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Communicative Language Teaching: Contemporary Applications in Japan

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Abstract

The delivery of second language (L2) curriculum has experienced a transformation over the last several decades as its focus has evolved from simply understanding the mechanics of an L2 to improving communicative competences. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has emerged as a prominent approach in L2 classrooms around the world, and Japan is no exception. Despite the criticisms often associated with CLT – that it ignores grammatical foundations, rarely generates “real-world” output, and is not practical for various entrance exams – the authors of this report argue that it can play a crucial role in the development of students’ L2 abilities, especially in Japan. Using scaffolding techniques with traditional grammar translation approaches to teaching an L2, instructors are increasingly embracing elements of CLT that are required for successful cross-cultural interactions and hosting major international events, such as the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics.

Background of CLT

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) first emerged in Europe in the 1970s in response to the increased demand for communicative competence in a variety of European languages. This demand was born from the increasing interdependence of European countries, and the desire to teach adults the major languages of the European Common Market (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Before CLT rose to

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prominence, two of the most popular approaches to foreign language teaching were *situational language teaching* in Europe (especially Britain), and *audiolingualism* in the United States. These two approaches began falling out of favor with linguists, because as Chomsky (1957) pointed out, “current standard structural theories of language were incapable of accounting for the fundamental characteristic of language—the creativity and uniqueness of individual sentences” (as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p.153). Although these approaches were originally conceived to make the learning process more communicative, their strong focus on the form of language failed to take into account the spontaneity of “real-world” (i.e. outside of the classroom) communication. This resulted in a paradigm shift regarding how languages were to be taught, with greater focus on communicative proficiency in lieu of mere mastery of structures (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

The rise of delivering communication-focused L2 curriculum gave priority to the function of language over form, similar to the foundations of audiolingualism and situational language teaching. British linguist, D. A. Wilkins’ (1976) book *Notional Syllabuses* is credited with having, what Richards & Rodgers (2001) describe as, “a significant impact on the development of CLT” (p.154). His work is known for establishing numerous styles of CLT that we see in L2 classrooms today (Richards & Rodgers, 2001), as he researched the multitude of communicative meanings that are critical for an L2 learner to both understand and express language. A core feature of Wilkins’ (1976) construct of language acquisition is not the traditional concepts of grammar and vocabulary, but instead a system of meanings that underpin the various communicative aspects and practical manifestations of language use. This concept became the basis for what would become CLT.

Communicative competence is the main aim of CLT; however, as with many other aspects of CLT, there are different interpretations as to what constitutes communicative competence. Yule (2010) defines it as, “the general ability to use language accurately, appropriately, and flexibly” (p.194). He goes on to state that the three main components of communicative competence are grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence, though these components were originally conceived by Canale and Swain (1980). Grammatical competence was the main focus of language teaching for many years; however, the inclusion of the other two components is what sets CLT apart from audiolingualism and the *grammar translation method*. CLT’s focus on function does not mean that grammar is not an important part of the learning process, rather, it assumes that grammar will be learned inductively. As noted by Harmer (2007), “if students are involved in meaning-focused communicative tasks, then ‘language learning will take care of itself’” (p.59).

Sociolinguistic competence is closely tied to the idea of “real” communication,

which is often promoted in CLT curricula. If students are sociolinguistically competent, they are able to adapt their language to fit a variety of situations, or to use appropriate language in particular social contexts. This is especially helpful in avoiding linguistic, as well as social misunderstandings, as students should be aware of the meaning carried by the words they are using. This is also noted by McDonough, Shaw, and Masuhara (2013), who say “the concept of ‘being communicative’ has to do with what a language has the potential to mean, as well as with its formal grammatical properties” (pp.23-24). The CLT classroom provides a space for L2 learners to practice what Anderson and Larsen- Freeman (2011) refer to as *real-world language*. Only through repeated practice can L2 learners deal with the spontaneity of real-world communication. As Cook (2008) notes, “Learning language means practicing communication within the four walls of the classroom. You learn to talk to people by actually talking to them: L2 learning arises from meaningful use in the classroom” (p.251).

