Contextual Factors Affecting the Implementation of Communicative Language Teaching in Vietnam

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Abstract
Research has proposed the application of communicative language teaching principles into English classrooms to enhance EFL learner's communicative competence, but it is also noted that there is no existing one-fits-all approach. Language educators are supposed to consider contextual factors affecting the teaching and learning process to reinterpret and adapt communicative language teaching (CLT) principles to fit the local context. The study aims to explore potential factors affecting the adoption of CLT principles in the Vietnamese context by means of reviewing the literature of the filed. In this paper, the researcher defines CLT, discusses the current status of English language teaching in Vietnam, and finally interprets contextual elements that might have an impact on the CLT implementation. The study revealed three main context-relating factors, including Vietnamese teachers' and learners' perspectives on language teaching and learning in practice, distinct features of English environment at the local, and cultural expectations. The study drew an implication that ideas and techniques from whatever sources including CLT should be considered as a common pool on which each teacher can adapt to make it socially and culturally sensitive to their own contexts and meet the target learners' needs and goals.
Keywords: Communicative language teaching, contextual factors, English language teaching, Vietnam

1. INTRODUCTION

The communicative approach is based on the idea that language is learned best through using, and hence, learners should be engaged in interactions to develop communicative competence (Savignon, 2005). The introduction and implementation of communicative language teaching (CLT) have received some level of success in the ESL context. Due to its efficiency in developing ESL learners' communicative competence, which has been demonstrated in several studies, many teachers and educators in the EFL context have expressed a desire to adopt CLT principles in their settings. Some advocates of the communicative approach claim that it is the best for language teaching and learning (Liao, 2004), and that it can be utilized effectively across contexts no matter where you are and whoever you teach (Rockwell, 1998). With the aim of helping learners to develop a good command of English and increase their ability to engage in a globalized world, EFL teachers in Vietnam have been encouraged to apply CLT principles into classroom practice. However, as Kramsch and Sullivan (1996) observe, CLT in Vietnam and London is likely to share the same rhetoric or the same 'pedagogic nomenclature', yet things in classroom practice take place differently due to many contextual factors (Khoshsima & Toroujeni, 2017).

Many teachers, in fact, appear to hold some different attitudes toward CLT after trying to implement it in actual classrooms, and hence, seem to return to the grammar-based approach or integrate both meaning and forms-focused approaches (Pham, 2007). It is believed that for a successful implementation in different contexts, the practitioners are supposed to reinterpret CLT principles to develop their own approaches fitting their contexts. As Bax (2003) states, "methodology is not the magic solution", a second language can be learned in many different ways; and that "the context is a crucial determiner of the success or failure of learners" (p. 218). A number of studies have thereby suggested for a reinterpretation and adaptation of CLT in non-English-speaking contexts, but very few have comprehensively figured out contextual factors resulting in that need. This paper aims to fill the gap by means of reviewing the literature of the field. It is argued that many contextual aspects, such as teachers' and students' perspectives on English language teaching and learning in practice, cultural expectations and distinct features of the English environment at the local have a significant impact on the implementation of CLT in the classroom.

In this study, the researcher presents the fundamental concept of CLT, followed by a discussion of English language teaching (ELT) in the Vietnamese context. The main body of the paper reviews the literature of the field and discuss three teaching-context factors, including: Vietnamese teachers' and learners' perspectives on language teaching and learning in practice, distinct features of English environment at the local, and cultural expectations.

2. COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

Since its birth in the late 1970s, there have been constant debates on the definitions of CLT and the matter of its appropriateness in certain cultures. From the outset, it has existed two versions. The first so-called 'strong' version of CLT assumes that "involvement in communication is sufficient in itself for learning without the need of 'traditional' techniques" (Howatt, 1984, p. 287) such as explanations, drills, error correction, and so on. The second so-called 'weak' version of CLT, on the other hand, still leaves rooms for the teacher to integrate communicative activities with other techniques and other points of view of language learning These two versions propose different implications for how language is best learned in the classroom.

The main goal of CLT is to develop learners' communicative competence. However, it is not in accordance with one particular theory but from an eclectic mix of principles in different areas, such as cognitive science, second language acquisition and educational pedagogy. As such, it allows to "meet a wide range of proficiency-oriented goals and also accommodate different learner needs and preferences" (Bandl, 2007, p.6). CLT, therefore, is better considered as an approach to language teaching rather than a method (Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

The core principles of CLT have been described by a number of researchers in different ways; however, all of them share the following consensus, such as (1) CLT consists of interactional activities to involve learners in information exchange and problem-solving, (2) classroom instruments are authentic texts and communication activities that link to the real world, (3) learner-centeredness is the main concern of CLT, in which learner's background, their needs, and goals are taken into consideration (Wesche and Skehan, 2002, p. 208).

