

UNIVERSAL RELEVANCE OF COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING: SOME RESERVATIONS

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Abstract

In recent decades, the methodologies and practices of communicative language teaching (CLT) have been dominant in the context of English as a second language all over the world. Some countries in which English is taught as a foreign language have also adopted CLT in their educational systems. Despite enormous efforts made to implement CLT into their English classrooms, research studies indicate that there are severe limitations on the way of importing CLT in foreign language environments. The purpose of this paper is to question whether CLT can be adopted in the Iranian educational setting. To provide a structure to this paper, the writer will deal with the barriers on the way of implementing the CLT approach in the Iranian high school context under the broad category of milieu, and within this framework, the context of teaching English in Iranian educational system, learning strategies of Iranian students, the very nature of the context of English as a foreign language, as well as the washback effect of the University Entrance Examination on the teaching/learning of English will be touched upon. Furthermore, throughout this paper, references are made to the concept that any curricular change should be sensitive to cultural values and pedagogical beliefs, or it may negatively affect the learning process.

Introduction

Communicative language teaching (CLT) is probably the most important development in the history of teaching English as a second language (ESL). CLT is said to have developed because of the dissatisfaction of methodologists and applied linguists with the grammar-translation and audiolingual methods of language teaching. In other words, it developed as a reaction against the language teaching practices that saw language as a system of rules in

which form was deemed important and accuracy in the production of those forms was thought essential. It was felt that under such circumstances

students were not learning enough realistic, whole language. They did know how to communicate using appropriate social language, gestures, or expressions; in brief, they were at a loss to communicate in the culture of the language studied. (Galloway, 1993, p.1)

What Is CLT?

Although CLT is a cover term for a variety of approaches to language teaching, ranging from functional-notional to task-based language teaching, "they all emphasize (i) independent, inquisitive work by the learner, (ii) target language communication in the course of learning, (iii) the development of skills in understanding, speaking, reading and writing as the goal of teaching" (Ting, 1987, p.55).

Language learning in CLT, according to Breen and Candlin (1980), refers to "learning how to communicate as a member of a particular socio-cultural group" (p.90). To communicate effectively, therefore, language learners must be able to express their own meanings, interpret the meanings of others, and negotiate between their own meanings and the meanings of others. It is probably clear by now that the basic underlying tenet of the CLT approach is developing communicative competence in the learners.

The emphasis on the development of communicative competence in the language learners has led CLT to an approach whose main focus is the message, rather than the form. Since it is believed that the functional aspect of language is primary, language learners should try to learn to get their message across, with almost no particular concern to form.

In order to help learners to become able to get their message across, CLT employs activities that involve authentic communication and activities that resemble those that language learners will encounter in real life situations. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the language teacher, or, better to say, the learning facilitator or the counselor, to make learners prepared to use language as a system of communication in which meaning is deemed important, and fluency in the expression of meaning is thought essential.

In recent decades, the methodologies of CLT have been dominant in ESL contexts. Textbook writers have been busily engaged in the preparation of teaching materials to satisfy the needs of the ESL students. It would not be an exaggeration to state that CLT is in vogue in ESL settings nowadays.

Meanwhile, some countries, such as China, Hong Kong, Japan, and Korea, in which English is taught as a foreign language (EFL) have adopted the methodology and materials of CLT, designed to be used in ESL contexts, with no proper questioning about the compatibility of the principles of CLT with their cultural and pedagogical norms in EFL contexts. They arrived at the question, however, of course, a little late, whether the transferability of pedagogical practices across cultures is feasible.

Some overzealous EFL educators in Iran also seem to be in favor of adopting CLT in Iranian educational system. They believe that the roots of the problem of teaching English in Iran are due to the lack of recognition of CLT methodologies. The concern of the present paper is to question the relevance of the introduction of a predominantly Western language teaching approach to the Iranian educational system. This paper looks at problems associated with the implementation of CLT in Iranian high school system. To provide a structure to the discussion, this paper tries to outline the milieu of teaching English in Iran, and within this framework the context of teaching English in Iranian educational system, learning strategies of Iranian students, the very nature of the EFL context, as well as the washback effect of the University Entrance Examination on the teaching/learning of English, will be discussed.

