Problems in Adopting CLT in a Rural Korean Primary School

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Assignment LT/12/07:

To what extent is it appropriate or indeed possible to adopt a communicative language teaching approach in your current teaching environment?

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1 Introduction

Since its inception in the 1970's (Savignon 1991: 263) communicative language teaching (CLT) has had a significant influence on language teaching around the world. CLT has come to be a buzzword in EFL circles, and Butler (2005: 424) points out that "CLT has become the goal in many Asian countries." Yet, for some English teachers arriving in Asia, expectations of using CLT in the classroom differ significantly from what actually takes place (Bax 2003: 279).

The English curriculum developed by the Korean Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST) has been strongly influenced by the global trend of the CLT approach in EFL, moving away from a grammatical approach (Li 1998: 681). The textbooks also reflect this (Ham et al. 2012a), as well as the fact that the ministry has attempted to hire one native English teacher for every school in the country (Jeon & Lee 2006). This trend to push for CLT in Korea and other parts of the world has been discussed extensively in the research community. Li (1998) lists a number of difficulties Korean teachers were facing when trying to implement CLT, emphasizing that teachers needed much more training to use CLT effectively. Yoon (2004) suggests that CLT is not actually followed in the Korean curriculum, but rather a notional-functional approach, which divides the language into various notions and functions, such as quantity, descriptions, requests, greetings, etc. Bax (2003) proposes that CLT should not be used and instead should be replaced by a contextual approach, which takes into consideration environmental variables (e.g. culture, textbooks, attitudes and goals)

when developing teaching methodologies. It seems then, that although CLT is having a greater influence on English education in Korea, it has generally not been possible to adopt CLT completely, and it may not even be appropriate to force a strictly communicative approach on the country's public education system.

This paper will look at some of the challenges in adopting CLT in the context of a rural Korean primary school of approximately 120 students. Although it has ample resources, and even a native English teacher (referred to in this paper as NET), the teachers at the school are not actively pushing for CLT in the classroom, due to the need to prepare students for grammar and written skills that are assessed in tests, as well as teachers' own lack of English proficiency and training in CLT. These problems in adopting CLT will be considered in depth, but first the ways in which CLT distinguishes itself in the classroom from other approaches must be clear in order to determine the extent to which the school being considered is practicing this teaching approach.

2 Distinguishing Factors of CLT

2.1 Defining CLT

Communicative language teaching has been defined and redefined in so many instances that it is not easy to choose one single definition that perfectly encompasses it (Savignon 1983, McGroarty 1984, Savignon & Berns 1984, Markee 1997, cited in Li 1998: 678; Brown 2007: 241). As an approach (Richards & Rodgers 2001: 155), CLT is based on the "theory of language as communication" (Ibid: 159), which therefore makes communicative competence the major focus of CLT (Butler, 2005: 424). Canale & Swain (1980) pioneered the idea of communicative competence, initially proposing components of grammatical competence

(involving lexical items, syntax and semantics), sociolinguistic competence (involving sociocultural appropriateness and discourse rules), and strategic competence (involving ways to resolve breakdowns of communication). Bachman (1990) refines this further by separating discourse competence from sociolinguistic competence, and Hedge (2000: 46) also includes fluency as a fifth component.

In seeking to develop the communicative competence of learners, there are a number of key principles which help define CLT. Most importantly, communication should take place in class (Nunan 1991: 279) for meaningful purposes (Brown 2007: 241; Richards & Schmidt 2010: 99). This communication involves different language skills (Richards & Schmidt 2010: 99), and it is important that all components of communicative competence are given attention (Brown 2007). Though both are important (Richards & Schmidt 2010: 99), fluency is given priority to accuracy (Brown 2007: 241), due to the need for classroom interaction and the assumption that the language can be learned by the experience of learners (Nunan 1991: 279). There should also be a relation to the real world in classrooms, and a degree of authenticity should be present (Ibid).

2.2 CLT in the Classroom

An environment fostering CLT in an ideal way may take on various forms which in turn may have their own unique characteristics; content-based and task-based teaching are just two examples of methodologies that fall under the umbrella of CLT (Richards & Rodgers 2001: 151). However, for the purpose of this paper, it is necessary to consider how the definition and key principles of CLT in the previous section fundamentally affect a classroom environment consisting of young learners.