3. ELT IN THE VIETNAMESE CONTEXT

English has been taught and learned in Vietnam as a foreign language for decades. At the beginning of the ELT implementation, audio-lingualism and grammar-translation became the predominant methods in the EFL classroom in Vietnam. However, after a long time of learning English, Vietnamese learners are not able to effectively communicate in English, even in a daily conversation, though many of them can master English grammar quite well. Pham (2004) points out that only ten out of fifty English-major learners have adequate capacity of English for jobs as translators, interpreters, teachers of English or tour guides after graduation.

In the mobilized world, the demand of acquiring a certain level of English communication becomes more apparent to Vietnamese learners. In 2008, the government launched a project namely 'The National Foreign Language 2020', which focuses on developing the English capacity for Vietnam's workforce. The goal of this project is that until 2020 Vietnamese students graduating from secondary schools and universities will be able to communicate in English fluently (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2008). To achieve this

goal, EFL teachers have been encouraged to adopt CLT in their classroom practice to develop learners' communicative competence.

The introduction of CLT in Vietnam at first received positive attitudes from most of the teachers (Phan, 2004; Pham, 2004); however, when putting CLT principles in practice, teachers have encountered many difficulties and challenges. Ellis (1996) and Pham (2004) note some contextual constraints to the implementation of CLT in the Vietnamese context, such as large class size, negative washback from grammar-based examinations, teachers' low language proficiency and learners' low motivation. Thus, many teachers come back to the traditional approaches or modify CLT principles in their own ways to fit their contexts.

In the following, the paper will go insight into the factors affecting the CLT implementation in the Vietnamese context, including teachers and learners' perspectives on language teaching and learning in practice, English environment at the local, and cultural expectations.

4. TEACHERS' AND LEARNERS' PERSPECTIVES ON LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING IN PRACTICE

There is a common belief that no method is perfect to every learning setting, in which teachers and learners' backgrounds, attitudes and perceptions are taken into consideration (McKay, 2002). It is undeniable that teachers and students are the main stakeholders in the classroom to determine its success. Therefore, both teachers' and students' points of view, especially in practice, should be considered to achieve effective teaching approaches.

Some studies have revealed that many teachers recognize the importance of developing English communication skills and desire to adopt CLT in their classroom. However, after trying to implement CLT tenets in the actual classroom, they notice the need to modify these principles in their context to fit their learners' needs and goals. For example, Sakui (2004) found that although many Japanese secondary school EFL teachers believed in the benefit of communicative approach, they also expressed the need to primarily conduct teacher-fronted non-communicative activities. They explained that communication-oriented approach in which involving grammar instruction is an essential preparation for examinations in the local.

Similarly, Beaumont and Chang (2011) conducted an exploratory study to investigate Korean teachers' perceptions to the traditional and the communicative approaches in three secondary schools in South Korea. The finding from classroom observations shows that teachers used both 'grammar-based' and 'communicative' lessons. In the former way they used such techniques as translation, explanation in L1, repetition by students after the teacher or reading aloud by the teacher, while in the latter way, students did some speaking activities, including making group presentations in front of the whole class. The teacher participants explained in the following questionnaire that they found these

techniques "help students to understand the text correctly" and "help them to acquire linguistic knowledge" (p. 297). Beaumont and Chang's claimed that focus on meaning, the core tenet of CLT, is not sufficient for second language acquisition, especially in the EFL context where learners are not exposed to English in their daily life.

In order to explore Vietnamese teachers' perceptions to language teaching and learning in their practice, Phan (2004) conducted in-depth interviews with two EFL tertiary teachers. The first teacher stated that with different learners it was necessary to employ different approaches to fit their needs and goals, for example, for the first-year student with the low level of English proficiency she introduced grammar rules and structures more often through explanation and exercises, while she created more communicative activities for second-year students. The teacher expressed that her ways of teaching were not boring or lacked a communicative orientation. Importantly, she stated that what she practiced was what her students needed. The second teacher, on one hand, said that she liked to be a friend, a companion or a facilitator with her students but not a controller in the classroom; on the other hand, she also emphasized that students needed a good knowledge of grammar to study the subject – writing, well. She highlighted "the importance of equipping students with grammatical knowledge prior to and through her literature teaching, although teaching grammar was not her focus" (p. 54).

In the case study by Pham (2004) about Vietnamese teachers' beliefs and implementation of CLT, three university teacher participants emphasized the importance and the usefulness of teaching students to be able to use the language in communication. In their practices, however, they demonstrated different teaching approaches, for instance, allowing students to use Vietnamese in the group discussion; one group member will present the work to the rest of the class in English. They expressed that students preferred this way, and they performed well in the classroom. Although the informants found themselves not successful to absolutely meet currently specified tenets of CLT, they did not reject the "communication-oriented approach" (Littlewood, 2012). Pham notes that teachers incorporated CLT tenets with other approaches and different points of view of language teaching and learning to accommodate different learners' needs and goals, including communication development and grammar mastery.

