



Research Paper

Communicative Language Teaching: Expectation vs. Reality in the Bangladeshi Context.

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Abstract

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), has been a widespread and popular method of English Language Teaching (ELT) for the last few decades. Like many other countries, CLT was recognised as the proper medium of ELT in Bangladesh and introduced in primary, secondary and higher secondary levels. Though the introduction of CLT was thought to revolutionize the teaching of the English language in our country, the opposite has happened. Since the introduction of CLT in Bangladesh, the quality of English language learning and teaching in the country has deteriorated to an alarming extent. Therefore, it has become a dire necessity to investigate the discrepancy between what was expected from CLT and what happened. Such investigations will not only find out if CLT failed but also whether there is a need for a more effective methodology of ELT in our country. The present article tried to shed light upon all the aspects of CLT in the Bangladeshi context.

Keywords: CLT, learner centred instruction, socio-cultural context, teacher-learner preferences, infrastructural handicap, exam system etc.

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I. Introduction

Before the introduction of CLT into the Bangladeshi curriculum, English was predominantly taught following the Grammar Translation methodology. With the advent of CLT in the teaching of the English language, the curriculum, textbooks, syllabus, teaching procedure etc. changed drastically. Even in our country, NCTB (National Curriculum and Textbook Board) has designed syllabuses according to this method (Mehtab,2012). It was thought to be a storm that would blow away the earlier outdated method of ELT. The importance of grammar in ELT has been a debatable topic for the last few decades. (Debata,2013). “Knowledge of grammar helps the student in the correction of mistakes and improvement of written work. A person cannot learn a foreign language accurately only through a process of unconscious assimilation. Grammar is a sure ground of reference when linguistic habits fail us. So grammar is indispensable for the student (Debata,2013). CLT opposed the dominance of grammar in ELT and emphasised that learning or teaching of language can be done more effectively by focusing on meaning rather than structure or form. “CLT is based on the belief that grammar is acquired unconsciously during the performance in those communicative situations, so it would be useless to teach grammar previously and explicitly (Wen, 2018) In a communicative approach to language teaching, the focus is on the content rather than grammatical points (Xu, 2002). Simply put CLT omitted the necessity of grammar to learn or teach a language(Huda,2013) This was supposed to make the learning of a language “easier, simpler and effective” (Rahman and Pandian, 2018) but somehow the opposite of what was expected of CLT had taken place (Huda,2013). In Bangladesh inclusion of CLT, in the national curriculum, has brought a change in teaching practice, syllabus design, material development and testing system to an extent. This famous methodology has failed to prove itself worthy in the context of Bangladesh. Through this article, the following aspects will be investigated-

- a. communicative language teaching
- b. present condition of CLT in Bangladesh
- c. reasons for the miserable condition of CLT in Bangladesh

II. Communicative Language Teaching

“As a common knowledge, any new language teaching theory depends on linguistic theory. Up until recently, linguistics theories have faced three important phases; traditional grammar, structuralism and

functionalism. There is a connection between these three methods and they are responsible for the transformation of language teaching theories (Alshalan, 2019). These theories have bred multiple methodologies of ELT. “Common to each method is the belief that the teaching practices it supports provide a more effective and theoretically sound basis for teaching than the methods that preceded it (Richards and Rogers,2001). One such method that was developed from theories of human communication conceptualized in the late 1960s is called Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Mehtab,2012). CLT quite simply focuses on the activity of communication as a basis for instruction. “A communicative approach to language teaching involves the negotiation of meaning between speaker and listener or between author and reader. Meaning must be at the centre of all communicative exchanges; indeed, it is impossible to communicate without meaning”(Hendrickson, 1991). The above quote by James Hendrickson very simply defines the basic pedagogical idea behind Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). The conceptual basis for CLT began when linguist Noam Chomsky developed theories that characterized the linguistic competence of the ideal learner (Savignon,1991). His theories led to the notion of the term communicative competence which was simultaneously developed in the United States and England in the early 1970s.

