The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) at the Higher Secondary Levels in Bangladesh: Problems and Prospects from Teachers' Perspective

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Abstract

With the realization of increased needs of English language in Bangladesh in the backdrop of globalization, emphasis has been placed on effective learning of this language. Hence, as practiced globally, the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was introduced in Bangladesh in 1998-1999 with a view to enhancing the quality of learning among the students of different levels.

This study looks into CLT as a method and its application at the mainstream higher secondary level of institutions in Bangladesh. The study investigates into factors that have made

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adoption of CLT in Bangladesh not quite successful. The study has been done based on interview and surveys of a total of 40 teachers from 20 higher secondary colleges in and out of the capital city of Bangladesh. Based on the results of the survey and interview, this study concludes that despite positive attitudes towards CLT, multiples challenges are faced in this field. It also concludes that the solution of the problems with the collective endeavors both government and private, can bring positive changes in the learning and teaching of English language in Bangladesh.

Introduction

Considering the fact that methods play crucial roles in successful language teaching, various methods are used for optimal rate of success in language learning. In Bangladesh after a great of deal popularity of Grammar-Translation method (GTL), its shortcomings were gradually recognized, especially when students' performance in the practical fields were not found up to the mark. By and large, the relatively poor performance being attributed to the focus on process-based learning under GTL, emphasis was shifted to a function-based method with the aim that students' communication ability will be greatly improved through adoption of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). However, the application of CLT in Bangladesh has not yet produced impressive results because of various intervening factors despite the initial optimism.

Objective

The current study aims at finding out the impediments in the successful learning and teaching of English Language under the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach at the higher secondary levels in Bangladesh.

Literature Review

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Introduced in Europe in early 1970s, CLT rapidly began to influence the English teaching methodology across the world. Ever since its introduction, it has been viewed as one of the most effective methods in ELT.

Despite the fact that there is hardly any universally authoritative paradigm of CLT (McGrarty, 1984), it is an approach of language teaching the goal of which is to generate the learners' communicative competence (Richards and Rodgers (2001). Hymes (1971) referred to the communicative competence emphasizing the importance of social context in communication involving negotiation of meaning between speaker and listener, and author and reader.

Communicative competence considers the contents of communication, the manner of its appropriate production depending on factors like participants, their roles and intentions and on the situations.

According to Howatt (1984), CLT has two versions. One is "Weak" and the other is "Strong" version. The weak version of CLT emphasizes on the particular notions such as "certainty", "possibility", "politeness" and functions of language such as "Giving order", "Asking assistance'. Howatt(1984) considers this weak method as "Learning to use English".Ellis (2003) holds that the weak version of CLT is mainly grounded on the concepts that the elements of communicative competence are identifiable and can be systematically taught. Hence, it can be deduced that the weak version of CLT is an interventionist approach to language teaching and thus there is a little difference between this approach and the traditional approach.

The concepts of strong version, on the other hand is grounded on the assumption that "language is acquired through communication" (Howatt, 1984). Under this method, learners do not focus on the structural components of language and as such do not go through any process of learning before communication. Rather, the emphasis, in the strong version is placed on the communication first with the assumption that learners, while communicating on wide ranging practical situations, can learn the underlying structural rules through frequent use of the actual

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language used in the actual world. According to Howatt (1984), the strong version of CLT can be described as "using English to learn it".

The development of CLT did not have a uniform trajectory. Different writers have defined it in different ways over the years. According to Littlewood, 1981, communicative view is a result of emphasis on both functional and structural features of language. The CLT practitioners instead of keeping themselves limited to teaching the structural rules and features of the target language provide the learners with lots of opportunities to meaningfully use the target language in different contexts. According to Larsen-Freeman (1986), one of the major characteristics of CLT is the "communicative intent."

In CLT, meaning is at the centre and it is given the priority in interaction and negotiation between speaker/ listener and writer/reader. A variety of activities like role playing, games, problem solving, etc., are done by the learners and these activities offer them opportunities to communicate with the target language in different contexts where meaning is the main focus.

During the process of practicing different skills, students freely use the target language for communication without giving much thought to correctness. What is the most important to the learners in this approach is to being able to communicate in the first place even if with some mistakes. Teachers do not correct the mistakes of the users frequently thereby encouraging the learners to communicate uninterruptedly.

