

# “Imported” Communicative Language Teaching IMPLICATIONS FOR LOCAL TEACHERS

CURRENT LITERATURE ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING (ELT) CRITICIZES the transfer of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) from Western English-speaking countries to other development contexts. This transfer is seen as problematic since pedagogy imported from abroad conflicts with the social, cultural, and physical conditions of the recipient countries (Holliday 1994, Pennycook 1989). However, abandoning CLT in the English classroom in countries such as Vietnam or China seems not to be a viable measure, given that the ultimate goal of English teaching in these countries is to help learners acquire a good working command of English. The solution, therefore, appears to be a modified version of CLT, made appropriate to the local condition. For this, a deep understanding of CLT theory and its implications for classroom practice is important (Thompson 1996, Sato and Kleinsasser 1999). This article defines the theoretical essentials of CLT and characterizes the issues that commonly arise when CLT theory

is put into practice, aiming to offer suggestions to help EFL teachers in non-Western EFL settings develop appropriate CLT practices for their classrooms. Finally, the article identifies the need to redefine CLT to accommodate the theory to differing local conditions.

### The need for CLT

With the importance of English in the world today and the demand to teach learners a working command of English to satisfy various communicative needs in their life, EFL teachers in many Asian countries have felt an urge to learn the newest and best methods of teaching. In Vietnam, for example, teachers of English recognize that traditional pedagogy, emphasizing the acquisition of grammar and vocabulary rather than communicative competence, does not meet the requirements of English learning in an era of integration and globalization. Since the early 1990s, therefore, CLT has quickly gained popularity in Vietnam. Universities and schools have not only encouraged teachers of English to attend workshops and seminars on CLT given by foreign educational agencies in the country but have also sent their teaching staff abroad to study in TESOL or TESOL-related programs.

In China, as in Vietnam, the government feels that the use of CLT is beneficial. Thus, the State Education Development Commission, which represents the highly centralized Chinese system of education, requires the teaching of English for communication (Liao 2004). Liao (270) observes that “by introducing CLT, teachers can keep up with developments in English methods outside China. If not, teachers will return to the traditional way of teaching.... In addition, CLT will assist learners to develop greater competence in the use of English for communication.”

Teachers in many countries, including Vietnam and China, are eager to learn about the newest methods of teaching English, but whether they use those methods in their classroom remains a matter of speculation. Le (2000) observes that Vietnamese teachers express their appreciation for communicative ways of teaching English during the training courses, “but after they return from those courses, they continue teaching in their own way, using traditional methods” (73). Although CLT was introduced to China more

than twenty years ago, ample data indicate that many English classrooms are more traditional than communicative (e.g., Burnaby and Sun 1989, Hui 1997, Hird 1995, Yu 2001).

The failure to promote CLT by many EFL teachers inspired to learn about it is a great concern in the ELT profession. In response to Bax’s 2003 criticism of CLT, Harmer (2003, 292) makes the important point that “the problem is not with the methodology itself, or with ideas that it generates, but rather with how they are amended and adapted to fit the needs of the students who come into contact with them.”

Sato and Kleinsasser (1999) and Thompson (1996), among other researchers, have argued that if teachers do not have a thorough understanding of CLT, they can hardly develop practices appropriate to their context, and thus they easily return to traditional teaching. In their study, Sato and Kleinsasser found that teachers’ understanding of CLT was based more on teachers’ personal experiences, conceptions, and interactions with the numerous challenges in their local contexts than on the theory promoted in the academic literature. Thompson also found that ELT practitioners all over the world held misconceptions about CLT. He viewed the development of CLT in the future as dependent on clearing up these misconceptions.

### Defining the essentials of CLT

Since its inception in the early 1970s, CLT has been defined, described, and used by various educators and practitioners in many different ways. However, it is possible to identify the common essentials of CLT as proposed by the main scholars in the field.

#### *CLT in theory*

CLT is based on the work of sociolinguists, particularly that of Hymes (1972). Arguing against Chomsky (1957), Hymes proposed that knowing a language involves more than knowing a set of grammatical, lexical, and phonological rules. In order to use the language effectively, Hymes posited, learners need to develop *communicative competence*—the ability to use the language they are learning appropriately in a given social encounter.