2.2.1 Teachers

With CLT, classes are usually less teacher-centered, with the teacher focusing on

"[organizing] the classroom as a setting for communication and communicative activities" (Richards & Rodgers 2001: 168). Nunan (1987) also indicates that while the teacher may still control much of the class, there should be deliberate efforts by teachers to encourage input from the learners that does not get assessed by the teacher. Rather than maintaining complete control over all aspects of the class, the teacher should allow learners to work with the language themselves and thereby relinquish some control. Teachers then, should also act as facilitators (Breen & Candlin 1980: 99, cited in Richards & Rodgers 2001: 167; Celce-Murcia 2001: 8).

In the school that this paper considers, some teachers are quite familiar with this less central classroom role, but they lack something which Savignon (in Celce-Murcia 2001: 26) describes as communicative competence and communicative confidence. In other words, teachers must not only be skilled in communication using the L2 but must also show no hesitation in using these skills in their classes and even with native speakers. However, this does not infer an English-only classroom policy, since a strict adherence to using only the L2 in the classroom is not necessarily a characteristic of CLT; rather, the L1 may be of use especially during the presentation of new linguistic material (Richards & Rodgers 2001: 170).

2.2.2 Learners

The role of the learner is described by Breen and Candlin (1980: 104) as negotiative, since the learners must discover how they themselves can learn the language and develop strategies to accomplish this. For this very active learner participation (Savignon 1991: 261) to take place, however, learners must be highly motivated to learn the language using a communicative approach. Learning using communication is particularly important with young learners, who are much more concerned with meaning than form (Moon 2005: 5). For rural Korean primary students however, there is often no motivation to communicate in English, since their only use for English is to pass exams (see Section 3.4).

To facilitate communication among students, group work is often used (Li 1998: 679), and dramatizations may also be used to simulate real-life contexts and practice negotiation of meaning (Celce-Murcia 2001: 8). It must be noted, however, that although group work is important to making CLT work, it should not be used exclusively (Thompson 1996). Instead, Hedge, referring to CLT, states that "the content should be determined by the learner" (2000: 57). Thus, learners should be taught the language according to their own communication needs (Savignon 1991: 266); in other words, rather than using the language in an unrealistic role-play, they should prepare for situations that they might encounter in their lives.

2.2.3 Syllabuses

A syllabus incorporating CLT typically avoids dividing the language into structural parts; instead, the language is typically divided according to communication tasks or functions (Richards & Rodgers 2001: 164-165). Despite misconceptions that CLT only focuses on oral skills (Thompson 1996), it includes all four skills and focuses on all components of communicative competence (Brown 2007: 241). Although reading and writing skills are communicative and should be developed (Savignon, in Celce-Murcia 2001: 27), young learners, who may still be learning their native written language, should focus on oral communication first (Cameron 2003) and only be introduced to written language based on what they already are familiar with orally (Cameron 2001: 139). Activities should be designed for learners to use the language as much as possible and there should be frequent usage and examples of authentic language (Brown 2007: 241). With grammatical (or linguistic) competence as a key component of communicative competence (Hedge 2000; Savignon in Celce-Murcia 2001), grammar should be dealt with in the CLT classroom, and not ignored (Thompson 1996; Hedge 2000: 47), although assessment should take a qualitative, holistic form, as opposed to quantitative discrete testing (Savignon 1991: 266). The Korean primary curriculum claims to abide by CLT (Ham et al. 2012a), and in many

ways it does, although curiously it avoids grammar completely, while including highly quantitative assessment techniques (see Section 3.3).

2.2.4 Genuine communication

Nunan (1987) argues that most classrooms that claim to be communicative may not actually be so. In these instances where "weak communication" is used, questioning by the teacher in an interrogation-response-feedback (IRF) style forms the basis of the teacher led class. Nunan goes on to describe another class demonstrating CLT:

> "The … features, which are characteristic of genuine communication, appeared... : content-based topic nominations by learners; student/student interactions; ... the negotiation of meaning by students and teacher, ... clarification requests and confirmation checks. There is even an instance of a student disagreeing with a teacher." (Ibid: 143)

It can be expected then that classrooms using CLT will have less weak, teacher-led communication, and more interaction involving students taking the lead. Regarding written skills, the use of authentic material also constitutes a key part of genuine communication. Savignon (1991: 270) emphasizes the need for authentic material, which as she points out, develops sociolinguistic competence. While the school this paper focuses on pushes for genuine English communication, there are several obstacles preventing this which will now be discussed in the following section.

