

CLT versus Context-based Language Teaching: which works best?

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Abstract

It seems that Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is being assailed on all sides. Being so visible and unloved, it is an easy target for those decrying “declining standards in education.” Popularised in the early 1970s, it came out of the writings of applied linguists such as Brumfit, Candlin, Widdowson and Wilkins, and had an emphasis on language use rather than language knowledge, with communication the goal of language learning. Over time there have been modifications, especially through new theories of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), which have broadened the research field to cognitive psychology and emphasised form-focused instruction (FFI). These days, words like ‘tasks,’ ‘projects’ and ‘portfolios’ are increasingly entering the lexicon of university courses, with mechanical targets (the TOEIC test) reflecting an era of centralised information-gathering and data control. This workshop at Hue University investigated the assumptions underlying communication as an aim for learners in an EFL setting, the place of CLT as just one way or as the way to achieve communicative aims and, given the reality of teaching and learning in Asia, appropriate context-specific solutions.

Introduction

A number of questions were posed to participants at the beginning of the workshop. They were encouraged to consider whether communication was one aim or the primary aim of English language study in Vietnam. They were asked if they thought CLT worked, in the sense of being the best means to achieving the aim of communicative competence. In addition, they were urged to think about the use of learning strategies and communication strategies and whether these could help their learners apply what they know to achieve their communicative needs.

The reason for the general background questions was to highlight the confusion of purpose that exists in curriculum planning and then works its way down into syllabus design and lesson planning. Time and resources in English language education for second language learners are frequently devoted to the study of English Literature, or of liberal arts, when we are hoping or even expecting them to acquire oral proficiency in English. Yet oral proficiency may not be the most useful aim for technician who will be researching English-language journals in their field. If instructors are unclear about the overall direction of study in their respective institutions and departments, then it follows that so too are our learners.

CLT and its development

Most participants were instructors in secondary or tertiary education, and had attended the workshops precisely because some kind of communicative need is deemed to exist for Vietnamese learners of English. CLT arose in the West as a reaction to traditional teaching approaches, and “soon spread around the world as older methods such as Audiolingualism and Situational Language Teaching fell out of fashion (Richards, 2006, p.8).” It is pertinent to ask how well it translates to English language teaching in Vietnam. As CLT first developed, it came

to be typified by a communicative syllabus that was often skills-based or grounded in functions. English for Specific Purposes also grew out of this. More recently, it is a set of principles that are generally agreed upon.

The problem with those principles is that they are tied to attitudes underlying a kind of cultural imperialism. According to Pham Hoa Hiep of the University of Hue (2005),

“current literature on English Language Teaching (ELT) criticizes the transfer of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) from Western English-speaking countries to other development contexts. This transfer is seen as problematic since pedagogy imported from abroad conflicts with the social, cultural, and physical conditions of the recipient countries. However, abandoning CLT in the English classroom in countries such as Vietnam or China seems not to be a viable measure, given that the ultimate goal of English teaching in these countries is to help learners acquire a good working command of English. The solution, therefore, appears to be a modified version of CLT, made appropriate to the local condition.”

Holliday (1994) offers a short list of considerations related to CLT in Asian EFL contexts (Appendix).

Reaction to CLT

One reaction to CLT has been the “context approach.” Bax (2003) argues that the dominance of CLT has tended to result in the neglect of the context in which learning takes place. He sets out a comparison between a CLT and context approach:

CLT approach	Context approach
CLT is the complete answer.	We must consider the whole context.
If we don't have CLT, then we can't learn a language.	Methodology (including CLT) is just one factor in learning a language.
No other factors count in learning a language - only teaching methodology.	Other factors may be more important.
If you don't have CLT, then you are backward.	Other methods and approaches may be equally valid.

Figure 1. Comparison of CLT and a Context Approach (Bax, p.281).

Group task

The participants split themselves into small groups, on the basis of whether they preferred to design a short lesson plan governed by *Lexical*, *CLT* or *Task-based Learning* assumptions.

1. Lexical
2. CLT Presentation-Practice-Production
3. Task-based Learning

The starting-point for the example lesson was a text and song: *Yesterday* by the Beatles.

Yesterday all my troubles seemed so far away
Now it looks as though they're here to stay
Oh I believe in yesterday (verse 1)

Why she had to go I don't know . . . (chorus)

Each group was given time to come up with ideas, and a sheet to make notes on. A leader from each group then displayed their ideas on the board and explained them briefly. After a discussion and feedback, the participants were then introduced to a number of suggestions or possibilities for teaching the class on the basis of the three sets of assumptions.