Larsen-Freeman (1986) placed special emphasis on the small size of the group. It is convenient for small number of learners in a group to better interact for dealing with negotiation and meaning. In small groups they can concentrate on meaningful communication and thereby can achieve authenticity and better quality in learning. In small groups of learners, it is possible to focus on the learners in a deeper way as learner-centered teaching and learning is very much emphasized on by the experts. Teachers should pay attention to the learners according the unique needs of the latter. According to Li (1998), the learning styles, goals, needs, interests and the attitudes of the individual student are not same. Hence, it is essential for teachers to prepare the

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course materials taking into consideration the unique individual learning styles, motivation and other factors.

According to Brown (2001), the following features are the pivotal ones with regard to the tenets of CLT

1. Focus for the entire classroom goals are put on all of the components of communicative competence such as grammatical, discourse, functional, sociolinguistic, and strategic.

2. Learners are engaged through language techniques in the pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaningful purposes. Language forms are not of main focus. The focus is instead on the aspects of language that enable learners to achieve those ends..

3. Fluency and accuracy are seen as complementary principles. Sometimes fluency is given more importance than accuracy in order to keep learners meaningfully engaged in language use.

4. Students in a communicative class ultimately have to use language, productively and receptively, in unrehearsed contexts outside the classroom. Classroom tasks must therefore equip students with the skills necessary for communication in those contexts.

5. Opportunities are provided to the learners to focus on their individual learning process through using their own styles of learning and through applying appropriate strategies for autonomous learning.

6. Teachers play the roles of only the facilitator and guide, not an all-knowing knowledge provider.

According to Richards (2006), under CLT approach language teachers and teaching institutions all around the world soon began to reorganize their teaching, syllabuses, and

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classroom materials that did not make grammar as the starting point. He summarizes the main principles of CLT as follows:

1.   Real communication should be the focus of language learning.

2.   Opportunities should be provided for learners to experiment and try out what they know.

3.   Learners errors should not be frequently checked as errors show that the learners are building up their communicative competence.

4.   Opportunities should be given for learners to develop both accuracy and fluency.

5.   Different skills such as speaking, reading, and listening should be linked as they normally occur in the real world. 6. Students should be allowed to discover grammar rules. (Richards, 2006)

Communicative Competence

Canale and Swain (1980) pointed out four types of competence, i.e., grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence and said that these are all parts of of communicative competence. According to Canale , grammatical competence "focuses directly on the knowledge and skill required to understand and express accurately the literal meaning of utterances." *Sociolinguistic* means "the learner's ability to use the language properly in different social contexts and demonstrates the learners' ability to go beyond the literal meaning of utterances and recognize what is the intent of such utterances in particular social situations"

Canale went on to define the discourse competence as that "relates to the learner's ability to combine grammatical forms and meaning in an appropriate order for diverse needs." Strategic competence, according to him, is that "relates to the learner's ability to master verbal and non-verbal communication strategies." Savignon (1983, 1997), who has extensively worked on communicative competence, stated that that communicative competence includes four components of competence (Canale & Swain's (1980). Communicative Competence is defined by Savignon (1997) as "functional language proficiency; the expression, interpretation, and

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negotiation of meaning involving interaction between two or more persons belonging to the same (or different) speech community".

Methodology

In this study 40 teachers from 20 higher secondary colleges took part and they were randomly selected from 15 colleges located both in and around the Dhaka city. An MCQ questionnaire was made consisting of five questions and three follow up interview questions were made. Both survey questions and semi-structured interview questions were made as using questionnaire is an effective way of collecting lots of data in a short time from a large sample while the semi-structured interview questions "allows the interviewers sufficient freedom to digress: that is, the interviewers are permitted to probe far beyond the answers to their prepared and standardized questions." With the findings from the questionnaire and interviews, the data that were collected were then typed on the computer and the frequency of the data was counted. Then, data analysis was done based on my thorough study of the information collected from the questionnaires and interviews.

The long experience of my teaching career proved very useful in analyzing and interpreting the data thereby giving 'the meaning, structure and order to the data.' Further, the related literature review served as the guidelines for the data analysis. Besides, I utilized my intuitive and interpretative abilities to analyze the data systematically.