3 A Rural Korean Primary School

3.1 Resources and Advantages in the English Program

The school discussed here is an example of the government addressing an increasingly

difficult problem in Korea involving regional and class disparities in society by providing rural and lower-class schools with extra facilities, resources and programs. This school has particularly benefited from being designated as a demonstration school, resulting in totally renovated facilities and after-school English classes taught by the NET. The extra English resources at this school have been utilized, but in many cases they have proved to be a disappointment.

Unique to this school is a relatively large English library, complete with audio players and laptop computers with educational software installed. However, at least half of the media in the library is unsuitable for the students, either due to language level or age level. As a result, the students are not motivated to read these materials, as in many cases, the content that is appealing to them is at a language level much higher than their own. As an excellent source of authentic material, these books are often used in classes in line with CLT; however, it is regrettable that students are not motivated to read or listen to materials from this poorly chosen selection on their own.

The two classrooms also have several useful tools, including large touchscreen displays, and a chroma-key video system for role plays. These aides have certainly been useful in making communicative activities more enjoyable for students, but the problems here relate more to inconvenience. In particular, the chairs and tables are designed for adults and are thus uncomfortable for younger students. They are also difficult to move and quite large, making group work somewhat difficult, as the classroom arrangement cannot easily be changed. Many of the technological tools, not being designed for children, are either broken or damaged, and other resources have been of such poor quality as to be impractical to use regularly.

In addition to these extra resources, the students are also entitled to many opportunities to use English. The school has an after-school program, taught solely by the NET, which

provides one or two classes per week for all grades, including kindergarten, to improve their English skills; thus, in combination with the 2-3 classes per week of regular English curriculum taught to grades 3-6, some grades receive up to 5 classes per week of English instruction. The student-class ratio is also much lower than the national average of 35.5 (MEST 2010), with an average of only 18 students per class.

It is clear then, that this school has several major advantages that can be helpful for implementing CLT. Regardless of the slight mismatch between the resources and the age of students, teachers have access to numerous sources of authentic material and technological tools to help improve students' motivation in communicative activities. Also, the high amount of classroom English time, in addition to the low student-teacher ratio, ultimately give the students more time with the NET, increasing opportunities for genuine communication. However, although there is certainly a potential for CLT to be used effectively here, there are a number of problems preventing this from happening as well as it should be.

3.2 Homeroom Teachers: Lack of Communicative Competence and Specialization

The homeroom teachers in this school lack both communicative competence in English and training in CLT methodology, making the implementation of CLT in the English classes that they teach impossible. These teachers are all experienced and have graduated from universities specializing in primary education. Unfortunately, homeroom teachers at this school are expected to be able to teach all subjects. Although they are aware of CLT due to their education, it is unrealistic to expect every homeroom teacher to have extensively studied English language and teaching skills to the point where CLT would be possible, yet the task of teaching English is divided among all homeroom teachers. In addition to this unfortunate

teaching arrangement, homeroom teachers are also obliged to teach together with the NET. This usually makes the situation even more difficult, because it is usually embarrassing for them to try to teach in English in the presence of a native speaker.

These challenges are not unique to the school; on the contrary, they are well documented, particularly in East Asian classrooms (Li 1998, Nunan 2003, Butler 2004). Notably, Butler's survey of primary school teachers reveals that even in the largest city in Korea, teachers' self-assessed proficiency in English was below the minimum level that they felt was required to teach the language (2004: 268). These studies question how realistic it is to expect teachers, faced with these challenges common to EFL environments, to effectively use CLT, which was originally developed in ESL contexts (Li 1998: 678, 680).

