

The Challenges in Instilling Communicative Competence in Second Language Learners

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Abstract – *Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was regarded as a major innovation in language teaching in England in the 1970's, as it focuses on developing learners' communicative competence in the target language. Although CLT rapidly gained extensive acceptance in western countries, adopting CLT as a curriculum innovation has generally been difficult in Asian countries. The factors that contribute to this lack of success in the implementation of the CLT in Asian regions include the exam-oriented education system that is practised in some countries, the teacher-centered approach to teaching English and teachers' negative attitudes towards the CLT approach. Attempts should be made by language educators to improvise the CLT approach so as to facilitate the development of communicative competence in ESL learners. Teachers need to be made more aware of the definition of this term 'Communicative Competence' which comprises the various dimensions of grammatical, discourse, strategic, and sociolinguistic competence. This knowledge and awareness of communicative competence among English teachers is crucial as only then, classroom lessons can be designed to emphasize the features of CLT which are to emphasize both forms and meanings, to allow learners to negotiate meaning through available knowledge of the language and to perform the various communicative functions in the ELT settings. Copyright © 2016 Penerbit Akademia Baru - All rights reserved.*

Keywords: communicative language teaching, communicative competence, grammatical competence, discourse competence, strategic competence, sociolinguistic competence, English language teaching, ESL learners

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was regarded as a major innovation in language teaching in England in the 1970's [1]. This is because CLT refers to a language teaching methodology which focuses on developing learners' communicative competence in the target language. Since the CLT focuses on the process of communication in the classroom and is very much against traditional language teaching methods, introducing CLT was considered a revolution in language teaching methodology [1-3].

Although CLT rapidly gained extensive acceptance in western countries in a short time and became acceptable all around the world, adopting CLT as a curriculum innovation has generally been difficult in Asian countries [4]. Many researchers [5, 6] believe that one of the most important factors that has led to the lack of success in applying CLT in Asian countries is Asian teachers' negative attitudes towards CLT. Teachers appear to be making decisions in

whether to promote or to avoid specific teaching strategies on the basis of their attitudes towards CLT [7].

2.0 ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING IN MALAYSIA

Malaysia has gone through vast changes in various fields since it attained independence from Britain in 1957. Razak's Report, which proposed the introduction of a single national education system to promote national unity, and Talib's Report which emphasised the use of English at school, became significant catalysts that revolutionized the education system in Malaysia. The National Language and National Educational policies were then implemented gradually from 1970 until 1983 at primary and secondary levels of education.

During these years, various issues related to the teaching of English such as finding the best approach to teaching English to multilingual students, were deemed insignificant [8]. The then adhoc committees and the Curriculum Development Centre developed different approaches in the English syllabus for the primary, secondary and upper secondary schools. Hence, the Structural-situational Syllabus was applied for Form 1 until Form 3 ESL learners and the Task-oriented situational approach Syllabus was implemented for Form 4 and Form 5 ESL learners at secondary schools [8].

After 1970, the structural-situational syllabus was adopted in primary and lower secondary schools. According to Pandian [9], the main objective of the structural approach which emphasizes discrete learning of grammar is to provide a list of language structures and words in their contexts or situations. Teaching reading and writing in the structural syllabus led to teacher- centered classrooms. In addition, sentences were learned in isolation and students also needed to be trained with skills in order to excel in public examinations.

The communicative syllabus for Forms 4 and 5 gave learners an opportunity to use the language for various functions with the assumption that students at the secondary school level have acquired adequate grammatical knowledge to use it [10] but students and teachers could not adapt themselves with the new syllabus which focused less on grammar [9]. Thus, it was felt that Malaysian students are still not equipped with communicative competence [9, 11], even after the communicative syllabus was adopted for the teaching and learning of English in Malaysia. Malaysian students' fluency in oral English was found to be comparatively low compared to their performance in writing [12].

