

The Effect of Culture and Society on Communicative Language Teaching

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Abstract

Teaching English as a foreign language has gone through many theories and approaches through time. Communicative Language Teaching is an approach which is being implemented in teaching English as a foreign language in wide areas of the world nowadays. This paper tries to explore the effect of culture and society in teaching the English language following the communicative language teaching approach. It provides clarifications of the meaning of communicative competence and its components and how it differs from linguistic competence and other types of competence. Also, the intercultural competence has been considered in this paper as it plays an important role in language teaching as well. The appropriate use of a language comes from its use within the society. The society of the target language, which is English, and its culture have significant influence in teaching English as a foreign language. This research paper shows that language and culture are related to each other and using the language appropriately requires the possess of good knowledge and background about the target language's culture and society.

Keywords: communicative language teaching, culture, society, competence.

تأثير الثقافة و المجتمع في تدريس اللغة التواصلية

الملخص

لقد مر تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية بالعديد من النظريات والطرق عبر الزمن. تدريس اللغة التواصلية هو احدى الطرق المتبعة في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في مناطق واسعة من العالم في الوقت الحاضر. تحاول هذه الورقة استكشاف تأثير الثقافة و المجتمع في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية باتباع طريقة تدريس اللغة التواصلية. تقدم هذه الورقة توضيحات لمعنى الكفاءة التواصلية ومكوناتها و كيف تختلف عن الكفاءة اللغوية وأنواع الكفاءات الأخرى. أيضا تم النظر في هذه الورقة الى الكفاءة بين الثقافات لأنها تلعب دورا هاما في تدريس اللغة هي الأخرى. الاستخدام المناسب للغة ينبع من استخدامها داخل المجتمع. ان مجتمع اللغة الهدف، وهنا هي اللغة الإنجليزية، وكذلك ثقافتها لهما تأثيرين كبيرين في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. توضح ورقة البحث هذه ان اللغة والثقافة مرتبطتان ببعضهما البعض وان استخدام اللغة بشكل مناسب يتطلب امتلاك معرفة و خلفية جيدتين حول ثقافة و مجتمع اللغة المستهدفة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تعليم اللغة التواصلية، الثقافة، المجتمع، الكفاءة.

1. Introduction

While Chomsky gained popularity in the U.S.A. and worldwide (Richards & Rodgers 2001), British linguists at the same time realized the functional and communicative characteristics of language. They started to doubt the need for mastery of structures to demonstrate communicative proficiency. Meanwhile, economic developments in Europe also implied the need to learn foreign languages in order to gain economic advantages. Communicative competence is the main goal of communicative language teaching (CLT). This competence basically involves the ability to understand and be understood, which is not parallel to basic understanding or mastery of language structures. Wilkins (cited in Richards & Rodgers 2001) proposed a functional or communicative definition of language suggestive of developing

syllabi in response to the goals of CLT. This directed both British and American language schools to explore notional-functional language teaching, otherwise known as the CLT approach. According to Richards and Schmidt (2002), in the 1980s the British applied linguists developed CLT as a reaction to grammar-based approaches such as Situational Language Teaching and the Audio-lingual Method.

Richards and Rodgers (2001) state that, according to the CLT approach, the intention behind learning is to acquire communicative competence that makes the students able to use the language in different contexts. It pays systematic attention to functional as well as structural aspects of language. This approach presupposes that students take the central role in learning and they are given a chance to do the learning themselves instead of having everything done for them by the teacher. Some major claims related to CLT include that by Howatt (cited in Littlewood2001).Howatt advances the claim that by using English one learns the language. This totally opposes the idea pioneered by early grammarians, which sought to teach language structures first before gaining the ability to use the language. Proponents of CLT believe that it is through struggling to utter words and constructing sentences during communicative situations, without conscious regard for grammatical correctness, that one learns a foreign language. As such, the more learners are exposed to the language in use, the more likely they are to become skillful in it.

