



INNOVATIONS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING – BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Dr.S.A.KHADER

Lecturer in English, Silver Jubilee Govt.Degree College (A),
Kurnool. Andhra Pradesh, India



Dr.S.A.KHADER

Article Info:

Article Received: 07/10/2013

Revised on: 17/10/2013

Accepted on:19/10/2013

ABSTRACT

English language teaching has acquired greater attention and importance as never before in the context of its position as a global language. As an immediate offshoot of this scenario, the demand for Communicative Skills in English has been on the rise in all fields. Obviously the demand has brought a lot of pressure on English teachers to perform and produce good results. Consequently English Teachers and class room practices in teaching English have come into sharp focus for the assessment of the state and stage of teaching English in Indian classrooms. English Language Teaching is now at a crucial juncture as a number of methods, approaches and innovations have been discussed in series of seminars and conferences arranged at various colleges and universities in India. A few of them have already been in practice for a considerable time but found to be short of expectations in improving the language skills of the stakeholders. It needs a lot of motivation, innovation and commitment on the part of all concerned to sincerely and seriously take a new approach, an experiment or a theory through the process of practice from a superficial level to a deeper one. Only full-fledged efforts in the process of practice help arrive at a conclusion to assess the degree of suitability or otherwise of any innovative measures adopted in English Language Teaching. The primary focus of this Paper will be on Communicative Language Teaching which received much attention and impetus for over a decade in India.

Keywords: English Language Teaching, Communicative Skills, Innovative measures.

INTRODUCTION

English language teaching has acquired greater attention and importance as never before in the context of its position as a global language. As an immediate offshoot of this scenario, the demand for Communicative Skills in English has been on the rise in all fields. Obviously the demand has brought a lot of pressure on English teachers to perform and produce good results. Consequently English Teachers and class room practices in teaching English have come into sharp focus for the assessment of the state and stage of teaching English in Indian classrooms. English Language Teaching is now at a crucial juncture as a number of methods, approaches and innovations have been

discussed in series of seminars and conferences arranged at various colleges and universities in India. A few of them have already been in practice for a considerable time but found to be short of expectations in improving the language skills of the stakeholders. It needs a lot of motivation, innovation and commitment on the part of all concerned to sincerely and seriously take a new approach, an experiment or a theory through the process of practice from a superficial level to a deeper one. Only full-fledged efforts in the process of practice help arrive at a conclusion to assess the degree of suitability or otherwise of any innovative measures adopted in English Language Teaching.

The primary focus of this Paper will be on Communicative Language Teaching which received much attention and impetus for over a decade in India. Though Communicative Language Teaching approach has partially been successful in meeting the needs of the stakeholders, there is also criticism on the effectiveness of it in the Indian context. The research of many linguists and ELT experts suggests that Communicative Language Teaching helps prepare students acquire written and spoken English. However, on the practical side, as learnt from interactions and discussions with English Language Teachers at various forums, there are certain gaps that exist between theoretical conceptions of CLT as an instructional approach and practical implementation of it in classrooms. Factors such as large number of students in classroom, scarce availability of resources, content-based Testing and Evaluation, lack of instructional inputs are some of the major gaps which need to be bridged to balance the theoretical and practical aspects of CLT for its complete success in Indian classrooms. This Paper makes a modest attempt to identify what went wrong with the Communicative Language Teaching approach in Indian context along with measures to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Suitability of CLT Approach

Whether CLT is an approach or a methodology is a more abstract debate which has been carried on for too long. In fact, it is the name itself, which has been used to challenge the relevance of CLT as the term implies a focus on communication and the argument is that this method cannot be suitably employed with lower level classes as there is no authentic communication, due to a limited vocabulary and restricted range of functions. The contention is that the communicative ability of a learner depends much on the length and complexity of exchanges, and confident delivery, which will grow with the student's language ability. Some also felt that constrained by the system under which they operate, teaching in settings which are particularly examination-focused the relevance of CLT to their situation is questioned as many of the students never used English outside the classroom. This returns us to the question of whether the students

need to know lexical items and linguistic rules as a means of passing an exam, or do they want to be able to interact in English? For those inclined to maintain the dichotomy between learning and acquisition, and who argue that our primary focus is learners, CLT still has relevance.

Pedagogical Principles of CLT

The various pedagogical principles of a communicative approach to language teaching can be more or less summarized as follows:

1. Teaching is learner-centred and responsive to learners' needs and interests.
2. The target language is acquired through interactive communicative use that encourages the negotiation of meaning.
3. Genuinely meaningful language use is emphasized, along with unpredictability, risk-taking, and choice-making.
4. There is exposure to examples of authentic language from the target language community.
5. The formal properties of language are never treated in isolation from use; language forms are always addressed within a communicative context.
6. Learners are encouraged to discover the forms and structures of language for themselves.
7. There is a whole-language approach in which the four traditional language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) are integrated.

These principles are all related in some way to the theories of language learning that were discussed above. To summarize these: language acquisition is an unpredictable developmental process requiring a communicatively interactive and cooperative negotiation of meaning on the part of learners; the subsequent integration of comprehensible input and output influences the learner's developing language system (or interlanguage).