Many English language students in higher education were reported to be facing many difficulties in speaking English [13]. This issue of students with low English proficiency level still exists in community colleges throughout the country [14]. "Despite the strength of CLT as a potential approach in enhancing oral communication skills among learners, community colleges constantly receive feedbacks from employers about students' poor communication skills, especially in English" [14: 789]. It appears that after a number of years of learning English in school, the low performance of Malaysian ESL learners still remains a problem to be solved [12]. The success of the national language policy was also cited as a factor that negatively affected Malaysians' ability to speak and write in English [15]. However, the implementation of the national language policy and its success is not the only factor; there are many other factors that contribute to the lack of mastery of English Language among Malaysian learners. Among the biggest contributor to this lack of success in mastering the English Language is the approach to teaching English in Malaysian classrooms.

3.0 THE IMPLEMENTATION OF COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING APPROACH IN TEACHING ENGLISH

Various definitions, principles, or components of CLT have been proposed by many researchers [1, 3, 16-18]. Although there are different definitions of CLT, general concepts that are agreed upon are few [18-20]. Hymes [2] and Haliday [21] believe that CLT sees language as a system for communication. Richards et al. [22] also state that CLT is an approach that focuses on communicative competence among learners as the goal of language learning. Savignon [23] defined communicative language teaching as a term for methods and curricula that include “both the goals and the processes of classroom learning, for teaching practice that views competence in terms of social interaction” (p. 263). Similarly, Richards [24] believes that CLT activities are based on interactions between learners rather than an individualistic approach to learning. Brown [19] adopts a more holistic view that perceives CLT as “an approach to language teaching methodology that emphasizes authenticity, interaction, student-centered learning, task based activities, and communication for the real world, meaningful purposes” (p.378).

Although CLT is defined differently by various scholars, the characteristics of CLT that are common in the principles of CLT as outlined by these scholars are its emphasis on communication in realistic situations, its use of meaningful activities/ tasks, and its provision for learner-centered learning settings. In general, CLT is considered an approach that provides for a learner-centered classroom and that which focuses on communication tasks and activities to improve learners’ communicative competence.

Gamble et al [25] also believe that the central theoretical concept in communicative language teaching is communicative competence. Language scholars in Britain and America agreed that CLT started from a theory of communicative language use and that developing learners’ communicative competence is its main goal [26]. Thus CLT aims to facilitate students’ development of communicative competence in the target language.

4.0 DEVELOPING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS

From Chomsky [27]’s view point, the linguistic theory enables students to produce grammatically correct and appropriate sentences, and develops their competency in the acquisition of grammar such as forms or structures in language. To Chomsky [28], language is “a tool for thought”, rather than a tool for communication (p.49). Chomsky asserts that learners would be able to analyze the deep meaning by learning the rules of language. Competence is distinguished from performance in the sense that the former is “the speaker-hearer’s knowledge of his language” (p. 4) and the latter is “the actual use of language in concrete situations” (p. 4). As a result of Chomsky’s [27] claim of linguistic theory in the late 50’s, both linguistics and language teaching have put more emphasis on the syntactic structure of language.

The opponents of Chomsky’s theory, such as Nunan [29], however view language as more than just a set of grammatical and vocabulary items. This view of language which was developed from Hymes’ [2] construct of ‘communicative competence’ goes against Chomsky’s theory of linguistic competence, which focuses on abstract grammatical knowledge.

Dell Hymes [2], an American sociolinguist, argued against Chomsky's [27] theory which to him ignores the importance of "communicative competence" (p. 281) and proper use of language which is a requirement for a speaker. In contrast with Chomsky's views of language as an abstract system of rules, Hymes [2] considers communicative competence as knowledge of using language rules while linguistic competence is merely knowledge of grammar rules. So, Hymes believed that communicative competence encompasses both knowledge and the ability for using the language properly. Hymes was however not concerned with the form of communication in the social dimension of language.

The contrast between Chomsky and Hymes' interpretation of competence is that "Chomsky's notion of competence entails the abstract, structural representation or characterization of language ability, while the Hymesian view of competence describes the linguistic knowledge which will allow for the practical and contextually appropriate use of language in a speech community" [30] (p.23).

Tucker [31] suggests that the concept of Hymes' communicative competence is for purposes of language instruction and noted that this concept "has become fossilized in its most reductive sense, as functional language (usually oral) stripped of interpretive content" (p. 265).