Johnson and Johnson (1999) state that CLT is regarded as an approach rather than a method, and its roots lie in an emphasis on sociolinguistics and pragmatics in the field of language teaching. In terms of syllabus, CLT is associated with the Council of Europe's work, and with

attempts to list language concepts and uses. In terms of methodology, the emphasis is placed on message-focus, on the ability to understand and convey messages. The Council of Europe is an organization of European countries designed to promote cultural and educational cooperation. Its ‘Threshold Level’ in the 1970s (Finney 2002) served as an important move in the field of language teaching. Transformation occurred as the communicative approach to language teaching replaced the grammar-based approach. The trend that followed gave emphasis on the notional-functional syllabus and needs analysis along with the purpose of language learning on top of narrow linguistic focus. In the view of Richards and Schmidt (2002), CLT led educators to re-examine their language teaching goals, materials for instruction, syllabuses, and classroom activities. Its impact made a revolutionary change in language teaching worldwide. Some of its principles have been incorporated into other communicative approaches, such as Task-Based Language Teaching, Cooperative Language Learning, and Content-Based Instruction.

2. Communicative Language Teaching

Many approaches to language teaching were conceptualized in the 70s to respond to the needs of the growing number of foreign language learners. Particularly, educators sought a more creative approach that diverted the attention of language learners from language drills and structure to its functions and notions. Likewise, arguments regarding the focus of instruction encouraged the emergence of different approaches, including CLT.

CLT is most often defined as a list of general principles or features. One of the most recognized of these lists is David Nunan’s (2004 p.6) 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 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.

With the abovementioned features, practitioners of CLT focus on the needs and desires of learners as well as the practical application of classroom learning. Unlike other approaches that failed to connect classroom instruction with real-life settings, CLT emphasized the use of authentic context as a more beneficial form of instruction. Hence, any teaching practice that develops communicative competence in an authentic context is deemed acceptable and a beneficial form of instruction.

In spite of the merits which characterize the communicative approach, it has been subject to some criticisms. Al-Mutawa & Kailani (1998) argue that it implies that every teacher should modify the syllabus to correspond with the needs and interests of his students because of the emphasis of the approach on these needs and interests. This is not possible to implement especially in classes with a high number of students, as it would require the teacher to write a separate syllabus for each student in the class. Moreover, Harmer (2005 p.86) states that "CLT has come under attack for being prejudiced in favor of native-speaking teachers, by demanding a relatively uncontrolled

range of language use on the part of the student, and thus expecting the non-native-speaking teacher to be able to respond to any and every language problem that may come up”. Furthermore, Al-Mutawa&Kailani (1998) point out that the communicative approach gives priority to meanings and rules of use rather than to grammar and rules of structure. This focus on language behavior may have harmful consequences. The student may not have enough awareness of grammar to do things with the language, i.e. to perform communicative tasks. There is also the danger of not covering all areas of grammar when they are solely taught through functions and notions. Moreover, the teacher may not be able to isolate and practice difficult forms of grammar before students can utilize them in speech acts.

In this respect, Al-Mutawa&Kailani(1998)remark that it is no use making meaning tidy if grammar then becomes so untidy that it cannot be learnt properly. They add that there are two major requirements for the successful application of the approach. One is the availability of a classroom that can permit activities of group work or student-student interaction and teaching aids and materials. Such a classroom is desirable but is unfortunately unavailable in many schools. The other requirement is a highly competent and imaginative teacher who can apply the techniques appropriately. Definitely, along with the requirements set by Al-Mutawa&Kailanithere should be a fully functional syllabus adhering to the principles of CLT.

3. Communicative Competence and other types of Competences

Thornbury (1999) points out that grammatical knowledge is only one component of linguistic competence. He believes that communicative competence involves appropriate use of grammar and vocabulary during

social interaction. Larsen-Freeman (2000) adds that while the goal of many approaches is to achieve communicative competence, the Communicative Approach is still more comprehensive for its emphasis on what it takes to be communicatively competent. The forerunner of the Functional-Notional Approach, Larsen-Freeman clarifies that communicative competence involves the ability to use the language appropriately in a specific social context. In order to achieve this, students need to obtain knowledge of linguistic forms, meanings, and functions. Considering the different forms and functions that language has, learners should be able to use the language in its different functions in their own social context to signify proficiency.

