

# **Cultural Constraints in Adopting Communicative Language Teaching Approach for Teaching English to the Secondary Students in Bangladesh**

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## **Abstract:**

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is the most successful and widely discussed method, which is improvised in the western English speaking country, where English is taught to the non-native speakers as a second language since the seventies. Obviously, the introducers counted the socio-cultural and educational settings of the western English speaking countries while introducing the CLT method, which is widely absent in the countries like Bangladesh, where English is neither a first language (L1) nor a second language (L2). However, like some other Asian countries as Japan, China, Indonesia, Vietnam etc., Bangladesh has also introduced communicative curriculum in teaching English for its secondary students from 1998. I would, in this regard, like to argue that language teaching and learning is a process of learning or teaching culture, but presumably, the cultural aspect of CLT approach was not addressed properly while introducing communicative curriculum in Bangladesh. As a result, this particular approach is not achieving expected degree of success in Bangladesh. Consequently, this very article is trying to focus on the particular issue how it has been hindering the application of CLT method in Bangladesh.

## **Introduction:**

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is the most influential approach in second language teaching, because it has been proved effective in enabling students to communicate in the target language. The demand for communicative ability in English is paramount in Bangladesh at the present time for various socio-economic reasons, especially among the executive community in government, non-government, business and international organizations. However, the traditional grammar-translation method of teaching English, used in Bangladesh, is largely unsuccessful in enabling students to use English words and rules in real life communication [Brown, (1994); Richards and Rodgers, (1986) cited in Brown, (1994, p.53) and Stern (1983) cited in Yu (2001, p.186)].

In order to improve communicative ability, the Ministry of Education in the Bangladesh Government introduced communicative syllabus in teaching English to the secondary students in Bangladesh in 2000. But the excitement of the stakeholders and pertinent persons is turning into despair very rapidly, as there are no signs of achieving the expected goal, communicative competence in their students. There may be many reasons for the lacking of success. But, this article will mainly explore the cultural factors that are constraining CLT method in fulfilling its potential in teaching English to the secondary students in Bangladesh.

Historically the communicative approach can be identified as a westernised language teaching method, as it was originated in the western English

speaking countries as a device to teach English as a second language and it is largely used in those countries, such as the UK, USA, Canada and Australia, where non-English speakers can learn English inside the classroom and simultaneously, can use the language outside the classroom within the community. They get the chance of experiential language learning input, authentic use of that and above all, the cultural input from the social setting, which are all the preconditions of CLT.

In contrast, Bangladesh is a non-English speaking country, where English is taught only inside the classrooms and there is no every day use of it in the community (excluding some exceptions). Bangladesh is a part of the “expanding circle” of English (Kachru, 1986), where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL). The cultural norms and various aspects of teaching learning in Bangladesh, e.g. teacher-student relationship and roles, behavioural practices, power relationship between teachers and students etc. are very much different from the western setting.

Consequently, it will be argued that some features of communicative approach do not fit Bangladeshi cultural norms. Subsequently, recommendations will be made to take measures for redirecting and re-adapting CLT in the culture of Bangladesh. However, this article will especially focus on the cultural aspects of communicative approach and how they work in secondary schools in Bangladesh.

## **Cultural Aspects of CLT Approach:**

Since Hymes introduced the theory of communicative language teaching in the early 1970s, it has exerted a significant influence on the arena of language teaching (McNamara, 2000). The idea of communicative competence has drawn the attention and discussion of educationists so deeply and widely that Swain (1984) defined the word 'communicative' as a 'buzz-word' (p.7). Hymes' original idea was that language is not based on grammatical rules only. So, knowing grammar rules alone is not enough for language use. We have to know the context of language use and have to meet the demand of social and cultural performance. For example, the ways of speaking or writing to a friend and to a stranger require different approaches (McNamara, 2000). However, Canale and Swain (1980b) specified four components of communicative competence, which were widely accepted and cited by various writers. The four components are- grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence.

Among the four competences, three of them- except grammatical competence- are deeply embedded in socio-cultural practices and norms. For example, to acquire the sociolinguistic competence, learners have to understand the appropriateness of the social and cultural context of using language. To do this, learners have to be conscious about the time, place, topic, purpose, social status and relationships of/with the interlocutors (Swain, 1984; McNamara, 2000; Musthafa, 2001). According to Swain (1984) sociolinguistic competence is like knowing when and whom we say "Shut-up!" and "Would you please

lower your voice” or “Well the children are finally asleep. I hope we don’t wake them up” (p.10).

