

Challenges in Implementing CLT in Ethiopian Higher Institutions of Learning

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The process of changing the existing teaching practice by new, student and learning - centered ways of teaching is underway in many institutions of higher learning in Ethiopia. Many have been offering trainings that equip teachers with the skills and knowledge to implement the change. A few notable moves in this regard are long and short term trainings being offered in areas of active learning, progressive assessment, action research, language improvement etc.

Communicative Language Teaching Approach, commonly known as CLT, is a widely acclaimed language teaching approach which is student and learning centered. Most language teachers and ELT scholars claim methods in tune with the approach to be effective in different language teaching contexts and with various learners. It is with such conviction of improving the quality of language instructions, that many private and public institutions of higher learning are training teachers to use CLT.

But what is Communicative Language Teaching? How can it

be implemented in various contexts and with various learners? What are the challenges institutions face in trying to implement CLT, especially in contexts where the traditional teacher - centered method has come to be accepted as the appropriate way of language teaching by faculty, students, and administration?

In this short article an attempt will be made to discuss the current literature on the questions raised. In addition, ways that help faculty to implement CLT will be indicated. It should be noted that suggested ways to effectively implement active learning methods also work with CLT as the latter is a sub-set of the former.

I. The Emergence of CLT

According to Richards & Rogers (2001), CLT came into the “scene of language teaching” because of the dissatisfaction with the Situational Language Teaching Method in Britain and the Audio-Lingual Method in the USA in the late 1960’s. Both methods focused on helping learners to master the structures of the language being taught rather than enabling learners to communicate with the language in real settings. The main parameter of learning a Language in the methods, therefore, was mere mastery of structures rather than communicative competence

(McDonough & Shaw, 1993). Yet, mastery of language structures alone didn’t result in ability to communicate with the language. This obvious deficiency observed among students prompted linguists and ELT scholars to doubt the validity of the method. Criticisms on the underlying assumptions of language and language learning in the above methods, therefore, began appearing in the arena of language teaching. This, among other factors, necessitated the emergence of a new approach that would better explain how language is learnt and enable learners to efficiently communicate with the language taught. This new approach came to be known as CLT.

II. What is CLT?

CLT has not popped out onto the scene of language teaching automatically. Nor has the application and interpretation of it already been completed. CLT today is “understood to mean little more than a set of very general principles that can be applied and interpreted in a variety of ways” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001:244). However, the following underlying principles of language and language learning are thought to be core in CLT:

- Tasks that involve learners in real communication enhance learning

- Activities that enable learners to complete tasks meaningful to them promote learning (Jhonson,1982)
- The learning process is enhanced if language that is meaningful to the learner is used(ibid)

In the above theory of learning underlying CLT, three important areas are focused: real communication, meaningful tasks and activities and meaningful language. The assumption is that successful language learning takes place if classroom teaching approximates the process of language acquisition outside the classroom. This can best be achieved by focusing on the process of language learning rather than on formal correctness.

Richards & Rodgers also list the following underpinning principles of language in CLT:

- Language is learnt through using it for communicative ends
- Fluency in language learning is an important aspect
- Integration of the language skills in communication should be focused
- Language learning takes place through experimenting and trial and error

The above points emphasize that language is a means of communication and should be taught as such. In the process of communication, getting messages across with ease and fluency and receiving them and creative construction are also thought to be important. Such a view is in total contradiction with a view of language teaching that focuses on formal correctness and reduction of the language skills.

Generally speaking, CLT is an approach that is based on well refined language and language learning principles. It is a very broad concept providing a frame work for designing a number of methods, techniques, tasks etc. that could be used to teach language in a meaningful way to a variety of students. Owing to this fact, teachers who want to use CLT, thus, have a big challenge to design new tasks and activities or modify existing ones suitable to the needs of their learners.

III. What Do Students Gain from CLT Classrooms?

As opposed to teacher centered classrooms, CLT and other learner-centered classrooms are thought to present various opportunities to students. Most obvious of all is the opportunity it provides to interact with one another and the material, and thereby develop their independence in learning. Plass (1998:309) believes that such methods enable learners to develop transferable skills; promote cooperation rather than competition; enhance goal negotiation skills, organization of arguments, evaluation of processes from various perspectives etc.

Brown (2001) also lists various advantages CLT provides to learners. Among these is the opportunity it provides to understand and develop their own strategy of learning and move effectively to autonomy. In addition, through using the language for “genuine linguistic interaction”, they will be ready to interact with the language outside the classroom for real purposes (ibid). Others, like Weimer (2002:160), argue about the

advantage of CLT and other learner-centered methods by showing the negative consequences of teacher-centered classrooms. She argues that according to research, “students’ motivation, confidence and enthusiasm for learning are all adversely affected when teachers control the process through and by which they [students] learn.” Conversely, laying the ground for learning so that students can be involved more through interaction, meaning extraction, argument, negotiation and evaluation, in short through maximizing students’ involvement in the process of learning, we can increase their motivation as well as confidence.