Hymes’ notion of communicative competence was examined by a number of practice-oriented language educators. This examina-

tion culminated in 1980 with Canale and Swain's elaborate definition of the term (later refined by Canale in 1983). According to these researchers, communicative competence comprises grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, *and* strategic competence. Grammatical competence refers to linguistic competence—the knowledge of syntactical, phonological, and lexicological systems. Sociolinguistic competence deals with the social rules of language use, which involves an understanding of the social context where communication takes place, including role relationships, the shared knowledge of the participants, and the communicative purpose of their interaction. Discourse competence is the ability to understand an individual message and how its meaning is represented in relation to the entire text and discourse. Strategic competence entails the strategies employed for successful communication, such as how to initiate, terminate, maintain and repair a dialogue.

In light of subsequent arguments and practices, it should be noted that Canale and Swain's definition of communicative competence specifically includes grammar. However, it places grammatical competence within a more broadly defined communicative competence. Canale and Swain (1980, 14) make it clear that, although "there seem to be no strong theoretical reasons for emphasizing getting one's message across over grammatical accuracy at the early stages of second language learning...some combination of emphasis on grammatical accuracy and emphasis on meaningful communication from the very start of second language study is suggested."

Breen and Candlin (1980) set out the essentials of a communicative curriculum, the impact of which is still apparent today. They proposed that curriculum should encompass five aspects: (1) content is focused on language knowledge that is personally significant to learners; (2) sequencing is cyclical, rather than step by step; (3) content is subdivided into activities and tasks in which there is interaction, rather than broken down into structures; (4) continuity resides within and between activities, tasks, and themes; (5) choosing directions involves negotiation between learners and learners, learners and teachers, and learners and text—there is no predetermined route. In a radical development, Breen and

Candlin (cited in Sullivan 2000, 129–30) asserted that the classroom...

can serve as a focal point of the learning-teaching process... [It] no longer needs to be seen as a pale representation of some outside communicative reality. It can become the meeting place for realistically motivated communication-as-learning, communication about learning, and meta-communication. A communicative methodology will therefore exploit the classroom as a resource with its own communicative potentials.

Drawing on the implications of Canale and Swain's definition of communicative competence, elaborated upon for more than a decade, Savignon (1991, 2002) emphasized that CLT puts the focus on the learner: "Learner communicative needs provide a framework for elaborating program goals in terms of functional competence" (1991, 266). To support the theoretical and practical foundations of CLT, Savignon identified and described the following five components of a communicative curriculum:

- (1) *language arts* (which includes those elements teachers often do best and which may be all they have been taught to do) include exercises used in mother tongue programs to focus attention on formal accuracy.
- (2) *language for a purpose* is the use of language for real communication goals.
- (3) *personal English language use* relates to the learners' emerging identity in English.
- (4) *theatre arts* provide learners with the tools they need to act in a new language, such as by interpreting, expressing, and negotiating meaning.
- (5) *beyond the classroom* refers to the need to prepare learners to use the language they learn outside the classroom.

Authors discussed above offer various views of CLT—within the theoretical framework of communicative competence proposed by Canale and Swain—however, they agree on the need for meaningful communication to support learning and agree that classroom activities should focus on learners' genuine communicative needs.

While communicative activities are considered a means to develop learners' communicative competence in the second language, these activities cannot take place in the absence of control of grammar. Where researchers differ is in how this grammar is to be discovered. Some favor the more traditional presentation of a rule followed by practice. Others believe grammatical awareness will emerge naturally from practice in communicative interaction that has meaning. In either case, teachers still need to know what *communication* means for classroom practices. The answer is, largely, that teachers need to work that out for themselves. As Richards and Rogers (1986, 83) put it:

Communicative Language Teaching is best considered an approach rather than a method. Thus although a reasonable degree of theoretical consistency can be discerned at the levels of language and learning theory, at the levels of design and procedure there is much greater room for individual interpretation and variation than most methods permit.