Yule (2010) posits that L2 users will inevitably be faced with a situation in which they will be unable to clearly express themselves, due to gaps in their L2 knowledge. Therefore, acquiring strategic competence becomes a key part of the L2 learning process, as it allows students to compensate for these gaps in their L2 knowledge (e.g. grammar or vocabulary) by employing strategies to keep a conversation from ending abruptly. This can be achieved in various ways, for example, substituting vocabulary for similar words, or when failing to explain an unknown word, using known vocabulary. Speakers who have not had sufficient practice communicating in their L2 may find this difficult, as these strategies require confidence and quick thinking that can only be achieved through adequate practice. So long as effective communication has been achieved, the accuracy of the language used is not as important. Cook (2008) expands on this idea when he suggests that CLT does not require students to produce utterances that are clear of mistakes, rather, students are free to explore their own strategies, and solve their own communication problems, even if the end result is not considered as “native” level English (p.249).

Criticisms of CLT

The emphasis that CLT places on fluency over accuracy has been criticized in the past, with one critic going as far as saying, “CLT has sometimes been seen as having eroded the explicit teaching of grammar with a consequent loss among students of accuracy in the pursuit of fluency” (Harmer, 2007, p.71). This idea, that grammar will be learned inductively as part of communicative activities, is on the surface a radical departure from the strictly regimented lesson structures of past

methods. However, to say it has “eroded” the teaching of grammar is a questionable claim, because as Cook (2008) points out, the means of carrying out CLT adopt many of the qualities exhibited by the audiolingual methods’ features, including the tenets of actively practicing with spoken language. This suggests that CLT is not as radical a departure from more traditional teaching methods as some of its detractors might suggest. Nevertheless, it is still a valid criticism that is echoed by Wicksteed (1998), who warns of “a general over-emphasis on performance at the expense of progress” (p.3).

Another criticism of CLT is that the activities and tasks involved in its delivery are no more “real” than what may be found in traditional L2 teaching approaches, and that classroom exercises are “contrived” and “do not, in fact arise from any genuine communicative purpose” (Harmer 2007, p.71). Certainly, it is difficult to create real-world communication within the confines of a classroom setting, especially in a country like Japan where classrooms tend to be ethnically homogenous. Furthermore, pedagogic problems associated with CLT can also cause issues for teachers who are not familiar with the order in which to deliver new vocabulary or grammatical items, or in designing lesson materials for use in CLT classes (McDonough, Shaw, and Masuhara, 2013, p.25).

Issues surrounding successful implementation of CLT can also arise from cultural factors. Tanaka (2009) suggests that CLT was primarily developed for use in *inner-circle* English speaking countries (Kachru, 1990), and then later exported to other countries without consideration for local sociocultural context. Smith (2012) supports this assertion by positing that some countries have rejected CLT due to the fact that it does not suit their own sociocultural situation, or institutional regimes, such as “classroom realities and constraints” (p.194). Tanaka (2009) also discusses the difficulty of applying CLT in East Asia (e.g. Japan and South Korea), referring to the traditional role of teacher. She suggests that in Asian educational settings, the teacher is often viewed as an “authoritative expert,” whereas CLT positions the teacher as more of a “facilitator” (Tanaka, 2009, p.112). This change to traditional classroom dynamics also extends to the students’ role in CLT classes. CLT often requires the students to be active participants in the learning process; this too is at odds with traditional student behavior in East Asian classroom settings. Tanaka (2009) argues that L2 students in East Asia are not accustomed to the more active roles they are required to play in CLT classes, and are more comfortable being “recipients of knowledge” (p.113). These issues are prevalent in Japan, with Tanaka (2009) suggesting that the roles students are expected to adopt in CLT classes are such a departure from traditionally accepted Japanese classroom norms that they can be “highly problematic” for students (p.112). However, this does not mean that CLT is completely inappropriate for Japan. In order to implement CLT effectively, it is

important to understand the difficulty of maintaining the balance between the social and the pedagogic, in order to “develop a pedagogy more appropriate to local conditions” (Tanaka, 2009, p.116). In relation to these issues, the next section of this paper will explore the role that CLT has played in L2 classrooms in Japan and the difficulties that some educators have in reconciling the features of CLT with more traditional approaches in L2 acquisition.