3.3 A Self-Contradicting Syllabus

The English textbook used by the school is based on CLT (Ham et al. 2012a), and this is evidenced by the use of role plays, games which promote speaking between students, and even surveys and information gap activities found in the text. With these types of activities occurring at least once per lesson, one may assume that CLT could take place in the classroom relatively easily. However, the textbooks seem to be inconsistent their CLT approach, particularly regarding assessment. For example, in the review sections at the end of each lesson in the textbooks, students demonstrate their conversation skills by looking at pictures of situations and creating appropriate dialogues in pairs; this is in line with CLT, providing a helpful way for both students and teachers to assess oral communicative skills. However, looking at the lesson tests included in the supplementary materials published with the textbooks (Ham et al. 2012b), the tests are purely quantitative and even include many questions based on written skills and grammar, which are given little attention in the textbooks. While the lessons include activities based on CLT, the tests do not attempt to

measure students' communicative competence and instead focus on grammar and written skills.

It appears then, that there are two major problems, one being that students are not assessed based on their abilities to orally communicate, and the other being that these young students may not be as developed in reading and writing (Cameron 2003). The tests, then, may assess communicative competence to a degree, particularly grammatical competence, but a means of assessing the oral communication skills of students is needed to accurately assess students based on the CLT content of the textbooks. As an example, the NET could interview students individually as part of the end-of-semester exams by conversing with students based on the learned material and assessing them according to their interactions.

3.4 Reasons for Learning English: A Competitive Culture

Over the past two decades there has been an increased desire to learn English in Korean society. The Ministry of Education, anticipating a need for English speakers to aide international commerce, introduced English to schools (Jeon 2012: 241), sparking a national desire to learn English when it was included in the National University Entrance Examination (NUEE). The NUEE scores of a student often affect which university he/she may attend, which in turn may affect career opportunities in the hierarchical and competitive society of Korea (Hwang 2012: 2). If this is indeed the case, the content and format of tests plays a major role in determining how Koreans study English. However, looking at the rural community in which this school is located, the "English fever" is not quite as strong. Most of the school's students do not go to after-school English academies, nor are they faced with situations in their lives which require them to use the language, such as encounters with foreigners in their community or trips abroad. Thus, the only need to learn English is because it is a school subject and they will need to pass the tests issued by the school.

The Korean Institute for Curriculum and Evaluation (KICE) even acknowledges that there is a major problem in improving students' conversational skills. In a statement, it notes that

> "Because English education in Korea focuses on reading and grammar, many Koreans who have learned English for ten years in school still have difficulty in daily conversation. … the current curriculum has been established to improve expression in speaking and writing, but learners cannot be motivated due to an absence in connection with evaluation." (KICE n.d.)

It is this "connection with evaluation", as well as limited opportunities to use English, which fundamentally affects both teachers and students in their attitudes towards CLT methodologies in English classes.

Teachers, feeling the pressure to have students perform well on tests, are concerned about how they can prepare the students for the material on which students will be tested. At this school, English tests are made of questions selected by the homeroom teachers, usually from the testing resources given by the textbook publisher. As argued in Section 3.3, these tests fall short of assessing communicative competence by focusing on under-developed written skills rather than oral communication skills. Not surprisingly, tasks given to students by teachers may involve pattern drills and rote memorization of word spellings, sometimes to the point that students do not understand the meanings of what they are memorizing. Cameron (2001: 218) acknowledges the "unfortunate consequence of concentrating teaching on the written forms" when teachers use written tests to assess young learners who are not ready to take on the written skills of a foreign language. Learners at such a young age cannot realistically be expected to excel in this aspect of CLT, yet they are often pushed prematurely to do so.

In addition, students are severely lacking in motivation to learn English. They have no use for the language, and the work assigned to them in English classes is not interesting for them. Motivation is an important ingredient to making CLT work well (Savignon 1991: 265), and

with young learners, having an abundance of fun activities that students will enjoy is considered essential (Moon 2005: 18), since it offers a replacement to the motivation students would have from communicating daily needs and wants in an authentic language environment. In order for CLT to be effective, class activities need be enjoyable for the students to provide the necessary motivation, otherwise using CLT will prove difficult in EFL contexts such as this rural Korean primary school.

3.5 Setbacks in Using the NET

Over the past four years, a NET has been assigned to this school by EPIK (English Program in Korea). EPIK was designed to create a somewhat authentic English experience in which students would be faced with a different language and culture in the classroom, thus developing teachers' and students' English communication skills (Jeon & Lee 2006: 57; EPIK n.d.). Given that the teachers that EPIK hired were not required until recently to have any English teaching training, it seems that the priority has been to have NETs in the classroom as ambassadors of culture and communicators rather than skilled teachers. It would be expected then, that the experience of having the NET in the classroom would be new and interesting for students, and they would feel an urgent need to speak English. At this school however, this facade of a foreign culture is not noticed by these young students, and they consequently still feel no need to speak English.

