

Demythologising Communicative Language Teaching

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The CLT vogue

- The ‘default’ approach to English language teaching since the 1970s
- Promoted by predominantly western academics and educators as a developmental advance on previous traditional grammar-translation and structural approaches
- Reflective of western, progressive movements in education, not necessarily supported/understood elsewhere
- Adopted increasingly in education policy and mandated curricula for English language teaching in most parts of the world.

What is CLT?

- Difficult to say as there is no coherent or agreed definition despite over 30 years of adherence to CLT and its spread universally
- Assumes a broad, vague, and contested set of key assumptions, such as:
 - language learning is enhanced through a focus on communicative purpose (typically oral)
 - communicative activities should be authentic and meaningful
 - the focus should be on language use rather than usage
 - learner autonomy, responsibility and risk-taking are major goals
 - fluency takes precedence over accuracy
 - the teacher should facilitate and not control learning

What is CLT?

Teachers in communicative classrooms will find themselves talking less and listening more--becoming active facilitators of their students' learning...The teacher sets up the exercise, but because the students' performance is the goal, the teacher must step back and observe, sometimes acting as referee or monitor. A classroom during a communicative activity is far from quiet, however. The students do most of the speaking, and frequently the scene of a classroom during a communicative exercise is active, with students leaving their seats to complete a task. Because of the increased responsibility to participate, students may find they gain confidence in using the target language in general. Students are more responsible managers of their own learning...

(website for English language teachers)

What is CLT?

- Suffers increasingly from:
 - definitional ambiguity (Nattinger, 1984)
 - inconsistent representation of its meaning (Harmer, 2003)
 - extreme and conflicting positional descriptions (cf. strong and weak versions) (Whitley, 1993)
 - circular arguments (e.g. using skills is means to learning them and vice versa, Grenfell & Harris, 1999) based on notions of proficiency/competence
 - lack of basis in research on actual teaching practice and teacher knowledge (Bartels, 2005)
 - insufficient positioning within the local and contextual (Bax, 2003)

Why question CLT?

- Many teachers are unsure what it means and how to implement it (Duquette, 1995)
- Observations of language classrooms show CLT to be “a chimera” (Thornbury, 1998) - a hybrid of CLT and non-CLT approaches, “not only weak, but very weak”.
- Classes in which CLT is observed to be used effectively are rare (Karavas-Doukas, 1996, Sato, 2002)
- Focus on CLT as the “norm” for ELT practice together with research evidence that CLT is “rare” leads to deskilling of teachers and more calls for accountability.

Why question CLT?

- CLT is a product of progressive movements in education where the language of *education* has been replaced by the language of *learning* (cf. Biesta, 2006):
 - Learning is increasingly in a consumerist relationship with education which focuses on the user of educational provision (learner as consumer; teacher as supplier; education as commodity)
 - Learning is valued over teaching (“the learner-centred curriculum”; “the lifelong learner”)
 - Teaching is increasingly subsumed with learning (“learning and teaching”)

From CLT to E(ffective)LT?

... One of the key educational responsibilities is that of providing opportunities for individuals to come into the world... coming into the world is definitely *not* about self-expression. It is about entering the social fabric and is therefore thoroughly relational. It requires first and foremost the creation of situations in which learners are able and are allowed to respond.... It is about responding and therefore also being responsible for what and who is 'other'... To respond is as much about activity, about saying and doing as it is about passivity: listening, waiting, being attentive... (Biesta, 2006: 28)

Why refocus on teaching?

Walkerdine (1984) outlines how, within what are termed *progressive approaches*, the focus shifted from teaching to learning. The teacher is expected to provide an environment in which learning occurs and teaching has become invisible.

So what does it mean to refocus on teaching?

What is teaching?

Vygotsky (1978) proposed that learning is essentially a social activity and teaching is essential to the learning process. All learning can be seen as an apprenticeship and no matter how that learning occurs, whether in the classroom, through a book, through observation, through demonstration, over the Internet, in the workplace or via a CD ROM there has to be a teacher thinking about instruction or attempting *to intervene and short-circuit the learning process.* (Widdowson 1990)

What is effective teaching?