The notion of CLT has expanded from a basic method to what is today widely regarded as a valid approach to teaching a foreign language. CLT is essentially an approach rather than a method (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). It is best considered an umbrella term with a broad framework. A large number of definitions exist in the literature, but the essence of CLT is based on the consideration of learners as communicators who are endowed with the ability to learn language naturally (Yalden, 1987). It considers language as means of communication (Hasan and Akand, 2009). To achieve this communicative view, both functional and structural aspects of language should be integrated (Littlewood, 2007). However, most derivatives of this approach focus on two basic ideas-

- Making communicative competence the goal of teaching
- Developing procedures for the teaching of the four language skills that acknowledge the interdependence of language and communication. (Richards 155)

Finocchiaro and Brumfit(1983) created a fairly inclusive list of the distinctive features of the Communicative Approach while contrasting the benefits of this method as compared to the Audio-Lingual method. They identified the following factors:

- Meaning is paramount
 - Dialogues, if used, centres around communicative functions and are not normally memorized
 - Contextualization is a basic premise
 - Language learning is learning to communicate
 - Effective communication is sought
 - Drilling may occur, but peripherally
 - Comprehensible pronunciation is sought
 - Any device that helps learners is accepted
 - Attempts to communicate may be encouraged from the very beginning
 - Judicious use of native language is accepted where feasible
 - Translation may be used where students need or benefit from it
 - Reading and writing can start from the first day
 - The target linguistic system will be learned best through the process of struggling to communicate
 - Communicative competence is the desired goal
 - Linguistic variation is a central concept in materials and methodology
 - Teachers help learners in any way that motivates them to work with the language
 - Language is created through the individual, often through trial and error
 - Fluency and acceptable language are the primary goals
 - Students are expected to interact with other people, either in the flesh, through pair or group work, or in their writings
 - Intrinsic motivation will spring from an interest in what is being communicated by the Language
- (Finocchiaro and Brumfit,1983).

These goals can often also be combined to form a more complex idea. For example, teachers may state that they believe language learning is effective communication through comprehensible pronunciation. As a result, much of their syllabus will be based on achieving this goal. This is an acceptable conceptualization of CLT as it is based on some of the goals of the approach. In successful cases, the educator now has a complex idea as well as a frame of reference for desired course content. An additional set of notable theories were developed by linguist and child development researcher Michael Halliday(1975), as cited in Richards and Rogers(20010, regarding children learning their first language. According to Richards and Rogers, Halliday(1975) theorizes that there are seven basic functions that language holds for children learning their first

language. These ideas have been adopted by CLT educators who often base the development of their programs, learning objectives and ideas on this theory.

1. the instrumental function: using language to get things.
 2. the regularity function: using language to control the behaviour of others
 3. the interactional function: using language to create interaction with others
 4. the personal function: using language to express personal feelings and meaning
 5. the heuristic function: using language to learn and discover
 6. the imaginative function: using language to create a world of the imagination
 7. the representational function: using language to communicate information
- (Richards and Rogers, 2001)

The next logical step in an analysis of CLT is how to combine the above-mentioned theories, goals and functions to create a successful curriculum design. This is a complicated and not easily answered question because there is no single authoritative text on the approach of CLT. Developers began to focus on the fact that CLT requires learners' involvement in an interactive process of communication and a proper environment allows learners to experience and analyze language. Savignon(1991) who was also a prominent force in the creation of communicative competence, continued to work on the idea and developed specific components of curriculum design. Some of the more prevalent ones include language arts, language for a purpose, theatre arts and beyond the classroom applications (Savignon, 1991). Each of these components identifies a focus as well as a set of activities that can be used to support the features of CLT. Language arts focus on the explanations of how language works. This is perhaps one of the harder elements to maintain within the communicative approach because it requires a teacher to remain almost exclusively in the target language. The analysis of how a language works include structural and functional analysis. Teachers of CLT must remain in the functional analysis by specifically designing communication tasks. Instead of grammar rules learned from repetition and textbook work or memorization work, activities such as vocabulary expansion through definitions, pronunciation exercises, patterned repetition and substitution exercises of grammatical tenses can be used. These all allow the teacher and student to communicate in the target language while enforcing the need for learning the art of the language (Savignon, 1991). Language for a purpose is a powerful component of the language learning curriculum. This is most evident in immersion programs that use the second language to study topics in the target language. During allocated class time, teachers should remain in the second language and develop a set of classroom instructions that the students can perform. Simple phrases such as "open your books", "pick a partner" or "close the door" can be modelled, and then used on a reoccurring basis. The students do not necessarily need to repeat the phrases, but they should be able to act upon the meaning.

