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Observation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in a Year 3 Primary School in Johor Bahru

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ABSTRACT

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has a long history in an English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom. It is an approach which focuses on developing learners' communicative skills in a meaningful context. However, the application of communicative language teaching (CLT) in an English language classroom has recently been debated extensively. Teachers still find it difficult and challenging to adopt CLT effectively in the classroom. This paper aims to report the application of CLT in a Year 3 English language classroom during a 90-minute lesson. Specifically, the study intended to observe and describe whether or not the teacher focused on CLT in terms of lesson development and implementation. Data was collected using an observation checklist and field notes in accordance with the objective of the study. The collected data was analysed using content analysis and validated by interrater reliability. The findings have indicated strengths and weaknesses in the lesson conducted. This can be seen in certain features of the observation towards CLT such as pair or group work activities, fluency of the language, error correction implemented by the teacher and the role of the teacher. It can be concluded that CLT approach should be given importance in the classroom by teachers in the learning process.

Keywords: Communicative language teaching (CLT), English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom, observation, content analysis

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Communicative approach to second language teaching began in the late 1960s when it was proposed by Hymes (1972). However, it came to prominence in the late 1970's and early 1980's. The demand for language learning, particularly in Europe, grew with the dawn of the European Common Market which brought with it European migration. Foreign language learning was necessitated for work or personal reasons. This led the Council of Europe to develop a syllabus for learners based on notional-functional concepts of language use (Savignon, 2001). As part of the curriculum being broadened and modernized, secondary schools offering foreign languages rose worldwide and foreign language learning was no longer monopolized by the elite academies.

CLT is often misunderstood as a method per se. It is not specifically a method in which the content, syllabus and teaching routines are clearly pinpointed. There is no single, universally

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accepted authoritative text or model on it (Richards and Rodgers 2001). Appropriate materials and methods to a given learning context are generally accepted to be utilized. In terms of learning theories and effective strategies, CLT does not attach itself to a certain theory or method. The 'theories' come from an array of fields like cognitive science, educational psychology, and second language acquisition (SLA). In fact, it accepts and reconciles a variety of approaches and beliefs about the learning and teaching of a language, thus enabling it to satisfy a large number of proficiency-oriented goals as well as accommodate a variety of needs and preferences of language learners.

CLT is an approach which suggests that the setting for language learning should be meaningful and the language input, authentic. It is a term which encompasses a variety of methods and techniques (Parrish, 2004). According to Lindsay and Knight (2006: 20), the view of this approach is that effective communication "in the world outside the classroom" is the main purpose for learning a language. The focus is not on the form or structure but on using the language to communicate meaningfully, thus the term "real-life" communication in the classroom (Brown, 2000). Savignon (2001:13) believes that a 'new', 'innovative' way of teaching English as a second or foreign language is paved by CLT as it deals with 'the interactive nature of communication.'

CLT puts fluency and ability to communicate in different settings and in a variety of ways as top priorities. Nguyen (2010) points out that "CLT may currently be considered and accepted as an inclusive approach to language teaching, which encompasses various approaches and methods, motivations for learning English, types of teachers and the needs of individual classrooms and students themselves; it is learner-centred and emphasises communication in real-life situations." Parrish (2004) emphasizes that instructions in CLT should be contextualized, meaning-based and authentic, as well as maximizing learner interaction.

As CLT is regarded as a broad approach to teaching, there is an absence of a clearly defined set of classroom practices. With no one particular method or theory that underlies their practical and theoretical foundation, the methodologies employed in CLT are best described as a set of macro-strategies (Kumaradivelu, 1994) or methodological principles (Doughty and Long 2003). Although there is lack of universally accepted models, there exists some degree of consensus regarding the qualities required to warrant a language teaching the label "CLT". It is most often defined as a list of general principles or features. One of the most recognized of these lists is David Nunan's (1991) five features of CLT:

1. An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language.
2. The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation.
3. The provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language but also on the (Learning Management) learning process.
4. An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning.
5. An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activities outside the classroom.