Richards & Rodgers (2001) offer a more profound meaning of communicative competence. According to him, communicative competence pertains to the knowledge and ability to use the language according to the intended purpose, means, degree, and effect. This contrast with Chomsky's view of competence is entirely linguistic. Savignon (1997) distinguishes among different components of communicative competence. These include grammar competence, discourse competence, socio-linguistic competence and strategic competence. Grammar competence refers to the ability to use the language in its correct and standardized form. Simply, this means the knowledge of structural rules and the ability to apply them in communication. Particularly, a person with grammatical competence knows how to construct sentences using correct word formation and sentence structure (phrases, clauses, etc.). While grammatical competence denotes command of the language, it does not guarantee that individual will succeed in every given communication setting. One needs discourse competence or the ability to understand and create language forms in order to form meaning and

substance. The ability to carry out simple or everyday conversations and write correspondences constitutes discourse competence. Clearly, these two kinds of competencies – grammatical and discourse competencies – are what Chomsky refers to, while Hymes refers to a more complex and in-depth meaning, one that involves understanding of other factors affecting communication.

Richards & Rodgers (2001) clarify that the meaning of communication involves not only structure and function, but also culture and norms. The ability to communicate effectively considering such factors is called socio-linguistic competence. This kind of competence is specifically important when communicating with people of different cultures or backgrounds. People who have differing cultures may have difficulty understanding each other until a conscious effort is made to bridge gaps. As such, people with socio-linguistic competence are adept at knowledge of different cultures, history, and even current events. These factors allow a person to communicate without offending the other speaker, or making oneself appear superior. The other kind of competence, which may be included in Hymes' notion, is strategic competence. Strategic competence is the ability of a person to compensate for the lack of ability in the other areas (Savignon 1997). This relates to the ability of the person to survive a communication situation at perverse settings, when grammar, structural, and functional clues are not enough. With strategic competence, a person can survive the given situation through the effective use of words, actions, facial expressions, or gestures.

4. Socio-Cultural Implications of CLT

The disagreement between Chomsky and Hymes regarding communicative competence suggests socio-cultural implications of CLT for the learners' ability to learn a foreign language. Nazari (2007) explains that Chomsky's notion of competence is only linguistic while that of Hymes, being communicative, is more encompassing. This is to say that a person with communicative competence is also expected to understand the elements and structure of a language. Therefore, we should look into the socio-cultural implications related to the use of CLT given the goal of communicative competence. This is far more important considering the widespread use of CLT throughout the world in nations' effort to learn English, among other languages.

Hymes defines communicative competence as the knowledge and ability to use the language with respect to "whether and to what degree something is possible, feasible, appropriate, and done" (Richards & Rodgers 2001 p.159). In other words, he perceives communicative competence based on a person's ability to communicate, and according to the intended purpose, means, degree, and effect. It is through achieving such intention that one can claim communicative competence and not by knowing linguistic structures such as that viewed by Chomsky. Following Hymes' view, we can note the socio-cultural features of language (Hymes cited in Nazari 2007).

Language involves socio-cultural features. Thanasoulas (2000) contends that "we cannot go about teaching a foreign language without at least offering some insights into its speakers' culture" (p.7). Communicative competence requires that one comprehends not only the structure and literal meaning of the language but also the point of view of the communicator (in

the case of language teaching, the learners), which is often characterized by notions, myths, traditions, values, and beliefs one grew up with. As such, teaching a foreign language without teaching culture is similar to “teaching meaningless symbols... to which the student attaches the wrong meaning” (ibid p.100).

Therefore, in teaching a foreign language, it is important to assess how the learner’s socio-cultural background would interact with the socio-cultural features of the target language. In particular, the mere practice of saying hello, which entails shaking of hands in the West is totally different from the East, especially in the earlier times. For Asians, physical contact is not necessary when introducing oneself. This suggests that the disparity between the socio-cultural features of English could affect the culture of the Chinese or Japanese, who usually bow their heads when being introduced to others. Hence, if we are to consider Hymes’ view of communicative competence, there is a need to learn not only the structure and function of the language, but likewise the socio-cultural features of it.