Some research has also indicated that Vietnamese learners prefer a communication-oriented approach in which grammar instruction is involved. Ngoc and Iwashita (2012) conducted a study to compare teachers and students' attitudes towards CLT. The authors used a four-point Likert-scale questionnaire to collect the data on 88 first-year students and 37 in-service EFL teachers from two universities in Hanoi, Vietnam. A quantitative approach was adopted for data analysis. The finding shows that both teachers and students hold a moderately favorable attitude toward CLT. Between them, students expressed their preference to involve grammar instruction and error correction in the classroom along with communicative activities. The authors also made an important claim that these favorable views of students should not be necessarily considered obstacles to CLT

implementation. Rather, teachers and educators should accept it, and hence, interpret CLT approach to fit the learners' needs and preferences. As Savignon (1997) asserts, the "ultimate success in learning to use an L2 most likely would be seen to depend on the attitude of the learner" (p. 107). Thus, teachers and educators should consult learners and involve them in developing effective teaching approaches. In this sense, Ngoc and Iwashita's argument for an integration of grammar instruction and error correction into CLT with attention to meaning and context is quite robust. This claim confirms Savignon's (1991) contention that grammar is very important and is best learned with attention to meaning and context. The authors also made a significant implication that to reinterpret CLT to make it socially and culturally sensitive to the Vietnamese context; it is important to consider both teachers' and learners' perspectives on how the language should be taught and learned in the actual classroom.

In short, although many teachers and students agree on the goal of CLT to help students be able to use the language, some also expressed that for successful English language teaching and learning in practice, both meaning-focused and forms-focused approaches should be integrated.

5. DISTINCT FEATURES OF THE ENGLISH ENVIRONMENT AT THE LOCAL

The fact that English is not used in daily life in the Vietnamese context, so it is challenging to create so-called practical English communication activities in the classroom.

In essence, CLT assumes that learning takes place through real communications that learners encounter outside the classroom. Brown (1994) proposes three ways to activate social interactions in the classroom, such as (1) practitioners need to provide authentic language input in real life, (2) students are engaged in language production for genuine and meaningful communication, (3) classroom tasks conducted must aim for actual language use outside the classroom. Those principles and practices of CLT have been studied and used effectively in ESL environments. However, the EFL setting like in Vietnam is markedly different from the ESL setting. In particular, Vietnamese learners are not exposed to English in their daily life, for example, they do not need to use English when shopping, participating outdoor activities or chatting with their family or friends, what they need is Vietnamese. As Pham (2004) asserts, "the principles of doing tasks in the classroom which are applicable to the world outside the classroom is not as valid in Vietnam as in an English-speaking country, since Vietnamese learners rarely have a real need to communicate in English outside the classroom" (p. 5). Some opponents might argue that learners can use English to search the information on the Internet, or can make friends with foreign people through the Internet. It is true to some extent. However, firstly, students might not often use many daily-life conversations through the Internet, for instance, conversations between customers and a shop assistant, asking for direction, or ordering food in a restaurant. Pham (2007) points out that when teachers ask students to work in pairs or groups to create a conversation, the question raised is whether they are

really engaged in authentic communication. Additionally, the argument above appears to ignore the countryside learners who have very few or even no chances to use the computer or the Internet. Teachers and educators, thus, should be aware of these issues, and reinterpret learning principles, both in CLT and in other approaches to develop their own approach that fits the local conditions.

In addition, the lack of English speaking environment in the local causes the challenges to find authentic language materials to the learners. As Larsen-Freeman (2000) notes, authentic materials plays an important part in making communicative activities become meaningful. However, since English is not used in everyday life, materials in English are not available in most of the regions in Vietnam. In reality, most of the English materials in the classroom are originated from English-speaking countries. Although the contents of these materials including communicative activities, events, and so on are considered realistic to learners in the ESL setting, they are seen unrealistic and impractical to Vietnamese learners. As Kramsch and Sullivan (1996) comments, what is authentic in London might be inauthentic in Vietnam. It is suggested that teachers should act as transformative intellectuals to modify some aspects of the textbook or materials from the ESL setting to fit their own settings. Moreover, in some cases, teachers can keep the original texts but explain the context where the language in the text is used so that learners are aware of the circumstances of using it.

Overall, in the context that English is not a communication tool for learners outside the classroom, it might be challenging for teachers to find authentic materials and create practical communication activities. Therefore, teachers need to interpret what is so-called 'practical and meaningful' to EFL learners in the local context.

6. CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS

It is assumed that local cultural norms more or less affect learners' cultural expectations in the classroom, leading to some modifications in teachers' CLT implementation.

