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Interaction vs Instruction: A Review of Communicative and Structural Approaches in English Language Teaching



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Abstract

This paper examines the distinction between interaction-based and instruction-based paradigms in English Language Teaching (ELT) through a critical review of communicative and structural approaches. The structural approach conceptualizes language as a system of rules and patterns, emphasizing the mastery of grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structures through controlled practice, repetition, and teacher-centered instruction, where accuracy is prioritized over fluency. In contrast, the communicative approach views language as a tool for meaningful communication and social interaction, focusing on the development of communicative competence through learner-centered activities such as discussions, role plays, and problem-solving tasks that simulate real-life contexts. The review highlights fundamental differences between the two approaches in terms of pedagogical focus, classroom dynamics, the role of teachers and learners, and assessment strategies, showing that while structural methods promote linguistic accuracy and systematic knowledge, communicative methods enhance fluency, confidence, and functional language use. Despite their differences, recent pedagogical perspectives suggest that an integrative approach that combines explicit instruction with interactive practices provides a more balanced and effective framework for language acquisition, addressing both form and meaning in diverse learning contexts.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching, Structural Approach, Interaction, Instruction, ELT

Introduction

English Language Teaching (ELT) has experienced substantial pedagogical transformation, shifting from traditional instruction-based methods toward interaction-oriented approaches that emphasize communication and learner engagement. Historically, structural approaches dominated language classrooms, viewing language as a system of grammatical rules to be mastered through drills, repetition, and teacher-centered instruction. However, the emergence of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) redefined language as a tool for meaningful interaction, prioritizing real-life communication and learner participation. Recent studies highlight that CLT has become a dominant paradigm in modern language education due to its focus on practical communication skills and interactive learning environments (Salam & Luksfinanto, 2024; Qasserras, 2023). Furthermore, research trends indicate a growing global interest in communicative approaches, with scholars emphasizing their role in enhancing fluency and functional language use (Liu & Jin, 2024; Hui & Yunus, 2023).

At the same time, the role of instruction-based approaches remains significant, particularly in developing grammatical accuracy and foundational linguistic competence. Structural and input-based instruction provide learners with explicit knowledge of language systems, which is essential for academic writing and formal communication. Recent research shows that input-based instruction can effectively support language development, especially in improving speaking skills when combined with meaningful exposure (Zhang et al., 2025). However, studies also

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reveal limitations of purely structural approaches, as they often restrict opportunities for authentic interaction and may reduce learner motivation. Classroom-based research demonstrates that teacher-centered practices can limit student participation, resulting in minimal interaction and reduced communicative development (Siregar et al., 2023; Babayev, 2021).

In response to these contrasting perspectives, contemporary ELT research increasingly advocates for an integrated approach that combines interaction and instruction. Scholars argue that communicative competence extends beyond linguistic knowledge to include intercultural and pragmatic abilities, which are best developed through interactive learning environments (Zhou et al., 2024). At the same time, recent discussions in language pedagogy emphasize the need to balance fluency and accuracy by incorporating both communicative tasks and explicit instruction within the classroom (Teng et al., 2025). This shift reflects a growing recognition that neither interaction nor instruction alone is sufficient; rather, effective language teaching requires a principled combination of both approaches to address diverse learner needs and educational contexts.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the key differences between communicative (interaction-based) and structural (instruction-based) approaches in English Language Teaching.
2. To analyse the effectiveness of interaction and instruction in developing learners' communicative competence and linguistic accuracy.
3. To explore the potential for integrating communicative and structural approaches in modern ELT classrooms.

Research Questions

1. What are the major differences between communicative and structural approaches in English Language Teaching?
2. How do interaction-based and instruction-based methods influence learners' communicative competence and grammatical accuracy?
3. To what extent can communicative and structural approaches be integrated to enhance language learning outcomes?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it contributes to the ongoing debate in English Language Teaching regarding the relative importance of interaction and instruction in language learning. By critically examining both communicative and structural approaches, the research provides insights into how each method supports different aspects of language development, such as fluency and accuracy. The findings will be useful for teachers, curriculum designers, and policymakers in understanding how to balance these approaches to create more effective teaching strategies. Additionally, the study is particularly relevant in contexts like Pakistan, where traditional teaching methods still coexist with modern communicative practices, offering practical implications for improving classroom instruction and learner outcomes.

