

The Bell Tolls for Communicative Language Teaching

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The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching posited the view that language was a social tool and consequently language teaching objectives should be aligned with such a view of language. The notion in itself was not new. Locker had way back, about three hundred years ago, recommended that language should be learnt by use rather than by systematic study (cited in Stern: 1983:96). Thus although the notion of communicative competence is not new the term communicative competence became the rallying cry of communicative language teaching (CLT). Rules should not be learned in isolation but should be linked with the functional uses of language. These specific functional needs of the learner have to be ascertained by a needs analysis. Use, not merely usage, should be the objective of the CLT teacher. CLT thus posited an approach towards language teaching.

Based on this view of language and language teaching, one strand of CLT which came to be known as British Communicative Language Teaching (BCLT) concerned itself with syllabus design. Wilkins'(1976) Notional/Functional Syllabus (an analytical framework for systemizing notional/functional grammar), Munby's Communicative Syllabus Design 1978 (an off-line needs analysis on what the learner should, ideally, say), and van Ek's Threshold Level English 1980 are names associated with BCLT. The Notional Syllabus, for instance, was an attempt to organise second language syllabus on semantic rather than grammatical principles. BCLT thus was "a fashionable term to cover a variety of developments in syllabus design" (Brumfit & Johnson: 1979:1) In her discussion of syllabus design Yalden (1983) discusses a number of CLT design alternatives ranging from one where the communicative exercises are overlaid on top of an existing structural syllabus, to the other extreme where the syllabus is learner-centred. BCLT thus focussed its attention on syllabi and cognitive goals rather than teaching methodology.

On closer view, it appears that the essential components in language teaching remained the same, i.e. both the traditional and communicative approaches related to form, function and communication. What was different was the emphasis and order in which these components were organised. In the traditional structural approach it is common to start with forms and work towards communication (via a situational approach.) In CLT the starting point is communication and forms are then selected for carrying out that particular act of communication which is realised in terms of functions. This was the 'novelty' of the CLT approach.

Although CLT gave a view of language and related it to language teaching (i.e. the goal of language teaching was language for communication), it was relatively silent on the question of how learners acquire a language (L2), unlike some of the earlier theories on language teaching. For instance, the stimulus-response learning theory was based on the assumption that verbal behaviour (language) was not different from any other behaviour and could therefore be acquired in the same way, i.e. conditioning, imitation, practice, etc.

Chomsky attacked this view of language and language learning, presenting his "deductive theory" (Corder: 1973: 129) of language acquisition. The deductive theory assumes that man is born with a specific device for acquiring language and that by hypothesis formation and testing, man acquires the rules of language. Chomsky limited his discussion to linguistic competence but Hymes (1972) discussed the notion of communicative competence. The notion of communicative competence attracted interest and there appears to have been an overhasty response to the CLT syllabus and consequently, scant attention was given to anchoring CLT onto a theory of language acquisition or even to methodology.

The overhasty response to CLT was probably due to two factors. Firstly, the early 70's was a time for "reactive research" (McLaughlin: 1987: 65) - for the most part a reaction against behaviourist emphasis on external factors. Secondly, there was an urgent need and a demand for such syllabi which had a high surrender value. Consequently there was "an overhasty response to the threshold level" (Bolitho, in Johnson et al: 1983: 242) Perhaps this haste was because "situational language teaching was no longer felt to reflect a methodology appropriate for the seventies and beyond" (Richards and Rodgers: 1986: 83). The haste also resulted in a great deal of fluidity in teaching methodology and relative silence on testing techniques, at least initially. A teacher in such a classroom therefore had to be eclectic and would require nerves of steel.

Communicative methodology has been accused of being speculative, exploratory and lacking coherence. Swan states that CLT is "based on speculation more than on proven facts" (Swan: 1985: 86). Yet sans language acquisition theory, sans teaching methodology, the CLT ripple has become a revolution!

