. Most studies evaluating English textbooks claim that all coursebooks have certain limitations and deficiencies, and no textbook can be applied to all situations, all teachers and all students (Charalambous, 2011). Abdelrahman (2014: 148) pointed out that most textbooks are based on the traditional view that “students are consumers of knowledge” and presented new information to learners directly by stimulating their memory system without allowing them to think and create independently. Similarly, studies showed that despite the advantages of coursebooks in language learning, complete reliance on these materials and technologies prevents students from interacting with their teachers (Hmouma, 2026; Stewart, 2008; Weiss, 2009; Coyle, Yanez & Verdu, 2010). According to Weiss (2009) out that the so-called intelligent classroom has lost a lot. For example, the creativity and interaction of students and teachers decline significantly. Moreover, active learning is strangled, and the classroom becomes silent, with an emphasis on memory. Influenced by several current teaching methods, Dogme advocates the materials light principle. As Thornbury (2000: 2) pointed out, language classes should return to the original state, just “a few chairs, a blackboard, a teacher and some students”. Dogme is not against material or against technology but refuses materials that do not conform to the Dogme principles and techniques that cannot be learner-centered and based on authentic communication (Thornbury, 2009).

3.2.3 The Principle of Focus on Emergent Language

An important theory that contributed to the birth of Dogme is Emergentism. It began in the 1970s as a movement against prescriptivism and argued that language learning arose from the interaction of social input and implicit language patterns. Emergentism suggests that if learners are placed in the right linguistic environment and encouraged to be actively engaged, the internal mechanisms of the language system will be activated, and language will occur in a natural way rather than learned (Nguyen & Hung, 2020). In addition, when learning a language, learners can adjust the language structure according to the conversational pattern to improve their language processing ability (McCauley & Christiansen, 2019; Hmouma, 2025).

According to Dogme, language emerges mainly in two cross-level ways, they are, communicative activity and language output. Specifically, communicative activities in the classroom could trigger interaction between students, and then language emerges naturally in the interaction. As Ellis (2014) suggested, similar to the way young children learn their mother language, second language learners acquire the target language mainly through incidental learning rather than intentional learning. Dogme puts more emphasis on the nature and emergence of dialogue, allowing learners to create the content and objectives of language materials (Meddings & Thornbury, 2009), and thus supports the principle of emergent language. Emergent language refers to the unplanned language which appears naturally in the interaction between teachers and students. Larsen-Freeman (2006) once showed the emergence of language as follows, simple learning mechanisms can have access to real language information, then operate in human perceptual and cognitive systems, and exist as part of the human social environment, so it is enough to promote the emergence of complex language representations.

3.3 Classroom Philosophy

It is inspired from the belief that traditional ELT methods view students as passive consumers of grammar McNuggets (Thornbury, 2010), Dogme ELT has its name from Dogme 95, a Danish film movement aiming to rescue cinema from an obsession with technique and a complete dependence on technology (Meddings & Thornbury, 2003a). In the same vein, Thornbury (2000) highlights that Dogme ELT was developed to draw attention to the overdependence on resources in the ELT classroom where the actual communication is buried under an avalanche of photocopies and materials. Meddings and Thornbury (2009, p. 21), the originators of the Dogme ELT movement, point out that Dogme ELT is "...a different way of being a teacher." They claim that it is a learner-centered way of teaching enabling conversational communication between the learners and the teacher without resorting to published materials and a pre-planned lessons. They argue that English teachers should use only the materials that are brought to the classroom by students. From their perspective, Dogme ELT is a critical pedagogy as it paves the way for teachers to be skeptical about materials, including course books. As for listening materials, for example, Thornbury (2002) proposes that there should not be any recorded listening materials; instead of that, the teacher and students themselves should be the source of listening activities. On the other hand, in terms of the assessment of students' progress, he believes that the criteria of any assessment procedures must be determined with the students. Moreover, Meddings and Thornbury (2003b) show the roles of a Dogme ELT teacher by stating that he/she should be a skilled linguist who knows how to use the emerging language for teaching purposes and a caring observer who is interested in the learners. According to Thornbury (2013), the goal of Dogme ELT is to enable students to become self-directed learners by creating for them the optimal conditions for discourse creation and by using the mental sources students bring with them to the class.

4. Traditional ELT Practices in Libya

The quality of ELT in the Libyan context has been subject to various challenges arising from the country's socio-political context. The political instability have had significant implications for the education sector, leading to disruptions in schooling, a shortage of resources, and

inadequate support for teachers. Moreover, the Libyan education system has been grappling with issues related to curriculum development, teacher training, and the integration of technology in the teaching and learning process. These factors have influenced the perspectives of teachers on ELT in the Libyan context and have shaped the challenges they face in the classroom.