#### *CLT issues in principle and practice*

As presented above, CLT is based on a theory of communicative competence. However, when this theory is translated into classroom practice, several problems and issues arise. These include the challenge of creating genuine communication in the classroom, questions about the goal of developing native speaker competence, and apparent ideological contradictions in the values underpinning many CLT classroom techniques.

#### *Creating genuine communication*

In essence, CLT theory holds that learning takes place through genuine communication. However, determining how to create genuine communication within the classroom setting presents challenges to teachers. Some ELT authors have proposed general principles and practices to help do this. For example, Nunan (1989, 194) suggests the use of "activities [that] involve oral communication, carrying out meaningful tasks, and using language which is meaningful to the learner" as well as the use of "materials [that] promote communicative language use...[and] are task-based and authentic." Brown (1994, 81) proposes that communication is likely to occur in the classroom when: (1) a significant amount of pair work

and group work is conducted; (2) authentic language input in real life context is provided; (3) students are encouraged to produce language for genuine, meaningful communication; and (4) classroom tasks are conducted to prepare students for actual language use outside the classroom. Larsen-Freeman (2000, 65) also notes that it is important "to facilitate small group and paired activities in which students have opportunities to interact. The activities themselves often engage students in communicative tasks such as filling information gaps using authentic materials."

Principles and practices such as those suggested above are frequently discussed in TESOL programs in the West, and most have been developed in and for ESL environments rather than EFL environments. In the ESL context, such as in Australia or in the USA, most learners of English are immigrants or international students. They study English in order to conduct their present and future life in communication with native and other competent English speakers. The classroom in these settings operates with the goal of immersing learners into the society and community outside, and thus it is pertinent to establish what Holliday (1994) terms the *learning group ideal*, or the *optimum interactional parameter*. Within these parameters, by interacting with each other on meaningful matters, learners can best develop the communicative skills they immediately need in their life.

The EFL setting is markedly different from the ESL setting. For example, in Vietnam, students learning English have no immediate need to use English in the classroom. They all share the same mother tongue. When Vietnamese students are asked to use English to conduct a "real life" game, the question raised is whether they are really engaged in genuine communication. Furthermore, the principle of doing tasks in the classroom which are applicable to the world outside the classroom is not as valid in Vietnam as in an English-speaking country, since Vietnamese learners rarely have real need to communicate in English outside the classroom. The use of authentic material, meaning authentic to native speakers of English, can also be problematic in the Vietnamese classroom. As Kramsch and Sullivan (1996, 199) point out, what is authentic in London might not be authentic in Hanoi. The lack of teach-

ing facilities, the large size of classes, and the traditional examination system further hinder Vietnamese teachers' success in organizing communicative tasks in their classrooms.

Despite the lack of need or opportunity to use English meaningfully, there has been, as Holliday (1994) points out, a transfer of CLT teaching techniques from ESL in BANA [Britain, Australasia and North America] countries to EFL classes in non-BANA countries. Holliday notes that this has happened because of the high status and hegemony of the received BANA English language teaching methodology. Similarly, Hird (1995) comments that today CLT, as developed for ESL, is accepted by many teachers the world over as the orthodoxy for EFL. Western classroom principles—such as *emphasize communication through meaningful interaction among learners; link classroom language learning to real life outside the classroom; and use material authentic to native speakers*—are understood to represent what CLT is, and thus are equated with good classroom practices in many parts of the world. When such principles are adopted, the common Western practices used to implement them are also taken on board, often with little critical scrutiny.

#### *Native speaker communicative competence as the goal of CLT*

A fundamental issue facing teachers is whether setting a goal of native speaker communicative competence is appropriate in an EFL setting. As presented earlier, the goal set by all in CLT is to develop the communicative competence defined by Canale and Swain, who in 1980 presented a model comprising four competencies: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic. These competencies comprise the knowledge that the authors believe a native speaker controls. In an EFL setting, however, a goal of achieving native English speaker competence may raise issues (Preston 1989, Berns 1990). Inherent in such a standard are many Anglo-American norms and values that contradict the cultural norms and values of EFL learners and, in turn, challenge the identity of these learners. As Preston suggests, non-native-like features in language use may be maintained intentionally to exhibit non-native English learner identity.