Effective teaching is educationally responsible (Biesta, 2006) teaching which responds systematically to local conditions:

- understanding student characteristics and needs
- developing student language
- building confidence to use English outside the classroom
- viewing students and their learning from a positive, not “deficit” perspective

What is effective teaching?

Rather than focusing on whether language teaching “conforms” to the ambiguous norms of CLT, research should focus on what constitutes effective language teaching seen through the lens of the *relentlessly local*. (Levinson & Holland, 1996)

Traditional approaches

In traditional approaches to education and language learning:

- *the teaching-learning relationship [is] one of transmission and reception* (Gibbons 2002: 6)
- content is decided at a system level and is usually supported by textbooks, designed as apprenticing texts

Traditional methods of language teaching have been criticized for *work[ing] against what is generally accepted as one of the central principles of language learning: namely that using the language in interaction with others is an essential process by which it is learned* (Gibbons 2002: 7).

Traditional approaches?

Delpit (1988) argues that traditional education systems were more successful in educating black children in the USA than later progressive approaches:

- the curriculum was less hidden,
- textbooks supported learning
- teachers concentrated on teaching
- teachers (not learners) took responsibility for ensuring that students had a sense of being able to learn.

Progressive approaches

“Natural” (and communicative) learning approaches:

- *place the learner at the centre of the pedagogic process and see education not as a matter of receiving information but of intelligent inquiry and thought (Gibbons 2002: 6)*
- came to dominate education in Australia and elsewhere from the 1970s and 1980s, with CLT, as a progressive methodology, introduced into language teaching

Progressive approaches?

Let me summarize the points I have made against a too-ready acceptance of the primacy of doing. To try to replicate the conditions of natural communicative use for language in the classroom is mistaken for two basic reasons. First, to do so is to deny the whole purpose of pedagogy, which is to contrive economical and more effective means of language learning than is provided by natural exposure and experience. Second, natural language use typically deflects attention from language itself and presupposes a knowledge of the language system as a basic resource which learners have, by definition, not yet acquired. (Widdowson 1990: 164)

Progressive approaches

Progressive pedagogies have also been criticized for *their lack of explicit language teaching, which, it has been argued, places a disadvantage on those who are less familiar with the language and assumptions of a [Western] middle-class ... curriculum.* (Gibbons 2002: 7)

FLT?

- Fractured language teaching (FLT) - the “hybrids” revealed by much of the research on CLT classrooms - is the product of confusion and tension on the part of teachers between traditional and progressive pedagogies, learning and teaching, and language system and language use.

“This is not to be critical of teachers. Rather it points to the inadequacy of the most common models of learning within which teachers are expected to work. In fact, though very different in the way they view learning and the role of the teacher, both ideologies have what is essentially an individualistic notion of learning.” (Gibbons 2002:7)

Case study: The AMEP

(Burns & de Silva Joyce, 2006-7)

- Surveys of AMEP students over a number of decades have shown that many are not familiar with CLT approaches and often feel confused by what they perceive as randomised activities and unsystematic syllabus design.
- The overall take-up of AMEP entitlement (510 hours) is low and there is concern about how much is achieved in the available hours, especially for lower-level and special needs students.

Case study: The AMEP

Goals of research were to investigate:

- the characteristics and features of effective teaching in AMEP classrooms

and more specifically:

- the role of the teacher in framing the language learning experiences of their students
- the way students responded to the teaching approaches

Case study: The AMEP

Research over six months:

- observations of 11 classrooms in five states
- classes ranged from pre-literate refugees to intermediate students with secondary/tertiary education (180 students)
- interviews with all teachers and student focus groups (3-8 students) from each class (using bilingual interview questions where required)

The context of the AMEP

The AMEP was originally established as part of the settlement program of the Commonwealth Government and the focus was on language learning, which would enable newly-arrived migrants and refugees to participate in Australian society. More recent directives from the Australian Government are towards preparing these same students more directly for participation in the workforce.

The curriculum (CSWE) reflects learning goals in general outcome statements but it is the AMEP teacher who contextualises these outcomes through pedagogic discourse. In the case of second language learning the classroom mediates *real world* discourse into a *mediated, virtual or imaginary* (Bernstein 1996: 47) discourse.