As another linguistic theory of communication, Halliday's [21] functional theory of language use has contributed to the theoretical base of CLT. Based on a descriptive case study of a child's utterances between the ages of 9-18 months, Halliday [21] developed a functional or sociolinguistic theory of early language development. Halliday [32] declares that it is unnecessary to distinguish between "an idealized knowledge of a language and its actualized use: between 'the code' and 'the use of the code', or between 'competence' and 'performance'" (p. 145) if its only purpose is to distinguish between what structural linguists have been able to describe in the grammar, and what they have not [30]. Halliday then proposes a powerful theory of functions of language, which is complementary to Hymes' view of communicative competence [33]. In his theory, Halliday [21] proposed that there are seven basic functions that language performs for children learning their first language. These seven functions are: the instrumental function which means using language to get things, the regulatory function which means using language to control the behavior of others, the interactional function which refers to the usage of language to create interaction with others, the personal function which refers to the use of language to express one's feelings and meanings, the heuristic function which refers to the usage of language to learn and to discover, the imaginative function which refers to the usage of language to create a world of the imagination and finally, the representational function of using language to communicate information [21].

Savignon's [34] viewpoint of CLT supports Hymes' concerns with language use as a meaning-making activity. Savignon [35] argues that competence is used to describe what one knows, while performance defines what one does. Nevertheless, only performance can be observed, and it is only through one's performance that competence can be assessed and enhanced [35]. Savignon [34] defined students' communicative competence as "the expression, interpretation and negotiation of meaning involving interaction between two or more persons or between one person and a written or oral text" (p. 249). Savignon [35] characterizes communicative competence as a dynamic rather than a static concept since it relies on the negotiation of meaning among people and applies to both written and spoken language. In her opinion, there is a theoretical difference between competence and performance. She elucidated competence as a presumed underlying ability and performance as the overt manifestation of that ability. Savignon [35] believes that communicative competence is the main goal of CLT and for

communicative competence to be achieved, the cooperation of all the participants and teachers and their awareness of CC characteristics is much needed. Savignon [30] also acknowledges “the interaction among grammatical, discourse, strategic, and sociolinguistic competence, positing that prior to the acquisition of grammatical competence, sociolinguistic and strategic competence facilitates overall communicative competence” (p. 28).

In 1980 Canale and Swain [36] created a more detailed framework for defining communicative competence. This four-area framework of knowledge and skill related to communicative competence includes grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence.

Grammatical competence puts emphasis directly on the knowledge and skills in producing the form of sentences and discourses correctly. Grammatical competence is needed for English Language learners to express meaning of utterances accurately and literally. This type of competence refers to “knowledge of lexical items and rules of morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar semantics and phonology” [35] (p. 29). This type of language ability is associated with what Hymes [2] calls the “systematically possible” or “formally possible”.

Sociolinguistic competence demonstrates the learner's ability in applying language properly and appropriately in various social contexts. In other words, sociolinguistic competence represents the ability of learners to identify the significance of such declaration in particular social situations. Canale [37] adds, “sociolinguistic competence is crucial in interpreting utterances for their 'social meaning'” (p.8). The goal, subject, and topic of communication and interaction should be understood by the speakers to express and convey their meaning appropriately to receivers. This might be viewed as an extension of Hymes’ [2] theory of communicative competence as it relates to “whether and to what degree something is appropriate ... in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated” (p. 281).

Discourse competence relates to the ability of learners to combine forms and meaning appropriately and involves the ability to understand and identify different forms of utterance to connect discourse to an overall theme of communication for diverse needs. In addition, Berns [38] argued that the meanings of large units of spoken or written texts are derived from discourse competence. Discourse competence draws attention to learners’ awareness of the discourse patterns of a language.

Strategic competence describes the ability of learners to master verbal and non-verbal communication strategies which are important for two reasons: “to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to limiting conditions in actual communication or to insufficient competence in one or more of the other areas of communicative competence (e.g., not being able to recall a grammatical form; lack of grammatical, sociolinguistic or discourse competence) and to enhance the effectiveness of communication” (p. 10). By way of explanation, learners may still keep on the flow of conversation even with their limited vocabulary through strategic competence.