The use of English internationally extends beyond interactions between native and non-

native speakers in English-speaking countries to encompass interactions between non-natives in non-English-speaking countries. Because of this, some scholars have questioned the validity of the native speaker norm of communicative competence. Indeed, Alptekin (2002, 57) claims that such a norm is “utopian, unrealistic and constraining in relation to English as an International Language.” Alptekin calls attention to the fact that English is used differently across the world, noting, for example, that in Vietnam, it is mainly used for “instrumental reasons such as professional contacts, academic studies, and commercial pursuits” (61). The milieu where these activities take place in English is Vietnam, not an English-speaking country; interaction involves both native English speakers and Vietnamese as well as non-native English speakers and Vietnamese. Alptekin concludes that there is little point in Vietnamese students acquiring English native speaker competence and calls for a new notion of communicative competence that recognizes English as a world language. Similarly, Byram (1997) finds it problematic for learners of English in an EFL setting to be taught only to speak and write according to native speaker conventions, such as turn-taking, nonverbal behavior, and tone of voice. He argues that this model of instruction implicitly suggests that foreign language learners ignore their social identities and cultural competence in an intercultural interaction.

In sum, as Berns (1990) points out, communicative competence is shaped by the social and cultural context in which a language is used. In light of this, there is considerable controversy over whether EFL learners really should have as their goal the achievement of native-like competence in the linguistic features and social conventions of the target language. This is an issue not easily resolvable by any single answer.

#### *Ideological underpinnings of CLT*

Sullivan (2000) observes that even a brief description of CLT is value-laden. Thus, as with the issue of native speaker competence, there are Western values and beliefs underpinning CLT. For example, terms commonly used to describe CLT—such as *involve learners, allow learners choices, change in the roles assigned, monitoring learning, and breaks down*



*hierarchical barriers*—carry ideological values about *choice*, *freedom*, and *equality* that are not universal.

Sullivan goes on to show that Western values are reflected not only in the principles of CLT but also in common CLT classroom activities and practices, such as pair and group work and information gap activities. For example, when students are encouraged to work in pairs and groups, the methodology assumes that they enjoy freedom of choice and equality, can choose whom they want to talk to and what they want to talk about, and have an equal power relationship with the other students in the class. Likewise, information gap activities carry the assumption that people are equal in the classroom since at some point during the activity each student knows something that other students (or even the teacher) may not know. The underlying message of these activities, Sullivan concluded, is that unequal, hierarchical relationships are not conducive to communicative teaching and learning.

Sullivan's view is supported by other scholars, including Holliday (1994) and Pennycook (1989, 1994). Furthermore, these authors see the cultural shaping of CLT at an even broader level. Phillipson (1992) and Pennycook (1989, 1994) criticize the transfer of teaching methods from the Western, "developed" countries to the non-Western "developing" countries over the past decades. They point out that education is situated in a particular cultural environment and, within this environment, the definition of good teaching is socially constructed. In this way, assuming that what works well in one particular educational setting will work well in another is to ignore the fact that ELT methodology is grounded in an Anglo-Saxon view of education. Such an assumption, Pennycook (1989, 611) argues, constitutes *cultural imperialism* in English language education, carried out by the "many Western teachers abroad [who] blithely assume superiority of their methods." Pennycook (1989, 606) believes "teachers should make a whole series of decisions about teaching based on their own educational experiences, their personalities, their particular institutional, social, cultural, and political circumstances, their understanding of their particular students' collective and individual needs, and so on."

As the various issues set out illustrate, putting CLT principles into practice entails dealing with complex, interrelated social and linguistic issues. Among other factors, the lack of a real English environment inside and outside the classroom to support genuine and meaningful communication, the conflict of native speaker norms of competence over learner identity, and the ideological underpinnings of common CLT practices all mean that teachers anywhere must consider CLT critically if they are to develop appropriate practices for their own classes. Indeed, as Savignon (2002, 2) observed: "Communicative language teaching methods designed to enhance the interpretation, expression, and negotiation of meaning will continue to be explored and adapted."