What is most controversial in CLT and learner-centered classrooms is the role of students in evaluation. Many teachers fear that involving learners in determining their own grades will open room for endless arguments and chaos. This is more so given the special role grades play in the life of the learners. On the other hand, there is a strong argument coming from scholars who support the involvement of students in every aspect of the teaching learning process.

Plass (1998), for instance, says students will have the opportunity to evaluate their own work and that of their peers objectively and therefore develop a very important skill. In real life situations, there could be a number of occasions where they may be expected to design criteria and objectively evaluate their own work and that of their colleagues. This task, therefore, will prepare them for real working challenges. To solve problems related to bias on self

and peer evaluation, Weimer (2001) advises that while faculty should evaluate students' work and determine the final grades, students should be involved in a way that they be benefited from the process.

IV. Challenges in Implementing CLT

Implementing CLT in contexts where it did not originate poses various problems to practitioners. Especially if it is introduced in a context where a teacher-centered way of teaching has been accepted as the norm of good teaching, the challenge becomes two fold. Among the challenges are problems related to the context of the methodology, cultural appropriateness, misconceptions and resistance on the part of teachers and students etc.

- ***Problems Related to the Context in which the Method is Used***

Most language teaching methods are said to be originated in the West. More specifically, they are believed to have been originated in Britain, Australia and North America for students with instrumental motivation to learn a language (Holliday, 1994). Thus, making use of these methods for students who have no such motivation to learn a language (as for instance, in the case of students in state education system where there is a wider policy and few resources) (ibid: 12), it is presumed that it poses certain problems. One obvious problem is that such methods, activities and tasks are not designed to fit to all contexts. And as teachers try to implement them, more problems are

expected to arise.

- ***Problems related to the Students' Culture***

As we have seen above, CLT is originated in countries having specific cultural beliefs in learning and teaching and is imported by countries having different cultural values and beliefs. According to Ellis (1996), for instance, the teacher as a facilitator in the Communicative Approach is a social principle typical to Western culture. Orton (1990) quoted in Ellis (1996) says she had to modify her methods of teaching because she had found most of them to be in radical contradiction with values, beliefs and ways of acting amongst her Chinese learners. In the same way, Ethiopian teachers and students could be assumed to have been facing such problems in teaching/learning English using CLT methods. The problem is more visible in cross-cultural settings where the teacher is from a certain culture and students are from another.

- ***Misconceptions about CLT***

The first step in bringing about change in our teaching practices is, as many believe, to work on teacher training. The assumption here is that if teachers are well equipped with the theory and the skills of student-centered teaching, they can be in a better position to implement it in the classroom. While this may be true in some cases, some research findings show results contradictory to the assumption. Kleinsasser & Sato (1999) researched the understanding of Japanese in-service trainees about CLT and found out that their actions and views had very little to do with the

modern notions of CLT. In fact, neither their in-service nor pre-service trainings could help them implement CLT in the real sense of the term. So the understanding these researchers gained was the fact that the trainees formulated their own conception of CLT based on their own personal experiences belies the notions of foreign language teaching.

In this connection, we can think of the influence of the ways teachers were taught within elementary as well as high schools in shaping them as teachers. Plass (1998) quotes Nunan (1991) as saying teachers are surely influenced by their previous learning experiences and advises that teachers have to be taught in a learner-centered way so that they themselves use the methods later in their career. Otherwise, she warns, the teacher centered-method will perpetuate itself.

- ***Low level of English Language Proficiency***

CLT demands teachers as well as students to use a variety of language structures and situations in the classroom. This makes it difficult for non native teachers of English to give feedback for various language problems that arise in such classes as opposed to when they teach a specific language structure through dialogues, drills, rehearsed exercises and discussions using first language (Brown, 2001; Harmer, 2001). Thus, it becomes more difficult for the language teacher to be of help in the area s/he is deficient and may resort to a

more structured specific way of teaching. The same could be said about students. They may not feel confident enough to deal with activities and tasks that demand uncontrolled range of language. As a result, CLT methods intended to promote communicative efficiency, confidence and motivation of students may end up with doing just the opposite.

- **Resistance from Teachers**

Unfortunately, among the first stakeholders who are believed to be resistant to change(s) in education are teachers. Scholars who carried out studies in this area have exhaustively discussed the reasons for teachers' resistance especially in regard to changing old teaching practices, a sensitive area where the teacher thinks no one has a better knowledge, skills and experience than himself/herself.

Numerous reasons are listed and discussed in the literature about the reasons for teachers' resistance to changing old teaching practices. Some are recognized as good and need to be heeded and yet others are thought to be born out of fear of the unknown and unpredictable circumstances. Among the good reasons are pressure to cover content, lack of student-centered materials, the wash back effect of exams, problems in class organization and management, deterioration of teacher authority, lack of proper training to implement the method, resistance on the part of students and school directors etc. (Plass, 1998).

