

Challenges and Opportunities of CLT in the Specialty of Executives for Customer Service in a Public Technical Secondary School in Costa Rica

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Abstract: *The present analysis is focused on the challenges and opportunities faced in implementing CLT in the Specialty of Executives for Customer Service in a technical Secondary School in Costa Rica. Technical Education in Costa Rica is relevant as tool for social mobility. The motivation to discuss this topic arose from my own experience teaching the specialty and the vast room for improvement in terms of its design. Globalisation has played a major role in recent years in Costa Rica, and English as Foreign Language is an instrumental motivation for Costa Ricans. Challenges and opportunities are discussed in terms of the curricular design proposed by educational authorities of the country. The analysis concludes that some theoretical tenets should be redesigned as well as the standardised test students take to get their technical degree.*

Keywords: English teaching, TESOL, Methodology, CLT

1. Introduction

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) blossomed in Costa Rica mid-90s (Barboza, 2010) and it remains still one of the primary methods to teach English as a Foreign Language (EFL). CLT developed as one of the solutions to the rigidity of other prior methods like the audio-lingual method. In terms of this paper, CLT is extremely relevant since it is the method proposed in the curricular design and each of the syllabus of the English Subjects of Executives for Customer Service. Technical education in Costa Rica has risen due to a necessity of qualified workers for companies as a result of globalisation. In technical education, students study one more year in secondary school and choose a specialty. Depending on the specialty, students take different courses. Specialties are offered according to the area where you live. The curricular design and syllabi that will be analysed is the one for a bilingual specialty: Executives for Customer Service. Students take the specialty for three years and at the end they take the practicum using the target language -English- in different companies. Even though the specialty has shown great results, there seems to be a lot of problems related to the implementation of CLT and the theoretical tenets of the syllabus.

This essay was written as an assignment in the Course Language Teaching and Curriculum of the MA TESOL at the University of Nottingham, England. It attempts to explore the theoretical and practical value of CLT, and search for present challenges and future opportunities based on my own CLT teaching experience in a secondary technical school in Costa Rica.

This essay is organized in five parts. After a brief introduction, the second part is a literature review including its definition, key features, strengths and criticisms of CLT and CLT in Costa Rica. The third part presents the context of teaching English in Costa Rica where the application of methodology is of great importance. The fourth part covers

the challenges of CLT and opportunities for the future for the implementation of CLT in the specialty of executive for customer service in secondary technical schools in Costa Rica. The last part contains a summary of the essay and some recommendations for future analysis.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition and Key Features

CLT has been typically defined as an approach rather than method with the goal to make the communicative competence an aim of teaching a language and develop listening, reading, writing and speaking to correlate language and communication (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Nonetheless, authors like Maley (1986) argue if communicative competence can actually even be taught. For that reason, this section presents different points of view on what CLT is.

As Richards and Rodgers (2014) mention there is not an authority in CLT or even a text that has been accepted universally. Therefore, many scholars interpret CLT with some differences. As an example, some say CLT is more of an integration between grammar and functional teaching (Littlewood, 1981). Others interpreted it as “using procedures where learners work in pairs or groups employing available language resources in problem-solving tasks” (Richards, 2014, p. 86).

Despite a lack of consensus, Howatt (1984) explained the differences among two types of CLT: a “weak” and a “strong” version of CLT. The weak form consists of Presentation, Practice and Production which is the customary form that has been implemented (Littlewood, 1981). Littlewood (1982) emphasizes the relevance of appropriate pre-communicative activities as structural activities and quasi-communicative activities that will hold close ties to the communicative activities. On the other hand, Nunan (1988)

explains that the strong rather than drills focuses on real-life tasks and uses authentic materials. One of the major agreements among CLT advocates is the importance of direct use of the communicative component instead of delaying communicative practice (Canale & Swain, 1980; Richards & Rogers, 2014).

Some relevant tenets expressed by Richards and Rodgers (2014, p.89) are the following:

- Language is a system for the expression of meaning.
- The primary function of language is to allow interaction and communication.
- The structure of language reflects its functional and communicative uses.
- The primary units of language are not merely its grammatical and structural features, but categories of functional and communicative meaning as exemplified in discourse.
- Communicative competence entails knowing how to use language for a range of different purposes and functions.