Lexical

Grammar-translation worksheet

Words & verses jumbled

Reformulate text & write it out

Put verses in order

Translate lyrics

Analyse language

= We assume knowing a language is knowing its nuts and bolts

CLT (especially derived from older ideas like PPP)

Many stages e.g. eliciting so set up is busy, teacher-centred

Present language items to make meaning clear

Present target structures to make form clear

Gap-fill, sing, repeat, shadow, etc.

Controlled practice

Freer practice if time for student centred work

Find someone who ATE breakfast, BRUSHED their teeth YESTERDAY

= Production is controlled, predictable, systematic

TBL with/without FFI

Play song for pre-listening/background

Student-centred jigsaw task where A & B have to get missing info from one another

Interactive dictation where focus is on meaning, not predictable lexis or form

Group work - read - compare - choose - share

Review/feedback stage

= We use all the language we know to work through a process to communicate meaning (a product)

Context approach

The ideas generated by the various groups were contrasted with the considerations of context that could apply to a class in Vietnam. According to Bax (2003: 287), one might begin by looking at and analyzing the learning context. From there, one would move on to take account of individuals (learning styles, strategies), classroom culture (group motivation, school environment), local culture (regional differences, status of teachers and students in the community) and national culture (politics, religion). Only then would one deal with a teaching approach (methodology, materials, methods) to accomplish those aims, and finally consider a language focus (lexis, phonology, grammar). With methodology placed much lower down the list of priorities than is common in CLT, assumptions underlying practice in and out of the newly conceived classroom are thus (Bax, 2006):

STAGE ONE

- Improve your awareness of all aspects of context

STAGE TWO

- Plan and teach a lesson, being constantly aware of and responsive to the unfolding context

STAGE THREE

- Evaluation and Reflection.

Think how to do the lesson differently next time.

Consider whether learners are getting what they need.

Start the cycle again.

Strategies

As part of a context approach, it is hoped that instructors would leave behind some of the constraints of a skills-based or functional or notional syllabus, and consider the strategies that successful language learners apply as individuals. Strategy instruction and training is particularly useful in that: (1) it is applicable to any context, (2) it does not deal with a fixed

body of vocabulary or grammar, (3) it can be used in class and outside class every time we interact in the L2, and (4) it works with CLT, FFI, PPP, TBL, etc. in a range of different contexts.

For example, strategies can be broken down into vocabulary strategies:

- Make more use of collocations
- Make word lists meaningful
- Make use of an L2 corpus

They can also be categorised as listening strategies:

- A variety of top-down and bottom-up processing activities
- Noticing the kinds of information that English speakers listen out for, such as intonation and catenation, which are often overlooked while pronunciation is over-emphasised

And then there are the communication strategies, which are of particular importance to learners struggling to get their messages across with a limited repertoire of linguistic resources at their disposal in conversation:

- Own-performance strategies may be the best to concentrate on

Clearly then, CLT is neither the whole picture nor the most satisfactory answer for every L2 classroom.

Conclusion

Within the confines of a single workshop, it is difficult to cover a lot of ground without falling victim to the accusation of superficiality. The attempt here has been to limit the scope of inquiry to the relevance and effectiveness of CLT, and the possibility that considerations of context might be a better starting point for many instructors than an approach designed in the West and artificially grafted on to teaching in situations for which it was never properly suited. CLT in its current form and broadest sense still has much to offer, providing it is employed after an analysis of a specific learning context has identified it as part of the solution to second language education, and not as part of the problem.

Biographical Statement

Roger Palmer graduated from London University in European history. His postgraduate study was in Education, and research interest is communication strategies. He currently teaches at Kyoto Sangyo University and is the co-author of a four-level blended learning (online plus textbook) series for Pearson Longman Asia, coming out in 2009.

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Appendix (Holliday 1994)

Questions concerning CLT from Asian teachers' perspectives

- What do teachers find potentially useful in CLT?
- How do teachers go about implementing what they value in CLT, and what challenges do they face in their attempts?
- Do teachers believe they can incorporate the key aspects of CLT theory without using common Western techniques such as pair and group work?
- Is there any empirical data to document the success of adapting CLT to local culture?
- How do constraints within the non-Western EFL setting shape teachers' understandings, beliefs, and practices with respect to CLT?
- Are the forces that are often viewed as constraints necessarily constraints, or should they be considered essential components in a process of developing appropriate pedagogy for use in a local context?