In line with this thinking, Nazari(2007) states that learners who are trying to learn English as a second or foreign language should learn about the Western culture, the culture greatly associated with English. Linguistic knowledge is not enough to obtain communicative competence. Take for example the following conversation between a British and an Asian. In this conversation, the British expresses his concern towards an Asian friend who is visiting London for the first time.

British: Where are you staying?

Asian: In a condominium unit that the company rents.

British: Really, how do you find your place?

Asian: I usually take a taxi.

In the conversation, the British wants to find out how his friend is doing. By asking, ‘How do you find your place?’ he wants to know his friend’s impression of the place where his friend stays. However, the Asian takes it literally, telling how he could get to his place physically. This illustrates that while linguistic competence is important, the teaching of language cannot be done without socio-cultural features. In saying this, one of the issues that CLT users confront is the inclusion of some cultural concepts in the teaching of the foreign language.

In the field of teaching English, on the one hand, a basic knowledge and understanding of socio-cultural aspects of English is important to achieve communicative competence. The use of communicative situations in CLT provides venues in which to address this issue. Activities such as role-playing could make learners assume different personalities, including those they could meet given the possibility of going abroad. With the help of the teacher and material resources, foreign language learners could gain a background to the functions, notions and socio-cultural features of the target language. On the other hand, while socio-cultural aspects imply a need to know the culture surrounding the target language, it should likewise be emphasized that CLT is not limited to the teaching of a specific language and culture. Its use of notions and situations clearly suggests the applicability of the approach in diverse cultural backgrounds other than that relating to the target language.

On a different note, while learning the cultures embedded in a foreign language can already be a big task for language teachers, there is a more serious consideration underlying the use of a foreign language whose culture negates or significantly differs from the culture of the adopting group. In the

discussion above, problems in implementation arise as CLT is viewed to be in contrast with the socio-cultural background of Arab learners. Al-Khwaiter (2001), for example, cites the problem faced by teachers when implementing paired or group activities due to the fear that such will produce noise, which school investigators or observers do not allow. Pair work is one inevitable feature of CLT instruction, for according to Richards & Rodgers (1999); interaction is possible only if two parties convey meaning to each other. Without communication, there will be no competence.

Another conflict brought up by Al-Khwaiter is that CLT promotes values such as cooperation, whereas Qatari's culture highly values competition among learners. In order to achieve communicative competence, learners should act together to share in communicative experiences. However, Qatari parents and school administrators expect students to be competitive, implying the use of a scoring system as that demonstrated by grammar test items to determine itemized achievement.

The same is true in other cultures whose notion of language learning is exclusively geared towards the achievement of high scores during examinations. Orafi & Borg (2009), note the high regard of students, especially the Chinese, for grammar lessons as these were what they needed to perform well in college entrance and professional examinations. Meanwhile, Rao (2002) cites in that the preference of some Chinese students to engage in non-communicative activities more than in communicative ones. While Littlewood (2001) claims that this is not due to their shy attitude. This implies that socio-cultural factors and environmental influences significantly affect learners' preference and motivation to learn a foreign language. In this view, CLT teachers and implementers confront the need to address issues

governing culture in order to effectively implement CLT. It is notable that many countries started adoption of CLT as early as the 80s but many teachers are still using grammar-based approaches due to lack of training and resources, adherence to examination standards, and misconceptions regarding the use of CLT.

In sum, learners' experiences of CLT in different parts of the world vary due to differing views and styles of implementers. This is not surprising considering the fact that no specific limits to the design have been established. While resources are available for teachers to use, it becomes difficult to implement the approach due to some syllabus and socio-cultural factors. In particular, it becomes difficult to implement CLT in many countries where syllabus alignment with national examination standards has not been established. Teachers show unwillingness to adopt the approach due to the need to prepare students for qualifying examinations that evaluate grammar and structural learning. This is particularly the case among many learners who pay more importance to lessons on grammar and language structure because a major part of English examinations they take is based on grammar and structure.