Literature Review

The field of English Language Teaching (ELT) has witnessed a sustained theoretical and pedagogical shift from instruction-centered approaches toward interaction-based

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models, reflecting broader developments in applied linguistics and second language acquisition research. Traditionally, structural or instruction-based approaches conceptualized language as a system of rules, emphasizing grammar, vocabulary, and sentence formation through controlled practice and teacher-led instruction. However, the emergence of communicative paradigms redefined language as a social tool for meaning-making, thereby placing interaction at the center of learning. This shift has generated extensive scholarly debate regarding the relative effectiveness of instruction and interaction in developing language proficiency, communicative competence, and learner engagement.

Recent studies strongly support the increasing dominance of communicative approaches in modern classrooms, highlighting their emphasis on interaction, authenticity, and learner-centered practices (Salam & Luksfinanto, 2024; Zano, 2025). Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) prioritizes the use of real-life tasks, collaborative activities, and contextualized communication, which are believed to foster deeper language acquisition and functional competence. According to Jatoy et al. (2024), learners exposed to communicative methods demonstrate significant improvements in speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills compared to those taught through traditional instruction-based methods. Similarly, Salmanova (2025) argues that CLT enhances fluency, learner motivation, and engagement by promoting meaningful communication rather than rote memorization. These findings reinforce the argument that interaction plays a crucial role in language learning by providing opportunities for negotiation of meaning and authentic language use.

In addition to improving linguistic skills, communicative approaches are also associated with the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC), which has become a central goal in contemporary ELT. Zhou et al. (2024) emphasize that language learning is inherently tied to cultural understanding, and interaction-based methods facilitate learners' ability to communicate effectively across cultural contexts. Supporting this view, Permatasari (2023) highlights the importance of integrating intercultural elements into communicative teaching practices to enhance learners' global competence. Furthermore, research by Munir and Yavuz (2024) demonstrates that pragmatic instruction within communicative frameworks can significantly improve learners' interpretative and productive skills, particularly in understanding implied meanings and contextual nuances. These studies collectively suggest that interaction-based approaches extend beyond linguistic competence to include sociocultural and pragmatic dimensions of language use.

Despite the growing prominence of communicative approaches, structural or instruction-based methods continue to hold relevance in ELT, particularly in contexts where accuracy and formal knowledge are prioritized. Structural approaches emphasize systematic grammar instruction, controlled practice, and error correction, which are essential for developing linguistic accuracy and foundational knowledge. Baigulina et al. (2024) argue that structured models of language teaching provide a necessary framework for building communicative competence, particularly in academic and professional contexts where precision is required. This perspective aligns with the view that explicit instruction plays a crucial role in helping learners internalize grammatical rules and linguistic structures.

Moreover, several studies highlight the limitations of purely communicative approaches, particularly their insufficient focus on grammatical accuracy and assessment challenges. Salmanova (2025) notes that while CLT promotes fluency, it

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

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may neglect systematic grammar instruction, leading to gaps in learners' linguistic competence. Similarly, Zano (2025) points out that communicative approaches may not always align with institutional requirements or standardized testing systems, which often emphasize accuracy and formal knowledge. These limitations suggest that interaction alone may not be sufficient for comprehensive language development, particularly in contexts where learners require explicit instruction to achieve academic success.

The debate between interaction and instruction has also been explored through the lens of classroom practices and contextual realities. Eslit (2025) highlights that ELT in multilingual and diverse settings often involves a flexible combination of teaching methods rather than strict adherence to a single approach. Teachers frequently adapt their instructional strategies based on learners' needs, institutional constraints, and cultural contexts, resulting in a hybrid or eclectic approach to language teaching. Similarly, Educational Research Review (2021) emphasizes the role of instructional materials and texts in mediating interaction and facilitating communicative learning, suggesting that both input and interaction are essential components of effective pedagogy.

Contemporary research increasingly advocates for an integrative approach that combines the strengths of both communicative and structural paradigms. Jatoi et al. (2024) suggest that blending traditional instruction with communicative activities can enhance both accuracy and fluency, providing a more balanced learning experience. Likewise, Salam and Luksfinanto (2024) argue that effective ELT requires a combination of explicit grammar instruction and meaningful interaction to address diverse learner needs. This integrative perspective is further supported by Munir and Yavuz (2024), who demonstrate that pragmatic competence can be developed through a combination of instruction and interaction.

Another important dimension of the interaction versus instruction debate is learner engagement and motivation. Communicative approaches are widely recognized for their ability to create dynamic and interactive learning environments that encourage active participation. Salmanova (2025) notes that student-centered activities and collaborative tasks increase learner motivation and reduce anxiety, making language learning more effective. In contrast, traditional instruction-based methods are often criticized for being monotonous and teacher-centered, which may limit learner engagement. However, structured instruction can provide a sense of clarity and direction, particularly for beginners who require explicit guidance.

