

Post CLT or Post-Method: major criticisms of the communicative approach and the definition of the current pedagogy

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Abstract. The paper is focused on the origin and definition of the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach as well as its major criticisms. The study aims at examination of typical features of CLT to establish the reason why none of the methods or approaches so far has come to replace it; whether it is plausible to suggest that any such method or approach will appear in the future; whether it is possible to describe the current situation as post-method. In order to achieve this goal strengths and weaknesses of the CLT approach have been scrutinised and its influence on the present day post-method state has been explored. The authors state that in spite of all criticisms, CLT has a great impact in the present teaching context. Having given special attention to the description of post methods pedagogy, it is obvious that this condition may be considered as a consequent stage, which has emerged as a result of CLT breakdown. Nevertheless, the term “post-CLT” seems to be general and does not reflect the specificity properly, i.e. co-existence of various approaches and methods with the focus on context requirements.

Introduction

“Along with its many virtues, the Communicative Approach unfortunately has most of its typical vices of an intellectual revolution. It over-generalizes valid but limited insights until they become virtually meaningless; it makes exaggerated claims for the power and novelty of its doctrines; it misrepresents the currents of thought it has replaced; it is often characterized by serious intellectual confusion; it is choked with jargon.” [1]

This quotation best summarizes the major criticisms of communicative language teaching (CLT), which is surprising as it used to be the most authoritative methodology in language teaching. However, after CLT lost its leading role, the position has not been claimed. Some researchers believe it proves the vitality of CLT principles, others argue that language teaching pedagogy has reached the so-called the post-method stage when neither methods nor approaches are needed. In order to see who may be closer to the truth, it seems necessary to scrutinize both the strengths and weaknesses of CLT, and explore its influence on the present day post-method state. This paper is aimed at examining:

1. typical features of CLT to establish the reason why no method or approach so far has come to replace it;
2. whether it is plausible to suggest that any such method or approach will appear in the future;
3. whether it is really possible to describe the current situation as post-method.

1 Strengths and weaknesses of CLT

According to Kumaravadivelu [2], it was the focus on learners and communication that helped CLT gain the popularity, which brought about an almost immediate implementation of concepts and ideas all over the world. Arguably, this is what has also led to the general disappointment in CLT later on as signals of frustration with new methodologies quickly started coming from various countries.

1.1 Origin and definition of CLT

As stated by Kumaravadivelu, Richards & Rodgers, Celce-Murcia et al., Canale & Swain, Widdowson, etc. [2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7] CLT appeared to make up for the deficiency of the audiolingual method and the so-called grammatical approach which heavily focused on receptive skills and language structures. The problem was quite evident – after spending many hours learning a language learners fail to communicate which led to ‘communication’ becoming a buzz word in teaching and linguistics in the late 1960s. According to Richards & Rodgers [4] it was British linguists (Wilkins, Candlin, Widdowson, Brumfit, etc) who first stressed the importance of teaching how to use a language as a communication tool rather than drilling language forms. As a theoretical framework the whole range of concepts

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and ideas were adopted from applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics and philosophy, e.g. J. Firth, M.A.K. Halliday, D. Hymes, J. Gumperz, W. Labov, J. Austin, J. Searle – the most detailed account of contributions can be found in Kumaravadivelu [2] and Richards & Rodgers [4].

Generally, though, the definitions of CLT describe it as a theoretical approach that tries to apply a communicative view of a language in language pedagogy, starting from syllabus design to classroom activities and behavioral patterns of learners and teachers. It ought to be noted that from the very beginning it aspired to comprise an array of ideas, concepts and techniques as well as elements of language teaching and learning, i.e. seemingly it ventured to become an ideal model which could suit all circumstances and cover all areas in language pedagogy.

It is worth mentioning that the obvious contrast between previous methods and approaches, such as favoring productive skills over receptive, extensive theoretical background, the overwhelming importance of real-life communication practice, innovations in syllabus content and classroom interaction, made CLT highly competitive. Nevertheless, some of these benefits are rather questionable and inconsistent, and they could be regarded as the weaknesses of the approach rather than strengths.

For instance, theories and concepts underlying CLT, in fact, have never come to agree on some fundamental issues, the most vivid illustration would be defining communicative competence. As can be seen from Canale & Swain [6] and Celce-Murcia et al. [8], fifteen years of studies have produced three different models of the competence, but whether such elaborations have made CLT more manageable in classroom application seems doubtful. One possible reason may be that CLT attempted to embrace so many language-related disciplines at once, thus turning a benefit into its opposite. Another point of view, expressed by Widdowson [7], argues that models and principles, borrowed from linguistics, were initially contradictory which only aggravated further because those, who adopted the linguistic theories, simply omitted unattractive or ambiguous parts, producing a fragmented and confusing mixture of misshapen models and conflicting ideas.