Phrases that need to be repeated and learned can then be introduced. Students will also respond well to activities that show direct results while working within the target language. Learning to play chess, soccer, gymnastics and following directions in the second language are mentioned as appropriate events (Savignon, 239). Theatre arts refer to one of the more common implementations of CLT that most educators refer to as role-playing. This method involves a teacher setting up a situation in which a student can act and become fully immersed in the target language. Activities that involve listening, observing and then acting are some of the most successful. Other approaches involve using facial gestures to set up situations and convey meaning. The students may involve themselves in scripted or unscripted role-playing or more open-ended simulations. The goal of each of the events is to encourage enjoyment while working within the desired target language. Beyond the classroom activities, there is one final suggested way to prepare learners for their second language world. CLT focuses on communication. Savignon(1991) states that this focus can be reinforced by utilizing real-world situations once the classroom portion is over. If possible, learners should be encouraged to find a second language community where they can interact with native speakers of the target language. If this is not available, teachers should work to construct situations outside the classroom, where learners can interact in the target language. These types of activities build confidence and support the communicative nature of the approach (Savignon, 1991). CLT in its basic premises holds, more or less, whatever has been discussed in this article. It seems like a fantastic approach to learning English but the application of this methodology has faced numerous obstacles in different contexts.

III. CLT in Bangladesh

Communicative Language Teaching has been burdened upon the Bangladeshi Curriculum ignoring the earlier grammar oriented and much-accepted form of ELT. "As in many other countries, in Bangladesh too CLT, after its introduction in the country in the 90s of the last century, has exercised an enormous influence on teaching English as a foreign language at the primary, secondary and higher secondary levels of education" (Huda, 2013) for the past 22 years. CLT when introduced in Bangladesh was thought to have much potential. The very first change that it was supposed to bring into ELT in Bangladesh was to get rid of rote and memorization of grammar rules and reproducing them (Huda, 2013). The deductive process of learning

grammar and translation was going to be replaced by an inductive process of learning English. It was deemed to be an easier and more effective process of learning English. Rather than depending on the book, the learners were supposed to learn in an intrinsic manner where the teacher would act as a guide or an instructor. The learners were supposed to learn or rather “pick up the language” (Richards and Rogers, 2001). Textbooks were designed to mimic the basic principles of CLT. The exercises and tasks were developed to commemorate the practice of inductive learning. Group work and pair work were included where the student was in control of what he/she was learning. This textbook in “accordance with the principles of the CLT after its introduction into the country contains a lot of these kinds of tasks and activities, neither the teachers nor the students are found showing any eagerness for them”(Huda,2013). Learners’ autonomy was the target for learning. Learners would learn the language themselves (Huda,2013). The syllabus and curriculum were designed following the CLT methodology(Mehtab,2012). It was a wholesome effort to change the existing methodology of classroom instruction into a more updated and seemingly more scientific and progressive methodology of teaching English as a foreign language. The prescribed textbook up to a higher secondary level was *English for Today*. This book centred its topics on the target culture that is the Western culture. It was thought to be the proper cultural medium of instruction for learning English. CLT was thought to accelerate the process of learning English and inculcate communicative ability in English in students. “CLT would make students good communicators in English” (Afroze et al.,2008) but the reality is very different from what was expected. CLT was met with a lot of resistance and problems (Rahman and Pandian, 2018).

