

Questioning CLT's applicability in an EFL context: The case of Japan

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The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method is widely accepted amongst English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers. This paper will provide a methodological analysis discussing the background and development as well as the main arguments against this method's application in Japan. Included are suggestions that while CLT has benefits, these are only for students looking to enter the English speaking community and perhaps it is not so applicable for students with only a superficial interest in learning the language.

Introduction

This paper will provide an analysis of the CLT method from both teacher and student perspectives. It will discuss the background and development of CLT, and how this method fails to meet its communicative goals in many situations in Japan where English is taught as a Foreign Language.

It is argued here that CLT fails to meet its communicative goals in Japan due to the non-conducive conditions of large language class sizes, non-target language proficient teachers, and students who do not harbour integrative motivation towards English acquisition. This teaching methodology is in effect forcing an unreasonable learning methodology on students in Japan.

Background and development

For more than 30 years the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has promoted CLT-based classroom approaches (Sasajima, Nishino, Ehara, Nagamine, 2010). This implementation was an

attempt to address the failure to produce communicatively competent students by previous language-centered methods (Sasajima et al., 2010). The centrality of grammar in language teaching and learning was questioned, since it was argued that language ability involved much more than grammatical competence to encompass communicative competence (Richards, 2006). CLT's tendency towards the natural use of language separates it from previous methods that focused on sounds and grammar (Newmark, 1968 as cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Natural use refers to the pragmatics of language, as well as their norms and cross-cultural sensitivities (Clyne & Sharifan, 2008). CLT expands on previous language-centred methods which focused on grammatical correctness, by adding the performative feature of being communicatively appropriate.

The development of CLT addresses such communicative deficiencies not only through viewing language as a system but also as a discourse, which focuses on interaction and motivation (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Interaction and motivation aim to enable the learner to communicate in the Target Language (TL) (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). CLT's development necessitated functional, real-life, meaningful simulation to aid communication outside the classroom (Littlewood, YEAR, as cited in Richards & Rogers, 1995). Communicative competence outside the classroom, or the ability to communicate in the 'speech community,' according to Hymes (YEAR, as cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2006), encompasses the socio-cultural norms of the language community. However, it seems that most Japanese EFL learners are not active members of any English speech community, so this questions CLT's applicability within typical Japanese social settings.

Needs and motivation

Motivation to speak in the language one is learning is a worthwhile goal of any language learner, and students having a realistically applicable learning method seem to address their practical interaction needs. It is evident why CLT is referred to as 'learner centred pedagogy' because the method corresponds to learners' needs. Teachers identifying and meeting the language needs of students motivate them (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1984, as cited in Richards & Rogers,

1995) classify this motivation as intrinsic because student motivation comes from an interest in what is being communicated in the language. A study by Norris-Holt (2002) investigated the attitudes of Japanese students towards the study of English finding that communicating with foreigners and listening to foreign music were among the main motivating factors to learn English.

Motivation is, of course, helpful to all teachers in Japan. Interest in a study topic fosters a student's intrinsic motivation, which is an aim of CLT, whereas previous language-centred methods were teacher-centred and language was generally learnt by rote, which was perhaps not as motivating (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1984, as cited in Richards & Rogers, 1995).

Theory

In addition to CLT being more motivating than language-centred methods, Clyne and Sharifian (2008) state that language used in meaningful interaction rather than through memorization allows students to internalize language systems. Richards and Rogers (1995) add to this line of argument stating that language learning develops through using language to communicate, as opposed to practicing it out of context. This relates to CLT's premise that learners learn a language through using it to communicate. However, outside of the classroom, Japanese students rarely get to use English, especially in meaningful interaction situations.

Berstein (1988, as cited in Exley, 2001) adds that social communication skills enable foreign students to meet Australian university demands. Whether students use a second language (L2) to socially converse or for foreign study, the emphasis on English as a lingua franca has shifted from a primary focus on written communication to oral communication (Sawir, 2005). It seems that aiming for communicative competence and using real language applications would be much more beneficial for students' language acquisition than previous language-in-isolation methods.