While the establishment of theoretical background was still under way, enthusiasts were already busy trying to implement the new ideology which led to what Thompson [8] refers to as ‘misconceptions’, like teaching no grammar at all, or teaching only speaking. The reported results of such practices were predictably upsetting which undermined the credibility of the approach as a whole. It comes as no surprise that eventually the gap between a collection of different concepts and a variety of practices became too wide which led to break-up and formation of two versions: strong and weak CLTs. Moreover, some CLT proponents, for example Littlewood [9], even propose to treat it as an umbrella term covering a number of approaches which has led the opponents of CLT to the

conviction that there was no revolutionary approach, but a renamed collection of the long existed methods.

1.2 Criticisms of CLT

Apart from the weaknesses that destroyed CLT from the inside, there is quite an astounding amount of criticism which is based on the evidence that CLT failed to fulfill its many promises to innovate educational environment in the world. The first and foremost issue, widely outspoken in literature, is the lack of communicativeness in the approach that contains the very word ‘communicative’ in its name. For instance, Kumaravadivelu [2] doubts that CLT is able to promote ‘authentic communication’, because various studies, his own included, have failed to describe CLT classroom interaction as genuinely communicative. As Nunan [10] writes in his much-cited article - even CLT enthusiast teachers did not manage to recreate real-life communication in their classes as well as to create conditions conducive for developing communication skills.

Studies that followed Nunan’s work scrutinized this problem at every possible angle: from whether it is really conceivable to expect from classroom interaction to reflect real-life conversations [11]; to how to make the traditional Initiation-Response-Follow-Up (IRF) routine more communication-oriented [13]. The debate seems far from being over as now discussions mainly concern the authenticity of materials to use in classroom. Thus, Widdowson [7] warns that caution is needed when relying non-critically on linguistic insights such as corpora studies, because no method is void of limitations, and authenticity does not equal to appropriateness or pedagogical relevance in certain cases. What’s more, preference of fluency over accuracy in practice promoted such low performance requirements that it resulted in poor competence.

According to Bax [15], the main reason why CLT has been discarded and replaced by other teaching paradigms was its inability to fit various contexts. Kumaravadivelu [2] supports this view and uses the whole range of studies from various countries, reporting general dissatisfaction that has arisen as a result of little compatibility of the approach with certain features of local contexts. Application of CLT has turned out distressing at times for teachers and students alike, even in cases when it was backed by governments and institutional authorities, as is evident, for example, from Hu [16] who emphasizes in his highly critical account how socio-cultural filters can prevent both teachers and learners from benefitting the introduction of new teaching methods and models.

Most researchers (Kumaravadivelu, Swan, Bax, Hu, etc) believe that differences in culture between various teaching and learning communities present an insurmountable hurdle for CLT practices as national language policies, learners’ expectations and socio-cultural norms may clash with CLT fundamental notions. One most cited example is a gap between western and eastern perceptions of a teacher’s role: learner-

centeredness fails to fit well in societies with a strict top-down hierarchy of social relationship. Perhaps, the most detailed analysis of issues, arising in Asian communities, is presented by Littlewood [17] who lists among various problems larger sizes of language classes, minuscule learners' output, which is not compatible with exam-oriented syllabi and public demands, and low proficiency levels of teachers and learners, hindering communication in a target language.

As it has been mentioned in the previous section, even CLT proponents question the novelty of the principles, methods and practices of the approach, something that Kumaravadivelu [2] refers to as 'acceptability' of CLT. What he means is that, apart from a few theories, the suggested practices, methods and concepts hardly differ from those applied by the CLT predecessors [2]. Though he also argues that this view is not common, the same idea can be found in Richards & Rodgers [4] and in pro-CLT publications such as Hall [14] and Richards [13] where it can be inferred that focus on the form and communicative teaching relies on the same interaction pattern – IRF.

2 Teaching in the post-methods era

Arguably, the general disappointment with CLT has influenced to a certain extent the most recent transition in pedagogy. As there is no ideal method or approach which could cater for all needs in all contexts, the wisest solution seems for a teacher to give up searching for the best method, but to adapt the existing methodologies to specific teaching and learning environment. The reason why this state of affairs has been labeled as 'post-method' is the fact that since CLT lost its dominant position, this place has remained unoccupied.