2.2 Brief History

In 1972, a British linguist by the name of D.A. Wilkins had a big impact on the development of CLT through his ideas proposing a communicative function of the language. Instead of focusing on grammar and vocabulary, he proposed categories of communicative function like offering, requesting, refusing or denying (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). In addition to Wilkins' ideas (1972), several others helped shape CLT:

The work of Council of Europe; the writings of Wilkins, Widdowson, Candlin, Christopher Brumfit, Keith Johnson, and other British applied linguists on the theoretical basis for a communicative or functional approach to language teaching; the rapid application of these ideas by textbook writers; and the equally rapid acceptance of these new principles by British language teaching specialists, curriculum development centers, and even governments gave prominence nationally and internationally to what came to be referred to as the Communicative Approach, or Communicative Language Teaching (Richards & Rogers, 2014, p.85).

Along with the contribution of the aforementioned, CLT spread all over the world and quickly became a part of the national curriculum in several countries.

According to Chomsky (as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2014), the theory of competence meant to have an ideal speaker and listener in a community where the language was spoken homogeneously; and that a limited memory, interest, modifications of attention and others do not affect the speaker. Nonetheless, Hymes decided to extend and broaden that definition. Therefore, the theory of communicative competence was created and vastly used by CLT writers. This theory included communication and culture –“what a speaker needs to know in order to be communicatively competent in a speech community”- (Richards & Rodgers, 2014, p. 88). Halliday (as cited in Richards & Rodgers,

2014, p.88) explained seven basic functions for learning a language that were relevant for CLT writers: instrumental, regulatory, interactional, personal, heuristic, imaginative, and representational.

3. Communicative Language Teaching

3.1 Teacher and Learner Roles

As CLT built a path towards different classroom activities, new roles were established for both teachers and learners. According to a shift from individualistic classwork to a cooperative one involved changes in terms of students being comfortable with more pair work or group work (Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Savignon, 1991). In addition, more responsibility was assigned to students. Breen and Candlin (as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2014) state the relevance of the student as a negotiator in the class. On the teachers' hand, the role is of a facilitator and monitor of students work. Regarding error correction, teachers have to favour fluency rather than accuracy (Richards, 2006). Maley (1986) states that teachers need to get involved actively as 'real people' in the activities they develop. The teachers have to promote interaction which places them in a less secure role. Richards and Rogers (2014) expand widely on the role of the teacher pointing out that the teacher has possible roles in a CLT classroom -needs analyst, counsellor, and group process managers-.

3.2. Claimed Strengths

In this section, the strengths several authors have underlined regarding CLT will be briefly presented. Maley (1986) mentions as strengths the variety of competence, the earlier opportunity of language use compared to other approaches, more motivating for students, focus on the necessary elements, and foresight of skills for the real world. CLT meets the learner's needs, puts the focus on the learner and encourages students to communicate in social situations rather than memorising phrases (Canale & Swain, 1980; Savignon, 1991). Littlewood (1981) expresses that CLT creates more situations where communication can take place thus students feel more comfortable and allow the learner to supply their personality. Moreover, students use the language in a meaningful real-life-related style (Hoa Hiep, 2007).

3.3. Criticisms

Even though CLT has been broadly implemented in many language schools and even government syllabi, criticisms have also been emphasised by authors (Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1997; Maley, 1986; Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Savignon, 2007; Swan, 1985a; Swan, 1985b). One of the main criticisms CLT has been a subject of is that it provides room for fossilization. Most research has reported that fluency is developed while accuracy is affected. It reflects the role of the teacher under this method. In addition, some critics like Hird (as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2014) indicated that CLT does not fit well in some contexts; thus, it is not applicable due to cultural contrasts in some contexts like China. Moreover, Kumaravadivelu (as

cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2014) argued that the communicative syllabus and common procedures for its implementation do not capture the diversity of students' needs and goals. In addition, Swan (1985a) highlighted how difficult it is to use CLT in a beginners' class by setting the example of the usage of comparatives. Maley (1986) deepened in the problem related to teacher training and their competence. It is difficult to differentiate teacher absence or inactivity and knowing the correct moment to intervene whereas the use of a textbook provides guidance to the teacher. Additionally, evaluating and testing is more difficult than with other approaches.