Furthermore, the role of interaction in language acquisition is supported by theories of social constructivism, which emphasize the importance of social interaction in cognitive development. Interaction allows learners to negotiate meaning, receive feedback, and co-construct knowledge, all of which contribute to language acquisition. At the same time, instruction provides the necessary scaffolding to support learning, particularly in complex linguistic areas such as grammar and syntax. This complementary relationship between interaction and instruction underscores the need for a balanced approach to ELT.

In many educational contexts, particularly in developing countries such as Pakistan, the implementation of communicative approaches faces practical challenges, including large class sizes, limited resources, and exam-oriented curricula. These constraints often necessitate a continued reliance on instruction-based methods, even as educators recognize the benefits of interaction. Consequently, teachers often adopt

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

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a pragmatic approach, integrating communicative activities within a structured framework to achieve desired learning outcomes.

Overall, the literature reveals that the interaction versus instruction debate is not a dichotomy but a continuum, with both approaches offering valuable contributions to language teaching and learning. While communicative approaches emphasize fluency, interaction, and real-life communication, structural approaches provide the necessary foundation for accuracy and systematic knowledge. Recent research consistently highlights the importance of integrating these approaches to create a more holistic and effective ELT framework. By combining interaction with instruction, educators can address the diverse needs of learners, enhance communicative competence, and ensure a balanced development of language skills.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on a systematic literature review to explore the contrast between interaction-based (communicative) and instruction-based (structural) approaches in English Language Teaching (ELT). A qualitative approach is appropriate as it enables an in-depth examination of theoretical frameworks, pedagogical practices, and empirical findings related to language teaching. The study focuses on interpreting and synthesizing existing research rather than collecting primary data, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The data for this study were collected from secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and credible online publications published between 2015 and 2025. Academic databases such as Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, and ResearchGate are used to locate relevant studies. Keywords such as “Communicative Language Teaching,” “Structural Approach,” “interaction in ELT,” and “instruction in language teaching” guide the search process. Inclusion criteria consist of studies directly related to communicative and structural approaches or interaction versus instruction in ELT, while irrelevant or non-scholarly sources are excluded (Snyder, 2019).

Reliability and Validity

To ensure the reliability and validity of the study, only credible and peer-reviewed sources are included. The findings are cross-checked across multiple studies to identify consistent trends and avoid bias. Transparency is maintained throughout the selection and analysis process, ensuring that the research is systematic and trustworthy.

Ethical Consideration

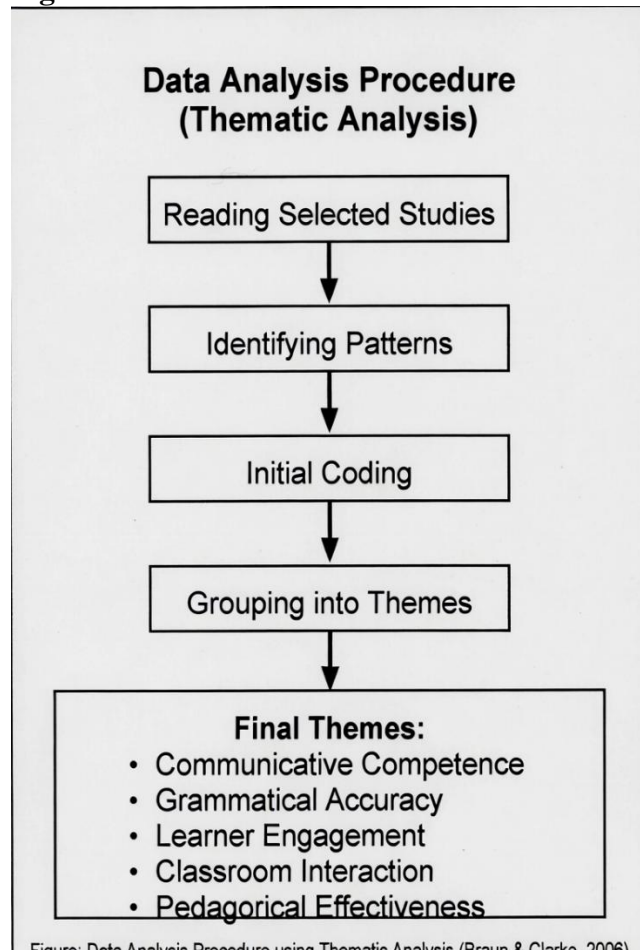
Ethical standards are strictly followed in this study. All sources are properly acknowledged using the APA referencing style to avoid plagiarism and ensure academic integrity. The research relies solely on publicly available data and does not involve human participants, thereby minimizing ethical risks (Creswell, 2014).

