

Is Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Appropriate to the Indonesian Context

Syarifuddin

(Universitas Yudharta Pasuruan)

Abstract

There has developed an assumption that communicative language teaching (CLT) is the best approach for teaching foreign languages. However, in some cases, CLT may not be appropriate for learners in some countries including in Indonesia. This essay will discuss four principles of CLT that are likely to meet the needs of Indonesian students but those principles need to be adapted to the Indonesian context. Those principles are individuality, learner-centeredness, communicative competence and authentic materials. Teachers can still implement CLT in their classrooms, but teachers should adopt CLT to the Indonesian context.

Keywords: Language teaching approach; Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Introduction

Much research has been done to develop the techniques, methods and approaches of foreign language teaching. From these different methods, there has developed an assumption that communicative language teaching (CLT) is the best approach for teaching foreign languages (Thompson, 1996; Prapphal, 2004). However, many critics of CLT argue that, in some cases, CLT may not be appropriate for learners in some countries (see, for example, Al-Humaidi, n.d.; Ghosn 2004; Jarvis and Atsilarat, 2004; Kolaric, 2004; Tan, 2004; Tan, 2005; Hiep, 2007). From the above comments and based on my teaching experience, this essay will discuss four principles of CLT that are likely to meet the needs of Indonesian students but those principles need to be adapted to the Indonesian context. This essay will then put forward reasons why some principles or features of CLT may not be appropriate in the Indonesian context, and then lastly, it is followed by recommendation.

Individuality versus collectivism

Firstly, it is widely known that CLT is based on individualistic values, which means CLT focuses on individual initiative, activities and interests. According to Snow (1992), individuality is encouraged in CLT. This means learners are expected to have an opinion about every topic based on their own individual judgment. In addition, it is also often

assumed that learning English means learning the English-speaking culture and that because individualism is central to an English speaking culture; therefore, it should be part of language teaching (Kramsch, 2003, cited in Sowden, 2007).

However, I question whether individualism is in harmony with Indonesian cultural values. This is because most Indonesian teachers and students argue that Indonesian culture emphasizes an opposing cultural value, namely collectivism. That means Indonesian students emphasize the group rather than the individual. Littlewood (1998, cited in Xu, 2001) reports that many Southeast Asian students tend to have collectivism as their primary value rather than individualism. Sampson (1984, cited in Larsen-Freeman, 1999) states that not everything that comes from developed countries may be appropriate for developing countries, and CLT is an example. In addition, English is now an international language. It does not belong to one culture anymore, so, it is not necessary to adopt individualist values, as Sowden (2007) says that learners do not necessarily have to take on the whole of the target language's culture.

Learner-centeredness versus teachers seniority

Secondly, another well-known feature of the CLT is learner-centeredness. In CLT, teachers are facilitators and students are communicators. CLT emphasizes and focuses on learners (Richards & Rodgers, 1990; Snow, 1992; Beale, 2002; Rowe, n.d.). This learner-centered approach aims to make students interested in their subject or target language. Snow (1992) argues that CLT gives students a chance to choose what, and how, they want to say. It should also be noted that CLT is needed in order to make students confident in using the target language (Deckert, n.d.).

In fact, I see that most Indonesian students, however, feel difficulty in implementing 'learner-centeredness'. This is because most Indonesian students often look to their teachers as their learning 'managers'. They expect the teacher to play a proactive role. As a result, they depend on their teachers. Also, they tend to respect their teachers seniority as 'the experts'. Tan (2005, p. 24) says that Asian students tend to respect their teachers as "the repositories of knowledge" and see themselves as "the recipients". They also tend to just learn from their teachers rather than asking questions, challenging, and making demands of their teachers. In addition, Jarvis and Atsilarat (2004, p. 11) report in their study in Thailand that many students do not understand the role of the teacher as "facilitator" and the students as the "generator of knowledge". Furthermore, Cortazzi (2000, cited in Tan 2005, p. 25) agrees that students of an East Asian background are "shy, passive and non-participating" students.

Between communicative competence and grammar

Thirdly, many experts agree that the goal of CLT is developing the learners' communicative competence. CLT emphasizes that the learners are able to make communicatively competent sentences and are able to use language in appropriate social contexts (Richards & Rodgers, 1990; Snow, 1992; Sierra, 1995; Rodger, 2001; Beale, 2002; Liu & Shi, 2007; Harmer, 2007; Rowe, n.d.). Furthermore, Canale and Swain (1980, cited in Mangubhai et al., 1998) say that learners should communicate in classroom activities as in daily communication including interaction within society, and unpredictable and creative conversation. Also, Erton (2006, p. 80) says "Favorite activities (of CLT) are; social interaction activities; conversation and discussion sessions, dialogues, pair and group discussions and role-plays". In addition, Jarvis and Atsilarat (2004) claim that language now is viewed in terms of its application in a social context such as functions and notions; language, therefore, is not simply about grammar anymore.

However, in my view, most Indonesian teachers and students have difficulty implementing a curriculum that focuses only on communicative competence because most students prefer to study grammar rather than language for communicating. This is because they do not want to fail in their exams, particularly in national final exams. Kirkpatrick (2000) and Collins (1999) (Both cited in Tan, 2005) say that because of the exam-oriented curriculum or the university entrance exams, for example in Japan, the dominant method to prepare students to enter universities is the grammar-translation method. Hynes (2002, cited in Kolarik, 2004) states that because of the exam driven environment, Asian students want their teachers to use the traditional grammar-translation method. Also, Tan (2004, p. 19) says, "Being exam oriented, most students here see traditional methods of teaching where they are being spoon-fed by the teacher as the safer way to arrive at the correct answers in exams."