A teacher who has been running a more structured lesson for many

years will be hindered by the above factors to introduce a radical change in his/her way of teaching. Especially in our system of education where covering the content of a course has long been a measure of effective teaching by students as well as the administration, implementing the new method becomes a big challenge to the teacher. Even though the teacher may full-heartedly go into implementing the change, a good deal of time may lapse before the change bears fruit. Or the result may not altogether be worthy of the effort made by the teacher and students may begin to question whether the old method shouldn't have been their first choice.

- **Resistance from Students**

Resistance from students is also inevitable when changing teacher-centered methods of teaching with more communicative ways of teaching. Their resistance could determine the success or failure of this change.

Students resist such changes for a number of reasons. Like the causes of resistance on the part of teachers, student resistance may or may not have legitimate grounds. Both ways, what should be born in mind is that without the complete understanding and support of students, teachers and administrators won't be successful with respect to introducing changes.

Some obvious reasons for any resistance to such changes is that CLT and other learning-centered approaches are more work to the students; are more threatening, for they are unpredictable; and they may involve losses (Weimer, 2002).

The role of the teacher in CLT as discussed above is very limited. S/he lays the ground and facilitates more learning, discovery, and group/pair interaction. Thus, in the classroom, the main actor is the student. This additional work may be resented by students who had been enjoying being told by the teacher everything they need to know. In addition to that the benefit they gain from such a change is not immediately visible which, as a consequence, makes it difficult for the teacher to convince his students that progress is being made. Perhaps the most formidable challenge on the part of the student comes because of the inevitable loss when students move from one level of understanding to the other (ibid).

Apart from the reasons mentioned above, students may resist a change because of lack of skills and knowledge for the tasks and the pressure to cover contents (ibid). As discussed earlier, inability to complete tasks and activities within the time scheduled could be another source of frustration and de-motivation. If such tasks and activities are part of everyday challenge, the consequences could be far reaching. On top of all this, lack of psychological readiness for the challenges of any change is an important factor that should be thought of before hand. Sudden and unexpected changes may be resisted for the simple reason that they are sudden though the advantages may clearly be felt.

• Conclusion

Obviously, the first step in introducing change in our teaching practices is training faculty with the necessary skills and knowledge that would bring the effect we desire. However, training alone can't bring the required success. There are a number of other concomitant factors that need to be taken into account. Some of these are problems from students and teachers as well.

As we have seen in the above discussion, lack of the required language skills and knowledge, psychological readiness, fear of the unknown, misconception about the new methods etc. on the part of students and teachers hinder implementing CLT and other learner-centered methods in our classrooms albeit trainings might be carried out according to higher standards. In addition, cultural factors, appropriateness of methodologies and lack of teaching aids and materials could hinder teachers from putting the training into effect. All this is indicative of the need to assess the impact of such trainings and further follow up of its implementation. In this regard, researches that focus on challenges in implementing CLT and other learning-centered methods can serve as a spring board to bring about the required change. Thus, success in this regard is not the result of a one time effort. Continuous commitment and support from colleagues and the administration is vitally important.

Another essential point teachers should take into consideration is that CLT methods are not ready made and hence fit for all contexts. It is the responsibility of the language teacher to design tasks and activities in line with CLT and use them in their unique contexts. Trying to use methods produced elsewhere without modifying them to fit the existing contexts may be more disadvantageous. For example, too much obsession on implementing

CLT doesn't enable the teacher to focus on certain features of the language the discussion of which could be very useful to the learner. In this connection, Brown (2001) advises teachers to avoid over emphasizing CLT features like authentic language that is used in real life at the expense of any potential controlled exercises.

One important factor which may determine the success in improving our teaching practices is recognizing the fact that there is a loss involved when changing a firmly entrenched teaching practice by a new one. The old teacher centered way of teaching was enjoyed by and had a popularity of students in elementary, secondary, and even tertiary level of higher learning in our country for a long period of time up until present. Teachers and students have lived with it preparing themselves for teaching and learning tasks in this frame work. Changing this long practice and substituting it with another method cannot come into effect overnight without a cost. It is therefore highly advisable to both teachers and students that they need to be aware of the advantages of the aforesaid fact and try their best to benefit from the new trend.

The role of the teacher in helping students gain advantages from the courses he is supposed to offer as well as minimizing the loss that the introduction of the new method incurs is very decisive. Teachers, for example, can think of a smooth transition by increasing the dosage of the new method day by day until they can use CLT/learner centered methods comfortably.

Still an important factor in determining success during change is to keeping uniformity across departments in the implementation process. Students and, of course, teachers too shouldn't be made to assume that the change is temporary or the obsession of few departments.

Neither should they assume that its sustainability is short lived. Such attitudes have the potential to determine the success of the whole endeavor and need to be taken care of.

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