The Context of Teaching English in Iran

The EFL milieu of Iran presents challenges to those who wish to implement CLT for numerous reasons. One of the reasons for this claim is that the Iranian educational system is centralized. The state-approved curricula are observed in all schools across the country. Since provincial and national educational systems are employed to determine the language achievement of the learners, the same textbooks are used all over the country.

Furthermore, unlike CLT in which language learners are required to actively use English because oral production is often thought to be indicative of language success, in Iranian educational environment,

oral communication is not thought to be of prime significance. Such reasons as class time allocation, amount of language exposure, as well as the immediate needs of the learners, are the bases for this decision. For the same reasons, the main objective of language teaching in Iran is the development of the reading skills in the learners. Iranian language learners study English to fulfill the requirements of the curricula, to answer discrete point exam questions, and to learn grammatical structures and vocabulary items to gradually become able to read English.

In this regard, one can also mention that the class size, the amount of exposure to authentic language, and the availability of resources have played an important role in underestimating the oral production in Iran.

In terms of the class size, the average English class in Iranian high schools has more students than the average ESL class. ESL classes have a maximum of twenty learners, while classes here may have up to fifty or more students. It is quite difficult, if not impossible, to use communicative techniques, as recommended by the CLT approach, in large classes, especially when the teacher is under the time pressure to cover the course material.

Moreover, in school foreign language teaching here exposure to authentic language is strictly restricted. The allocation of class time for the teaching of English is negligible. English makes a portion, and only a very small portion, of the school curriculum. Class time for Iranian high school students is limited to 2-4 hours of English per week, depending on the grades the students are in. Practice time, therefore, in English classes is almost non-existent.

Similarly, the lack of adequate funding and shortage of resources with insufficient teaching equipment are other obstacles on the way of implementing CLT in Iran.

Learning Strategies

From another perspective, learning strategies of the Iranian language students do not seem to be congruous with the principles of CLT. Traditionally,

Iranian educational system has emphasized repetition, memorization, and accumulation of knowledge. In fact, repetition and memorization are among the most favored learning strategies of Iranian school students. Iran, no need to mention, is influenced by the scholarly tradition whose emphasis has been memorization and accuracy of form. Iranian students make a lot of effort to memorize Persian poetry as memory practice, as well as for the esthetic values of the poems. It should be mentioned that repetition and memorization are conditions for the mastery of form rather than the mastery of meaning. This is evidently contrary to CLT principles in which meaning takes precedence over form.

Furthermore, in Iranian educational system, language is viewed as knowledge, and learning is the mastery of knowledge. Unlike the CLT approach that is quite lenient toward the language errors of the learners, under the EFL condition here, errors committed by language students are looked at as inadequate repetition, inadequate memorization, and inadequate study.

Another carry-over from repetition, memorization, and accumulation of knowledge on learning, in general, and language learning, in particular, is that Iranian students normally demonstrate acceptance of the knowledge of the teacher. They view the teacher as the sole authority in the learning environment. Therefore, the teacher is not normally questioned and never challenged. It is the teacher who assumes full responsibility for the learning that occurs.

The overreliance on the teacher may be an explanation for the passivity of the students under traditional approaches to language learning (Flowerdew, 1998). This, again, is in sharp contrast with the assumption of CLT in which "the student is willing to be an active participant" (Penner, 1995, p.7) in the learning environment. Whether the passivity of Iranian students in English classes is due to their educational milieu (Littlewood, 2000) or to their personality trait, as some Iranian educators may believe, is not important. What is

important is that this phenomenon is in contrast with the CLT principle in which the syllabus is learner-centered, while pedagogical practices influenced by Iranian educational tradition tend to be teacher-centered. It seems a truism that whenever a teacher is not seen as a facilitator in the English class, but viewed as a source of knowledge, English language teaching becomes teacher-centered.

ESL versus EFL

Another barrier on the way of implementing the CLT approach in Iranian educational system is the very nature of the EFL context. It seems commonplace that there are major differences between ESL and EFL environments.

Since ESL takes place within an environment in which English is a medium of survival, ESL learners will have a far greater need to communicate than their EFL counterparts (Ellis, 1996). In addition, in terms of testing out and practicing what ESL learners have learned in authentic situations, as well as the amount of linguistic exposure they have, they are not comparable to EFL learners here whose contact with the language and their practice of the language are meager. Besides, English is neither the medium of survival nor the medium of instruction in Iran, but only a component of the school curriculum. Therefore, one can claim that ESL students are normally integratively motivated, or at least instrumentally motivated, while Iranian EFL students' motivation comes from the initiative of the teacher or from the learners' desire to fulfill the requirements of the curricula.