4. Communicative Language Teaching in Costa Rica

CLT was implemented in the syllabus of some subjects by Ministerio de Educación Pública (MEP) -the ruling entity in terms of secondary teaching- in 1994 up-to-today. Nonetheless, in a national basis CLT has not been researched broadly. Barboza (2010) indicated the lack of research existent in Costa Rica to decide if CLT was a proper method to acquire in our context. Cordero and Pizarro (2013) researched if CLT would improve grammar classes but at a university level. The result was that students were more motivated by including communicative principles in a grammar class. Historically Costa Rica has had a slow response to changes and updates to educational theory. Today, new programs for some English secondary levels include in their syllabus characteristics of CLT, Task-based, Cooperative Learning and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). The latter has been taking strength in technical education specialties where students as an example take accounting subjects in English. As I mentioned before, academic articles of high quality are lacking regarding the use of CLT -and even more so at a secondary level- in Costa Rica.

4.1. Context

The secondary school is located near the capital of Costa Rica -San José- in the city of Tres Ríos. The secondary school is a public technical school where several specialties are taught in the last three years of secondary school -for a total of six-. I worked for five years as an English teacher in the specialty of Executives for Customer Service. An average of students per specialty would round from 16 to 20 students. There is no specific number of boys and girls in every class since it tends to vary from generation to generation. Students will study for six years in this secondary school. During the first three years (seventh, eighth and ninth grade) students take the following main subjects: Spanish, Social Studies, Science, Mathematics, Physical Education, Values, Music, English, French and an exploratory workshop (fashion, accounting, technical support, technical drawing, secretary, or handcrafting). The main idea of these workshops is for students to explore their options before they decide their specialty in tenth grade. Students will take exactly the same subjects as the first three years but now they will attend more hours to the specialty of their choosing. The options for a specialty in the secondary school I worked for

were: accounting, technical support, networking, secretary, technical drawing, and executive for customer service. After three more years of studying (tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade), students go to a company to carry a two-month practicum before graduation. A lot of students stay working for the company after their practicum is finished. Some decide to continue university studies, but that option is not very popular among students once they get a salary.

The teaching syllabi is from MEP and some secondary schools like this one have a no-textbook policy. All subjects are taught in Spanish except English and French. Nonetheless, the specialty of executive for customer service is different. It is a bilingual specialty where students are expected to work using the target language before they graduate, thus more subjects are in English. Students of this specialty take the following courses in English:

In tenth grade, Oral Communication which represents eight hours a week, and Written Communication which represents four hours a week.

In eleventh grade, Oral Communication which consists of eight hours a week.

In twelfth grade, Oral Communication which is six hours a week, and Translation and Interpreting which is four hours a week.

The school year starts in February and it officially ends mid-December. Students attend classes from Monday to Friday on a schedule from 7:00 am to 4:30 pm. Even though throughout most educational facilities in Costa Rica educational and technological equipment is lacking, that is not the case of technical education or this specialty. Every class is developed in a lab with laptop computers, headsets, video beam projectors or smart projectors, recorders, DVDs, an educational software, among others. Most teachers are native speakers of Spanish who studied English teaching in a public or private university. The teaching approach to use is mostly CLT.

Regarding the application of CLT, there is no training provided to teachers working for MEP. The only input on CLT teachers receive is during their university years where a course on methods is usually taken. Most teachers were experienced when they were given the responsibility to teach the bilingual specialty. Nevertheless, the teachers' English proficiency in the country has been proven to be deficient. Barahona, Acuña and Ceciliano (2010) stated that by 2009 48% of teachers were B1 and B2 in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), but even more alarming - some teachers were A2 in the CEFR-. In the Sexto Informe del Estado de la Nación (2017) in the topic of Education, it was indicated the low English proficiency of teachers as a cause for the lack of success of the syllabi.

