Communicative Language Teaching: A Modified Version

Furrakh Abbas, Sahar Aslam and Rabia Yasmeen

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Abstract

The study aims at providing solutions for implementing Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in accordance with local culture. CLT is the first comprehensive method of language learning and it has achieved enormous importance as it addresses all important issues regarding language learning. It has also been criticized by many researchers for paying insufficient attention to the context in which teaching and learning take place. It is considered unsuccessful in a sense that it conflicts with social, cultural and physical conditions of the recipient countries.

Despite all the drawbacks in CLT, its importance can not be denied. With expansion of globalization and increased demand of English, adopting communicative language teaching is inevitable. Its prominence is well observed not only in East Asia but also in South Asia.

The need of the hour is to particularize its theoretical notions and the most important aspect of teaching is peculiarity. This peculiarity can be achieved by introducing local culture in the framework of CLT. As it is the product of sociolinguists who believe in the relation of language with culture and society, so importance of culture cannot be left out of language teaching.

This has necessitated the appropriation of CLT according to cultural specifications. The study contends that there are certain cultural conflicts in CLT that impede its progress and implementation. For evolving culture-oriented version, the researchers conducted interviews of English language teachers.

A sample of thirty English language teachers, belonging to eight Pakistani universities was selected. Semi-structured interview comprising open-ended questions leaving room for the opinion of the respondents was conducted. The data was transcribed and then interpreted to extract the suggestions. The study presents a modified and acculturated version of CLT which is in harmony with the local culture of the learners and thus readily acceptable.

Key terms: communicative language teaching, culture, communicative competence, intercultural communication, specificity

Introduction

Twentieth century was the period when communicative value of the language was openly acknowledged. During this period, the pendulum from one extreme of wholesale use of mother tongue shifted to another of fully avoiding the resources of the mother tongue in L2 learning (Mukalel, 1998). The developments in the field of language teaching marked a shift from writing and teaching of grammar to spoken and speech skills. Audio Lingual Method and Situational Language Teaching were the forerunner of the most influential language teaching methodology of the century i.e. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).

The label that is used for the developments in the field of language teaching 1970s onwards is communicative. It makes the learners consider language not only in terms of its structures, but also in terms of its communicative functions. The newer functional view of language is combined with the traditional structural view to achieve a more complete communicative perspective.

Communicative Language Teaching emphasizes meaning as the foremost component of communication. It seeks effective communication with comprehensible pronunciation, fluency and negotiation of meaning. It was the first comprehensive method as it addressed all important issues regarding language learning. Li Xiaoju (1984) defines it as "language is communication and learning a language a language is learning how to communicate". David Nunan (2004) sees CLT as an overarching concept – a broad, philosophical approach to the language curriculum.

With the expansion of globalization and increased demand of English in the twentieth century, the inevitable circumstances to adopt CLT led to its popularity. William

Littlewood (2006) says that the educators and governments in Asian countries felt the urgent need to increase the number of people who could communicate effectively in English. CLT and TBLT (Task-based language teaching) were the expected solutions.

Communicative Language Teaching was triggered from the concept of communicative competence propounded by Dell Hymes opposite to the grammatical competence of Chomsky. Hymes believes that linguistic competence is not the knowledge of grammatical rules but the knowledge of social and cultural norms as well (Hymes, 1972).

Language was no longer seen as abstract grammatical rules but having application in social context and as such, it is not just the grammar but also function. Grammatical competence (knowledge of the linguistic forms of the target language), sociolinguistic competence (understanding of the dynamics of communication in social contexts), discourse competence (ability to interpret individual elements of a piece of discourse in terms of their interconnectedness and relationship to the entire discourse) and strategic competence (ability to employ various strategies effectively to get communication accomplished) were introduced as components of communicative competence by Canale and Swain (1980).
Savignon (1997) added another dimension of communicative curriculum to the concept of communicative competence.

When CLT was becoming recognized, Swan (1985a, 1985b) raised questions against some of the assumptions of CLT which were defended by Thompson who saw these questions as no more than misconceptions (Thompson, 1996). Much of the debate related to CLT has focused on the issues of cultural appropriateness whether of context or of content (Jarvis & Atsilarat, 2004; Guangwei, 2002; Pennycook, 1989; Canagarajah, 1993; Yang, 2003 and Palmer, 2007).

Though CLT has achieved enormous magnitude yet inadequate consideration to the culture of learners leads to dissatisfaction and subsequent malfunction in language classrooms (Holliday, 1994). There were social, cultural and physical conditions of the learners' context that hampered its progress in many countries as there is a direct relationship between culture and language. Language does not exist in a vacuum. It is rooted in the reality of culture and the customs of the people. Culture is a way of life and is the context within which we exist, think, feel and relate to others (Sarigul & Ashton, 2005). Languages always exist in a social and cultural matrix. Culture and language are inseparable so cultural influence on language cannot be undermined. "Language is not a culture-free code, distinct from the way people think and behave, but, rather it plays a major role in the perpetuation of culture particularly in printed form" (Kramsch & Widdowson, 1998).

