

COMPETENCY-BASED LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION IN SPEAKING CLASSES: ITS THEORY AND IMPLEMENTATION IN INDONESIAN CONTEXTS

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Abstract

The competency-based curriculum as endorsed by the Department of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia has recently been implemented nationwide from elementary to high schools in the country. It is claimed that by improving syllabi, materials, and activities or by putting a more emphasis on learners' autonomy, more effective language learning will take place. However, such an approach may also be counter-productive as it emphasizes the outputs more than the inputs. Another problem may arise as learners' language performance may also entail teaching preparations in that teachers are obliged not only to be knowledgeable of the topics discussed, but also to be skillful and creative in preparing the materials. The implementation of this approach then becomes more complicated, especially when related to the learners' culture. The features of this language instruction seem to be contradictory to Indonesians' cultural values and beliefs which are reflected in the forms of total obedience, the unquestioning mind, the concept of the old know all, and the teachers can do no wrong.

Due to the above barriers, this study intends to explore and evaluate the effectiveness of the implementation of this instruction in speaking classes in Indonesian contexts. It will specifically attempt to assess the extent to which closed and open tasks can affectively be accomplished and with what degree of success the students acquire natural language use.

Keywords: Competency-based curriculum, output, input

INTRODUCTION

The competency based-curriculum as endorsed by the Department of Education of the Republic of Indonesia has recently been implemented nationwide from elementary to high schools in the country. It is claimed that by improving the curricula, syllabi, materials, and activities or by putting a

more emphasis on learners' autonomy, more effective language learning will take place (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). However, this argument might not be entirely justified in that such an approach can also be counter-productive, for it emphasizes the outputs more than the inputs. As language performance requires learners' knowledge and skills of the language, inputs then inevitably become a key factor to learning outcomes. Students must have a certain level of prerequisite knowledge derived from their specific trait to perform a particular task.

Another problem may arise as learners' language performance also requires the teachers' teaching preparations. Teachers are obliged not only to be knowledgeable of the discussed topics, but they are also to be skillful in the language and in transferring their knowledge to the students. In addition, teachers have to be creative and innovative in preparing the teaching materials and making the teaching aids that meet the nature of, and reflect the authenticity of, the learning tasks (see Dardjowidjojo, 2003, Setiono, 2004).

As Competency-Based Language Teaching (CBLT) necessitates active class participations, its implementation may then become more complicated especially when related to the learners' culture. The basic features of CBLT seem to be contradictory to the learners' dominant cultural values and beliefs of Javanese as reflected in the forms of total obedience, the unquestioning mind, the concept that the old know all, and that the teachers can do no wrong (Dardjowidjojo, 2003). The implication of these views in classroom contexts is that the best students are always obliged to their teacher's instructions, and that they must have no interest in challenging their teacher on the discussed topics.

In conjunction with class success, it is argued that any educational or instructional success may not solely be derived from the effectiveness of a particular teaching approach, well-designed curriculum, syllabus and teaching materials, but it is also affected by the efficacy of the students' learning strategies. Many other problems are textbooks, class size, assessment, language environment, teachers' qualifications, attitudes and motivation, school facilities, and students' mastery of the language.

Due to the above barriers, this paper intends to explore and evaluate the extent to which CBLT is properly implemented in English classes in Indonesia. Two techniques of data collection are employed--classroom observation and interview. The first uses video camera recordings in that classroom interactions are video-taped and analyzed, and the second employs questions with representative samples of respondents--teachers and students under investigation. Five outstanding senior high schools in the metropolitan city of Jakarta became the target of this study so as to comprehensively depict a portrait of CBLT practice in class.

ON COMPETENCY-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING

Competency-Based Language Teaching is basically the application of the principles of Competency-Based Education to language teaching. It focuses more on the outputs rather than the inputs. Therefore, it is a performance-based instruction with which the goal is to address what the learners are expected to do with the language (Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

A performance outline of language tasks then becomes important in this approach as it may lead to a demonstrated mastery of the language associated with the specific skills and the realization of traits, which are necessary for the learners to function in real life settings. Learning outcomes, thus, underpin the curriculum framework and syllabus specifications, teaching strategies, and reporting. Accordingly, the quality of teaching and testing as well as student learning will be enhanced by the clear specification of the expected outcomes (Docking, 1994).

Competencies, according to Richards and Rodgers (2001:144), comprise essential skills, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors required for effective performance of “a real-world task or activity”. Docking (1994) further asserts that a unit of competency can be realized in the forms of a task, a role, a function, or a learning module. These will vary from context to context. Therefore, this sort of competency may include specific knowledge, thinking processes, attitudes, and both perceptual and physical skills. All of these may be linked to any domain of life in the field of work and social survival in a new environment.