5. Discussion

5.1 Challenges

In terms of assessment, the curricular design for tenth grade in the specialty of executives for customer service includes some aspects to be incorporated by teachers: "...a purpose for using the language..., a context for language use..., promote individual and group activities..., opportunities for critical thinking..." (MEP, 2008, p.93). The evaluation criteria for each subject is as follows: Classwork (25%), Out-of-Class Assignments (10%), Tests (40%), Project (15%), Attendance (5%), Behaviour (5%). One of the biggest challenges I faced is establishing a balance between what and how it should be taught in counterpart to what students will probably face in a national standardised test when they get to twelfth grade. The biggest difficulty is faced when as a teacher I had to decide whether to prepare students and evaluate them following the aforementioned guidelines or prepare them for the standardised test. Hoa Hiep (2007) noticed how it was difficult for Vietnam teachers to put CLT into practice since students were worried mostly about exams.

Furthermore, a more incredible scenario happens for the subject of Oral Communication which carries the biggest load of hours and content. As indicated in the syllabus, Oral Communication only includes objectives towards two skills: listening and speaking; nevertheless, Oral Communication's contents are evaluated in multiple choice questions -not listening items- in the standardised test. Therefore, one of the biggest challenges is matching educational authorities' guidelines for teachers juxtaposed to reality and their assessment goals. In addition, even though it clearly states that individual and group activities should be promoted, it never discusses other types of assessment rather than only the teacher evaluating and assessing students. Peer-assessment or self-assessment are not included in the curricular design even when CLT promoted that shift in mentality: "Giving learners greater choice over their own learning, both in terms of the content of learning as well as processes they might employ. The use of small groups is one example of this, as well as the use of self-assessment" (Richards & Rodgers, 2014, p.106). Richards and Rodgers (2014) also mention the importance of alternative forms of assessment like observation and portfolios which are used in the specialty of executives for customer service; however, students are faced towards a traditional form of assessment in a standardised test.

The syllabus at hand is definitely a 'Type A' Syllabus (White, 1988), thus the following characteristics are matched: being external to the learner, authority made the decisions, objectives were previously designed, assessment by mastery and the teacher makes the decisions. Even though the syllabus is based on CLT where one of the aims is developing processes for teaching the four language skills to show interdependence altogether even with additional skills (Canale & Swain, 1980; Richards & Rodgers, 2014), Oral Communication and Written Communication each teach separate skills; as an example, Oral Communication only includes speaking and listening. While authors have expressed a different path to be followed: "link the different skills such as speaking, reading, and listening together, since they usually occur together in the real world" (Richards & Rodgers, 2014, p.95). Teaching Oral Communication was a

challenge for me as a teacher because of the structure of the syllabus. As a teacher, you have 320 hours to carry out three units named: personal interaction at the company, company structure and working conditions, company furniture, equipment and tools. The first two units have the exact same linguistic competences and all three units are strictly directed towards the content of being in a work place. At first, I thought it was because those were my first years as a teacher, but now I understand that the syllabus is not clear and it does not meet a clear objective of having a syllabus -standardise teaching- (White, 1988). In addition, it includes a lot of information that may cause a lot of misunderstandings for a novice teacher. It indicates that it "integrates basically the following approaches and methods: CLT, Cooperative Learning, Multiple Intelligence Theory and Learning Styles" (MEP, 2008, p.77). After that, it explains each separately. CLT and Cooperative Learning have a lot of characteristics in common but Multiple Intelligence theory is exactly that -a theory- and not a teaching method (Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Slavin, 1980). The syllabus and curricular design should be clear in terms of what CLT is and what its characteristics are.

In addition to a confusing syllabus, there is no teacher training provided focused on CLT or any other methodology. Authorities know that there is a deficiency regarding teachers linguistic and theoretical knowledge (Estado de la Nación, 2017); nevertheless, no training is provided. During five years as a teacher, I only attended to one training session and it was six hours on classroom arrangement (debate, semi-circle, etc.). The lack of knowledge by a great number of teachers altogether with the lack of help by authorities to counterpoint those deficiencies make a lethal combination. In my case, I knew what CLT was, but I had never put it to use before; therefore, I considered a challenge implementing CLT in class without the proper preparation. I strongly believe and from what I have previously discussed with other teachers is that they opt for not following what has been established in the curricular design.