Data Analysis Procedure

The study employs thematic analysis to examine the collected data. This process involves carefully reading the selected studies, identifying recurring patterns, and

organizing them into key themes such as communicative competence, grammatical accuracy, learner engagement, classroom interaction, and pedagogical effectiveness. Thematic analysis enables a systematic comparison of the two approaches and facilitates a deeper understanding of their strengths and limitations (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Figure 1



Data Analysis

Introduction

This section presents the analysis of data collected through a systematic review of literature on interaction-based (communicative) and instruction-based (structural) approaches in English Language Teaching (ELT). The purpose of this analysis is to compare both approaches in terms of pedagogical effectiveness, learner outcomes, classroom practices, and overall contribution to language learning. The analysis is based on thematic categorization of findings from previous studies and highlights patterns, similarities, and differences between the two approaches. The findings are organized into key themes, including communicative competence, grammatical accuracy, learner engagement, classroom interaction, and pedagogical integration. These themes are supported by evidence from recent research studies, ensuring a balanced and critical evaluation.

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

Overview of Selected Studies

The reviewed studies provide a comprehensive understanding of how communicative and structural approaches function in different educational contexts. Most recent research emphasizes communicative competence and learner-centered interaction, while also acknowledging the continued importance of structured instruction for accuracy.

Table 4.1
Overview of Selected Studies on ELT Approaches

Author(s)	Year	Focus	Method	Key Findings
Qasserras	2023	CLT effectiveness	Systematic Review	Improves communication but lacks grammar focus
Francis	2020	CLT vs traditional	Experimental	CLT improves communicative ability
Rousse-Malpat et al.	2022	CLT models	Comparative	Weak CLT integrates structure
Matamoros et al.	2017	Teaching approaches	Comparative	Structural approach ensures accuracy
Graves & Garton	2017	Curriculum approaches	Analytical	CLT is widely adopted but context-dependent

Research shows that communicative approaches enhance learners' ability to use language in real-life situations, while structural approaches provide a strong foundation in grammar and syntax. For instance, CLT promotes meaningful communication and learner engagement, whereas structural approaches focus on systematic language learning.

Theme 1: Communicative Competence vs Linguistic Accuracy

One of the most prominent distinctions between interaction and instruction lies in their focus on communicative competence and linguistic accuracy.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emphasizes the development of communicative competence, which includes the ability to use language appropriately in real-life contexts. Studies show that learners engaged in communicative activities develop better fluency, confidence, and functional language skills. Interaction allows learners to negotiate meaning, interpret messages, and engage in authentic communication.

In contrast, structural approaches prioritize linguistic accuracy by focusing on grammar rules, sentence structures, and controlled practice. This approach ensures that learners develop a solid understanding of language systems, which is essential for academic writing and formal communication. However, it may limit learners' ability to use language spontaneously.

Table 4.2
Comparison of Communicative Competence and Linguistic Accuracy

Feature	Communicative Approach	Structural Approach
Focus	Fluency and meaning	Accuracy and form
Learning Goal	Communicative competence	Grammatical competence

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

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Activities	Role plays, discussions	Drills, exercises
Outcome	Functional language use	Correct language use

The findings indicate that while communicative approaches enhance fluency, structural approaches remain essential for accuracy. A balanced combination of both is necessary for effective language learning.

Theme 2: Learner Engagement and Motivation

Learner engagement is significantly influenced by the teaching approach used in the classroom. Communicative approaches are widely recognized for promoting active participation and learner-centered environments. Students are encouraged to interact, collaborate, and express their ideas, which increases motivation and confidence.

Research indicates that communicative tasks such as group discussions and role plays create a dynamic learning environment where students actively participate in the learning process. This leads to improved engagement and better retention of language skills.

On the other hand, structural approaches are often teacher-centered, with a focus on repetition and memorization. While this method provides clarity and structure, it may reduce learner motivation due to limited interaction.

Table 4.3

Learner Engagement in Communicative vs Structural Approaches

Aspect	Communicative Approach	Structural Approach
Student Role	Active participant	Passive learner
Motivation Level	High	Moderate to low
Interaction	High	Limited
Learning Environment	Dynamic	Controlled

The analysis shows that interaction plays a crucial role in enhancing learner motivation, making communicative approaches more effective in engaging students.