From the analysis of its basic features, it is evident that CBLT is based on the functional and interactional perspective of the nature of language. It seeks to teach language in conjunction with social contexts in which it is used. Consequently, CBLT changes its emphasis from what the students know about language to what they can do with it.

Apart from being practical and applicable, CBLT has been criticized for not having a valid procedure to develop competency for most programs (see Tollefson, 1986). Many of the areas for which competencies are needed in a community are impossible to operationalize. Others argue that dividing activities into sets of competencies is simplistic in that the sum of the parts differs from the complexity of the whole. CBLT is, therefore, seen as prescriptivist in that it prepares the students to acquire sets of language performance rather than to develop thinking processes and skills.

PROBLEMS AROUND CBLT IN INDONESIAN CONTEXTS

As briefly discussed in the introduction, CBLT encounters many problems in its implementation in Indonesian classrooms. A great number of

textbooks, for instance, do not include a grammatical aspect as essentially required in communication. Many textbook writers seem to misunderstand the concept of communicative competence in that it deals merely with language use. Accordingly, teachers never address grammaticality in class (further readings, see Berns, 1990; Johnson, 1982; Wilkins, 1972, 1981; Widdowson, 1978; Littlewood, 1981).

Another problem deals with an ideal physical setting or class size. An English class in Indonesia normally has more than forty students. The number of students in such a class has to be considerably reduced to approximately ten to fifteen learners so as to make teaching-learning activities more effective.

As CBLT focuses on continuous and ongoing assessment, there has not been any readily available valid and reliable procedure and standards on how to evaluate the students' language competence. The holistic method of assessing the students' performance was once reviewed by the committee of quality assurance as sponsored by the Directorate General for Higher Learning Education. Yet, the procedures and detailed criteria of its measure have not yet been made available for public use nationwide.

When discussing language teaching and acquisition, it is somehow to be related to time allotment and language environment. Learning a foreign language such as English in Indonesia is quite restricted in terms of its time allocations. Students are exposed to the language within a relatively short span of time. Dardjowidjojo (2003) notes that high school learners have an average of five contact hours a week, each lasting for forty-five minutes. With respect to language environment, students learn English only in class and outside the class; they communicate either in their national language, Bahasa Indonesia, or in their vernaculars. Consequently, they normally do not acquire the target language even after they completed the school program.

Teachers of English in Indonesia are mostly the products of IKIP and FKIP (Teachers Training Institutes), and many have not yet even reached the level of maturity in the use of English. It may come as no surprise that a national survey conducted by the Ministry of Education in 1982 indicates that 93.3% of junior high school teachers have only a PGSLP degree, a degree obtained one year after senior high schools. As for senior high school teachers, 7.1% are B-satu graduates and 44.1% are bachelor's degree holders. Although the number annually increases, the overall percentage still remains very low (further readings, see Dardjowidjojo, 2003; Hamied, 1996; Ridwan, Renandya, and Lie, 1996; Sadtono, 1983).

CBLT focuses on learning outcomes and learners are granted the privilege to be self-directed independent individuals. It means that the teacher's role then has to be shifted from an authoritative agent to a facilitator. This shift, to a great extent, cannot be made possible as for many

Asian societies “knowledge is traditionally seen as something to be transmitted down through generations,” and that “knowledge is passed down from teachers to students” (Kirkpatrick, 1995, 1996).

Teachers’ lack of motivation is still another problem for class success. The reasons rest, to some extent, in the shortage of English teachers and, to some other extent, their insufficient income. As a result, teachers work in more than one school and thus consume their energy and leave little time to professionally prepare their teaching.

CBLT by its nature demands active learning in its classroom practice. In order to enhance the dynamic learning, a big class has to be broken down into small ones, leading to a great number of new classrooms throughout the country. This will unquestionably be too costly for both state and private schools, and as such makes it impossible to realize.

With regard to students’ motivation, CBLT in classroom practice will encounter some obstacles on the part of the students. As English is compulsory at high schools, students are obliged to learn it. As a result, the majority do not find it useful as Indonesians live in an environment in which knowledge of English is not mandatory. This situation becomes more complex when related to the students’ previous academic backgrounds. Consequently, class interactions and participations are largely dependent upon the levels of their prerequisite knowledge—the higher the level, the more lively the class will be.

As discussed before, the implementation of CBLT confronts in classroom practice is hindered by cultural barriers, for it requires students’ active learning. For most dominant ethnic groups in Indonesia, silence, passiveness, and obedience mostly constitute a standard cultural norm in which they believe. Therefore, students are normally not encouraged to actively participate in classroom discussions. This makes it difficult for CBLT to be implemented in class as it may significantly mitigate, if not eliminate, the possibility of class interactions.