Analysis of the Information

The current study has found that most teachers have positive notions about CLT approach and are not in agreement with the misconceptions revealed in the research literature. They are almost unanimous about the shortcomings and difficulties faced in implementing CLT approach in all levels of education in Bangladesh. It was found that most teachers carry out CLT based activities in the class rooms i.e. role playing, storytelling, group discussion, listening to audio tape and answering questions, pair work etc. Most students also testified to the fact that the

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above mentioned activities are carried out in the class and expressed their liking for the approach. However, inspired of there being a good deal of potential and positive attitudes towards the approach, expected level of success is not achieved by employing CLT approach in Bangladesh. Teachers pointed out a number of challenges and difficulties that impede the successful implementation of this approach in Bangladesh.

The first question that was asked to the teachers was "Do you agree that CLT approach is more effective in acquiring communicative skills than the traditional approach?" In response to the questions, 69% of the respondents answered that they agree on this while 20% disagreed preferring a combination of traditional and communicative approaches. In response to another question, " Do you do such activities in the class as role playing, doing listening, group discussion , pair work, question-answer etc.?,", 68% answered that they do the activities and 25% percent said that they do the activities but irregularly while the rest said that they do not do only question answer activity in their classes.

One of the common tendencies as reported in the previous research literature about the Bangladeshi teachers is their persistence in using grammar translation method. In the current study, when teachers were asked to give their feedback on "Should grammar be totally excluded from the CLT approach?", 72% said that teachers should not totally leave out grammar. Their response was not quite in keeping with the findings of the previous research some of which found that EFL teachers mainly continued the traditional practices in classes (Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999), and were unwilling to use communicative activities (Gamal & Debra, 200l).

In response to a vital question "How much are you satisfied with the learning rate of your students?" 76% answered that they are not satisfied with learners' success rate while 17% said that they are fairly satisfied and 8% said that they are satisfied. The feedback showed their dissatisfaction about the result that was achieved through the application of CLT approach. Teachers were interviewed to get their feedback on the factors that are responsible for the unsatisfactory result in English teaching in Bangladesh. The interviewees almost unanimously agreed on some common problems that impede the satisfactory rate of success and quality of

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English teaching in Bangladesh. The problems that were pointed out are –Teachers' large size of class, teachers' workloads, discrepancy between curriculum and exams, students' lack of motivation and lack of logistic support of the institutes.

83% teachers said that they are to deal with large number of class that has in some cases more than sixty students. The large size of the class prevents them from giving attention to the small group or the individual students sufficiently. They further said that even if they divide the students in small groups, they cannot closely monitor the practice of communication skills of the large class.

Another problem that majority of teachers (75%) identified is the work load of the teachers. They said that they are to teach diverse course and give large number of classes. They added that on most days, they have four classes of long duration. Hence, they can hardly give adequate time to make appropriate course materials suitable for different types of students. According to them, this overload is a major factor behind the poor success in English teaching in Bangladesh.

70 % respondents mentioned the grammar based exam system as another impediment for the unsatisfactory result in learning while 15% of the respondents said that discrepancy in the exams does not affect the CLT application and it result. As the annual and semester end English exams in the mainstream education system in Bangladesh are based on grammar, students often find themselves in a dilemma about whether they should emphasize communication skills or grammar learning as they always remain under pressure to do well in exams. According to Gorsuch (2000), if the exam is concentrated on only grammar knowledge, communicative competence development does not meet the needs of students. According to the findings in a Vietnamese CLT situation, Ellis (1994) also asserted that, the design and content of texts and examinations will need to be consistent with communicative goals for communicative language teaching to become a reality.

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The majority respondents (70%) also attributed the low motivation of the students for the improvement of the communicative skills to their dilemma resulting from the discrepancy between exams.

Successful language learning also depends on the supply of the logistics. With the development of technology, it is being now incorporated into the language teaching process and its application produced good results. In Bangladesh, lack of adequate support i.e. free class rooms for practice for extra time, lack of power supply, multimedia and comfortable atmosphere, etc., can pose challenge to the successful implementation of CLT. Majority teachers (87%) agreed on the point that lacks of poor logistics sometimes impede the satisfactory learning whereas only 10% said that the lack can be made up.