This then, was CLT's theoretical status in the early 80's. Perhaps the egg would come after the chicken? Could post hoc research develop rather belatedly a theoretical base? A review of the CLT literature of the early eighties could help determine this question. A good portion of the literature has been taken up with articles on teaching techniques, CLT classroom activities and tasks, testing and personal views of both native and non-native teachers vis-a-vis CLT1. Theoreticians had concerned themselves with designing a language syllabus based on their approach to language2. It was now time to focus on methodology.

Tests, for instance, had to be made interactive, authentic and unpredictable, for as Larsen-Freeman (1986) says, if we are serious about teaching languages for communication the implication would be that we need new, presumably criterion referenced tests. Research on communicative language testing is an on-going affair. Building supportive structures for a CLT approach was thus the order of the day and it is rather later in the day to hear a voice in the wilderness cry:

"The language classroom is by definition a contrived context for the use of language as a tool of communication and in such an environment is it really possible to have communicative activities?"

(Seliger, citing Nunan: 1983: 250)

Perhaps the unrest was due partly to the fact that the theoretical foundations had not been laid firmly.

A natural immediate consequence of BCLT was a resurgence of books on syllabus design albeit for specific classes of learners, for instance English for Specific Purposes (ESP) - a register analysis for different disciplines, English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), and other such specific registers. A number of these syllabi were based on the taxonomies and listings earlier set by Wilkins, Munby and Widdowson, (1978) but were the results of a needs analysis directed at individual/specific learners. There was thus a move away from a general taxonomy to specific syllabi. This output, though useful, cannot be deemed theoretical input to CLT as it was, for the most part, based on taxonomies earlier set.

Some variations of CLT began to emerge. Amongst these are the Natural Approach (Krashen & Terrell, 1983) task-based classrooms (Prabhu's Bangalore Project). These writers see communication as the function of language. The former state that the Natural Approach is similar to other communicative approaches (Krashen & Terrell: 1983: 17). Their approach to syllabus designs appears, to some extent, to derive from the threshold level specifications (Richards & Rogers: 1986: 135). Additionally their notion of comprehensible input is linked to activities which involve genuine communication. More importantly, from a theoretical aspect, Krashen & Terrell and Prabhu based their theory of language teaching on a theory of language acquisition. The former's focus was on the internal psyche, i.e. the affective factors, whilst Prabhu was of the view that language is an organic growth and consequently the teacher has to supply the conditions to stimulate language growth.

These variants of CLT attempted to link CLT post hoc to a theoretical base. However, since these variants cannot be considered as authentic British CLT (as they appear to focus more on the processes of language teaching rather than the syllabus), such theoretical input cannot discount BCLT from having remained static theoretically - a natural consequence of having originated from a very confined theoretical base which had limited itself to a view of language.

The BCLT approach had been meant for an environment which would provide social opportunities for contact with native speakers and complement the input provided in the language classroom. However, due for the most part, to the 'auspices' of the British Council, BCLT found itself in regions and societies where English was a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) and where in the latter case especially, a supportive environment simply does not exist.

Furthermore, there was also a danger of "cultural imperialism" for in such societies

"The values which underlie the Threshold Level ... while they may be appropriate to the Western Europe context in which they were evolved, may in fact be inappropriate in the context in which they are later applied, in other cultures"

(White in Johnson et al: 1983: 240)

Consequently, cultural factors have to be considered in the designing and teaching of a CLT syllabus. Culture bound communicative syllabi resulted, for instance in Malaysia. However, such syllabi cannot be considered theoretical input as they were based on models earlier set, though modified and adapted for local situations.

What was however novel and relatively interesting, was the development of CLT not only for adult learners, as had been the original intent, but the designing and implementation of a communicative syllabus for schools. Malaysia has adapted a communicative syllabus at the school level. Another interesting development is a revival of the teaching techniques which were once considered

inappropriate for CLT. For instance, drills and grammar are now being adapted for use in a communicative setting³. Furthermore, new technology has been utilized (for instance interactive computer/video) for CLT. However, such input cannot be deemed theoretical input to a CLT philosophy. The emphasis was on the "nitty-gritty" of implementation and consequently the emphasis of any new input was at this level.