5.2 Opportunities

The first opportunity to the challenges is finding an assessment and evaluation criteria that matches the methodology and the reality of the context. As mentioned before, all assessments are teacher-assessments while peer or self-assessment are non-existent. Moreover, there is room to include formative assessment rather than just the traditional summative assessment to decide what students are learning and how. In addition, a standardised test that includes multiple choice questions to evaluate contents from even an oral communication course should be eliminated since it may cause the class to change and strictly prepare students for that test. Nonetheless, a good solution is implementing a CLT-based standardised test such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). In terms of the lack of coherence of contents, linguistic objectives, aims of the specialty, expectations and reality, a re-design of the English subjects in the specialty should take place. As a teacher of the specialty, I felt a combination of Written and Oral Communication under only one subject would make the subject better suitable for CLT, the students, and the teacher

in the case of tenth grade. "There is general acceptance of the complexity and interrelatedness of skills in both written and oral communication and of the need for learners to have the experience of communication" (Savignon, 1991, p.262). Therefore, a communication subject with mixed characteristics of the two pre-existent ones would fit perfectly since "the principles of CLT apply equally to reading and writing activities that involve readers and writers engaged in the interpretation, expression, and negation of meaning" (Savignon, 2007, p.213). In addition, the advantages of implementing CLT have been highlighted even in traditional grammar classes which could be taken into account for combining Written and Oral Communication into one (Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1998; Cordero & Pizarro, 2013). In eleventh and twelfth grade a redesign of what is taught is relevant as well. Borden (1998) focuses on the relevance of high-quality design of ESL (English as a Second Language) programs meeting student needs and cultural reality by authorities.

Another opportunity is changing the curriculum design and syllabus so that it becomes more applicable for novice or unprepared teachers. As stated in the challenges section, the unit division can improve substantially and set better linguistic objectives. Moreover, there is an opportunity to change the syllabus and set better tenets for the application of CLT. Instead of using a Type A syllabus, it would be interesting to mix a Type A with a Type B and take into account both the teachers and students as well in the design (White, 1988). Teachers rather than authorities -who are the ones who build the syllabus around a methodology- are the ones who experience every day the challenges of implementing CLT in the classroom. A big opportunity in terms of CLT is that it is not that difficult of a task to train teachers in one particular method and that does not necessarily mean to exclude characteristics from other methods in the curricular design. Well-established guidelines would provide a better standardised teaching in any technical secondary school where the specialty is taught.

Teacher training is often overlooked in Costa Rica and the use of CLT in this specialty requires more preparation on the teachers behave. Educational policies are established by the Public Ministry of Education; therefore, they must provide proper training in the areas where it is needed. With the implementation of technology through the use of video conferences, teacher training could take place in distance and it would not require teachers to move across the country. In addition, through the use of video conference, it would not be time-consuming neither for the teacher, the expert on CLT, and the organising authorities. Another opportunity could be creating induction and training videos for teachers which they can watch at home. Possibilities on teacher training are endless.

6. Conclusions

As a conclusion, this paper has provided a literature review on CLT, along with its relevant characteristics. Additionally, strengths and weaknesses on the implementation of CLT have been provided. A short remark on the history of CLT is

provided. The teacher and learner roles under CLT have been summarised. Then, it has described the research carried in Costa Rica on CLT where the lack of research and academic articles is alarming. It also explains in depth the context of my teaching experience with CLT -as a teacher and a colleague- where it is not clear if CLT was beneficial or even applied correctly by most teachers. Some reasons for not being applied correctly could have been obstacles presented by the context, curricular design, syllabi, assessment and evaluation, or even lack of knowledge on the teachers' behave.

Therefore, some proposals were presented as an opportunity for improvement. Firstly, exploring better ways to assess under CLT and present students with different types of assessment. Furthermore, eliminating the standardised test would help improve the quality of teaching in the class instead of teaching for a national test or substituting the standardised test for a CLT-based test. Another solution could be re-structuring the test in a way that it actually matches the linguistic objectives of the curricular design and the aim of the specialty of Executives for Customer Service. A re-design of the English subjects is also presented so that CLT suits better the curriculum. Writing a clear and effective curriculum design and syllabus for each course will help novice teachers a long way in their day-to-day teaching under CLT. The last proposal introduced the idea of authorities providing teacher training on how to use CLT and how to take the theory and syllabus to the class. Teacher training and research -not only on CLT- are one of the top necessities in Costa Rica's public education system.

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