CLT in Japan: Challenges

With the Olympics being held in Tokyo in 2020, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has been continuing its efforts to make English classes more communicative. Yet, despite over twenty years having passed since MEXT’s introduction of CLT, its implementation is still progressing slowly, with problems continuing to persist at the classroom level (Tahira, 2012). Reed (2016), Smith (2012), and Tahira (2012) contend that MEXT is to blame for a number of issues surrounding the unsuccessful implementation of CLT in Japan thus far. The *Courses of Study* are official guidelines released by MEXT, approximately every 10 years. These guidelines have been criticized for being too vague with regards to teachers’ communicative goals, and how CLT should be integrated into classrooms (Reed, 2016). Tahira (2012) further suggests that this confusion regarding the implementation of CLT in L2 classrooms has led to ambiguity about CLT itself. Although MEXT has tried to address these issues by providing teachers with training, Smith (2012) argues that MEXT has given little support in addressing the classroom realities that prevent CLT’s “acceptance and adoption by Japanese teachers” (p.196). One such example of the disconnect between classroom realities and expectations regarding CLT can be seen when considering pair or group work. Pair and group work is arguably instrumental to success in the CLT classroom. However, such collaborative work among students with the same first language L1 often leads to frequent codeswitching between the L1 and the L2 age (Cook, 2008). Although this is not always a negative trait of L2 learners, the dominance of the L1 in Japan often leads to students switching to Japanese to complete activities while disregarding the target language, thus negating the purpose of the activity. Sakui (2004) notes that students reverting to Japanese during pair or group work was yet another reason Japanese teachers are generally not confident in conducting CLT classes.

CLT has also been criticized for favoring native speakers, due to the expectation that the teacher can adequately respond to any language problems that may arise throughout the course of an average L2 class (Harmer 2007). Consequently, as a result of a lack of exposure to CLT methodologies, and direct

support from MEXT, many Japanese teachers of English lack the confidence in their ability to teach CLT (Tahira, 2012). One possible explanation of this lack in confidence is offered by Sukui (2004) who states that some Japanese teachers' understanding of CLT is "more semantic than conceptual" (p.160). This could support the theory that a lack of clear guidelines from MEXT has created a conceptual misunderstanding of CLT methodologies. Sukui (2004) further clarifies this sentiment of misunderstanding by noting that most teachers feel that before attempting any kind of CLT activity, students first need explicit grammar instruction. Sakui (2004) posits that Japanese teachers' teaching philosophy, "revealed a conceptual schema in which grammar instruction serves to build knowledge about language, and CLT consisted primarily of fluency building and grammar manipulation activities" (p.160). Therefore, we can see that the integration of grammar translation and CLT methodologies is a serious challenge in Japan, due to the perception that CLT is fun, with little to no educational benefits, while grammar-focused classes are needed in order to prepare students for entrance examinations (Sakui, 2004).

Junior and senior high school teachers are responsible for helping their students pass entrance examinations to high school and university, respectively. This responsibility to prepare students for the grammar-intensive examinations may be yet another reason why some teachers have difficulty changing from "L1-based teacher-centered instruction to student-centered CLT styles" (Otani, 2013, p.289). Sakui (2004) also lists "grammar-oriented entrance examinations" as a "constraining factor" affecting implementation of CLT in Japan, suggesting that even if teachers want to incorporate CLT into their classes, they "cannot ignore the demand to prepare students for entrance examinations" (p.161). These entrance examinations are one of the main reasons that the grammar translation method has enjoyed an extended shelf life in Japanese schools and universities, as it fits well into curricula aimed at helping students pass entrance examinations (Schaaff 2010). Japan's over-reliance on, and tradition of test-taking is one of the biggest roadblocks faced by those who would like to implement CLT into English language education in Japan (Fujimoto-Adamson, 2006).