Washback Effect

Probably the most serious impediment to the implementation of the CLT approach in Iran is that of the washback effect--here the effect of University Entrance Examination on the teaching/learning of English. Unfortunately, it has become a tradition that language teaching in Iran is test-driven. Since English is one of the components of the state-run examination for the university entrance, and the English tests almost always measure the grammatical

ability of the candidates, its effect carries over into the academic milieu, as well as into the language teaching/learning environment. Due to the effects of washback, teachers and language students teach and learn the language they would not, most likely, do under normal circumstances. English language teaching in Iran means teaching prescriptive grammar, vocabulary items, and, to some extent, reading. This practice has been initiated and undoubtedly perpetuated due to the washback effect of the University Entrance Examination.

Concerning the relevance of CLT in such a circumstance, Markee (1997) questions how feasible it is for teachers to use CLT if their students' only identifiable need for English is to pass a matriculation exam that emphasizes a passive knowledge of the English grammatical structure.

It is under these conditions that Iranian language teachers teach English. The teachers, the majority of whom have learned English under the grammar-translation method, do their best to convey their knowledge to their students. In traditional educational systems, it is the primary role of the teacher to transmit knowledge to the students because it is the teacher who holds the knowledge, who holds all the knowledge.

However, it should not be denied that some of the Iranian English-language teachers do not have significant spoken-English ability. They may have reading and writing abilities, but their skills to express and interpret verbal communication are not well developed. It should be remembered, however, that

near native-speaker language proficiency and confidence are essential for teachers using the CLT approach. Teachers are encouraged to utilize authentic English language materials (radiobroadcasts, newspaper articles, real-life dialogues, etc.) rather than a prescribed textbook. (Penner, 1995, p.10)

It seems it is too much to ask Iranian English-language teachers to use the CLT approach in their classes. In this regard, Thompson (1996) asserts "it is certainly difficult ... to ignore the charge that CLT is an approach developed by and for native speaker teachers" (p.14).

Conclusion

This paper touched upon the language teaching processes and practices in Iran and cast doubt on the appropriateness of the CLT approach in this particular context. However, review of the literature would also indicate that the issues raised here also seem to be of relevance in traditional English-language teaching classes in other countries. The critical issue is that CLT, mainly developed through research in ESL contexts, is being exported to some EFL environments without proper investigation of the compatibility of the two contexts.

For an educational approach to be suitable for one context or the other, it should be sensitive to the cultural and pedagogical principles, as well as to the needs and learning strategies of the learners who receive training under that very approach. If we take a close look at the beginning of CLT, we realize that CLT was designed and tailored for language learners in the second language milieu. In the early 1970s when the language needs of an ever-increasing number of "immigrants and guest workers" (Savignon, 1991, p.263) were felt, the Council of Europe responded appropriately to the call for teaching materials to meet the communicative needs of the immigrants. In this case, CLT matched the cultural norms and language needs of the ESL learners. It is, however, certainly difficult to ignore the fact that ESL and EFL require two very different pedagogical practices. The writer of this paper certainly agrees with those who believe that the import of foreign educational concepts will probably do more harm than good to the educational standards of the recipient. In this regard, Nunan (1999) voices the depth of the worry of the educators, anxious about the mismatch between foreign and domestic educational norms when he asserts

In English language teaching, there has long been a debate about the appropriateness of many of the methods used..., some commentators claiming that Western concepts of education are being applied, inappropriately, in non Western contexts. (p.4)

The recommendation that can be given to language

methodologists is that they develop theoretical frameworks compatible with the cultural and pedagogical norms of different EFL contexts. Unfortunately, it seems that particular needs of millions of EFL students have so far escaped the attention of the methodologists and textbook writers.

At the end, it should, however, be admitted that there seem to be elements of the CLT approach that can be utilized in Iranian language teaching curricula. But these elements should be located through research and then ways of incorporating them in the language teaching curricula should be found. It should always be remembered that if learning involves the incorporating of new information into the existing beliefs and knowledge, the new knowledge must be sensitive to existing beliefs and values.

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