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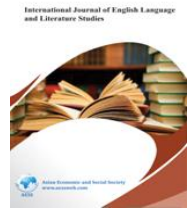

COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH TO LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING AND EFL CONTEXT

Seyedhamed Sadoughvanini

Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

Sarimah Shamsudin

Language Academy, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Teaching a language is a complicated process which requires considering and applying a method while performing it and is conducted through a method in a language class. A teaching methodology refers to the way or method in which a teacher teaches the learners. The methodology used by the teacher will determine the kinds of work and activities the students will do in class and how well or how poorly the student or learner will be able to learn and use the language. Thus it is imperative that the method or approach used in the classroom meet the needs of the learners. This paper aims to discuss the communicative language teaching method and its application in the EFL context.

Key Words: Communicative Language Teaching, Teaching Method, EFL.

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INTRODUCTION

In the history of language teaching, certain methods such as audio lingual, grammar-translation, suggestopedia and total physical response have appeared and risen in different historical periods. All these methods have been widely and extensively discussed and evaluated by researchers and scholars. Each of them has their own focus, weak points as well as strong points and they are based on a theory. In other words, methods are developed based on theories such as behaviorism, structuralism, constructivism and universal grammar. Communicative language teaching (CLT) is no exception with this regard. This method has been discussed widely by researchers such as Larson-Freeman (1986) and Ellis (1994).

This article evaluates CLT briefly by explaining the development of CLT and discussing the weak points and strong points of this method in comparison with other teaching methods and approaches such as the grammar-translation method, direct method and audio lingual method as well as its application in an EFL context.

COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

Numerous and different kinds of methodologies or methods and ways of teaching English have risen over the decades. One of the methods of teaching discussed and considered in the methodology of language teaching is communicative language teaching (CLT). This method was developed in the 1970s (Richards, 2006) as a result of changes in British language teaching. The development of this method or approach was a reaction to previous methods that had concentrated on form and structure rather than meaning (Richards, 2006). In other words, grammatical competence was the focus of methods until the 1970s whereby it is acknowledged that language and language learning goes beyond just focusing on form and structure. It could be said that CLT developed due to dissatisfaction of some linguists with the grammar-translation and audio lingual methods.

The main goal and philosophy behind the inception of CLT was the "teaching of communicative competence" (Richards, 2006). CLT was developed to provide language learners with the ability to use the target language in real life conditions. In other words, it would enable the learners to satisfy the needs they have to handle a communicative situation effectively. Situations can be exemplified as when a learner needs to buy a ticket, do shopping, invite a friend to a party or make an appointment with the doctor. The activities in a classroom that is run through CLT are based on the needs of learners in real life communicative situation whether in written or spoken communication. Even the grammar taught in a CLT class is based on the needs of learners in real life communication and "according to the functions being taught" (Richards, 2006). For example, "I would like" is taught in a CLT class when a learner needs to make an order in a restaurant. It is inferred that class materials and activities in CLT are based on the needs of students in real life situations. Language is a well-developed means of communication. Thus, language learning is supposed to lead to using language in communication. Methods applied in many classes for language teaching and learning seem unable to satisfy the needs of the learners who intend to learn a language and use it effectively in a natural communication in the real world**.** Therefore, it can be inferred that CLT tries to lead the learners to this goal of language learning.

It is obvious that what is assumed to be fulfilled in CLT is enabling the learners to speak in the second language they are learning and to conduct effective communication in various communicative situations. According to (Larsen, 2003), everything in a CLT class possesses a communicative intent. From the various examples of communicative situations such as buying a

ticket and going shopping, it can be inferred that CLT focuses on the functions of language. In other words, a CLT class entails teaching and learning social functions and does not focus on linguistic structures and forms. Thus, one of the theories that lay the foundation of CLT is multi functionality of language proposed by Halliday (1975). Halliday (1975) as summarised in Richards and Theodore (2001) distinguishes seven functions of language that are as follows:

1. *"the instrumental function: using language to get things*
2. *the regulatory function: using language to control the behaviour of others*
3. *the interactional function: using language to create interaction with others*
4. *the personal function: using language to express personal feelings and meanings*
5. *the heuristic function: using language to learn and to discover*
6. *the imaginative function: using language to create a world of the imagination*
7. *the representational function: using language to communicate information"*

With reference to the explanations presented, to illustrate the above mentioned functions of language, it is understood the seven functions happen in a real life communicative situation. For example, when someone wants to order orange juice in a restaurant, he/she can say *I would like orange juice*. In this case, the person is using the instrumental function of language and in this function, language is used to get things. In a language class based on CLT, a learner learns how to get things and the learner is actually learning how to use the instrumental function of language.