One issue with CLT with regards to test preparation is that of error correction. Since CLT's focus is on communication, participants need to be not only concerned with linguistic accuracy, but also context, roles, and discussion themes. As these elements are important factors contributing to successful communication, detecting errors becomes more than just identifying incorrect grammar and vocabulary (McDonough, Shaw, and Masuhara, 2013). Therefore, as the vast majority of classes in Japan are geared towards helping students pass tests, the grammar translation method is preferred since it is much easier to define what constitutes "right" and

“wrong” answers. Without a fundamental rethinking of the ways in which Japanese students’ English ability is evaluated, it will continue to be difficult to implement CLT effectively.

As well as accurate error correction, teachers can also find it difficult to decide the order in which to present the language, when using CLT (McDonough, Shaw, & Masuhara, 2013). This issue is further compounded by the varying ability levels present in the Japanese L2 classroom, which can be yet another barrier to successful implementation of CLT (Otani, 2013). As McDonough, Shaw, and Masuhara (2013) state, “the complex relationships between grammar and communicative functions may be too overwhelming for beginners or learners with low proficiency” (p.26). Therefore, by adhering to grammar translation methodology, teachers may feel they are able to negate these factors. This results in students who have a good knowledge of the various forms of English grammar, as well as a large vocabulary, but who are unable to communicate in English, therefore falling short of the goals set by MEXT. Couple these factors with an inclination in Japanese society to avoid the unpredictability of new methods (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkoy, 2010), and we have the current situation, in which the grammar translation method is still widely used in schools throughout Japan in place of other methodologies, such as CLT.

One factor that could potentially redirect the discourse surrounding entrance examinations is the change coming to university entrance examinations in 2020. Whereas the current entrance examinations are primarily concerned with reading and listening, the new system will aim to test all four basic language skills, including speaking, which MEXT hopes will result in an increase in usable English amongst high school students (Masahiko, 2018). Masahiko (2018) remains doubtful that the new entrance exams will have the desired effect, because despite the changes to the examinations themselves, there are no proposed changes to the current methods of instruction. This could certainly be an opportune time to reconsider CLT’s place in Japanese secondary education. Aspinall (as cited in McCrostie, 2017) suggests that the inclusion of a speaking component to entrance examinations “may be the best thing that has ever happened to English teaching in Japan,” as it will give teachers the opportunity to teach speaking in regular classes (para. 9). Due to these imminent changes, it is time to consider contemporary applications of CLT in Japan.

CLT in Japan: Responses

As outlined thus far, the vast majority of students in Japan study English in order to pass internal school tests or university entrance exams, resulting in a tendency towards instrumental motivation when studying English. However, in a study of Japanese university students and their attitudes towards CLT, Iwamoto

(2017) found that a majority of students who have experienced CLT teaching methodologies tended to be more intrinsically motivated, with a greater desire to communicate in English. Therefore, CLT can certainly be seen as desirable to students in Japan, and with correct implementation, it could improve motivation to learn. This is especially important when considering that motivation is a major factor affecting language learning success (Brown, 2004).

Given the myriad issues discussed in the previous section, in order to achieve successful integration of CLT into Japanese classrooms, “it is crucial for teachers understand the concept and principal of CLT and to adapt their teaching in culturally appropriate ways” (Tanaka, 2009, p.117). In order for the change to take place, there should be no radical reinvention of current classroom practices, instead, innovation must be acceptable to stakeholders in order to promote more organic changes (Asquith, 2015). This includes the need for teachers to create a classroom atmosphere conducive to affective exploitation of CLT practices (Tanaka, 2009). Students should feel secure and non-threatened, without pressure of making mistakes (Tanaka, 2009). On the broader, pedagogic level, in order for communicative classes to be feasible within Japan’s current curricular requirements, “acceptable to teachers, and relevant to students’ needs, they must enhance learners’ exam prospects” (Asquith, 2015, p.52).