Considering the importance of teachers' roles, factors related to teachers can be the causes of poor achievement in the implementation of CLT in Bangladesh. The interview of the participating teachers in this study produced some shortcomings that the teachers themselves confessed.

In respect of the difficulties related to teachers, in response to a question "To what extent, do you use English in guiding students for their improvement in communicative skills?", 58% respondents answered that they use some times, not always. Only 14% answered that they use English most of the times. In response to an open-ended interview question, 55% respondents stated that as they were mostly used to teaching in traditional methods earlier, they still had the tendency to go back to their precious practice of using the first language instead of the target language. They further said that they need to be more fluent, creative and spontaneous in spoken English and provide students with more improvised and spontaneous guidelines.

In order to guide the students in learning appropriate use of English is essential so that the learners can effectively communicate in the practical contexts. For this, teachers must have a good deal of knowledge about sociolinguistic aspects. In answer to a question "How strong are you in the appropriate use of English?", 52% interviewees said that they had inadequacy about

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the use of English in real contexts while 36% said that they have fairly good knowledge about the appropriate use of English.

Another problem teachers of Bangladesh faced at almost all levels is the inadequacy of locally contextualized materials. In response to a question " Do you think that you can provide students with sufficient materials made based on the local contexts", 78% respondents said that they depend on the books available in the markets and those books, though many of them are written locally, do not have materials developed based on our own contexts. They further said that they also do not have adequate time nor do they have sufficient expertise to develop locally orientated materials. According to Ellis (1996), to make the communicative approach suitable for an Asian situation "it needs to be both culturally attuned and culturally accepted."

In answer to a training-related question, "How much do you think training is needed for making CLT more effective?", the respondents gave varying answers. 61% respondents stated that training that they receive is not enough. They further said that they need higher training that can make CLT implementation more effective. 30% respondents said that they have received adequate training while 5% said that they received no training at all (Li, 1998; p. 697).

Bangladesh teachers need continuing support with CLT and this can be achieved by appointing highly qualified teaching consultants and conducting in-service teacher education programs (Li, 1998). Proper training can teach them how to use CLT in their classrooms and they can be motivated to overcome the difficulties.

Conclusion

In the light of the above findings, it can be concluded that implementation of CLT approach is facing some major challenges despite the recognition about it that it is one of the most effective methods in the world. The difficulties found from the study are of different types. Among the general difficulties faced in this field are the large size of the class, heavy workloads of the teachers, difference between syllabus and exam system in the mainstream education, lack

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of motivation on the part of students and lack of logistic support from the management that are found mostly similar to the findings of the previous research. Besides, these challenges, there are others that are mostly teachers-centered. Like in case of the general difficulties mentioned above, majority teachers provided consistent feedback about the teachers-related problems. Also, they gave similar feedback about their level of satisfaction with the students' learning rate.

According to the confessions of the teachers themselves, it can be further said that a number of shortcomings on the part of the teachers i.e. their poor knowledge about appropriate use of English, poor spoken English skills, inability of making locally contextualized materials due to their work loads and other problems, and lack of training about the overall application of the approach are the major impediments to the successful implementation of CLT approach at the college levels of Bangladesh. Finally it can be said that despite a good deal of positive attitudes and ideas about the CLT, some challenges are faced on the ground level thereby making the application of CLT approach ineffective in Bangladesh.

Recommendations

For overcoming the impediments mentioned above, immediate steps are imperative considering the high importance of English skills in Bangladesh. First of all, comprehensive training must be made mandatory for the teachers of all levels—primary, secondary, higher secondary and tertiary levels. Materials and resources have to be developed based on the socio-cultural, contextual orientation, needs and inclinations of the learners. Students have to be at the focus while facilitating English class. Teachers have to be aware that they should not be too much authoritative and imposing in the teaching process. Teachers have to change their practice altogether in providing learners most of the time for communicating in a meaningful way and should encourage performance not caring for errors in the first place. Teachers should be focused on the communicative principles and implement them without compromise. Besides, the institutional authorities/management have to act with the practical goals instead of being stuck in the traditional practice or motivated only by the financial goals. The management will lessen the loads of teachers, make the class size small and be more generous in providing logistic support

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such as multimedia, projector, OHP, sound system etc. Both the public and private sectors need be active in addressing the challenges on a priority basis in order to overcome the challenges.

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