Authentic materials or confusing materials

Lastly, it is argued that the use of authentic materials is another feature that has to be fulfilled for CLT (Beale, 2002; Mangubhai, 1998; Rowe n.d.; Snow, 1992). According to Erton (2006), authentic materials play an important role in CLT. Also, Richards and Rodgers (1990) say this is because authentic materials can encourage students to communicate, and those authentic materials also can influence the quality of interaction and language use among learners.

I think the authentic materials are actually interesting for teachers and students. However, some teachers and I think that the use of authentic materials may be inappropriate for Indonesian students because they are rarely appropriate to the Indonesian context. Hiep (2007, p. 196) says “the use of authentic materials, meaning authentic to native speakers of English, can be problematic in the Vietnamese or Chinese classroom”. This problem also happens in Lebanese schools (Ghosn, 2004). The same applies in Indonesian classrooms also. This is due to the fact that authentic materials may not reflect the learners’ social reality. Those materials can even cause students to become confused, because most students will probably never see the context of these authentic materials throughout their life except if they go to a native speakers’ country.

Recommendation

Regarding those problems above, there is recommendation from Jarvis and Atsilarat (2004), they (2004, pp. 13-4) propose using a context-based approach (C-bA) that means is “teaching methods, materials and learning styles [that] stem from and are specific [to the] local and national context” (see diagram 1). This study suggests that the recognition of the problems of CLT is very important especially the relationship between teachers and learners including learners’ expectations. Also, Jarvis and Atsilarat (2004) suggest that government should understand that the goal of education has to reflect learners’ culture; the government cannot just implement and adopt any methods or approaches.

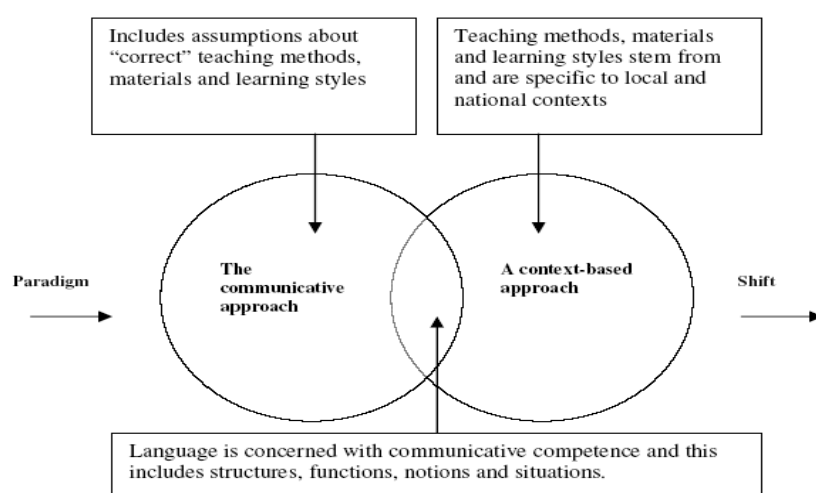


Diagram 1. “The replacement of CLT with a C-bA” (taken from Jarvis & Atsilarat 2004, p. 14)

There are particular recommendations that may help. In terms of cultural values, teachers and learners can negotiate their cultural values in their own classes. According to Kramsch (cited in Sowden, 2007), if teachers and learners can negotiate about the culture of the classroom, the process of learning will be more effective. Canagarajah (cited in Sowden, 2007) argues that teachers and learners can negotiate and then agree to make their own identity and to choose their learning goals together. In addition, in a country that has collectivist values, CLT can be implemented by introducing it gradually to students (Nolasco & Arthur, cited in Tan 2005).

Relating to the teacher-centeredness, the background of students and their experiences relating to CLT have to be closely examined before CLT is implemented. This is important because teachers need to know students' way of learning (Kolaric, 2004). Tan (2004) argues that teachers should know students' specific learning styles, because by that, teachers can plan lessons effectively before teaching, including knowing students who do not prefer group activities. This does not mean that role-play is not implemented, but teachers can modify the lessons after understanding students' characteristics. Nolasco and Arthur (cited in Tan, 2004, p. 21) suggest "teachers should move from the 'known' to the 'unknown' by starting from teacher-centered activities such as question-and-answer exercises before leading to more student-centered activities such as role-play."

Relating to grammar exam-oriented, Tan (2005, p. 28) argues that grammar can be taught step-by-step in "pre-communicative or communicative" classroom activities based on students' needs. Moreover, teachers should integrate both grammar rules and the use of those in communication. This is because students should be able to understand the grammar and also how to implement it in communication (Belchamber, 2007; Prapphal, 2004).

Lastly, teachers should create materials appropriate to Indonesian students. Erton (2006) suggests that teachers should make materials from students' local context. Alternatively, Beale (2002) suggests that in order to be relevant, CLT needs to collaborate or combine both 'the experiential level' and 'the reflective level'. In addition, Prapphal (2004) says that teachers cannot just teach and give lectures in class but teachers should take other responsibilities including being 'materials adaptors.'

Conclusion

It is clear that although CLT is the most appropriate approach in Indonesia, it still has a number of weaknesses in the Indonesian context due to several principles inherent in CLT.

Therefore, CLT needs to be adapted to the Indonesian context. This does not mean that teachers cannot implement CLT at all in their classrooms. Teachers can adopt CLT as their approach but they need to adapt it to the Indonesian context. Finally, further research is needed to overcome the inappropriateness of some principles of CLT in Indonesian context or alternative methods need to be developed to counter the inappropriateness of some aspects of CLT.

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