### **Implications for teachers**

As discussed above, CLT is based on sociolinguistic and communicative views of language that appear to be useful in all contexts. However, while the goal of CLT—to develop learners' communicative competence—is equally applicable to Western and non-Western settings, different actions linked to this common goal can be taken. Kramsch and Sullivan (1996, 201) observe that CLT in Hanoi and in London might share the same rhetoric or the same "pedagogic nomenclature," but things look different in classroom practice.

For more success of the communicative approach in the EFL context, a new way of defining CLT and an adequate theory of action for local teachers must be found.

### ***Redefining CLT***

The Western version of CLT is characterized by activities such as pair and group work, which carry certain expectations and assumptions about the norms for using English and about teacher and student behavior and status. Many of these underlying assumptions do not pertain to the educational, social, and cultural contexts in other parts of the world. The Western version of CLT also carries within it notions about autonomy, choice, independence, and equality, which are heavily laden with Western values. Hence, this version of CLT should not be imposed in non-Western classrooms without adaptation and modification.

As Sullivan (2000) suggests, a broader notion of CLT is needed if it is to be used

throughout the world. Sullivan maintains that CLT should leave room for it to be adapted to the social and cultural sensitivities of the region. If CLT is to represent *real communication*, by which is meant communication meaningful to participants from different cultures, it must not be prescribed in ways that represent only a Western communicative style characterized by a certain mode of exchange of information and negotiation of meaning. Rather, real communication must be based on a multifaceted view of communication and language use (Kramsch and Sullivan, 1996). For example, communication in the classroom may be more real to Vietnamese students when they voice their ideas about issues of interest in a comfortable whole class setting, rather than in small groups. Likewise, negotiation of meaning in the Vietnamese classroom might occur more readily in response to a teacher's questions when students are allowed to call out ideas in chorus, rather than being asked to express themselves as individuals in pairs or small groups.

The point is, CLT can be manifested not only through pair work, group work, and information gap activities, but also through a variety of other practices that may be better suited to the local context. For example, whole class rhythmically tuned responses to teacher elicitations, playful narratives, and oral symphonic performances might be particularly appropriate in Vietnam (Sullivan 2000). Indeed, Holliday (1997) found that, rather than oral activities conducted in pairs and groups, activities with texts or teacher-led activities led to successful communicative involvement in English classes in China and India. Hence, effective classroom practices are not necessarily pair and group work or information gap activities, but activities that fit the students' discourse styles. Depending on the cultural, or even the physical setting, a teacher can use tasks and small group learning or a whole class format. Often a combination of the two is appropriate.

#### *Reexamining traditional views*

Although CLT needs to be adapted to fit the local context, local teachers in many EFL settings may also need to reexamine some of their traditional beliefs and assumptions about language teaching and learning. Embedded in the communicative approach to teaching is a

belief in the humanistic and communicative nature of language, which is not always in accordance with traditional views. Thus, to adopt CLT as a new teaching approach within a traditional education would require rethinking and adjustment of some long-held beliefs and values. For example, assumptions about the teacher's role as controller and provider of knowledge might need to be adjusted.

Furthermore, as developing countries like Vietnam gear toward reforming their educational systems to meet the demands of modernization, new values may emerge. Local teachers need to continually examine these values and reflect upon how they relate to learner participation, autonomy, and equality in their changing context. Learning about the culture, educational values, and practices of another country is always useful for language teachers.

It has been my observation that, while some of the constraints of CLT have been well documented in the literature, what these constraints mean for the thinking and behavior of local teachers has yet to be fully explored. Many important questions concerning CLT from teachers' perspectives remain, including these:

- What do teachers find potentially useful in CLT?
- How do teachers go about implementing what they value in CLT, and what challenges do they face in their attempts?
- Do teachers believe they can incorporate the key aspects of CLT theory without using common Western techniques such as pair and group work?
- Is there any empirical data to document the success of adapting CLT to local culture?
- How do constraints within the non-Western EFL setting shape teachers' understandings, beliefs, and practices with respect to CLT?
- Are the forces that are often viewed as constraints necessarily constraints, or should they be considered essential components in a process of developing appropriate pedagogy for use in a local context? (Holliday 1994)

These questions can trigger future thinking and research for new planning and action concerning the use of CLT.

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