Historically, English in Libya was taught through the Grammar-Translation Method, which emphasises memorization of grammar rules and translation tasks. This approach often produced learners who were grammatically proficient but communicatively limited (Maryslessor et al., 2014). These old-fashioned methods contributed to students' reluctance to communicate in English (Mofareh, 2019). The shift to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in modern Libyan textbooks marked a significant pedagogical transformation. CLT emphasizes meaningful interaction, authentic language use, and the integration of listening, speaking, reading and writing. It positions learners as active participants and encourages pair and group work, discussions, and communicative tasks (Thompson, 1996; Widdowson, 1990). Research supports the role of CLT in improving speaking proficiency (Mislawiyadi, 2023; Soliha & Dheasari, 2023), though some studies indicate that teachers often rely on limited strategies, such as repetition, drilling and modeling, which reduce opportunities for authentic interaction (Toro et al., 2019).

Despite the efforts devoted, many Libyan learners and teachers of English do not seem to went through any real changes in their perception of successful language education and in their classroom routines. CLT has not received pervasive support and the traditional approach is still prevailing in many classrooms (Orafi and Borg 2009). Based on their findings, these researchers revealed that although many Libyan instructors announce to be adherents of CLT, in reality, there has been opposition to CLT since its very beginning.

Interactionist perspectives on language acquisition focus on social interaction, meaning negotiation, and scaffolded support. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development emphasizes guided participation for enhancing learners' skills. Key concepts include comprehensible input and output, vital for communicative competence. However, creating interaction-rich classrooms is challenging in Libyan schools due to large class sizes and resource limitations.

5. Potential of Dogme ELT in Libya

Dogme ELT has strong potential in Libya as it promotes learner-centered, conversation-driven classrooms that can improve students' speaking fluency and engagement. By encouraging authentic interaction and reducing overreliance on textbooks, it can help develop more communicative and confident English learners.

5.1 Pedagogical Benefits

Thornbury and Meddings (2009) encouraged teachers to use the Dogme approach in the English classroom to try another way to become a language teacher, but due to the flexibility and urgency of Dogme, teachers are easy to be labeled as lazy (McCabe, 2005). Because of the emphasis on emergent language, teachers need to conduct classroom activities without prior planning, which does not mean that teachers do not need to prepare lessons but put higher requirements for teachers. Comprehensive language knowledge, accurate awareness of

students' needs, and the mastery of teaching skills and classroom activities are all essential for the successful use of Dogme. However, inexperienced non-native teachers may be limited by inadequate English proficiency to satisfy the immediate needs of students in class and thus cannot successfully use Dogme. Even if communication and interaction occur in the classroom, teachers still cannot guarantee the informative and educational significance of these conversations because they are not sure what type of dialogue is effective (Harmer, 2007). In addition, the stress on teachers is more worrying in larger class settings (McCabe, 2005; Hills & Nadu, 2015). Therefore, teachers using Dogme should be equipped with high creativity, rich practical training, and effective teaching experience. Meanwhile, some researchers (Nguyen & Hung, 2020) argued that it is wrongly believed that the Dogme approach may disadvantage non-native and inexperienced teachers because it is materials-light. Both native and non-native speakers supported that Dogme might ease the burden of lesson planning, which is a must for teachers (Coşkun, 2017). Moreover, Dogme not only allows non-native teachers to follow the textbooks but also provides opportunities for them to communicate and interact in English (Xerri, 2012). Coskun (2017) had interviewed three teachers employing Dogme and have found that one teacher had a positive attitude towards Dogme. The other two teachers said that the emergent need of middle school students for instant conversations in real language and the lack of English proficiency caused a pressure on them, so they preferred the traditional teaching method which is based on teaching materials.

5.2 Classroom Interaction Improvement

Dogme ELT has been identified as an effective approach for developing EFL learners' oral skills. A study by Abdalgane et al. (2023) revealed that classes implemented through Dogme ELT significantly enhanced students' speaking abilities, improved their fluency in using English, and promoted greater interaction between teachers, learners, and peers. Moreover, students became more confident in participating in conversations, asking questions, and providing responses. Similarly, Solimani et al. (2020) found that Dogme ELT contributed to the improvement of students' speaking skills by encouraging collaborative learning. Through this approach, learners became more active, creative, and proficient in oral communication, while also expanding their knowledge through supporting and scaffolding their peers' conversations. Mohamed (2019) investigated the impact of Dogme ELT lessons and reported that students' scores increased during a five-week study period, alongside improvements in their speaking skills and speaking self-efficacy. Therefore, Dogme ELT plays a significant role in enhancing learners' oral communication abilities. Furthermore, Solimani et al. (2019) demonstrated that conversation-based tasks within Dogme ELT enabled learners to construct dialogues and engage in small-group communication. The emphasis on emergent language was also considered a valuable element in facilitating authentic communication. Consequently, Dogme ELT can help learners become more confident and competent speakers.