This appears to be due in part to a dilemma created by the NET's acquisition of Korean language skills. The Ministry of Education has repeatedly tried to incorporate English only classrooms (Kang 2008: 215; Jeon 2012: 245), and it has been assumed that the NETs, unable to speak the L1, would naturally fulfill this; both students and teachers would be forced to use their English skills to communicate with the NET. The situation changes, however, if the NET begins to acquire communicative competency in the L1. If it becomes apparent that the

NET's L1 skills surpass teachers' and students' English skills, it no longer seems necessary for any of the three parties involved to use English to communicate. Such is the case with this school, to the point where all school staff communicate with the NET only in Korean.

To promote the practice of communication in English, the NET almost exclusively uses English with students, and when students use Korean, they are encouraged to think about how to explain themselves using English. Despite the persistence of the NET in interacting with students only in English, the concept of authentic communication is undermined by students' and teachers' reluctance to communicate to the NET in English. While an English-only policy is not necessarily a characteristic of CLT (Section 2.2.1), genuine communication is essential to making CLT successful. Although this is being encouraged by the NET, speaking in English is not seen by students as a need but as an exercise, again relating back to students' lack of motivation, and consequently, Korean is still very much the dominant language of the classroom. However, developing fun activities for students which spark motivation among them may be helpful for making CLT more viable. Examples might include games which require each student to ask a student leader questions in English, or role plays which make use of real tasks, such as a restaurant role play involving one group of students taking orders from another group and then serving them real snack food.

4 Conclusion

Despite the Ministry of Education's strong push for CLT in the classroom, this rural primary school is currently having difficulties in adopting a communicative approach. The main obstacle is that homeroom teachers are missing the specialized language and teaching skills necessary to implement CLT. Also, the school's CLT oriented syllabus fails to provide

materials and guidelines for qualitatively assessing oral communication skills, leading teachers to create tests focusing on structure and written skills. This non-communicative style of testing is disconnected from the syllabus and in turn forces teachers to avoid CLT in their classes, due to the pressure in Korean society for good test results. With the pressure to memorize written words before their oral mastery, students have lost their motivation to participate in English classes, seeing no reason to learn oral skills and being uninterested in dull memorization tasks. Even the genuine communication encouraged by the NET is largely ignored by students, with most unwilling to use even the English that they have learned. Thus, there is a need for new strategies to be implemented, so that activities and games can be used specifically to counteract this reluctance in students to use the L2.

Although progress in developing CLT further at this school is possible, CLT might never take its ideal form here. This paper has pointed out several shortcomings in implementing CLT, but it must be acknowledged that the language program at this school is not a failure despite little use of CLT. Bax (2003) points out that following a paradigm without first analyzing the context assumes that a particular methodology can work in any situation, which in reality is hardly the case. Bax's context approach, which involves "an understanding of individual students and their learning needs … as well as the coursebook, local conditions, [and] [culture]" (Ibid: 285) seems to describe to an extent what is already happening at this school. Rather than following a strict interpretation of CLT, it may be that methodologies and strategies developed from a contextual approach could prove to be more appropriate for this school.

Ultimately, in order for CLT to play a larger role at this school, testing at the national level will have to include a greater focus on communicative competence. A replacement for the English portion of the NUEE, known as NEAT (National English Abilities Test), will include a speaking section for the first time, which will likely have a great effect on English

education in schools (Hwang 2012: 3). However, the textbooks at this school only offer test materials focusing on grammar and written skills, and even the nationwide achievement test written by grade 6 students does not currently assess oral English skills.

In spite of the non-communicative testing, there is high potential for the school to better adopt CLT, considering the adequate resources available at this school, the textbook which has many communicative activities, and a native English teacher. Perhaps most importantly, either a specially trained dedicated English subject teacher or further training of the homeroom teachers is needed so that they will be better equipped for adopting CLT. Although a change of focus in assessment from written to oral skills would likely cause the most change in how the English program is run at the school, carefully planned strategies involving all teachers to promote communicative competence in classes, activities and games may lead to a better adoption of CLT.

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