Similarly, discourse competence also involves cultural knowledge, as it requires ‘ability to deal with extended use of language in context’ (McNamara, 2000, p.18). ‘Extended use of language’ means dealing with language beyond the sentence level, e.g. to ‘combine and connect’ various ideas appropriately to construct ‘coherent and cohesive’ text both written and oral (Swain, 1984, p.10). Let’s look on essay writing for an example. Liddicoat (1997) suggests, “Both issues of acquiring the genres of the discipline and issues of transferring and adapting existing cultural knowledge are important” in ‘specialist writing’ (p. 17). In the same manner, Kaplan (1996) argues, “valued patterns of logic and rhetoric are culturally based” (cited in Liddicoat, 1997, p.17). So, its clear that discourse competence is also a cultural skill.

Strategic competence clearly discloses the nature of communicative approach. When this competence is referred to the ability to use different strategies of communication either for continuing communication or to compensate for the ‘breakdown of communication’, lacking of information, ‘incomplete performance’, ‘imperfect linguistic resources’, i.e. inadequate vocabulary and structure etc. [Swain (1984, p.10); McNamara (2000, p.18) and Musthafa (2001, p.3)], we actually understand that it is about our engagement in communication.

However, Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983) (Cited in Menking, 2001, p. 5) specified the nature of communicative classrooms as follow,

- a. **Attempt to communicate** may be encouraged from the very beginning.
- b. The target linguistic system will be learned best through the **process of struggling to communicate**.

In this regard, Celce-Murcia (1991) (Cited in Menking, 2001, p.5) has argued to adopt the following strategies in CLT classroom:

- a. Students regularly work in-**group or pairs** to transfer meaning in situations where one person has information that the other(s) lacks.
- b. Students often engage in **role-play or dramatization** to adjust their use of the target language to different social contexts.
- c. The teacher's role is primarily to **facilitate** communication and only secondarily to correct errors.
- d. [All four skills] are integrated from the beginning.
- e. The teacher should be able to use the target language fluently and appropriately.

Similar to Hymes, Stern (1983) argued that CLT does not treat language learning as a process of code learning, rather it explores "the possibility of **non-analytical, participatory, or experiential** ways of language learning as a deliberate teaching strategy." (Cited in Yu, 2001, p196)

Richards and Rodgers (1998) said that a main emphasis of the communicative approach is the **student-centred classroom**, where the teachers will change their role from leader to **facilitator**. As a facilitator, teacher will help students to take more control of the class by giving the students more time to practise verbal exercise (Cited in Menking, 2001).

All the aspects and strategies discussed above refer to the educational culture- how a teacher should work, how a student should learn, what kind of classroom environment is necessary and how teachers and students should cooperate each other to ensure the language acquisition.

Consequently, I will explore Bangladeshi educational culture to compare and analyse it, in view to the cultural implications stated above, in the following sections.

## **Educational Culture of Bangladesh:**

Bangladesh has its own cultural norms and practices. It has been built up through its historical experiences, philosophical and ideational understandings, which are different, to a great extent, from the host countries of the communicative approach. They are discussed bellow:

**Institutional Setting:** The educational setting in Bangladesh is divided into four main levels: Primary (year one to five), Secondary (year six to ten), higher secondary (year eleven and twelve) and tertiary. Tertiary education, again, has two streams: College and university. The education system in the college level is very unintegrated. In some colleges, we see only higher secondary courses (year 11 and 12). Some colleges offer higher secondary and degree (a two-year long bachelor degree) courses. Of course, the degree courses have recently (2003) been upgraded into three years. In parallel, we also see some kind of

colleges where some four-year honours and one-year masters courses are offered. These kinds of colleges are popularly known as ‘university-college’.

On the other hand, in the universities students can study Honours, Masters, M.Phil and PhD (in some cases) courses, but not Degree courses.

**Teacher-Student Relationship:** In Bangladesh, teachers are given high positions and respect both in school and in the society. The students address them as “sir” or “madam”. Students salute them every time and call “sir” or “madam”. More over, students offer special honour to teachers by touching their feet when they come to visit a student’s house or in social environments.

**Classroom Culture:** In the classroom students sit on long benches, four or five students on one and the teacher sits down on a chair with a table in front. Normally teachers talk a lot and students keep very quiet. It is expected that students should be quiet and attentive to the teachers. Usually students don’t interrupt teachers in the middle of speech. At the end of speech teachers ask, “Have you understood?” If the students don’t understand, teachers repeat in most cases, but sometimes they insult students saying like “Were you sleeping when I was teaching?” “Am I your uncle/aunt? Go to your uncle/aunt if you don’t understand” etc.

In secondary schools, teachers check students’ homework and take oral tests. Students come to the teachers’ table one by one and answer (that s/he memorised earlier) to different questions and students are not allowed to see any book or note during the answers. Students, who fail to respond to the questions, receive various kinds of punishments, i.e. sitting down and



standing up ten times pulling the ears, being beaten by teachers etc. It was found that many students forget their answers for the fear of receiving punishment.