It can be summarized that Canale and Swain [36] illuminated Chomsky’s theory of competence and performance by describing competence as the knowledge of a language a person possesses implicitly or explicitly and performance as the production of that language under specific circumstances.

Taking into consideration the concept of competence by Canale and Swain [36] and Canale [37], Bachman [39] then divided language competence into two overarching competencies. Bachman [39]’s more complex and comprehensive model in comparison with the simple model

of Canale and Swain [36] now divides communicative competence into two components: organisational knowledge and pragmatic knowledge. Both organisational and pragmatic knowledge are broken down into further subcategories.

Bachman divided organisational knowledge into textual and grammatical knowledge. He believed that grammatical knowledge includes knowledge of vocabulary, morphology, syntax, phonology and graphology. His definition of grammatical knowledge appears similar to Canale and Swain's [36] definition of grammatical competence. In Bachman [39]'s model, textual knowledge refers to comprehension and production of text. This definition is similar to the definition of discourse competence of Canale and Swain but it provides more additional details.

Pragmatic knowledge is defined as the main component of Communicative Competence by Bachman [39]. He further categorized Pragmatic knowledge into "illocutionary power of utterances or discourse (functional knowledge) and knowledge of sociolinguistic convention for creating and interpreting language utterances which are appropriate in a particular context of language use (sociolinguistic knowledge)" [40] (p.99). In other words, illocutionary knowledge means knowledge of speech acts and language functions while sociolinguistic knowledge means the knowledge of how to use proper language functions in different contexts [41]. The difference between Canale's [37] and Bachman's [39] definition of sociolinguistic competence is that the term, as defined by Canale is influenced by extra linguistic constraints (e.g., gender, class, location, time) while in Bachman's definition, it is shaped primarily by linguistic constraints (e.g., vocabulary, figures of speech, register, dialect or variety).

Canale and Swain [36], Canale [37], and Bachman [39] agree with this assumption that competencies are considered to be separate components of language competence; however, in embracing the theory of language as communication, the interaction among these components has been duly considered [30]. Bachman has re-conceptualized Canale and Swain's [36] definition of strategic competence to include the function of strategic competence which goes beyond its initial scope in that it now includes the roles of assessment, planning, and execution [30].

A slightly improvised version of CC is that which is offered by Walcott [42], who posited the view that using language is the actions performed by learners who develop a range of competencies, parts of which are features of communicative competence. In his opinion, communicative competence includes linguistic, sociolinguistic, pragmatic, general and existential competence. Walcott [42]'s view of sociolinguistic competence however refers to one's pragmatic competence in addition to the regular necessary knowledge for handling social dimensions of language production.

CLT researchers refer to the above CLT models as conventional frameworks that share several common threads, such as emphasis on both forms and meanings, negotiation of meaning through available knowledge of the language and performance of communicative functions. Consequently, it is important to acknowledge that communicative competence plays an important role in CLT, and requires ESL teachers to be aware of its many aspects.

In this article, CLT is defined as an approach with the aim to develop the ESL learner's communicative competence, and that CC represents the learner's ability to use and recognize language in particular contexts. This article has covered a number of theoretical issues regarding communicative competence as the goal of Communicative Language Teaching. Since the theory of language as communication forms the basis for the communicative

approach, CLT puts a special emphasis on communication by changing the traditional roles of learners and considering them as active participants in the language learning process [18].

Briefly, CLT has a rich theoretical base in terms of how it views language [18]. The communicative view of language can be summarised into Language “being a system for expression of meaning; primary function is to allow interaction and communication; and whose structure reflects its functional and communicative uses and whose primary units are not merely its grammatical and structural features, but categories of functional and communicative meaning as exemplified in discourse” (p. 161).