E(ffective)LT - Some theoretical principles

Post-progressive, educationally responsible (Biesta, 2006) approaches propose a collaborative orientation. Here the teacher is central to the teaching-learning process, through processes of *scaffolding*:

[Scaffolding] is not just any assistance which helps a learner to accomplish a task. It is help which will enable a learner to accomplish a task which they would not have been quite able to manage on their own, and it is help which is intended to bring the learner closer to a state of competence which will enable them eventually to complete such a task on their own.

(Maybin, Mercer & Stierer, 1992)

Bernstein: Individual enhancement

Bernstein saw enhancement as a condition for experiencing boundaries, be they social, intellectual or personal, not as prisons, or stereotypes, but as tension points condensing the past *and* opening possible futures ... it is the right to the means of critical understanding and to new possibilities (Bernstein 1996: 7).

English language for AMEP students is the means to possible futures. It provides access to community membership and such membership can be high stakes indeed for individual learners ... [and] high stakes for the community itself in terms of being an inclusive community where capacity for 'participatory association' (Somers 1993:587) is available to all (de Silva Joyce & Hood forthcoming).

Bernstein: Pedagogic device

Bernstein was interested in the question: *[A]re there general principles underlying the transformation of knowledge into pedagogic communication, whether the knowledge is intellectual, practical, expressive, or official knowledge or local knowledge?* (Bernstein 1996: 39)

In exploring this question he developed the concept of the *pedagogic device*, which *mediates between the field of potential pedagogic meanings and what emerges as pedagogic communication* (Davis in Muller, Davies & Morais 2004: 45).

Bernstein: Classification

Classification is about boundaries or divisions between one category and another: *where we have strong classification, the rule is: things must be kept apart. Where we have weak classification, the rule is: things must be brought together.* (Bernstein 1996: 26)

For Bernstein (1996: 21), *classifications, strong or weak, always carry power relations.* A key question in CLT is whether *the inescapable authority of the teacher* (Bourne 2004: 65) is masked and how it is used to develop collaborative practice.

In the language classroom, a major categorical division is the four macroskills: reading, writing, speaking and listening. CLT tends to integrate these skills within sets of activities.

Implications for EFT?

Some key questions

Does the integration of skills mean that students lose the intended focus of an activity, through weak classification?

Does the integration of skills lead to student failure to achieve activities? (e.g., are speaking skills the basis for successful reading achievement?)

Do teaching approaches confuse the expectations of students about the role of the teacher and the learner and blur the *division of labour* within the classroom (Bernstein 1996: 29)?

Do teaching approaches blur the *specialisation of spaces* (Bernstein 1996: 29) within the classroom, and the multi-modal signals, such as *changes of place, pace and deportment* (Bourne 2004: 67) which establish the changing relationships between teacher and students within lessons?

Bernstein: Framing

[F]raming is related to the transmission of knowledge through pedagogic practices (Sadovnik 1995: 8). It is about the relationship between the transmitter (teacher) and acquirers (students).

Where framing is strong, the transmitter has explicit control over the selection, sequence, pacing, criteria and social base. Where the framing is weak, the acquirer has apparent control. (Bernstein 1996: 27)

For Bernstein strong framing develops a *visible pedagogy* where *rules of instructional and regulative discourse are explicit* and weak framing develops *invisible pedagogic practice* where *the rules of regulative and instructional discourse are implicit and largely unknown to the acquirer (28).*

Bernstein: Regulative and instructional discourse

Regulative discourse orders the relationship between teacher and students and includes *expectations about conduct, character and manner* (Arnot & Reay 2004: 135), through rules of how people will engage with one another. Instructional discourse refers to *the selection, sequence, pacing and criteria of knowledge*.

In classrooms where the decisions of the teacher are explicit, the student *will always know what is expected of him or her, since the rules of legitimate expectations are made clearly available to the acquirer [student] by the transmitter [teacher]* (Sadovnik 1995: 13). On the other hand where the teacher's decisions are implicit, the students must *create their own criteria for what is happening in the classroom and the teacher's role is as a facilitator not a transmitter* (13).

Implications for EFT?

Some key questions

- In “strong” CLT classrooms have the educational experiences of the students prepared them for implicit pedagogic practices?
- Do students have the time available to learn language by participating in communicative activities, with no explicit teaching?
- In the learner-centred curriculum, who has apparent and who has ultimate control over what will be taught and how the classroom operates?