CLT methodologies are highly adaptable, and teachers willing to innovate and experiment with CLT in their own classrooms may be able to do so with ease. This experimentation could also lead to ground-up changes in their own teaching practices (Asquith, 2015). The interpretation that CLT “means different things to different people” (Harmer, 2007, p.69) may be considered as a weakness by some, due to the subjectivity of the approach. However, the authors believe that the flexibility and dynamic nature of CLT make it a strong option for L2 acquisition in Japan. As evidenced by the experiences of the authors and the literature reviewed in this article, CLT can be catered to fit different educational styles, and the various needs of L2 learners. It is as a result of this flexibility that CLT has been so widely accepted and adopted by teachers in varying educational settings (Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

Despite many people criticizing CLTs lack of explicit grammar instruction, Thompson (1996) suggests that this is the most “persistent – and most damaging – misconception” people have of CLT (p.10). He goes on to state that, “the exclusion of explicit attention to grammar was never a necessary part of CLT” (Thompson, 1996, p.10). He suggests that learners can use the *retrospective approach* when attempting to teach grammar through CLT, which first involves exposing the learners to new language in a comprehensible context, “so that they are able to understand its function and meaning” (Thompson, 1996, p.10). Lastly, he describes

this approach as a “natural development from the original CLT emphasis on viewing language as a system for communication” (Thompson, 1996, p.10).

Holliday (1994) suggests various ways in which CLT can be adapted for use in Japanese classrooms, which are congruent with the factors outlined above. To address the concern that CLT classes may be difficult to manage, Holliday (1994) argues that if students are provided with clear communicative goals via simple, easy to understand rubrics, then they often remain more engaged, thus reducing the need for classroom management. The importance of goals in L2 learning is also confirmed by Atsuta (2003), who suggests that students with specific goals tend to be more successful learners. When considering the need to teach for entrance examinations, Holliday (1994) suggests that the use of communicative writing tasks could be good practice for the reading and writing sections of entrance exams.

Finally, Nolasco and Arthur (1986, cited in Smith, 2012) showed that it is possible to successfully employ CLT with large student numbers, often found in high school and first-year university L2 courses. They suggest that by gradually integrating CLT methodologies into traditional classes, it is possible to change students’ expectations and increase their receptiveness. Smith (2012) asserts that there is no clear reason why a similar approach would not also work in Japanese schools.

Conclusion

CLT has seen various changes over the years as it adapts to the ever-changing world of language teaching. As Thompson (1996) puts it, “CLT is by no means the final answer . . . But whatever innovations emerge, they will do so against the background of the changes brought about by CLT” (p.14). Despite the various criticisms of CLT addressed throughout this paper, and the fact that Japan is still struggling to successfully implement CLT into the average Japanese classroom, MEXT continues to advocate its use, making it a fertile area of advancement in research.

Through careful examination of the literature presented in this paper, it is the authors’ belief that CLT will continue to be adopted throughout educational institutions in Japan. The authors propose that in the Japanese context, educators will continue to evolve their techniques to implement more real-world communication, as it is essential for cross-cultural communication, participating in our increasingly internationalized society, and successfully hosting major international events. However, in order for this to happen at a faster pace, greater support is needed from MEXT. If the Japanese government wishes to reach its goals of more communicative English classes they will need to better support teachers in

their endeavors to deliver these classes. Vague guidelines in the Courses of Study have created a situation where CLT is largely misunderstood in Japan. Without further training, or more clearly defined goals, it will be difficult for educators in Japan to completely integrate CLT into their classes. With changes to university entrance examinations taking place in 2020 and the hosting of the Summer Olympics in the same year, now is the perfect time to rethink CLT's place in the Japanese education system.

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