**Culture in Teaching English:** English is a compulsory subject from class two to degree courses and up to 2<sup>nd</sup> year in universities. Usually, there are two subjects of English in year three to twelve: the first paper, which is based on discourse and the second paper that emphasises grammar and compositions (essay, letter, applications etc.). For the discourse and composition, students usually memorise all the answers, because they have to produce it both in the class and in the examinations. For the grammar section, teachers explain and analyse the items with some examples in sentence level and students have to show their understanding in discrete sentences as well. Recently (2000) communicative approach of teaching English has been adopted in secondary schools. So, explicit grammar teaching has been removed from the second paper and of course, English is taught as a Foreign Language (EFL) as there is no authentic language milieu of English in the social setting. Consequently, teaching of English is limited to the classrooms without applications of it in real-life practices.

**Assessment Process:** The assessment of students' competence is absolutely based on reading and written test- there is no test of speaking, listening and presentation skills. Generally, examinations are of three hours for every subject. Within this duration, students are traditionally required to produce answers to different kinds of questions, i.e. grammar, translations, paragraph writing, letter/application and essay writing etc. After the introduction of

communicative curriculum, students are required to read a passage and to answer some comprehensive questions including some grammatical items. It is not comprehensible how this assessment process shows the communicative competence of the students.

**Materials Use:** All schools have to follow a particular national textbook.

## **How Does Bangladeshi Culture Constrain the CLT Approach?**

As the cultural aspects of CLT method and the educational culture of Bangladesh are already discussed in the above sections, this section will shade light on how some aspects of the communicative approach do not match in the educational culture of Bangladesh and how the approach is being constrained by those features in Bangladeshi culture in general and in the secondary classrooms in particular.

It is evident that Bangladeshi educational culture is very much different from the host countries of the communicative approach and that is a vital reason why CLT is not working successfully as it did in the western English speaking countries, where English is taught as a second language to the non-native speakers.

The implications of the educational culture of Bangladesh as stated in the above section, indicate that it is very hostile to CLT approach in the following areas:

**Teacher-Student Relationship:** a friendly relationship between teachers and students is necessary for an “interactive”, “participatory” and “experiential” teaching strategy, where students can ask questions to the teachers freely and fearlessly, where there is no chance of being insulted or humiliated or beaten by the teachers and most of all where teachers will not easily charge the students with impoliteness. But as the reality of Bangladeshi classrooms resist these requirements, CLT approach is unlikely to succeed.

**In Classroom:** CLT emphasises student-centred classrooms, where teachers would work as a facilitator, where interruptions and asking questions to teachers are encouraged for clarifications. But the Bangladeshi culture shows that classrooms are completely a teacher-centred, where students are intimidated to interrupt teachers and to ask questions for clarification during their lecture. Moreover, students are scared of being insulted, punished or beaten by the teachers. Consequently, they feel safe by staying quiet in the classroom, which is a great hindrance to the spontaneous interactions. Simultaneously, it also hinders them in experiencing and struggling to use the language. Another vulnerable point is the preparation of students for the lessons- they tend to memorise the answers as the teachers do not allow them to see any books or notes as a helping source during oral presentation. This situation will, certainly, not promote the spontaneous response and expression of students’ understanding. Any authentic production of

understanding should allow the use of available resources, but the Bangladeshi culture does not allow the students in this case (probably because teachers need to prepare students for examinations this way). Consequently, it drives them towards rote-memorising, which is very similar to the audio-lingual method and the reverse of the communicative method.

**Influence of the Traditional Method:** Bangladesh had long been following the traditional grammar-translation method in teaching English. As a result, both teachers and students are being affected a great deal by it. Most of the time they tend to focus on reading and writing only with great emphasis on grammatical analysis. This is a real inhibition in achieving communicative skills. Similar to my observation, Sun and Cheng (2000) stated that China faced this kind of obstacle in implementing CLT, i.e. “preconceptions such as: views of knowledge and learning, of teacher roles, of learners roles and of students-teacher relationship.” (Li, 1997 cited in Sun and Cheng, 2000, p.7)

**Absence of an English Language Milieu:** An English language milieu is one of the big phenomenons that are scarce in Bangladesh. Both teachers and students, for this reality, have to limit their understanding and learning as well as practicing English to the classroom only, which inhibits them to a great degree. As half of the overall populations of Bangladesh are uneducated and most of the educated people are unable to speak English, the social and cultural milieu is not encouraging for English use.