The focus of CLT is to develop learners' skills of communicating (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Lindsay and Knight, 2006; Nguyen, 2010). Larsen-Freeman (2000:129) further stated that with CLT, "almost everything is done with a communicative intent." Nguyen (2010:209) also believed that the central notion of CLT is communication; and "CLT advocates learning through communication." CLT puts more weight on meaning instead of structure, and students' communication in the language comes from several types of communicative activities, such as role-plays, dialogues, games and problem-solving activities (Lindsay and Knight, 2006). Learners need communication practices and CLT places much worth in an extensive range of activities in the classroom so learners are exposed to the use of the language in a meaningful, authentic context. Littlewood (2007) claimed that such exercises in the classroom offer 'a repertoire of communicative activities and opportunities' to the learners to practise their language skills.

Under this general definition, any teaching practice or form of instruction that helps build students' communicative competence in an authentic context is held as acceptable and useful. Hence, in the CLT classroom, pair and group work which entail learners' negotiation and cooperation, fluency-based activities that promote self-confidence of the learners, role-plays practices which develop language functions and sensible use of grammar and pronunciation focused activities are carried out.

2.0 METHOD

Lesson Plan for the Teacher

1. Teacher begins lesson by getting pupils to recap the story of 'Four Friends.' Teacher projects the picture below on the screen to grab pupils' attention and ease them in recalling the story of 'Four Friends'.
2. After recalling the characters, the characteristics of the characters and the plot of the story, teacher projects two texts of Goody Donkey and Fluffy Dog.
3. Pupils read along both texts guided by teacher. Difficult words are briefly explained.
4. Pupils pointed out the similarities and differences of the characters' characteristics.
5. By referring to the paragraph on Goody Dog as a reference, pupils attempt to write a paragraph on Fluffy Dog.
6. Teacher calls out a pupil at a time to write a sentence which then follows by other pupils. If mistakes occur, teacher calls out other pupil to amend the mistakes done. Teacher gets peers to help correct each other mistakes.
7. Once completed, pupils copy the paragraph into their exercise book.
8. Next, teacher distributes several sentence strips of characteristics of other two characters in the story entitles 'Four Friends'.
9. Pupils go to the whiteboard to put up the sentence strips into the correct place.
10. As homework, pupils pick only one character and write a similar paragraph as earlier.
11. Teacher recaps lesson by recalling new vocabularies pupils have learnt and points out mistakes pupils have made.

Observation Process

The observer came and sat at the back of the class. The teacher began the class by asking one of the male students to come to the front and lead some warm-up movements. He gave commands to the other students to stand to attention and to be at ease a number of times. Then the pupils greeted the teacher. The teacher responded by greeting back. Next the students were asked to pick up the rubbish. All these activities were in line with CLT as it is based on the theory that the primary function of language use is communication. Its primary goal is for learners to develop communicative competence (Hymes, 1971), or simply put, communicative ability. In other words, its goal is to make use of real-life situations that necessitate communication.

The teacher began the lesson by asking the students to recall the story they had read in the previous lesson. She asked them to give the title of the story and the names of the characters. As she wrote on the whiteboard, she asked the students the date of the day. When some of them made a mistake by saying 'Three November', she promptly asked again and other students corrected the mistake. The seemingly trivial activity actually requires interaction among learners to exchange information and solve problems which is also a feature of CLT. Harmer (1998) also suggested that students feel comfortable when they are corrected by peers.

The teachers displayed a picture from the story to help with the students' recall and asked questions like "Where are they going?", "Where are they from?" and "What do they want to be?" Then she directed their attention to the sentences on the slide. She guided the students in the reading aloud activity. The students had already read the story in the previous lesson and this does not contradict CLT as Finocchario and Brumfit (1983) believed that reading and writing can start from the first day.

The students read aloud the sentences on the slide by themselves as the teacher pointed at the words. The teacher briefly explained difficult words. The students made a mistake in by pronouncing 'barked' as /bar-ked/. The teacher immediately corrected the mistake. Although grammar mistakes are allowed in the CLT classroom, space can be given for practice in developing not only language functions, but judicious use of grammar and pronunciation activities as well (Larsen-Freeman, 1986; Johnson, 1982)

Then the teacher asked the students to make comparison of the chosen characters using the displayed paragraph as reference. She first asked in the Malay language before repeating the question in English. She also asked questions regarding some parts of the story. When there seemed to be doubt of whether she can be understood, she again translated some of the questions into Malay. This is not wrong in CLT as stated by Finocchario and Brumfit (1983) that translations may be used where ESL learners need or benefit from it. Besides that, communicating meaningful information is vital in CLT.

