

CLT : A Promising Approach ?

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What is your view of language ?

I partly agree with Higgins and Johns (1984) that deciding how to teach a language is conditioned by one's view of what language consists of and what kind of a person the learner is. Looking at the historical development of foreign language teaching, you will see that the following views exist and play an important part in language classroom teaching.

- Language is a body of knowledge which can be learned by conscious memorization and recall.
- Language is a set of behaviors which can be internalized by heavy repetition and drilling until it is automatic.
- etc.

There is some justification for all of the aforementioned views, and some danger in clinging to any one of them to the exclusion of the others. However, a change in one's view of language can affect the teaching and learning process.

Since the 1970's, communication, communicative competence, and communicative language teaching have become key concepts in language pedagogy. In foreign language teaching, CLT has been introduced since late sixties (Jakobovits, 1969, etc.) Partially, it was a reaction against the mechanical nature and drills in the audio-lingual method with which teachers of English were most familiar. The emphasis of language teaching was shifted from usage to use or from linguistic competence to communicative competence.

The summary of Stern (in Alatis, 1981) may help explain the teaching situation now. Stern stated that there are two approaches to communication--the linguistic approach and psychological or pedagogical approach, each of which has its frame of reference.

The linguistic approach is based on recent advances in linguistics, especially the work of Dell Hymes' development of the concept of communicative competence. It moved away from a structural view of language to a more semantic and social

view, applying this view to language teaching. With this foundation, a language syllabus could be founded on thematic, situation, or semantic criterion instead of on the principle of grammatical sequencing. The work of Wilkin on the notional syllabus is a good illustration of this approach. The expectation is that a careful diagnosis of the language needs of learners can provide directions for a curriculum of notions, functions and discourse features.

The psychological or pedagogical approach is, on the other hand, experiential. The assumption behind this approach is that in ordinary language use our attention is usually focused on the message itself, not on the formal linguistic properties. We are involved in communication, like native speakers. Therefore, the emphasis is on the message not on the code. Communication by this point of view is not a late phase that follows language instruction. It must be part of that instruction. This approach follows the observation that children learn their first language in the process of communication. They are exposed to the use of language and they use it to communicate.

How can we apply the concept of communication to the language teaching syllabus? Prabhu (1984), in his article "Communicative Teaching: 'Communicative' in What Sense?", analyzed five concepts of what "Communicative" means in language teaching i.e. :

1. The reconciliation approach—the syllabus designer adds communicative exercises at the end of each teaching unit of a structural syllabus.
2. The message – the focused learning activities approach with a language structure review. A syllabus of this type is recommended for intermediate and advanced level courses.
3. Notional syllabus--the semantic approach.
4. The needs analysis approach--equipping learners directly with the relevant items of language or features of discourses.
5. The meaning -focused activity approach--unrestrained by any preselection or prediction of language.

We will see that the communicative concepts that Prabhu has delineated reflect the rationales of language teaching and linguistic authorities to help learners communicate in that language effectively. In fact, language teaching is not a simple task.

Are Thai teachers prepared for CLT ?

During the 1970's the pendulum in second or foreign language education continued to swing in the direction of the learners. Macnamara maintained that language is learned when the learner becomes involved in real communication so that he is a user of the language rather than a detached observer who analyzes and rehearses the language for later use.

The concept of language learning in Macnamara's point of view supports the communicative language teaching approach. Savignon's dissertation (1971) also pointed out that language learning which uses language for purposes of communication is a more efficient process of learning than the audio-lingual type pattern drills.

In the past we believed that by teaching the grammar rules of the language students would be able to use the language by applying those rules. In fact, they cannot. Knowledge gained from language is not transferred to use. We now know that teaching the rules of grammar exclusively is inadequate.

A general precept of CLT is that learners learn the language by using it. According to Krashen's theory, to facilitate learner's learning and acquiring the language, we must provide a rich linguistic environment to enable effective acquisition. Learners must be exposed to as much language as possible which is within the limits of their understanding and which can be interpreted by using visual or common sense clues. Also learners must be exposed to a sufficient quantity and diversity within the language.

However, Brumfit (1982) commented that the communicative approach limits language to only one of its aspects, excluding the educational, intellectual or social development property of language. At times, work needs to concentrate on accuracy. But at the same time, teaching needs to provide specific opportunities to talk or write in quasi-realistic situations without technical accuracy being the main concern.

Are classroom teachers prepared for CLT? No matter how promising CLT is, if classroom teachers are not prepared for change, then CLT will not work. Some limitations facing the Thai classroom context are that there is no language learning reinforcement outside classrooms. Then how does language grow? In the past we used to use textbooks in English for some school subjects. This exposure has helped language learning. But now we have lost that advantage.

If classroom activities are the only means for students to acquire the language, then teachers must be efficient models. Do we have enough of them? Are they prepared to use English as their medium of instruction? Are they prepared to be resource persons for students? Are they prepared to solve unpredictable linguistic and sociolinguistic problems in the classrooms? Apart from good techniques of teaching, foreign language teachers need to have a high level of both linguistic and communicative competence, or else any approach will not work.

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