**Assessment Procedure:** Assessment carries out a great significance in any teaching-learning process. The exclusion of speaking and listening skills from

the assessment criteria is one of the great reasons underlying the failure to attain expected level of success with CLT in Bangladesh in the secondary schools. Teachers skip these skills, as they are not essential to pass the examinations. Teachers are more interested and of course, legally and morally obliged too, to complete the syllabus in due time and to show higher pass-rates. So, the exclusion of oral assessment is taking the teachers away from communicative activities.

## **What Does the Literature Say?**

Many theorists and researchers have drawn attention to the role of culture in the application of language teaching methods such as CLT [Alptekin (2002), Widdowson (1998), Pennycook (1994), Yu (2001)].

Alptekin (2002) argued that native speakership is “a linguistic myth” and criticised it as “it portrays monolithic perception of native speaker’s language and culture” (p.57), hence “ it fails to reflect the lingua franca status of English” (p.57). He reckoned that there is not a single version of English, but multiple. As such, authenticity could exist in the localised discourse.

Widdowson (1998), in this respect, clarified that “the language which is real for native speakers is not likely to be real for non-native speakers.” He opined that language needs to be localized “to be authentic” “within a particular discourse community”, which engage learners more with it as discourse. (Cited in Alptekin 2002, p. 61)

Pennycook (1994) suggests that students need to be familiar with the standard forms of English on the one hand; on the other hand, they have to be informed that there are other forms of it. Consequently they should have chances

“To find ways of using the language that they feel are expressive of their own needs and desires, to make their own readiness of texts, to write, speak and listen in forms of the language that emerge as they strive to find representations of themselves and others that make sense to them, so that they can start to claim and negotiate a voice in English.” (p.318)

Similarly, Yu (2001) has highlighted the tension between CLT and Chinese culture when he refers to Hui’s (1997) interpretation of the ‘pervasive influence’ of Confucian ideas “Teachers are viewed as knowledge holders. If teachers do not display their knowledge in lectures, or if they play games with students or ask students to role-play in class, then they are not doing their job!” (p.38)

## **Recommendations:**

In order to achieve a greater success with the communicative approach of teaching English, the following measures should be taken into close consideration to improvise culture-friendly pedagogies to fit CLT with Bangladeshi culture:

## **A. Curriculum and Assessment Issues:**

- (i) Emphasis should be given on the lingua-franca status of English rather than the native speakership.
- (ii) Localised cultural norms should be adopted in the practices of sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competences rather than the native speaker norms.
- (iii) Assessment should include all the four macro-skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening.
- (iv) Strategies should be improvised to discourage students in rote memorising, such as allowing to see textbooks and notes during presentations, incorporating continuous assessment process instead of 100% annual test.
- (v) Use of authentic materials should be allowed as a supplement to the national textbooks, especially in the areas of speaking and listening skills.

## **B. Training and Other Motivational Programs for Teachers:**

- (i) Training programs should emphasise friendly relationship between teachers and students, as well as the new roles of teachers in a communicative classroom with a view to bringing flexibility in behavioural practices, which will be accommodative to the various classroom techniques of CLT.

- (ii) Some motivational programs should be undertaken by the authority aiming to build up awareness among the teachers for avoiding punishment and humiliation to students in classroom practices.

## **Conclusion:**

The above discussions clearly show that CLT is confronting a serious cultural constraint in achieving success in teaching English to the secondary students in a Bangladeshi educational culture. In one hand, CLT is deeply embedded in the western culture; and on the other hand, the traditional grammar-translation method is useless (in broad sense) in the acquisition of communicative competence. The implications here are that we have to improvise a way of how to fit CLT in the Bangladeshi cultural setting to achieve optimum success with it. However, I believe that much of the cultural constraints could be removed through policy decision, as in the case of inclusion of four macro skills in assessment criteria and allowing authentic material use as a supplement to the national textbooks. It will be very useful especially for the speaking and listening skills. A motivational program for teachers' behavioural changes will also improve teacher-student relationship and classroom culture. Hopefully, the new generation teachers would be enthusiastic about building friendly relationship between teachers and students. For an extended success of the CLT method, of course, many of the sociolinguistic and strategic issues have to be readjusted to suit it in the Bangladeshi cultural norms. Moreover, teachers should be well familiar with the various factors of communicative method and above all, they should be, at



first, fluent and competent speakers of English as they are the only role-model for the students. It has already been mentioned that English is a foreign language in Bangladesh, where there is very little use of English in the real-life situation. So, teachers have to play a vital role in showing the effective use of English. But, unfortunately, this utmost requirement is largely unfulfilled in Bangladeshi schools. As a result, the authority should undertake a large-scale teacher-training program with a view to building competence among teachers, who will be running CLT curriculum in teaching English to the secondary students in Bangladesh. In these ways, CLT method would bring optimal success in acquisition of communicative competence in teaching English in the Bangladeshi socio-cultural contexts.

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