For the next activity, she introduced the task which was Information Transfer. As she explained the task, she mixed the instructions with the students' first language. Then she called a few students to write their answers on the whiteboard. While waiting for the second student to finish writing, she asked the third student his answer. When he made a mistake in the answer, she again immediately corrected it. She also asked additional questions to the rest of the class as they waited for their friends to finish, like "Do you know any musician?" This is one feature of CLT that Nunan (1981) had

mentioned which is the learner's individual experiences are given importance as contributing elements to classroom learning.

As the few last students finished up writing their answers, she passed a number of sentence strips to randomly selected students. Then after the students had finished writing, she asked the rest of the class to check the paragraph for any mistakes. The students answered that there was no error at all. She praised the students for writing grammatically correct sentences and for punctuating them correctly. This can be a mean to motivate and garner interest in the students. As claimed by Finocchario and Brumfit (1983), intrinsic motivation will spring from an interest in what is being communicated by the language. When the teacher seemed to focus on the grammatical aspect of the paragraph, she did not actually wander away from CLT. It is true that CLT gives top priority to the use or function of the language and less focus on structure or form (Larsen-Freeman, 1986; Johnson, 1982) but, this is not to say that knowledge of grammar is not crucial to communicate effectively. In fact it is vital that functions and forms are accorded systematic treatment. Littlewood (1981) emphasized on this, as to him, "one of the most characteristic features of communicative language teaching is that it pays systematic attention to functional as well as structural aspects of language" (1981:1). In fact, neglect of grammar will almost certainly cause a breakdown in communication (Savignon, 1991, 2001; Thompson, 1996). When it comes to mastering an intermediate or advanced level of English proficiency for second language speakers, grammar lesson must be taken into consideration. Even though CLT denotes the lesson to be more student-centered or fun, it does not mean it should be unstructured (Belchamber, 2007). A student should be aware on how to use verbs at different times. There is still more room for CLT to be approached without ignoring the importance of grammar skills and different competence needs of the students within the limited time allocated for a language class weekly.

The students then read the sentences aloud before the teacher asked them to copy the paragraph in their exercise books. Next, she briefed the students on the second task. Again she mixed the instructions with Malay, especially on words that she thought might pose a problem to the students like "similarities" and "differences". As students who received the sentence strips came forward to paste their answers in correct column drawn on the board, she immediately corrected any mistake that the students made as they pasted the strips on the board. She also prompted answer from the class to correct the mistake. Here the teacher again used one of the features of CLT which allows learners to share responsibility, set goals, and take charge of their own language learning.

Finally the teacher asked the students to take out their exercise books. As she communicated with the students, she mixed the use of language. They were asked to write a paragraph on one of the characters they personally choose in the story. However, it was given as homework as time was running out. Writing is also a part of CLT. Communicative approach does not pertain only to oral skills. Development of other skills like reading and writing should not be overlooked so as to foster pupils' confidence in all four skills areas. From the beginning, students learn all four skills, i.e., a given activity might involve reading, speaking, listening, and possibly, writing as well (Celce-Murcia, 1991). She also called two students to repeat the instructions she had given. According to Jack C. Richards and Charles Lockhart (1997) this is one of strategies of giving feedback on form which is by requesting the students to repeat what the teacher had said earlier.

The teacher concluded the lesson by recalling new vocabulary learnt that day and pointed out the mistakes made by the students.

3.0 FINDINGS

Strength

When we talk about a method or approach being used in a language teaching environment, we cannot avoid discussing its strength and weaknesses. Among the strengths that the observer managed to identify with regards to communicative language teaching (CLT) methodology was the active participation in the classroom. According to Richards and Rodgers, one of the principle of CLT is to promote learning (Guangwei Hu, 2002). The teacher managed to engage the classroom with the usage of visual displays and sentence strips. Not only that, the personality of the teacher contributed to the active participation by the students. The teacher plays an important role not only in the aspect of producing a good lesson plan but also in reaching out to the students. When students are comfortable in a learning environment, they will be motivated to be part of it. Additionally, the role of teacher and students have changed in CLT. The teacher becomes the facilitator while students are expected to participate in classroom activities collaboratively rather than individually (Richards, 2006).