As noted, Communicative Language Teaching was largely inspired by descriptions of language and language use, with less reference to theories of language learning and acquisition [18], although some authors subsequently became more concerned with the relevance of theories of learning in their models [43]. Learning implications tended to be referred to on theoretical grounds rather than empirical grounds. However, the CLT view of learning is also claimed to be inferred from its practices, in which advocates [3, 44] describe the conditions needed for second language communicative competence to be developed. Three major elements are considered essential in promoting second language learning: communication, meaningfulness and the task principle [18]. As such, activities that stimulate communication are supposed to promote learning. In the same way, language that is meaningful to the learners facilitates the learning process. Lastly, language that is used for performing a task is likely to be acquired by learners. These dimensions are captured practically in such principles as Savignon’s principle of learning by doing [20] or experiential learning [45], and the role of learners in the learning process [46].

5.0 THE LACK OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AMONG MALAYSIAN ESL LEARNERS

The lack of communicative competence among ESL learners may be related to the unsuccessful implementation of CLT by teachers of English in Malaysia due to their constant practice of the teacher-dominated educational model for decades as in many other Asian countries. Faizah et al [47] discovered that ESL learners in Malaysia faced difficulties learning English, with the biggest challenge reported to be acquiring the Speaking skill. Producing autonomous and independent student learning in the Malaysian education system is not an easy task [48].

Teacher- centered approaches and the chalk and talk drill method have been used in English classes in Malaysia for decades. Teachers are still seen as the authority in the classroom. What more, Wong-fillmore [49] claimed that teacher-centered classes are far more effective than student-centered ones. Saleh and Aziz [50] believe that “in general, most of the teaching practices applied in Malaysian schools still take place in a condition whereby the teacher still dominates over the students. This shows that the teaching method at schools is still bounded by traditional methods” (p.4).

Examination-based system at schools has also been criticized as another reason for the unsuccessful implementation of CLT and for why teachers are still practising the teacher-centered teaching method in Malaysia [9]. Upon analysing the KBSM syllabus, it was found that many grammatical skills are tested in examinations and students have to learn them during the class time to pass exams and obtain good grades. Moreover, Musa et al. [51] found that due to school examinations and national examinations which give a strong focus on the teaching of reading, writing and grammatical rules, English language learning in Malaysia is

practically based on a “set of language mechanics with fixed ways of using the language; isolated from its communicative use. It is presented as a neutral set of language systems, to be learned and mastered for specific classroom situation” [51].

It is due to these reasons that teachers in Malaysia have had to place emphasis on teaching grammar and ignore sociocultural elements of language learning and the importance of communicative competence in their teaching. It is also for these reasons that learners have had to place emphasis on scoring good grades in exams by memorizing and regurgitating in the discourse of assessment [52]. Therefore, it can be concluded that, despite the fact that English language teaching has shifted towards CLT in Malaysia [50], teachers in Malaysia are still implementing traditional methods of teaching because the traditional methods which develop students’ grammar knowledge, reading and writing skills are required for success in school and national examinations [51].

Apart from examination-based system at schools, Musa et al [51] believe that the unsuccessful implementation of CLT is also due to teachers’ negative attitudes of learner- centered methods of teaching English which subsequently influences the teaching and learning process of English. Numrich [7] found that teachers prevent themselves from applying specific strategies of teaching in the classroom due to their positive or negative attitudes. Bax [5] also asserts that the language teaching profession has been negatively influenced by “an almost unconscious set of attitudes” which he labels, the CLT attitude. The effect of teachers’ negative attitudes on the lack of success of implementation of the CLT approach was also discovered by Hiep [53], who investigated this phenomenon in Vietnam. In view of this, Bybee [54] contends that teachers’ attitudes and their teaching practice are the most essential components for educational change to occur. Thus teachers’ positive attitudes are crucial if substantial changes are needed in the ways of teaching because teachers have a great deal of authority in making decisions regarding the planning of day-to-day instruction [54]. Hence, teachers’ ways of thinking and attitude are vital components of their practice in the classroom [4, 56 - 60].

6.0 CONCLUSION

To conclude, this article has attempted to explain the meaning of communicative competence and why ESL learners lack communicative competence. It has also touched on several issues that should be addressed for communicative competence to be instilled in ESL learners in Malaysian classrooms, and for successful implementation of CLT to take place. It is with great hope that when the means are developed for the CLT approach to work more successfully with ESL learners, the learning scenario may then facilitate Malaysian learners to become proficient users of English, so that they may become more participative, confident and competent users of English in international platforms.

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