Another theory that supports CLT is what Hymes (1971) mentions as "communicative competence". He proposes that social knowledge and social aspects of language should be added besides linguistic knowledge. He believed that teaching and learning language is supposed to enable the learners to use the language in communicative situations. Methods prior to CLT such as the audio lingual method were rooted in structuralism and form (Brown, 2001). Thus, CLT was a move or shift from structuralism and behaviourism to communicative competence. To illustrate the case, CLT shifted from focus on form which was emphasized in audio lingual method to meaning. According to Hewing (2000), meaning is of high consideration in CLT. To be more illustrative, the communicative approach is to teach and learn language based on the meaning and context of the statement used during a communication (Baepler, 2003). Methods before CLT such as the grammar-translation and audio lingual method are rooted in structuralism and behaviourism (Brown, 2001) in which "language learning was viewed as a process of mechanical habit formation" (Richards, 2006) that led to the central role of imitation

and repetition. It is assumed that meaning was ignored in the previous methods since those methods believed in mechanical habits and centrality of grammatical competence.

It was discussed that a CLT class aims to teach communicative competence. However, a wide variety of syllabus designs is noticeable in different CLT classes. Based on this and according to Howatt (1984), two versions of CLT seem to exist, strong and weak. In the former, the teacher role is less dominant as compared to the latter (Mekhafi and Ramani, 2011). Mekhafi and Ramani (2011) also mention that "the weak version includes precommunicative tasks, such as drills, cloze exercises, and controlled dialogue practice, along with communicative activities". Thus, a more dominant role of teacher can be noticeable in the weak version since the activities are controlled by the teacher. In the strong version, the teacher motivates the learners to go through the process of learning more independently. It can be concluded that the teacher plays the role of a facilitator in the strong version and the major responsibility for learning is upon the learners.

ADVANTAGES OF CLT

As opposed to grammatical and linguistic competence that is focused for example on audio lingual and grammar-translation methods, Richards (2006) mentioned that CLT focuses on and aims at communicative competence. Thus, enabling the learners to use the language in a communicative situation to satisfy their needs in real-life communication is a priority in CLT. In contrast, Brown (1994) mentioned that the grammar-translation method "does virtually nothing to enhance a student's communicative ability in the language". In this regard, meaning is emphasized in CLT (Finocchiaro and Brumfit, 1983). Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983) pointed out that CLT focuses on meaning as opposed to methods like audio lingual that focus on form and grammatical or linguistic knowledge. So, CLT shifts from learning structure of language to learning how to communicate and how to communicate effectively.

In CLT, the linguistic system of the target language is learnt best while the learner is attempting to communicate. In this case, the major portion of the learning process is not upon the teacher thus illustrating that CLT classes have moved from teacher-centeredness to learner-centeredness. CLT gives the learners more responsibility and involvement in the process of learning. In other words, learner-centeredness takes precedence over teacher-centeredness. Thus, the role of the teacher in a CLT class can be regarded as a facilitator that helps the students and learners in the process of learning to conduct effective communication. This notion is helpful as it is the learner who must learn how to communicate effectively and use the language comprehensibly. Thus, the learner should exercise and communicate enough in the CLT class to achieve communicative competence. In other words, the learner must be well involved in the process of learning. At the same time, the learner is also trying to use the language correctly. Therefore, the focus of CLT on linguistic

competence is contextualized and is achieved through the process of accomplishing effective communication (Brown, 2001).

In CLT, learning items are contextualized (Finocchiaro and Brumfit, 1983) but in grammar-translation method, only memorizing a "list of isolated words" is practiced (Brown, 2001). A CLT class may start with communication and communicative activities whereas this stage starts after a long process of exercising and drilling in audio lingual (Finocchiaro and Brumfit, 1983). Furthermore, in a CLT class, mastering speech takes precedence over reading and writing. Reading and writing are postponed until speech is mastered.

Following the emphasis of CLT on meaning, communicative competence and use of the target language in a communicative situation effectively, it can be concluded that functions play important role and are focused in CLT. It is worth mentioning that not only the functions but also the sequence of the functions are taken into consideration in CLT books. The sequence of units in CLT books for CLT classes is determined according to the functions that are of interest to the learner and is based on the needs of the learner in a communicative situation. For example, a CLT book would start with *greeting lesson* because it is the most basic need of a learner in real life communication. As the units of the book develop, the topics of each unit take into consideration more advanced needs of a learner in real life communication. For example, reserving flight tickets and making an appointment with the doctor are the subsequent units that would appear in the book for CLT class. Thus, the content of the units of CLT books that are used in CLT classes are based on the functions of language and needs of the learners in real life communicative situation and the sequence of the units are based on the learners' interest and their importance for the learners.

Apart from the above mentioned advantages of CLT, in the context of Iran, for example, the method of teaching English that is applied in its public schools such as high schools is different from the method applied in private English language centres. What is practiced in the English language classes in Iranian public schools include the translation of sentences and texts which leads to extensive use of the first language or mother tongue, Farsi, as well as the emphasis on grammatical competence or linguistic knowledge of the learners rooted in structuralism. In fact, this process illustrates practicing and applying the grammar-translation method which "has been practiced in public classes for many years" (Allahyar and Ramezanpour, 2011). Moreover, memorization of vocabularies and phrases as well as emphasis on pronunciation and application of repetitive drills were the other practices in the Iranian high school English classes that can be traced back to audio lingualism.