CBLT INSTRUCTION IN ENGLISH CLASSES IN INDONESIA

A survey of six classes where English is taught in five outstanding Senior High Schools involving 258 students in the metropolitan city of Jakarta indicates that the majority of the teachers under study are not completely knowledgeable of the approach and its procedures to implement it in class. Therefore, many of the CBLT principles are violated. Class activities, for example, are conducted in language laboratories. This is in contrast with one of the principles of CBLT that integrates collaborative learning in its application. Accordingly, students cannot actively interact as the class setting makes it impossible for dynamic learning.

Teachers frequently use Indonesian to discuss the topic and, to some extent, to explain the grammatical rules of the target language (TL). The reason why they speak Indonesian is that their command of English is poor. Dardjowidjojo (2003:34) affirms that “even at the university level, ... English lecturers have not reached a mature level of language use.” On the contrary, in CBLT teachers and students are expected to communicate in the TL and not to dominantly account for grammatical components and/or formulas. Some of the samples are illustrated in the conversation below:

- Teacher : Chandra, introduce yourself.
- Student : O.K. ... O.K. ...
- Teacher : *Jangan grogi* ... [Don't be nervous]
Introduce-*nya mana*? Use the
expression, *ya*. *Ayo, jangan grogi,*
ulangi lagi. [Come on. Don't be
nervous, repeat it again.]
- Teacher : “*Sudah*” *itu pakai tense apa*? [What
tense do you use when you have
“already”?]
- Student : Present Perfect Tense
- Interviewer: How long have you been
implementing CBLT?
- Teacher : Hmm ... It depend on the teachers,
Okay ... but for me ... uuh ... maybe
.... Uuh ... I will ... using this ... uuh
... system as possible as I can is
my concern ... uuh but for the others
teachers I don't know.
- Interviewer: What does competency mean to you
when talking about CBLT?
- Teacher : Uuhm ... from this ... competence
uuhm .. competency is means ... We
can do something, Okay? For
example ... a student can speak in
English all of the sentence in English
so they get the competention.

From the two dialogues above, it can easily be deduced that the teachers do not acquire English very well. Every sentence they made is full of grammatical errors. Besides, they were halting in expressing the ideas.

When learning outcomes become central to language learning, teaching preparation including teaching aids is fundamental for class success. Class observations show that teachers' preparation is quite restricted to the textbook exercises only in that the teachers do not make

supplementary materials that can be used to enhance the students' language performance.

The role of the teachers is still another problem. Teachers' dominance of the class is quite obvious in that they spent most of the class time talking to their students. They still cling to the old paradigm, in which teachers play a significant role in class as a model. In CBLT, teachers have to shift their role, not as a model, but as a facilitator, co-communicator, or advisor so that the class has ample time and opportunities to actively participate in class discussions.

Many teachers still use the Audio Lingual Method in CBLT classes, an approach that has a different set of tenets and beliefs from that of CBLT. As a result, teachers use a lockstep approach that consumes the whole class time—drilling and reinforcing a dialogue. The teacher plays the role of A and the students of B. In this case, the students have no opportunity to interact in group work. The example below illustrates the class activity:

A : Hi, Dennis! Hi, Karen!
B : Hi, Gina! How are you?
A : We're fine, and you?
B : I am fine too.

This dialogue is repeated so many times in class that the students memorize it. Thus, memorization and language reinforcement become fundamental in learning the language.

Teachers monotonously employ a particular teaching approach in class. The questions raised to the students neither provoke their critical thinking nor evoke their motivation to further express their ideas on given topics. Students have no chance to learn various ways to express different thoughts and feelings. The questions are then cliché, that is, they are stereotyped phrases and repeatedly given to every student in class. When teaching "greetings", teachers' interactions with the class will normally be:

T : How are you, Dennis?
S : I am fine, thanks.
T : Oh, great, what about you, Andry? (the student next to Dennis)
S : I am fine too.
T : Great, what about you, Gina? (the student next to Andry) ...Uuhm how are you, Gina?

As discussed before, students are normally passive and only respond to the teacher's questions when asked. There are at least two fundamental reasons explaining this class situation. First, their previous academic training, as part

of the realization of the dominant cultural values, has rigorously formed their academic habits and attitudes in that good students are persons with total obedience who respond to their teacher's questions when needed. Besides, they are unwilling to challenge their teachers, in particular, and classmates, in general, and to initiate or to be actively engaged in any class discussion. Second, the survey indicates that their mastery of English is basically very poor. Quite often they speak in Indonesian when doing the language task. Consequently, they feel reluctant to be involved in class interactions. The following samples illustrate their poor command of English:

Teacher: Your motto?
 Student : Is there a good ... *apa ya?* [what I'm supposed to say]
 Teacher: Repeat. Repeat. *Ulangi, ulangi!* [Repeat it again!]
 Student : My motto 'Be cool always'.