Implications for EFT

In the study, when interviewed most students reported their initial surprise and confusion about communicative teaching approaches.

However they were not averse to learning in *new ways* as long as they understood *why* the teacher wanted them to undertake particular tasks in the classroom and *how* this would help them to learn English.

Bernstein: Visible pedagogy and authority

Visible pedagogy (Bernstein, 1996) operates with strong classification and framing and *is explicit in acknowledging responsibility for taking up a position of authority* (Bourne 2004: 65).

Authority does not imply the *authoritarianism* of traditional pedagogy but the exercise of expertise through *authoritative* classroom practices:

But the teacher ... exercises authority in transaction by virtue of the achieved role of expert. His or her authority is based on professional qualification. (Widdowson, 1990:188)

Progressive approaches *simply mask the inescapable authority of the teacher* (Widdowson, 1990:65).

Observed examples of visible pedagogy and authority

Publication in the classroom of program planning

- Whole course programs, eg: topics to be covered, are displayed on notice-boards.
- The teacher gives the students the course outline to put in their folders and refers to it at the beginning of each week/lesson.
- Curriculum outcomes are displayed, with outcomes to be covered in the course highlighted.
- Translations of curriculum outcomes are displayed in students' languages.

Teacher's philosophy and expectations of student roles are made clear

- The teacher trains students explicitly in ways to participate in the classroom eg: the teacher expects students to ask one another for clarification in discussion and will not assist with clarification.
- The teacher expects students to take responsibility for classroom materials eg: to pack away materials and return them to the front of classroom.
- The teacher ensures a clear finishing point to the lesson before students leave.

Daily lesson planning published

- The teacher writes the plan for the lesson on the board at the beginning of the lesson, goes through it and refers back to it when planned activities conclude.
- The teacher reviews the plan at the end of the lesson and indicates what will happen with tasks not completed eg:
We will do this task tomorrow / We have not had time to do this task in class so you must finish it tonight and I'll check it first thing tomorrow.

Movement from one phase of lesson to another signalled clearly

- The teacher moves to another part of the classroom eg: to front when demonstrating and states change of focus eg: *Now all look to the front and I will read this text.*
- The teacher returns to the lesson plan on the board and ticks off completed activities.
- The teacher instructs students in what to do with completed material eg: *Now write the date on the page and put the page in your folder.*
- Students are asked to prepare equipment eg: *Open your books.*
- The teacher does not commence a phase of the lesson until all students are paying attention or understand what they need to do.
- The teacher clearly outlines the classroom processes eg: *I am going to play this tape twice. Put your pens down and listen.*

Purpose and focus of activities made clear

- The teacher names the macroskill focus of the activity eg: *We are now going to read a text about ... / This activity will help your reading.*
- The teacher explains the purpose of an activity and the language skill being developed eg: *This activity will help you develop more vocabulary for your writing.*
- The teacher gives clear instructions about how to undertake an activity or task and checks all students understand.
- If some students do not understand, the teacher suspends the start of the activity until more competent students explain in L1.
- The teacher displays an activity sheet on the OHP and gives instructions before handing out student copies.

Materials displayed in classroom

Teaching/learning materials are displayed in the classroom:

- acknowledging the products of student language learning eg: texts written by students
- providing reference points for ongoing learning eg: phonetic alphabet or posters outlining structure and language features of genres.

Reframing CLT in a visible pedagogy

In Burton (1991: 63) AMEP learners made comments such as the following:

- *It's too chaotic at the moment. A manual is what we need.*
- *Lessons should be sequential, day by day ... classes should be sequenced like a proper school.*

An over-emphasis on CLT and communicative activities as an end in themselves can result in constant movement across unrelated activities where learning is not educationally scaffolded. The focus is placed on the approach and not the effectiveness of teaching/learning.

Reframing CLT in a visible pedagogy

Classrooms where curricular and pedagogic frameworks are visible are not places where communication for its own sake drives teaching.

The most effective teachers:

- spent substantial time focused on one text or one activity
- were not afraid of silence in the classroom
- worked within repeated identifiable frameworks, which provided students with a sense of familiarity and security
- presented new language through familiar activities and tasks
- repeated phases of lessons to enable students to focus on language
- introduced new ways of operating in the classroom only when students had reviewed or practised previously learned material