There was also a lot of two way communication where students are expected to pose questions for further understanding and give feedback to the tasks being done. As the activities were being carried out, the teacher readily accept any answer or information from the students. She also at times corrected their mistakes inductively by asking "Are you sure?" "Really?". As a result the students could check their answers for any errors and make an effort to correct them. Moreover, the teacher rather facilitated than simply gave orders while students attempted the answers. She also employed the technique of self-correction which was effective because this technique not only helps the students to recall information for a long time but also to understand better.

T: Where does the Donkey live?
Ss: House.
T: It's in your textbook. Open your book and find the answer.
Ss: (check the book)
T: Read the sentence.
Ss: The Goody Donkey lived in a barn.
Eventually, with the indirect interjection, students will be able to self-correct themselves thus making it another valuable strength of CLT.

Weaknesses

As opposed to the traditional direct method where grammar is taught inductively, CLT does not merely focus on grammar teaching. The main focus of CLT is the communicative competence. If a student is able to use the target language outside a classroom setting, then the goal of CLT has been achieved. Looking back at the detailed lesson plan, it is quite plain to see that despite the lesson being regarded as a CLT, one of its key principles is missing – pair or group work, or more specifically, learner-learner interaction. Most of the communication or interaction came from the teacher with the students. More emphasis should be given to active modes of learning such as pair or group work in

problem-solving tasks in order to maximize the time allotted to each student for learning to negotiate meaning. Language teaching techniques in CLT are intended for meaningful purposes in which learners get involved in the pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language. Classrooms should provide opportunities for students to be able to practice real-life situations and provide opportunity for real communication to take place. However, it has been admitted that classroom group and/or pair work ought not to be considered an essential feature used all the time, and may well be unsuitable in some settings. Thompson (1996) and Savignon (2002) claimed that group and/or pair work are flexible and useful techniques, and they are active modes of learning which can help the learners to negotiate meaning and engage in problem-solving activities.

Another weakness which can seen was the teacher's correction of students' mistakes. There was almost always instant correction the moment the students make one. In one instance, during the 'information transfer' activity, even before the answer was written on the whiteboard, the teacher had checked the student's answer first to make sure that the answer was right. It would do us well as teachers, to remember that the possibility of over-correcting students always exist, as they may lose their motivation and enthusiasm. Constant correction is unnecessary and even counter-productive. The flow of the class or the activities may also be interrupted if every single mistake is deemed obligatory to be corrected. In CLT, errors are regarded as reflections of a learner's natural progress of learning the second language and are therefore tolerated. Besides that, students' reaction to the corrections and feedback should also be observed for fear that they may incur students' reluctance to respond in class to avoid making errors or embarrassment in front of others. Students also may form negative belief about error correction. It is opined that not all mistakes need to be corrected since they are perceived as natural outcomes of the development of communication skill. Moreover, Gower, Phillips and Walters report that the correction depends on the aim of activities. If the focus is on accuracy, the teacher's control and correction will be tight and if the focus is on more fluency then the teacher's direct control and correction will be less (Gower, Phillips and Walters, 1995). Nevertheless, it is undeniable that most students do wish for corrections of their mistakes as it provides the basis for their improvement. It is tricky to know when and how to correct students. Giving feedback and correcting errors essentially not only serve as a learner's progress indicator but also as a platform to increase motivation and build a supportive classroom climate.

4.0 CONCLUSION

To sum up, throughout the lesson, there are numerous interactions carried out by the teacher with the students. The students were encouraged to participate actively in the lesson and the teacher was able to grab and maintain the students' attention, which is crucial for any learning to take place.

There was also a mix of the mother tongue used by the teacher as her main purpose is to communicate meaningful information to the students. Although most of the times, the students responded in Malay, it also served to prove that they had understood what was being taught.

Despite some of the weaknesses in the lesson, which could be due to the time-constraint the teacher experienced, overall, it was still mainly a communicative language teaching approach and the

teacher had shown that she was capable of using different methods and strategies to make her lesson not only coherent and meaningful, but interesting as well.

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