Sapir and Whorf have tried to draw relationship among language, thought and culture. Their hypothesis is interpreted in two forms of linguistic determinism and linguistic relativity. The former is the stronger version of the hypothesis while later is the weaker

version. Sapir- Whorf hypothesis highlights that language reflects cultural concerns and constrains the way people think and that the context is of much significant in complementing the meaning encoded in the language. (cited by Kramsch & Widdowson, 1998).

Communicative functions of a language are culture specific, the same way as linguistic forms are language specific. As communicative functions are culture specific, function varies from culture to culture. It seems mandatory to keep in mind the context and culture in which language learning takes place. Kumaravadivelu (2001) comments, 'The most important aspect of post-method pedagogy is its peculiarity. This is to say that any post-method pedagogy must be sensitive to a particular group of teachers teaching a particular group of learners pursuing a particular set of goals within a particular context embedded in a particularly socio cultural milieu'.

Abdul Hafeez (2004) has supported communicative approach for Pakistani learners. It addresses the learners' needs not in terms of language items but meaning and function. The impact of social and cultural aspects must be directly addressed since the desired ability of the learners is the ability to communicate competently not the ability to use the language as native speakers.
Sabiha (2002) refers to objectives of teaching English and three out of her four objectives address culture and the need of learner to learn English within local culture. She further says that we need to publish local material in English if we want to see the development in the field of English language teaching. She adds that knowledge of culture is quite helpful in learning a language and calls culture an aid in language learning. The need of the hour is to integrate local culture in CLT.

Focus of This Study

The present study aims to address the cultural factors restraining the progress of CLT. Triggered by the question put forward for future thinking and action by Pham Hao Heip , this paper aims to present a modified version of CLT in light of the local culture as Palmer suggests that CLT has much to offer if it is employed after an analysis of a specific learning context (Palmer, 2007).

Methodology

A semi structure interview was used as an instrument for the present study. Thirteen open-ended questions addressing the cultural issues of content or context were formulated for the interview purpose. These questions were developed in the light of literature concerning language and language teaching in the framework of communicative language teaching.

A carefully designed criterion was utilized for selecting the sample which comprised thirty University teachers of English Language. The selected teachers either had taken some course in language teaching or had at least five-year experience of language teaching.

The sample was collected from eight recognized universities of Pakistan. A pilot study of interview questions was conducted. After the initial pilot study, certain modifications were made in interview questions. Nine questions for the purpose of interview were finalized and subjected to another pilot study. After five pilot interviews, questions were again refined with minor modification and re-sequencing of words. The final interview sheet consisted of nine open-ended questions leaving room for the opinion of interviewees. The interview addressed the points about understanding of CLT, role of culture and content in it and how to acculturate CLT and how to cope with emerging challenges regarding language teaching. The collected data was transcribed and then interpreted to extract the suggestions.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The interpretation of the data was done carefully. The responses were elicited and suggestions were cautiously written down. The interviews focused on the major issues related to cultural implications in the framework of Communicative Language Teaching. The detailed discussion on the results is given here:

What is Communicative Language Teaching?

The data collected through interviews showed that the teachers considered communicative language teaching an approach rather than a method. Terms like *"Interaction", "communication" and "negotiation of meaning"* were used to refer to CLT and these were considered the means and ultimate goals of CLT.

The respondents asserted that this approach believes in maximum involvement of students in real life like tasks where they get the chance to use language and share information. It gives them confidence and develops their competence. CLT develops all four skills especially laying emphasis on oral proficiency and fluency. Both aspects of communication (Verbal and non verbal) are given equal importance in CLT. It gives importance to communicative values and functions and the learner is the center of the whole process. The teacher serves as initiator, mentor, guide, facilitator and communicator.

The focus is on understandability rather than mastery of the language. The data showed that '*CLT is an umbrella term to include all methods that teaches the appropriate use of language and how to communicate effectively with primacy of meaning'.* To sum up,

'CLT moitivates learners create meaning rather than helping them develop perfectly grammatical structures or acquire native-like pronunciation.'

Culture and Communicative Language Teaching

The respondents defined culture as the aggregate sum of the ways of society. Language always stems out of culture and society. If society is the body, culture is its soul. Whatever ways a society uses to represent itself, these become culture. Language and culture are inseparable and indivisible. The data showed that culture is an important aspect of language. It has vital importance in language teaching especially in communicative language teaching as triggered by Hymes' model of communicative competence. CLT places great emphasis on helping students use the target language in a variety of social and cultural contexts. Language learning can be equated with "*how well a learner has developed communicative competence*".