Theme 3: Classroom Interaction and Teaching Practices

Classroom interaction is a defining feature of communicative approaches. Interaction-based learning encourages students to use language in meaningful contexts, facilitating real-life communication skills.

Studies highlight that communicative teaching involves pair work, group activities, and task-based learning, which promote interaction among learners. These activities help students practice language in authentic situations and develop communication skills.

In contrast, structural approaches rely on teacher-centered instruction, where the teacher plays a dominant role in delivering content. Students are expected to follow instructions, complete exercises, and memorize rules.

Table 4.4

Classroom Practices in ELT Approaches

Element	Communicative Approach	Structural Approach
Teaching Style	Student-centered	Teacher-centered
Interaction Type	Peer interaction	Teacher-student interaction

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

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Online ISSN: 3006-5895

Activities	Task-based learning	Grammar drills
Teacher Role	Facilitator	Instructor

The findings indicate that communicative approaches create more interactive classrooms, while structural approaches maintain control and order but limit interaction.

Theme 4: Effectiveness in Language Skill Development

Both approaches contribute to language skill development, but in different ways. Communicative approaches are particularly effective in developing speaking and listening skills, as they involve real-life communication tasks. Research shows that students exposed to communicative methods perform better in communicative tasks and demonstrate higher levels of fluency. However, these students may struggle with grammatical accuracy due to limited focus on form. Structural approaches, on the other hand, are effective in developing reading and writing skills, as they emphasize grammar and sentence structure. Students trained through structural methods tend to produce more accurate language but may lack fluency.

Table 4.5
Impact on Language Skills

Skill	Communicative Approach	Structural Approach
Speaking	Highly effective	Limited
Listening	Highly effective	Moderate
Reading	Moderate	Strong
Writing	Moderate	Strong
Grammar	Limited focus	Strong focus

The analysis suggests that both approaches complement each other and should be integrated to achieve balanced language development.

Theme 5: Integration of Interaction and Instruction

Recent studies emphasize the importance of integrating communicative and structural approaches. Rather than viewing them as opposing methods, researchers advocate for a hybrid approach that combines interaction with instruction. For example, the “weak” version of communicative teaching incorporates structural elements, ensuring that learners receive both input and opportunities for communication. This integration allows teachers to address both fluency and accuracy.

Furthermore, research highlights that effective language teaching requires flexibility and adaptation to learners’ needs and contexts. Teachers often adopt an eclectic approach, combining different methods to achieve desired outcomes.

Findings

The analysis reveals that interaction-based approaches, particularly communicative language teaching, play a significant role in enhancing learners’ communicative competence. Students exposed to interactive classroom practices such as discussions, role plays, and collaborative tasks demonstrate improved fluency, confidence, and ability to use language in real-life contexts. These approaches also contribute to higher levels of learner engagement and motivation, as they create a student-centered

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environment where learners actively participate in the learning process. The findings consistently show that interaction facilitates meaningful communication and supports the development of speaking and listening skills more effectively than traditional methods (Jatoi et al., 2024; Salam & Luksfinanto, 2024).

At the same time, instruction-based or structural approaches remain important for developing grammatical accuracy and foundational linguistic knowledge. The analysis indicates that learners who receive explicit instruction in grammar and language structures perform better in tasks requiring accuracy, particularly in writing and formal communication. However, these approaches tend to be teacher-centered and offer limited opportunities for classroom interaction, which may restrict learners' ability to use language spontaneously. This suggests that while instruction is essential for building language form, it may not be sufficient for developing communicative competence on its own (Burekovic et al., 2023).

Overall, the findings highlight that both interaction and instruction contribute to language learning in complementary ways. Communicative approaches are more effective for developing fluency and engagement, whereas structural approaches support accuracy and systematic learning. The most significant finding is that an integrated approach, combining interaction with instruction, produces more balanced and effective learning outcomes. Additionally, the choice of approach is often influenced by contextual factors such as educational systems and classroom conditions, leading many teachers to adopt a blended methodology in practice (Zhou et al., 2024).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that the debate between interaction and instruction in English Language Teaching is not a matter of choosing one approach over the other, but rather understanding their complementary roles in language learning. Interaction-based approaches are highly effective in promoting communicative competence, learner engagement, and real-life language use. In contrast, instruction-based approaches provide essential support for grammatical accuracy and structured language development. The findings suggest that relying solely on either approach may limit learners' overall proficiency; therefore, an integrated approach that combines meaningful interaction with explicit instruction is the most effective strategy. Such a balanced methodology not only addresses the diverse needs of learners but also aligns with contemporary pedagogical practices, particularly in contexts where both communicative goals and academic requirements must be met.

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Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

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