Kumaravadivelu [2, 3] relates this shift in pedagogic paradigm with two main ideas - the first is the will to find an alternative to methods as ways of teaching. The second is a suggestion to train teachers to professionally overcome the shortcomings of methods by adapting the existing methodologies to particular features of local contexts. Thus, a new trend in pedagogy emerges, offering to replace methods with professional strategies and skills. Richards & Rodgers [4] support the view that both methods and approaches may have certain limitations. Thus, post-method condition seems to represent another step in language teaching development. Nevertheless, it is only natural to ask a question whether strategies can better fill this vacancy.

2.1 Methods versus approaches

As can be seen from Richards & Rodgers [4], while approaches lack solid and clear-cut procedures, generating multiple (and at times erroneous) realizations of their concepts and principles, methods seem to be inflexible and as such may have really limited application. At the same time approaches might have longer life span, because they seem to be less prescriptive and can be associated with a number of methods and techniques. It is also noted that other

factors may affect the effectiveness of either, such as teacher's professionalism and context constraints. For example, less experienced teachers could find it challenging to determine what classroom practices correspond with an approach framework, on the other hand, they may be more open-minded towards innovations in the field [4].

The most essential drawback common to both approaches and methods, according to Richards & Rodgers [4], is not only failure to be universal, and difficulties of implementation, but the fact that the applications of conceptually different methods seem absolutely identical in practice. Nevertheless, they believe knowledge of all the existing methodology is absolutely essential for teachers for designing their own strategies. That leads to another crucial question: what can help a teacher to develop a successful strategy if there is very little difference in practice between various approaches and methods.

2.2 Features of post-methods pedagogy

To provide teachers with helpful guidelines some researchers have attempted to formulate the key principles, underpinning the post-method pedagogy. Thus, Kumaravadivelu [2, 3] offers his 'macrostrategic framework' that is based on 'particularity, practicality, and possibility', which he further develops into ten macrostrategies. However, his understanding of practicality looks somewhat questionable, and in fact represents a recommendation for teachers to become researchers in their field. His last principle – possibility seems to be even more ambiguous, moreover, it contradicts particularity as it invites teachers and learners to make social experiments in classrooms irrespective of the context constraints. Therefore, after comparing his model with others, suggested by Richards & Rodgers [4] and Bax [5], it is possible to confirm the existence of only two interrelated principles – context-centeredness (or particularity) and practicality with the meaning whether or not applying certain methods and approaches is feasible.

One more characteristic feature of post-method pedagogy, implied by all authors, is the increased responsibility of a teacher as it is a teacher who is expected to analyse context features and gain sufficient expertise to decide which methods, approaches and/or strategies will guarantee learners' success. Thus, teachers are left with two principles and as many as ten (twelve in Richards & Rodgers [4]) macrostrategies to develop their own microstrategies and, eventually, build their own post-method pedagogy. In our opinion, this may be worse than trying to squeeze one's own teaching practice into certain methods and approaches. For one reason, in case of failure all the blame will inevitably fall on teachers, not to mention how confusing it may be to follow a dozen of strategies at once. Another reason, this attitude is so similar to CLT where teachers are also expected to design communicative practice that it makes the use of the term 'post-method' unnecessary – arguably, it could well be replaced by post-CLT.

Conclusion: post method or post CLT

In spite of all criticisms, CLT impact can still be felt globally and locally in the present teaching context. Nowadays the notion of competence is an inalienable part of language syllabi, reflecting the changes, adopted within Common European Framework for Language Teaching – one of the CLT legacies. Assessment procedures and, consequently, teaching materials have been modified to include communication-oriented activities. Obviously, lessons plans and classroom practices have undergone changes as well, for instance, translation as an exercise type has disappeared completely from classrooms. All methods and approaches that followed CLT, such as task-based language teaching (TLBT) or content and language integrated learning (CLIL), necessarily highlight the importance of communicativeness for their implementation. Thus, following CLT principles, in its weaker version, has not gone out of fashion.

On the other hand, it is certainly true that the days when one method or approach could dominate are gone: neither TLBT nor CLIL have become as popular as CLT. It has become less important which concepts underlie techniques and activities as long as learners achieve their learning objectives. Innovation and versatility seem to be new buzz words, which is undoubtedly caused by the development of information technologies – the most powerful source of inspiration for teachers recently. Therefore, it is possible to discern the symptoms of the post-method pedagogy in the teaching environment. Undoubtedly, this condition may be considered as a consequent stage, which has emerged as a result of CLT breakdown. Nevertheless, the term ‘post-CLT’ seems too general and does not reflect well the specificity – co-existence of various approaches and methods with the focus on context requirements.

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