Communicative Competence and Local Culture of the Learners

The data showed that communicative competence refers to local culture of learners and believes that the learners must know the cultural norms of communication where they are to communicate. It asserts that knowing the grammatical rule is not enough as communication goes beyond grammatical rules; there are other aspects as well which refer to culture of the learners. It includes sociolinguistic discourse and strategic competence.

There is a dire need to include local culture because culture is something that makes learning interesting and effective. Local culture must be incorporated in activities of CLT. Another dimension of CLT is the difference between '*communicative efficiency*' and '*communicative competence*' that highlights the importance of local culture. Learning a language is a socio cultural phenomenon and that is why it has to fit for the social context. Local culture must be targeted by the teacher in class. Inclusion of local culture in language learning process makes things comprehensible and understandable; the culture always interferes with understanding. Cultural difference of vocabulary should also be taught to students, for example owl may mean wisdom in one culture but it ma be ominous in another.

Importance of Content

The respondents viewed that content makes major contribution in the whole language learning process. It is the backbone and the road map of the language learning process. The right input leads to the right output so proper output cannot be achieved unless proper input is provided.

The data showed that content is an integral part and streamlines the teachers towards language learning objectives. People adopt whatever they study, so content must be

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selected cautiously and carefully. Every learner tries to interpret input in light of schemta and resultantly, the learners locate meaning in light of their background knowledge. So if their local culture is given importance in selection of content, it will facilitate learning. The data highlighted the practical side of the things. The better the learners understand, the better they are able to apply.

Conflict between Content and Culture of the Learners

When conflict exists between the selected content and the culture of the learners, it may impede the whole process of language learning, and may even lead to its failure. It can also develop a sense of cultural and linguistic insecurity, creating obstacles and hindrances. It may create barrier in the dissemination and assimilation of knowledge. An experienced teacher can handle the situation with skill. But in case the situation is mishandled, it may create confusions in the mind of learners, shattering their confidence and resulting in the loss of interest. The problem is that if they aren't able to relate to life, what they study, they won't be able to understand it.

Authentic Material in the Framework of CLT

The respondents defined authentic material in the framework of CLT as those resources of language with which the learners are familiar. This is the language which occurs in natural setting of context. The material taken from brochure, magazine, real advertisement, newspapers etc was considered authentic material. It comprises authentic sources of communication and real life like situation. Authentic material is best obtained from the culture of the learners. While selecting authentic material, one must look for culture attuned material. The terms like "*stimulus*" and "*catalyst*" were used to summarize the importance of authentic material which suffices both content and contextual values.

Integration of Culture in Language Skills

The collected data proved that the integration of culture into skills requires careful selection of the content. Content should be taken from the local scenario of the learners.

The learners should be given case studies that must be from local environment. They should be given writing activities on cultural issues like fashion, co-education, traffic problems, uses and abuses of mobile internet, rituals related with wedding, funerals and parties. The routine topics on which we often exchange our views, i.e., about the people in the street, dialogues between friends and interviews should also be used for both spoken and writing. In speaking, teachers can ask them to talk about local and cultural things, persons and phenomena. For example, they would be able to talk about Benazir more conveniently than Tonny Morison.

Reading skills can be acculturated by selecting material from local literature and translation of great works of art by local translators. Reading materials can be taken from local newspaper. For listening, we can have our students listen Pakistani English news, documentaries, recorded material from social context, English movies depicting the local culture.

Culture and Teachers' Training Courses

The respondents were of the view that it is very necessary to supplement cultural courses in teachers training courses. The teachers must make the learners study both local and target culture. The respondents emphasized the importance of ICC (intercultural communication) framework. There should be exploration of similarity and variation in both cultures. It will enable them to make language learning more interesting. We also need exposure to the cultures of the world as the world has become a global village and we need to know about our neighbours and the people in our surroundings.

Coping with the Emerging Challenges

The respondents asserted that the religious, social and ethnic issues should be addressed while teaching a language. The study of culture should be included in teachers' training courses. Syllabus should be modified, specified and localized keeping in view the significant cultural aspects. Teachers should try their level best to neutralize the effects of heated cultural debates. The teachers must have a deep insight into culture of the learners as well as the culture of the language that he or she is teaching. Only then they can exploit the similarities and variation to develop the interest of the learners. In such situation, culture becomes an aid rather than hindrance to language learning.

Conclusion

The findings of the study suggest that communicative language teaching needs to be modified and acculturated. Local culture must be given importance in the framework of CLT. It must serve as the starting point for the whole language process. Culture must be integrated in content, material and skills. The teachers training programmes must have cultural courses as their integral component. The understanding of similarities and variations of the local and target cultures can enable the teachers to handle the content and techniques in appropriate way suited to conducive learning. If local culture is given appropriate importance, it can be an authentic aid rather than a hindrance in language learning. Thus, language can function effectively only when we know the culture of the society in which we are communicating.

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