Unfortunately, the changes and modifications were at times very extreme and bore no relationship to the original BCLT syllabus designs. Over-enthusiasm over CLT at times resulted in the jettisoning of a great deal that was good and a failure to realize that the teaching of forms was a vital component of the original concept. The practitioners appear in their over-enthusiasm (and more probably due to the fact that there was no firm theory of language acquisition resulting in a theory of teaching), to have thrown the baby (grammar) out with the bathwater. They were out of step with the theoreticians, as Wilkins, for instance, had no intention to exclude linguistic competence, for "... without such competence there can be no communication" (Yalden: 1983: 68). This failure to see that BCLT was really a shifting of focus from form to communication resulted in disillusionment and stocktaking in the eighties. At present there is a more overt and systematic teaching of forms, especially in Malaysia. Again, the practical problems associated with implementation appear to be the order of the day rather than any new theoretical input.

CLT failed to realise that, although the goal of language may have been communication, it did not necessarily follow that a communicative teaching strategy (implying as it did a new role for the teacher and his position in the class - more of a facilitator coordinator and adviser and the new roles for students-participants involved in pair/group task-directed activities) was universally acceptable. Research has indicated that there are many teaching and learning strategies and styles. Field-dependent people, for instance, tend to rely heavily on a teacher; young children generally respond more freely in communicative settings, while older learners generally are more inhibited and might prefer cognitive and academic approaches. It is precisely because BCLT was not based on a theory of language acquisition that such variables have not even been considered in BCLT. The complete neglect on this score resulted in BCLT floundering in societies where there was an incongruence between BCLT values and the cultures' norms.

BCLT was much acclaimed when it emerged. In retrospect, it is clear that what it did was to establish a functional-notional underlay to syllabi and emphasize the view of language as that primarily of communication necessitating "real life exchanges" in the classroom. Its popularity spread even though it was not anchored on to a theory of language acquisition and even though it did not concern itself (initially at least) overmuch on the methodological implications. Consequently teachers had to be militantly eclectic. Due to its relatively bunkered view of language acquisition, from the very onset, BCLT constrained and fettered its theoretical input limiting itself to the designing of functional/notional communicative syllabi. At the practical level however, the new 'ideology' spread. In the eighties BCLT has, for the most part, concerned itself with the practical realities of implementation and teaching techniques. Syllabi have also been modified and adapted to suit local situations. However from a theoretical aspect, BCLT appears not to have progressed.

What appears to be the future of BCLT? I anticipate that due to its theoretical weakness vis-a-vis language acquisition theory, and that although concessions have been made for readjustments with pedagogical realities, it is merely a matter of time before the pendulum swings back again to a much greater focus on syntax. Present second language acquisition research has focused its attention on universal grammar and syntactic items and probably such a theoretical base might give credence to the focus on syntax in language teaching. Syntax is not a shackle to be imposed on functions and grammar, it should be restored to its prime position and be made the mistress of functions, not its

handmaiden. It consequently comes as no surprise to be told that on the one hand "there is growing evidence that in communicative classes interaction may, in fact, not be very communicative after all" (Seliger & Lang 1983: 144), and on the other that in the original home of BCLT, the Secretary for Education has told his officials to "give a greater emphasis to pupils' mastery of grammatical structures of the English Language". (Sunday Times, U.K.)

Endnotes

1. Littlewood (1981) discusses classroom methodology and gives a methodological framework to communicative class room activities. Thus, although admittedly some writers like Littlewood had provided some signposts of communicative classroom techniques, the major focus however was on syllabus design.
2. BCLT was an approach to language teaching. It was made into a method (much later) by the coursebooks.
3. Littlewood, a proponent of the weak BCLT attempted to reconcile non-communicative and communicative activities by suggesting that activities like drills should have a valid place in pre-communicative activities.

Also see Rinvoluceri, Mario. 1984. *Grammar Games*. Cambridge: CUP.

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