On the other hand, the method applied in private English language centres in Iran is different. Students in Iran who intend to learn the English language to apply it in real life situations pursue this purpose in the private English language centres. One of the books used in Iranian English

language centres is Richards *et al.* (2005) *Interchange* books. Series of the *Interchange* books are taught from elementary to advanced levels. Each level of these books has 16 units and each unit tries to present a set of vocabularies and grammatical structures through real life themes such as how to order a drink in a restaurant or how to invite your friend to your birthday party. In this regard, the English language classes are run based on the principles of CLT (Razmjoo and Riazi, 2006). What all the units in the *Interchange* books and the English language classes emphasize and focus on are communicative functions rather than memorization of vocabularies and phrases. These classes are not centred on memorizing some individual words and phrases but in enabling the learners to perform effective communication. What are focused in these CLT-based classes are functions such as how to get things, how to express feelings and how to interact with others. Thus, CLT class leads the learners to learning how to do these functions in real life communicative situation.

The English class in private Iranian language centres starts with listening to a tape or teacher followed by speaking. The learners would try to communicate with the teacher or other learners and then focus on reading and writing. This natural process (Brown, 2001) which starts with listening and ends with writing is focused in CLT. By observing the natural process of learning, CLT bears resemblance to the direct method. As a result, high interaction of learners is noticeable in these classes and the classes are no longer teacher-centred. In such classes, the secondary emphasis on error correction is also obvious. For example, the teacher does not repeatedly interrupt the learners while he/she is speaking. What the teacher does is just facilitating the process of communication by reminding the learners of the vocabularies and structure he/she needs.

In a nutshell and with reference to what was mentioned above, CLT paves the way for the learners to use language effectively in real life communicative situation. Hence, communicative competence is the goal to be achieved through CLT.

DISADVANTAGES OF CLT

There have been various criticisms on the principles of the communicative approach to teaching and learning language. Discussions on the disadvantages of this method are essential to critically evaluate CLT. Hiep (2007) refers to the recent articles that have launched debates on CLT. Moreover, Hughes (1983) mentions that communicative language teaching leads to the production of "fluent but inaccurate" learners. What is predicted to happen here is the danger of giving priority to fluency over accuracy in CLT classes. In other words, error correction has no significant place in CLT classes. As mentioned above, teachers play the role of facilitator in a CLT class since CLT classes are learner-based. Thus, the teachers would try not to stop the learners repeatedly to correct their grammatical errors so that they can achieve the goal of speaking effortlessly. In this case, accuracy is ignored and "fossilization" (Brown, 1994) of errors would

occur and the fossilized errors may never be corrected. That is why prioritizing fluency over accuracy can be regarded as one of the disadvantages of CLT.

In this regard, Mekhafi and Ramani (2011) conducted a research to investigate EFL teachers' attitudes towards using the communicative approach to the teaching of English in an EFL context. From the results of the questionnaires distributed to the participants of the study, it was found that 58 percent of them agreed that CLT produces fluent but inaccurate learners. So, CLT can follow methods like the direct method and audio lingual method in teaching grammar to focus on accuracy apart from fluency. However, concentrating on grammar and form in CLT can be different from the two mentioned methods in the way that grammar can be focused and practiced in real communication instead of practicing grammar repetitively (Brown, 2001) in individualized sentences as practiced in audio lingual method. The teacher can supervise the learners who are practicing effective communication and inform them of their grammatical errors thus enabling them to be fluent as well as accurate. Hence, both accuracy and fluency will be taken into almost equal consideration in a CLT class.

Another disadvantage to be pointed out about CLT is that it is difficult to be implemented in an EFL context or classroom (Chau and Chung, 1987; Burnaby and Sun, 1989). Burnaby and Sun (1989) and Chau and Chung (1987) pointed out in their articles that applying CLT is difficult in an EFL context due to the lack of sources and equipments like authentic materials and native speaker teachers as well as large size of the classes. In EFL classes, the classroom is the only place that the learners receive input to learn how to conduct effective communication. Since the mother tongue is also used to manage EFL classes, the environment cannot be motivating enough to enhance communication skills of the learners. In addition, lack of native speaker teachers in EFL contexts leads to low-quality input and unauthentic material. Thus, implementing CLT in an EFL context turns to be difficult and challenging both for the teacher and the learner.

CONCLUSION

Achieving proficiency in oral communication (i.e. speaking) is considered the main objective, concern and incentive for a large portion of students to attend language classes (Richards and Renandya, 2002). Furthermore, students of second/foreign language courses are thought to be successful if they can demonstrate effective oral communication in the target language (Riggenbach and Lazaraton, 1991). In this regard, CLT can be considered as a helpful method to achieve the goal of oral communication since it focuses on communicative competence. Since language is a means of communication and CLT may enable the learners to effectively communicate in real life situation, it is inferred that CLT may fulfil the actual goal of teaching a language which is to improve learners' communicative competence. Today, the main concern of most learners of the English language is whether they are able to use the language independently

and fluently in a variety of real life communicative situations such as when someone is on a trip, in a meeting or in a restaurant. If accuracy and correcting grammatical errors are also taken into consideration in CLT, fluency and accuracy are yielded simultaneously through the application this method. Thus, the problem of "fluent but inaccurate" (Hughes, 1983) learner may be resolved.

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