RESEARCH ARTICLE

OVERCOMING SITUATIONAL CONSTRAINTS IN COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

It is well known that norms that enjoy prestige in English teaching still emanate from and find inspiration in the Anglo American models that assume universal applicability of approaches, methods and materials. The flow of information and aid being unidirectional, countries that use English in the outer and expanding circle (Kachru, 1985) often treat imports as the best and most convenient means of taking English to learners, no matter what the actual conditions and circumstances under which learning is predicated. One such import is Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), an approach that originally sought to teach English in natural settings and where learners feel at home mastering the second/foreign language with minimum inconvenience. Studies have shown that CLT may not be all that it was made out to be and that some modifications are called for to render teaching and learning effective. This study looks at the possibility of using CLT after introducing certain alterations that meet the needs of learners in a heterogeneous, multilingual setting.

Keywords: CLT, teaching constraints, second language classroom, culture, codeswitching

INTRODUCTION

CLT has been in vogue for quite some time now and the necessity of using it has been felt more now than before following globalisation and the arrival of Multi National Companies (MNCs) in India, which are seen as job creators for a burgeoning workforce fresh out of college. Apart from technical skills the recruiters look for soft skills and communication skills from potential employees and teachers of English are invested with the responsibility of honing these skills and bringing learners up to a satisfactory level. CLT hopes to redress the imbalance by allowing for language learning in a natural setting using authentic materials and situations. The most important question in the context of what has been said is: is CLT universally applicable for achieving good results in teaching – learning English?

In several countries of the world , where the notion of 'West-inspired' teaching methods and models have come under the scanner and subjected to stringent criticism for alienating learners and teachers, there has been the feeling that English teaching is best achieved through evolving one's own methods and approaches and not from a blind faith in imports.. One such teaching approach is CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) that has had several enthusiastic takers in Asia and Africa but whose efficacy is being questioned in the very countries that embraced it

without a pilot study over the feasibility of introducing it.

Numerous studies undertaken in different regions of the globe, Yildrim and Okan (2009) in , Dogancay-Actuna (2005) Cortazzi & Jin (1996), Barkhuzien (1998), Shamim (1996) point to "research reporting on problems arising in the process of exporting methodologies in an attempt to make language classrooms more interactive and communicative " (Actuna, 2005, pp.100-101).

The study

To investigate the extent to which CLT was welcomed as an effective approach to teach English to learners of various linguistic backgrounds and varying levels of competence, a study was conducted in two engineering colleges in Andhra Pradesh involving four teachers, and 60 students in their first year of engineering. As part of the curriculum learners have English language communication skills lab in addition to theory.

The data for the study came from three questions each put to students and teachers and from classroom observation to corroborate the answers to questions asked. The students were asked what kind of activity they were expected to participate in to improve their communicative competence, whether they found the activities conducive for language learning and if they encountered any difficulty, the possible reasons for the difficulty.

Teachers were asked what approach they followed and why they showed a preference for that particular approach and the possible drawbacks resulting from the approach.

Students were asked whether they actively and voluntarily participated in *Group Discussion* and debates since it is one of the activities prescribed as part of English language communication skills lab syllabus. Personal experience revealed that many students were unwilling participants though they had language skills to speak and express themselves freely. It was suspected that the reasons could go well beyond the merely 'poor communication skills 'tag. It has been reasoned by many that the reluctance of

students to take part in group activities may be a result of the cultural practices in vogue in those countries where the free mixing of boys and girls and the furious exchange of views in a democratic atmosphere may be alien to their culture or value system.

Only 20 (35 %) of the learners said they participated actively in GD/group/pair work while the remaining – 40 (65 %) - said they did not want to participate though the teacher compelled them and they needed to in order to fulfil the requirements of lab. 27.1 % said they were shy and that prevented their participation. 45.2% said they did not have enough English while 25.5 % said they did not want to be ridiculed by their classmates or teachers for stating their views. Several learners also added for good measure that they would sooner argue or debate topics they considered debate-worthy in their mother tongue to lend the discussion or debate weight, liveliness and spontaneity rather than wait for the correct term to appear in English. A few learners also confessed that they felt awkward when girls and boys were paired or made to sit in groups of four or five, as they had never come across anything like it in their school days.

Many also included the idea that a GD or debate without code-switching would appear simulated and artificial, a point of view that is absolutely valid given that India is a multilingual country and mother tongue use is in L2 classes is natural. Another problem with GD was it was never able to elicit the participation of everyone since the fluent ones would do all the talking and the weak ones would be passive listeners.

There is an erroneous assumption built into the discourse of communicative competence that free classroom discussion fosters independent thinking, a key element in success as a student and as a professional.

No wonder therefore that " the issue here is not so much the *effect* of teaching (i.e. the learning of English) but rather the *process* of teaching " (Pennycook, 1994, p. 166). To promote certain teaching approaches is tantamount to ignoring the "socio cultural, attitudinal, pragmatic and even socio-economic realities of Afro-Asia" (Nayar, 1989 ; as

cited in Pennycook , 1994,p.166-167), one of which is the multicultural and multilingual nature of classrooms.