In the dialogue above, the teacher used Indonesian "*Ulangi lagi*" meaning "Repeat it again" as the student might not understand the instruction. The sentence "My motto 'Be cool always'" obviously reflects the student's poor mastery of English.

Another example relates to the discussion of tenses, "Past Tense" or "Past Progressive Tense". The teacher gave grammatical patterns to the class and asked the students to use the given patterns to express an idea. The examples below show that both teachers and students have poor command of English.

Teacher: So, ... pattern-*nya*? *Di atas, di atasnya*. Above the first pattern.
 Student : *Ini* the first pattern, *ya?* [Is this the first pattern?]
 Teacher: No! The second.
 Student : *Ininya*. Did *apa namanya*, Miss? [Did what is the name (of it)?]
 Teacher: So, Subject + did not + V1. There for the negative, then for the question. Any question class, about simple past?

From the dialogue, the teacher used a codeswitch in "So, ... pattern-*nya*?". The word "pattern-*nya*" consists of two constituents, the English free morpheme or base-"pattern" and the Indonesian bound morpheme or affix "*nya*". In addition, she also made a grammatically incorrect sentence in "there for the negative, then for the question. Any question, class, about simple past?"

Class management is another problem that teachers encounter, particularly with respect to turn taking. The teacher gave a student a question one at a time. Accordingly, the rest of the class was chatting. It undoubtedly brings about the ineffectiveness of the teaching-learning interactions and the minimum language acquisition. As teachers stood most of the time at their desks, they could not spread their attention to the class. As a result, those sitting a little bit far away from the teachers or at the back of the class did not pay attention to the lesson.

Textbooks which meet the essential requirements of CBLT, i.e. to assess the students' competencies consisting of basic skills, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors required for effective performance of a real-world task or activity are not available yet. The detailed criteria evaluating each of the mentioned aspects has not been made and endorsed by the formal authority, the Ministry of National Education. Therefore, any assessment made for this language instruction has not been standardized yet.

Concerning the class size and time allotment, normally the class consists of an average number of forty-five students and lasts for forty-five minutes for an English lesson. Therefore, teachers find it difficult to implement CBLT into which collaborative learning is incorporated. The ideal class size required to implement CBLT should be approximately ten to fifteen students so that the class has ample time and opportunities to practice the language. In connection with the time slot, an effective English class needs roughly about sixty to ninety minutes for one meeting so that teachers have sufficient time to review the previous lesson, introduce the new topic, work on the current topic, as well as end the lesson.

CONCLUSION

From the findings, it can be concluded that CBLT fails to be implemented in the five schools under study. There are many factors causing the failure. First, teachers are not well informed about the basic tenets of this instruction nor do they feel knowledgeable of the approach. Consequently, they cannot implement it in the class.

Second, their mastery of English is still inappropriate. The majority of the teachers quite often still use Indonesian to communicate in the class. Third, their class management and teaching preparations are inadequate. Most teachers restrict their preparations to textbooks only.

As students come from different schools with different disciplines and academic trainings, their knowledge and mastery of English vary from individual to individual. As a result, the class success is greatly dependent upon the students' active roles in class discussions. Students' dominant cultural values and beliefs also significantly become educational barriers in

the implementation of CBLT. Students remain passive in class and have no interest in challenging their teachers and in initiating a discussion as active class participations may contradict their cultural values.

Other major obvious aspects affecting the failure include a big class size and time allotment. Big classes will certainly be ineffective in teaching-learning interactions. When a lockstep teaching activity is conducted, the teacher cannot individually supervise the students. Time allocation is another problem English teachers face in class. At high schools, English is taught four or five times a week, each lasting for forty-five minutes. This limited time slot will certainly cause ineffective learning in that the class cannot finish doing the exercises within this time frame nor can they have sufficient time to elaborate the discussed topic. As a result, teachers cannot give their students ample opportunities to interact and to practice the language in class.

In sum, many aspects and variables definitely affect the class success. The linguistic and non-linguistic factors certainly contribute a great deal to the failure of the implementation of CBLT in Indonesia. However, there is no need for pessimism as this kind of failure, to a greater or lesser degree, is not exclusively Indonesian. Any country that teaches a foreign language to young learners may result in similar outcomes.

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