5.3 Compatibility with Libyan Context

Although English language teaching in Libya has gradually adopted communicative principles, classroom practice in many schools remains largely textbook driven, teacher-centered, and examination-oriented. Lessons often focus on completing prescribed units, explaining grammar rules, and preparing students for written examinations, leaving less opportunities for

authentic communication. The Libyan English curriculum is consisted of many course books for different levels, titled, 'English for Libya', the main goal of these course books is to improve learners' competence in the language skills (Orafi & Borg 2009). However, many Libyan teachers use traditional methods the most is grammar-translation method and reading method, although the current English curriculum depends on the use of CLT and student-centered approach (Al-Bakbak, 2019). In such context, Dogme ELT provides a practical way to enrich classroom interaction by encouraging learners to communicate through meaningful conversations based on their own ideas, experiences, and immediate learning needs. This learner-centered way of teaching has the potential to enhance students' confidence in speaking English and promote the development of communicative competence, which remains a key objective of English language education in Libya.

Despite its potential, Dogme ELT is unlikely to replace the existing curriculum completely, nor is such a change necessary. Instead, its principles can be integrated gradually into current classroom practices without abandoning prescribed textbooks. Teachers can use textbooks as a foundation while incorporating Dogme-inspired activities that promote discussion, negotiation of meaning, and learner-generated language. This makes the approach particularly suitable for speaking lessons, classroom discussions, and communicative tasks where authentic interaction is the primary goal. By functioning as a supplement rather than an alternative to textbooks, Dogme ELT provides Libyan teachers with a flexible and realistic means of fostering greater learner participation while remaining compatible with the demands of the national curriculum and assessment system.

6. Challenges of Implementing Dogme ELT

Despite its pedagogical benefits, implementing Dogme ELT in the Libyan EFL context is likely to present several challenges. One of the main obstacles is teachers' reliance on textbooks, as many have been trained to follow prescribed materials and structured lesson plans. Shifting to a more conversation-driven and emergent approach may create uncertainty and resistance, particularly among teachers who have limited experience with learner-centered methodologies. Furthermore, Libya's examination-oriented curriculum places considerable emphasis on grammar, vocabulary, and written assessments, leaving teachers with little flexibility to devote classroom time to spontaneous communicative activities that are not directly assessed.

Other challenges include practical and cultural considerations. Large classes can make it difficult for teachers to guide meaningful interaction and provide individual feedback during discussion based lessons. The successful use of Dogme ELT also requires teachers to possess strong improvisational and facilitation skills, while many may not have received sufficient training in these areas. Another common misconception is that Dogme ELT completely rejects teaching materials; in reality, it advises for minimizing unnecessary dependence on materials rather than eliminating them altogether. Finally, in educational settings where teachers are traditionally viewed as a main source of knowledge and authority, adopting a more collaborative classroom environment may initially be unfamiliar to both teachers and students. Addressing these challenges through professional development, curriculum flexibility, and a gradual implementation strategy would increase the likelihood of successful adoption.

7. Practical Implications for Teachers

For teachers interested in adopting Dogme ELT, implementation does not require abandoning existing teaching practices or textbooks. Instead, they can begin by introducing simple conversation-based activities that encourage students to express their ideas, share their personal experiences, and interact with their classmates in English. Textbook topics can serve as effective conversation triggers, allowing teachers to expand beyond the printed material when still meeting curriculum requirements. Moreover, encouraging the content that is generated by students, such as questions, stories, and real-life experiences, helps create more authentic learning opportunities and increases learner engagement.

In order to ensure that discussions remain productive, teachers should provide appropriate scaffolding by offering language support, guiding questions, vocabulary prompts, and corrective feedback when necessary. Rather than viewing Dogme ELT as a replacement for the current syllabus, it can be incorporated through an eclectic approach that combines communicative, conversation-driven techniques with existing curricular objectives and materials. Such this balanced implementation make teachers to retain the structure of the syllabus while promoting greater learner interaction and communicative competence. However, successful adoption also depends on adequate professional development. Teacher training workshops are essential to help educators develop the confidence and skills needed to manage emergent language, facilitate spontaneous classroom interaction, and apply Dogme principles effectively in their own teaching contexts.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper explored the potential of Dogme ELT as a complementary approach improving communicative English language teaching in the Libyan EFL context. The discussion showed that while traditional textbook based and teacher centered practices still dominate Libyan classrooms, they often limit learners' opportunities to meaningful interaction and the development of speaking fluency. In contrast, Dogme ELT, with its focus on conversation-driven learning, learner-generated content, and emergent language, offers a more dynamic and interactive classroom environment that aligns closely with the principles of communicative language teaching and constructivist learning theory. However, the findings also suggest that Dogme ELT should not be viewed as a complete replacement for existing instructional practices, but it could work as a flexible pedagogical supplement that can be integrated into current curricula. Although challenges such as large class sizes, exam-oriented assessment, and limited teacher training may prevent full implementation, gradual adoption supported by professional development can make its application more realistic and effective. Ultimately, Dogme ELT holds considerable promise for improving learners' communicative competence in Libyan context.

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