Cortazzi and Jin (1996) state that a culture of learning may determine students' behaviors in language classrooms. In Vietnam, the existence of Confucianism during the thousand years has an influence on the learning culture of Vietnamese learners. Among the core doctrines of Confucianism that strongly affect Vietnamese learners' behaviors are: children have to listen to the parent; and learners have to obey teachers without questions (Rainey, 2010). Although the urge of the country development requires more flexibility and openness in society, those beliefs still more or less make an effect on the Vietnamese people's behaviors in a family and the school since they can benefit from those beliefs in some way. Kamsch and Sullivan (1996) point out that the Vietnamese classrooms often like a family, which respects supportiveness, politeness, and warmth. In the classroom, "students and teachers tend to construct the knowledge together, or students work together as a class while the teacher is the monitor" (p. 53). The classroom takes place with respect to both knowledge and moral values. Beaumont and Chang (2011) contend that these features of Asian culture of learning should not be considered 'backward' or

'shortcoming' compared to CLT. It is, in fact, endemic in many educational cultures and holds its own power. In particular, it views education as the accumulation of knowledge. Through educational history, it has shown some degree of success in transmitting knowledge to learners. Therefore, language teachers and educators need to adopt the communication-oriented approach along with taking advantage of the local culture of learning, but not negate it, to best fit the target learners' needs and preferences.

Phan (2004) also figures out the discrepancies in the belief of a good teacher in Vietnamese and in the Western context. In Vietnam, teachers need to "perform their duty as behavior educators or moral guides" (p. 55). In fact, these cultural features should not be considered a conflict with the Western culture but just the difference, which requires teachers to adapt CLT principles to develop their own approach that is sensitive to their own context. For example, teachers can take roles as facilitators, instructors, friends or teachers, and introduce grammar instruction as well as conduct communicative activities. In so doing, Phan comments that two teacher participants in her study (mentioned in the first reason) are successful in enabling their students to extend and explore the knowledge, which by no means contributes to students' second language acquisition. The author also notes that with "an expert learner of the language" and "moral guides", Vietnamese teachers have succeeded in providing the knowledge that their learners want without alienating them from their familiar home culture. In other words, Vietnamese teachers are successful in their teaching practice when "taking into consideration both the culture of the target language and the culture of the students" (p. 57).

In an exploratory study conducted on 177 tertiary students, Nguyen (2009) found out some typical features of the Vietnamese students' culture of learning. It is found that although students were motivated to learn English, they were not so excited to accomplish the tasks given by the teacher. Particularly, in the classroom, they actively engaged in covert learning, for example, "listening attentively and trying to quietly answer every question without verbalizing their answers aloud. In the out-of-class context, the Vietnamese learners preferred to undertake more receptive rather than productive activities" (p. 208), and were not keen on participating social interactions. Some opponents might argue that teachers should change the learners' learning styles to the ways that they think it is better for learners. It goes to some extent; however, Ngoc and Iwahita (2012) assert that learners' favorable views on language learning should not be regarded as obstacles in communication-oriented approach. In fact, teachers need to become aware of learners' beliefs and make necessary adjustments to develop a deeper understanding of new possibilities in teaching approaches (Pham, 2004). As Sullivan (2000) claims that CLT should consider the social and cultural sensitivities of the region. In fact, if teachers' approaches meet learners' beliefs and preferences, it can help to increase learners' interest and intrinsic motivation which are crucial for their language acquisition (Grabe, 2009).

7. CONCLUSION

In this study, the researcher reviews major factors might affect the implementation of CLT in classrooms in the Vietnamese context. As the common sense that no method is perfect for every context, merely CLT cannot be the best in a particular setting, including the Vietnamese context. When putting CLT tenets into practice, by no means it will be affected by the contextual factors, such as Vietnamese teachers' and students' views toward language learning, the lack of English-speaking environment in the real life, and cultural expectations. However, it is important to note that these contextual factors should not be seen as obstacles or barriers to the implementation of the communicative approach. Rather, it should be respected, and the practitioners are supposed to interpret learning principles and modify CLT tenets in order to develop their own approach that can fit the target learners' needs and goals. In addition, the modifications of teachers should not be considered as the failure of implementing CLT. In contrast, these changes enrich CLT in the way that adding more characteristics to it in practice, for example, "learner-centeredness, focus on both meaning and linguistic forms in context, use of collaborative activities, and new roles of teachers as facilitators and negotiators of meaning" (Richards and Rodgers, 2001, p. 126). In short, "ideas and techniques from whatever source – so-called traditional, so-called CLT or indeed any other source" establish a common pool on which teachers can create their own classroom practices that are meaningful to their learners and help learners fulfill their real communicative needs (Littlewood, 2012, p. 354).

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