The present condition of CLT is far from what it promised to be. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that in many expectations it has failed miserably. Instead of improvement in the student’s ability in the English language “Bangladesh has surely seen a gradual fall in the level of expertise in English”(Afroze and Rahman,). CLT has been rejected by both teachers and students alike (Huda, 2013). CLT has transformed into an abomination that is far away from the principles on which it was established. The earlier method of grammar-translation still possesses the present method of CLT. Students instead of learning English, use this method to get good marks in public exams. They still memorize and reproduce in the exams. Most teachers are unwilling to take the burden of carrying out classes following the CLT prescribed classroom instruction technique. Students are also not interested to learn English by themselves and performing various tasks and exercises. Most of the teachers are neither trained nor have adequate knowledge regarding communicative language teaching. Various factors have contributed to this failure of CLT (Mehtab,2012).

3.1. Why CLT failed to achieve the desired result

In the Bangladeshi context, a learner-centred method like CLT was supposed to fail. Several reasons contributed to the unsuccessful outcome of CLT. The most prominent cause of the miserable condition of CLT is the cultural aspect.

There is an undeniable “necessity of a good match between the mode of language teaching-learning activities in the classroom and the cultural orientation of the participants of these activities” (Huda 2013). CLT was introduced to the Bangladeshi curriculum without the consideration of the cultural aspect. Teachers' and learners' preferences were not valued for the most part. The cultural orientation of the Bangladeshi learners is quite different from that of the Western learners. “The cultural profiles of the Bangladeshi learners can be determined by evaluating the socialization process of a child within the culture of the family as well as in the society as a whole. Bangladeshi children from childhood are taught to obey and depend on their elders. To analyze the family culture in Bangladesh, it is found that the society of Bangladesh is a hierarchical one where family is a very important institute. A family in Bangladeshi society plays a very vital role to initiate children to the established patterns of the norms and behaviours of the society. In the family elders and parents command high respect and obedience from children, and take decisions for them on all important matters of their lives including choice of education, choice of career, selection of life partners and so on”(Huda,2013). The children inevitably learn to oblige to the choices and decisions made for them by their elder family members. Similarly, Huda opines (2013) that in broad society children also learn to look forward toward elders for directions and decisions. Children are usually “not considered equal partners in any discussion or conversation with those who are senior in age. It is thought that those who are superior to them either in age or in experience or in power have the authority to pass their opinions about something, and those who are inferior in age or in experience or in power are morally bound to respect those opinions”(Huda 70). It is considered that children are naturally inferior in knowledge and experience; therefore, they are incapable of taking responsibility for themselves. Children in turn also prefer that elders decide for them since they are culturally predisposed to such treatment. This phenomenon transcends into classroom teaching as well. Learners in Bangladesh prefer that a teacher should come into the classroom and deliver a lecture in which the teacher will discuss a topic and impart knowledge. Learners will gather the knowledge and learn about a certain topic. In Bangladesh “knowledge is seen as a monolithic entity, a finite, inflexible ‘object’, to be accepted whole and to be memorized and regurgitated” (Afroze and Rahman,2008). Teachers in Bangladesh similarly prefer that they should be the ones

in control of the classroom while CLT dictates otherwise. So, teachers very rarely want to give up their charge of the classroom to the learners themselves. Even too many questions asked in the classroom are not appreciated and are seen as the conduct of disrespect and impudence. As a result, learners rarely enjoy the freedom to express themselves or their understanding. Again, Dr M Shahidullah (2012) based on a study that assessed the attitudes of Bangladesh teachers toward using CLT in the local context, reported that teachers used CLT only sparingly because it required too much preparation time (Shahidullah, 2012). The voices of the teachers around the country went unheard (Rahman and Pandian,2018). Part of the problem is that the CLT curriculum was never explained clearly to teachers, with the result that diverse opinions circulated about how to follow a CLT curriculum (Das et al., 2014). So after a brief period teachers quickly returned to their old ‘chalk-and-talk drill method’ (Littlewood,2007; Chowdhury & Ha, 2008).