Motivation in the Communicative Language Teaching method

One disadvantage of CLT is if students do not have ‘integrative motivation,’ which Stribling (2003) describes as the basis for the intention of entering the TL community, then CLT’s speech community ideals are perhaps at odds with students’ extrinsic motivation. Gardner and Lambert (YEAR, as cited in Kumaravadevelu, 2006) term this motivation as ‘instrumental motivation.’ Learners with instrumental motivation want to learn a language for a practical reason, such as getting a salary bonus or getting into college. In the case of Japan, students are required to take English proficiency tests in all levels of schooling, and it has quickly become the standard of Japanese universities to have an English component in their entry exams, even for non-English majors (Nishio, 2011).

Stribling (2003) states that integrative motivation may be more applicable to French second language learning in Canada, because it is used as an actual second language there, whereas English language learning in the Philippines is more instrumental. It is instrumental because it is the professional domain language used in commerce, science and technology and international relations (Borlongan, 2009). It seems instrumental motivation might be more applicable to Japanese language learners viewing English as a means of academic advancement or for students who use English as a lingua franca in inter-cultural communication. This problematizes the broad applicability of CLT, because this method does not cater for all the second language learners’ intentions. Students who are only motivated to learn English for communicating with foreigners and listening to foreign music cannot be associated with integrative motivation because the students have no wish to integrate into the English speaking community. These students wish just to have a ‘para-social relationship’ with their favourite Hollywood celebrities or Western pop music idols. Horton and Wohl (2006) define a para-social relationship as a relationship at a distance and only one-sided, where no interaction is needed. Interaction is genuinely needed in social situations where speakers share the same place of communication and have to pay attention to the same thing(s) together. Linguists refer to this as achieving ‘joint attentional focus’ (McGregor, 2009). Having a social relationship would stimulate joint attentional focus, requiring genuine language use, whereas a para-social relationship would not require joint attentional focus due to the absence of a conversa-

tion partner.

Noncommunicative ‘communicative’ classrooms

A further critique of CLT is that communicative classrooms in Japan are not communicative in practice, that excessive grammatical accuracy activities compromise communicative fluency (Nunan, 1997, as cited in Kumaravivelu, 2006). This critique is supported by Nishio (2011) who found that teachers in Japanese high schools held positive beliefs about CLT but did not frequently use communication activities. Teachers creating communicative classrooms did so at the expense of teaching for tests (Nishio, 2011). The obsession with English testing in formal Japanese education is having a harmful effect on implementing actual communicative English in classrooms. It is not that CLT does not have a place but that it is not possible to use this approach when testing is the focus.

A lack of genuine interaction produced in the classroom could also possibly be due to the teacher’s inability to create communicatively conducive conditions. One criterion for providing CLT is a teacher possessing native TL proficiency (Celce-Murcia, 1991), it logically follows that in some instances non-native teachers feel uncomfortable teaching CLT (Richards & Rogers, 1995) and this restricts the overall feasibility of delivery of CLT to students in Japan.

In addition to teacher TL proficiency, CLT requires learner-centred content, a necessity which could be made impractical by large class sizes. As Nishino (2011) states, Japanese schools usually have large class sizes and also a lack of native English speakers, which would hinder CLT methodology. This observation is supported by Sawir (2005) who states that Japanese students learn English as a Foreign Language (EFL), via methods that value reading and writing ahead of communication and reflects Exley’s (2001) claim that traditional EFL pedagogies in Asian nations lack emphasis on oral communication. Sawir (2005) states that students accustomed to the teacher-centered environment with less classroom conversation found it difficult to make the transition from passive learning to active participation. Sawir (2005) provides empirical data supporting this argument, finding that international students from Asia, studying in Australia, face serious learning difficulties

and lack confidence in speaking and taking a proactive role in classrooms. This example could be used as a possible case study in Japan. CLT in Japanese classrooms is problematized due to a lack of cohesion. As Bernstein (1999, as cited in Exley, 2001) states, “both educator and learner must work within an expected or an accepted pedagogical frame.” It seems that forcing an active learning methodology on students who are unaccustomed to taking such active roles might result in ineffective outcomes.

Conclusion

This paper has argued how the CLT method was introduced in Japan to address the purported failure of previous language learning methods to produce communicatively capable students. I have argued that this method fails to meet its communicative goals due to non-conducive conditions of class sizes, non-target language proficient teachers, and students who do not harbour integrative motivation. Furthermore, EFL teachers have misunderstood the students’ motivation and this affects the pedagogical choice administered in the classroom. The CLT method is greatly compromised in Japan’s education system, and major attitudinal and policy changes would be required to reverse this.

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