Problems in implementation of CLT: Need-based Syllabus

A communicative approach is often seen to need a syllabus based on language functions from which the necessary forms and structures will be derived. The prescribed course books are in contrast presenting a syllabus with the formal elements of language in a structured way, regardless of functional use. A curriculum framed only on grammar structures and vocabulary without sufficient attention to functional language skills will

be of little help in implementing Communicative Language Teaching. It would be wrong to see course books as a reflection of actual practice since an appropriately designed communicative syllabus has not been widely included in them.

It is not only in the area of classroom activities and overall syllabus that the application of a communicative approach has been problematic; for teaching to be accountable it requires the monitoring and assessment of learning. A qualitative assessment of communicative competence would seem to provide a more realistic view of a learner's progress than a quantitative measurement of errors or mistakes. Unfortunately the assessment process still continues to be dependent on quantitative lines.

Lack of Training and Facilities

Another serious lacuna in the implementation of Communicative Language Teaching in Indian Classrooms is lack of necessary training and research facilities for English teachers. Difficulties and challenges such as students' lack of motivation for developing communicative competence, low English proficiency, resistance to class participation, misconceptions about CLT and developing suitable instructional materials in one way or the other affect the performance of the teacher in continuing with the CLT approach. Successful implementation of CLT in English classrooms will be possible if teachers are sufficiently trained to tackle these challenges. Unfortunately most of the English teachers are not sufficiently equipped for implementing CLT practices in their classrooms due to lack of training in these areas. In addition to this, the insufficient number of English teachers in public-funded institutions makes it even more complicated for the teachers to allot sufficient time for pair and group work while implementing CLT practices.

Infrastructural Drawbacks

Huge number of students in classrooms is a common sight in most of the public-funded institutions and this makes it rather difficult for initiating any novel method in teaching. In such a situation bringing the students to the learning mood using CLT proves to be the hardest task. Another related factor that helps in learning is the psychological state of learners. Supportive interpersonal relationships must exist among learners for effective Communicative Language Learning to take place.

This again seems to be detrimental in large classrooms in taking up CLT. An ideal ratio of teacher and taught would bridge this gap.

Lack of Assessment Mechanism

Communication skills are difficult to be evaluated in traditional test forms. Much work and research need to be done to design tests that evaluate communication. Though the curriculum recommends the use of CLT in English classrooms, students are predominantly tested on grammar in their formal assessment. The present examination system is memory-based and aims at obtaining good results on quantitative lines. Hence the teachers tend to concentrate more on examination results than on skills development as their performance is measured only by the pass percentage. Lack of assessment procedure is one of the serious lacunae in CLT and an appropriate assessment mechanism need to be devised for the successful practice of this approach.

Instructional Inputs

CLT stresses communication in the target language and as such activities like pair work, group discussion, role-play and other related activities should be given to students with proper inputs. Inputs give learners the material they need to develop their ability to use language on their own. However, the whole concept of facilitating in a CLT classroom seems to be misunderstood and some of the teachers give tasks without giving proper instructional inputs. The teachers should provide learners the authentic material they can manage on their own and preferably which match their comprehension levels.

CONCLUSION

Generally seen theory and practice act as opposing counterparts; a perspective which presents a gap and the consecutive call for bridging it. Yet, looking at them as two complementing areas, which cannot exist on their own and therefore do not make sense without the other, it is self-evident that they can only profit from each other: practice is the fundament of theoretical research theory helps practice to work effectively. Classroom theory therefore needs to support teaching; it is called on to give answers to the questions arising within the process of learning in class. When quite a few years ago theorists argued for more student-centred

teaching methods which allow for differentiation, individuality and creativity, this quest led towards a change of paradigm. However, it appeared to be difficult to change the conservative teaching habits towards satisfying new methods; though knowing about the benefits of such student-centred methods many teachers still do not live this change. The lack of practical experience and models for the implementation of such theory is still a burning issue in both teaching and teacher education.

This Paper in a modest way tried to explore the impact of CLT in public-funded educational institutions and also noticed the gaps between theory and practice of CLT in classrooms. These are identified on the basis of interactions and discussions with teachers, research scholars and students at various forums. While many studies and research works have already noted CLT as an advantageous and favourable approach it cannot be totally taken for granted to conclude that CLT is suitable for all students at all levels. In view of the positive and restrictive aspects of CLT in our context, it will be significant if the teachers of English develop suitable teaching methods besides practising CLT approach.

REFERENCES

1. **Widdowson, H.G.**, : **"The Teaching of English as Communication"**, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.
2. **Littlewood, W.**, : **Communicative Language Teaching**, Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1981.
3. **Medgyes, P.** , : **Queries from a Communicative Teacher**, *ELT Journal* 40(2), 1986.
4. **Ellis, R.**, : **Second Language Acquisition**, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
5. **Rogers, Ted.** : **Methodology in the New Millenium**, *English Teaching Forum* 41(4): 2-13, 2003.
6. **Deckert, Glenn**: **The Communicative Approach: Addressing Frequent Failure**, *English Teaching Forum* 42(1):12-17, 2004.