Further, books are regarded as the reservoirs of knowledge in Bangladeshi culture. It is considered the ultimate and absolute iota of knowledge. Regarding the importance of books in Bangladeshi culture Rahman says, “As in many educational cultures, textbooks carry a unique authority and are understood as the legitimate version of the society’s sound knowledge (Rahman and Pandian,2018). This phenomenon is common in many other Asian countries such as India, Pakistan, Japan, China and so on. Therefore, it is evident that a learning methodology that focuses on learners’ autonomy is bound to face problems from the Bangladeshi perspective. (Rahman & Karim, 2019)

The next cultural issue that contributed to the unsuccessful tenure of CLT in Bangladesh is the cultural medium of the textbooks (Barman, Sultana & Basu,2006). The prescribed book which is taught at primary, secondary and higher secondary levels was introduced with content that was predominantly based on Western culture. The narrative in *English for Today* is constituted of elements specific to the Western culture. These were not familiar to the learners or the teachers of Bangladesh. The outcome was both teachers and learners alike lost interest in both learning and teaching. (Barman, Sultana & Basu,2006)(Huda, 2013). It was as if they were going to decipher a puzzle. Though later on this book and its contents changed a lot and now it seems to be in tune with Bangladeshi cultural orientation yet it is not a book that should be the prescribed for teaching English in Bangladesh (Rahman and Pandian, 2018)

Another reason for the miserable condition of CLT in Bangladesh is the lack of infrastructural abilities (Barman, Sultana & Basu, 2017). The infrastructural handicap has crippled CLT in Bangladesh. Due to the excessive population in Bangladesh, the number of learners in schools and colleges is huge. The teacher-student ratio in Bangladesh is unacceptable. On average there is about one teacher for 103 learners in government-run schools and colleges(Rahman and Pandian,2018). Schools and colleges do not have the infrastructural facilities to incorporate CLT requirements as in a single class on average more than 100 students are taught. So, basic tasks of CLT like group work and pair work become a nightmare to perform and monitor. Further, electronic devices required for carrying out the proper exercises in the textbook are rarely available.

What aggravated the failure of CLT is the lack of knowledge of CLT among teachers and learners alike (Barman, Sultana & Basu,2006). When CLT was introduced in Bangladesh very few teachers had any idea about the methodology. The situation has not changed yet. Teachers lack proper training and knowledge regarding CLT (Huda,2013). Therefore, there is very little initiative and effort made by the teachers to take classes based on the CLT methodology. Most of the time learners condemn this methodology as being a total waste of time (Rahimi and Naderi, 2014).

The examination procedure is again a reason for the failure of CLT in Bangladesh. (Barman, Sultana & Basu, 2006). CLT dictates that “learners learn themselves by trial and error”(Richards and Rogers 45). But the exam system that tests learners’ abilities in English does not permit the making of mistakes. Marks are deducted and the learner is penalised even if there is a small mistake. As a result, both the teachers and learners focus their attention on completing the syllabus and getting good grades in the public examinations. Further “communicative competence is the desired goal” (Finocchiaro and Brumfit, 1983) of CLT. But our education system instead of evaluating the communicative skills test the writing ability of the learners while speaking ability is omitted totally. But oral communication is basic of CLT. This discrepancy between the methodology and the testing system is again responsible for the failure of CLT (Rahman and Pandian,2018).

IV. Conclusion

When CLT was introduced in Bangladesh it showed a lot of dreams. It promised so much. It was going to change the learning of English overnight but today as discussed in this paper, the reality is very different from what was expected. CLT has faced a lot of criticism (Huda,2013). The level of expertise in the English language among learners has decreased over the last two decades because of CLT. The methodology has no cultural acceptance or validity in the Bangladeshi context. (Barman, Sultana & Basu,2006). The ELT in Bangladesh needs to adapt to the Bangladeshi socio-cultural milieu (Huda,2013). A more teacher-centred methodology where learners will receive proper guidance is the need for time. A better environment for learners to engage and participate in classroom instruction is again necessary. Awareness of the difficulties of

implementing such an elusive method of language teaching among learners and teachers may provide solutions that could lead to the fulfilment of the expectations from CLT.

Similar to almost all studies done in the field of teaching English as a foreign language, this study is not free from various limitations. There is of course chance to argue more regarding how far CLT has fulfilled the expectations.

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