The codes for disagreeing and agreeing, the practice of turn taking, the belief in the equality of sexes, the idea of inviting equal participation from boys and girls, the assumption that a good speaker will also be a good team leader, the insistence on using only English are often too norm-based to take off successfully in a non-native context.

When asked if they found CLT effective to teach learners, three teachers strongly agreed while one teacher disagreed that they found it effective as a teaching tool. Those who agreed replied that they were able to give the learners a lot of opportunity to speak, participate in GDs, exchange ideas and debate.

Classroom observation did not bear this out fully. It was only partly true. While learners who were fluent in the language were able to take part with gusto, those who were weak in English or those who appeared shy and embarrassed, expressed reluctance.

It was also observed that out of a class of 60 students, only a few were able to take part at a time. The rest appeared distracted and noisy. Turn taking, politely disagreeing, expressing ideas cogently were not in evidence. The teachers themselves were unsure of how to proceed. They would often interrupt to take charge thereby violating a cardinal principle of CLT: teacher as facilitator.

At the end of the laboratory session, when asked whether what she organised as part of group discussion gave her satisfaction, one teacher mumbled that she had to do what it took to satisfy the requirements of syllabus as that alone was a determinant in ensuring her stay at college!! Another replied that CLT looked good on paper while actual implementation was another story. A third was of the opinion that one was not in a position to faithfully toe the official line about recent methods and approaches when other parameters had to be factored in. The teacher who chose to disagree was pragmatic and said that it was important for her to plan and carry out activities and assignments that answered the requirements of the course.

Three teachers who replied that they used CLT were also critical of the approach since they found it was not very conducive for implementation in a conventional classroom with low proficiency level learners. The reasons for limited success with the approach are detailed below.

When asked to detail the nature of problems in trying to implement CLT, almost all the teachers came out with complaints regarding its implementation. This is surprising considering that 3 teachers endorsed CLT as being effective for learners. 2 teachers replied that the learners had such low proficiency that they were not able to go ahead with the informal, group discussion mode. Getting learners to use target language was rather tricky as most of them did not have any fluency. All three teachers said the class size was too big. This is a feature of classrooms in both developing and underdeveloped nations. There are more learners than in a conventional classroom in the West.

A class size of 15 or 18 is not only unheard of but not feasible except possibly in international schools/ elite universities in India. The teachers explained that the end exam was not CLT based and in any case, they were entrusted with the job of preparing students for the final exam. 2 teachers felt that the materials in use did not allow a communicative approach. The texts are always taught using the blackboard and teacher talk, not through an interactive approach which many saw as non-productive and not 'result oriented'.

All three teachers reasoned that it was not made clear what CLT wanted from the teachers. Many teachers were frank enough to admit that they had not undergone any training that would put them in touch with the procedures of a CLT approach. Other teachers were of the view that regardless of what method was touted as the best; it remained for the teachers to determine on the spot what was required to get the teaching process off the ground and to achieve success in preparing students for the end of semester exams.

All four teachers (100%) agreed that the end exam which mattered most did not examine students on their communicative competence. The views obtained point to the flaws inherent in wholesale promotion of approaches that militate against local conditions and

the ambience of a multilingual classroom in developing countries.

CONCLUSION

Given the demands of job market and the dire necessity of preparing learners for a career after graduation, English teachers have a special responsibility in moulding them as potential recruits for employers, particularly MNCs and instead of jettisoning an approach that enjoys popularity , it helps to ring in certain changes appropriate for the conditions under which learning takes place. Instead of faithful adherence to all principles of CLT, one may bring in changes in tune with felt needs and in conformity with local conditions.

These changes are as follows:

❖ Introduce code-switching as learners feel comfortable using a language they grew up with and to which they most relate emotionally and psychologically.

❖ To enable learners to overcome shyness, address them on the necessity of communication skills and the likely situations where they might be called upon to use English – in conferences, seminars, business meetings, interaction with colleagues, etc – and tell them about the importance of English for sitting interviews, taking GRE-TOEFL exams for overseas education, and competitive exams.

❖ Pair learners with someone they are comfortable with; it helps if learners are given group and pair work after taking into account their interests and allowing them the freedom to pair up with anyone they are comfortable with. Thus, some kind of segregation will be in order to help them to communicate freely.

❖ Look for activities that promote genuine communication; learners need English in order to communicate with their teachers more than their friends and classmates with whom they are likely to use mother tongue. Thus, activities that see them use English with seniors, principal or teachers may be designed keeping in mind the prospective sentences and phrases that are used.

❖ More proficient learners may be paired with less proficient ones in the advanced stages of activities to enable the latter to benefit from interacting with fluent speakers of L2.

❖ The idea of teacher as facilitator has not really caught on; it goes without saying that the teacher will have to play the role they have always played in the conventional classroom: knowledge giver. In the initial stages, the teacher will have to guide students through tasks and activities, correct minor errors and constantly give them feedback so that their command of L2- English- improves over time.

Once these changes are introduced, language learning becomes meaningful and imbued with purpose for both learners and teachers.

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