Seeing the social function of language, Hardison (2009) provides a further view on the varieties of English. He explains that although grammarians have set definite standards of language, there also exists a de-standardization of language. He elaborates that language is a complex of different forms of speech which can be formally and functionally differentiated. One variation that Hardison expounds on is verbal repertoire. A person's verbal repertoire consists of the social context to which one belongs. This social context affects the way people use a language. For instance,

African Americans during the earlier times of slavery have a different set of verbal repertoire from the natives. When they speak, they combine distinct language codes, some from their native language and others from the English language that they were exposed to. Combining these codes when they communicate results in what is called code-switching. Later, this practice is passed on from one generation to another and even from one culture to another through oral folklore and everyday communication.

English varieties related to social context affect the way the language is used. For example, Hardison (2009) states that the language used in the church differs from the one used in media, economy, sports, medicine, etc. Moreover, the social meaning attached to the language causes its variety. The English varieties signify the evolution of the English language hence its use in different contexts. Such implies the need to teach the culture that lies behind it. This in turn suggests the complexity of the CLT Approach, and signifies a variety of communication situations that can be used in preparing instructional materials. Importantly, textbooks and references should then integrate cultural awareness by introducing different cultures and the various meanings of words or expressions as they are used in different contexts.

The common varieties of English used by second or foreign language speakers are usually narrowed down to at least two, either the British or American since they were the only English speaking countries among those who led conquests. This fact makes British English the most widely used, since the British colonized many countries more than the United States (Sage 2007). It is therefore not surprising that African countries, Hong Kong, Singapore, and many others use the British English, though with some

varieties. Likewise, those colonized by the Americans such as the Philippines, Guam, and Puerto Rico can relate more with American English.

5. Intercultural Language Learning and Intercultural Competence

According to Celce-Murica (2007), Intercultural language learning (IcLL) operates around two basic principles: first, that language and culture are inseparable; and second, that people are unique, both in the way they express their culture and in the way they respond to other cultures. Taking into consideration the important role that culture plays in human communication, IcLL aims to develop among its learners not just communicative competence, which focuses on the functional use of the language, but rather intercultural competence, or the ability to communicate with people from different cultures using a common language.

Celce-Murica (ibid), clarifies that the intercultural speaker is someone who possesses understanding of one or more cultures and social identities. Understanding culture does not require growing up in that culture, but rather gaining knowledge and showing tolerance of it. Hence, an intercultural communicator knows the dos and don'ts of a particular cultural context being dealt with. Celce-Murica (2007.) adds that an intercultural communicator enjoys discovery of new cultures, and maintains sound relationships with people from different cultural backgrounds. Interest in other cultures and the capacity to relate them to one's own are therefore some characteristics that intercultural communicators possess.

The regard IcLL gives to culture thus gives a new and deeper meaning to communicative competence. Celce-Murcia (ibid) proposes sociocultural competence to be part of communicative competence. As mentioned above, this includes knowledge of cultural background needed in

order to interpret and use language effectively. Taking into consideration the nature of the IcLL classroom, the goal of attaining intercultural competence requires a different structure composed of students from diverse cultures. To enhance intercultural knowledge is to have students represent different cultures and participate in intercultural communication in the classroom setting. Learners in the said setting are responsible for setting personal goals, self-monitoring (which includes getting rid of biases against other cultures), making connections, and engaging positively with others.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, many theorists have come to realize that holistic learning is important, thus CLT covers the four skills, involving individual, paired and group exercises, emphasizes student-centeredness, and touches on awareness of other cultures. These features make CLT the longest prevailing and most widely used approach to language teaching. Practitioners show the applicability of CLT in teaching of English language aiming for communicative competence of learners covering topics designed to develop cultural competence. Furthermore, communicators are not limited to classroom students, but may include network community friends both native and non-native speakers. Such is the change that intercultural language learning proposes.

The appropriateness of CLT emphasizes the growth of the cultural diversity in many situations. As an effect of globalization, problems associated with cultural diversity can be addressed not only by teaching a common language such as English but also by using an approach that pays importance to human expression, and not just the knowledge of language

structure but also the culture of the society of the language. Therefore, given its benefits to learners, CLT still remains an ideal approach to teaching English as a foreign language.

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