Communicative Language Teaching and its Cultural Appropriateness in Japan

Takako Tanaka

..., teaching method, although important, is just one aspect of language teaching. Every teaching situation involves the interaction between a given teaching method, the students, and the wider socio-cultural context of learning. If this interaction is not a happy one, learning is unlikely to be effective, no matter how good the credentials of the teaching method may be in theoretical terms. Teaching method needs therefore to be chosen not only on the basis of what seems theoretically plausible, but also in the light of the experience, personality, and expectations of the students involved. (Tudor, 1996b, p. 276-7)

Introduction

Communicative language teaching (CLT) is a teaching method. It has had a tremendous impact on the teaching of English worldwide and regards language as communication tools and sets the goal of language teaching as communicative competence¹, a term first coined by Hymes (1971) (Johnson & Morrow, 1981; Richards & Rodgers, 1986, 2001). Indeed, CLT has been a very influential teaching methodology worldwide since the communicative movement in the West arose in the 1980s. Richards and Rogers (2001) rightly note that it “marks the beginning of a major
paradigm shift within language teaching in the twentieth century, one whose ramifications continue to be felt today” (p. 151). Therefore, CLT has attracted considerable attention among second language researchers around the world. As Spada (2006) states, “CLT is undoubtedly the most researched approach to second/foreign language teaching in the history of language teaching” (p.271). Despite the dominance and positive attention attributed to CLT, several issues concerning this method have been raised in different parts of the world. These issues include ideological/cultural imposition (e.g. Canagarajah, 1993; Pennycook, 1994), the degree of practicality of its application to EFL situations where students must take grammar-based tests (e.g. Li, 1998), and the suitability for non-native teachers (e.g. Medgyes, 1988). Also, in addition to these concerns about educational appropriateness, numerous studies, conducted in non-Western countries (e.g. Coleman, 1996; Ellis, 1996; Holliday, 1994), have questioned its ‘cultural appropriateness’ in their contexts.

The purpose of this paper is to examine how CLT can be implemented into Japanese educational practices and their associated learning patterns. First, I will explain the Japanese socio-cultural context. This will involve an attempt to define the various meanings of the word ‘culture’ in relation to the Japanese culture of learning and in CLT. Then, in terms of its implications for implementing CLT, and with reference to relevant studies, I will discuss classroom culture and a culture of learning, as well as the influence that the Japanese culture places on conformity. Finally, I will offer some suggestions as to how CLT might be implemented in a Japanese context.
2. CLT and English language education in Japan: The socio-cultural context

In 1989 and 1990, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) introduced CLT methodology into junior and senior high schools with the intention that the perceived poor listening and speaking ability of Japanese students of English could be improved. This orientation was further promoted in the 1998 revision. Due to this curriculum innovation, less emphasis was placed on grammar and vocabulary, and new oral-aural communication courses were introduced. These new ‘communication-oriented” classes are mostly task-based, and the students are expected to engage primarily in listening and speaking activities.

However, introducing CLT has been met with widespread dissatisfaction among teachers, since it is considered incompatible with the exam-oriented atmosphere of their professional environment (e.g. Gorsuch, 2000). The exams themselves do not help in this respect, as they are not designed to assess communicative ability. For example, Nakata (1990) describes the difficulty of putting CLT into practice in Japan and suggests reasons such as the nature of the syllabus design, the entrance examination system, the communicative incompetence of Japanese teachers of English, and the large class size.

3. Classroom culture and a culture of learning

No one would deny there are cultural differences. At the same time, however, using the term ‘culture’ often involves stereotyping, prejudice and
the possibility of overgeneralisation (Holliday, 1994). Therefore, in this paper, ‘culture’ refers to what Scollon and Scollon (1995) call anthropological culture, which means any of the customs, worldview, language kinship systems, forms of social organisation, and other taken-for-granted day-to-day practices of a people which constitute a population as a distinctive group, while recognising that “[all] cultures incorporate competing sets of beliefs and practices which tend to invalidate stereotypical notions held by those outside the culture” (Cogan, 1996, p.104).

The classroom may be a special environment set for learning and teaching, but what happens within is a reflection of the world outside. As Bowers (1987, pp. 8-9 cited in Holliday 1994b, p.15) suggests, “the classroom is a microcosm which, for all its universal magisterial conventions, reflects in fundamental social terms the world that lies outside the window.” Also, LoCastro (1996) argues that “classroom practices reflect attitudes and beliefs about language and language learning that are embedded in the socio-cultural context” (p. 43). Therefore, any analysis of classroom practice must engage with the wider circumstances in which it is situated. That is, cultural expectations and social structures are central to the success of a given teaching strategy. In fact, some scholars have argued the importance of considering classroom culture as an influential factor in teaching and learning. For example, Tudor (1996b) states that this concept “encapsulates many of the beliefs and attitudes of the society in question, but they are perceived and experienced by the specific group of learners concerned” (p. 142). Also, Holliday (1994b) claims that it “provides tradition and recipe for both teachers and students in the sense that there are tacit understandings about what sort of behaviour is acceptable” (p. 24). This culturally influenced aspect of a classroom is referred to as a ‘culture
of learning’ (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996), which has to do with the beliefs and expectations people have as to what constitutes “good” or “appropriate” teaching in a given culture. In fact, this hidden aspect of culture is well represented in the metaphor ‘cultural iceberg,’ which means many aspects of culture such as beliefs and values are hidden below the surface of our consciousness (Hall & Hall, 1990).

4. Culture of learning in Japan and that of CLT:
   Culture of conformity

A number of studies (e.g. Coleman, 1996; Holliday, 1994a, 1994b; Kramsh & Sullivan, 1996; Shamim, 1996) have drawn attention to the importance of cultural factors in determining learning and teaching approaches in specific contexts. The effectiveness of a given method has often been analysed from an exclusively psycholinguistic perspective, and socio-cultural factors have been neglected (Tudor, 1996b). As a result, almost all “TESEP” (tertiary, secondary and primary) countries (Holliday, 1994b), namely, those outside what Kachru (1990) calls “the Inner Circle”, have simply imported a methodology invented in “BANA” (British, Australasian and North American) countries, rather than creating or developing a methodology derived from their own cultures—a methodology that might be better suited to their own sociocultural contexts. This is due to a widespread belief in the innate superiority of Western teaching practices to local ones (Pennycook, 1994). Holliday (1994b) also warns of the danger of naively accepting BANA practice as superior and uncritically adopting the ethnocentric norms inherent in Western English language teaching methodologies, without proper research into their effectiveness. Otherwise,
doing so entails the risk of “tissue rejection” (Holliday, 1994b) which means that “even well-intentioned curriculum innovations may fail to take root in their host institution” (p. 232).

A number of studies (e.g. Coleman, 1996; Shamim, 1996; Tsui, 1996) have identified and examined the contradictions and difficulties experienced by Asian students due to the conflict between their culture of learning and that of CLT. For example, CLT conceives of teachers as facilitators and resource-persons, whereas Asian students sometimes expect the teacher to assume the role of authoritative expert; while CLT imagines students as active, egalitarian participants in a learning process that involves open negotiation, Asian students might be more accustomed to environments in which they play a more passive role, as recipients of knowledge transmitted by the teacher; finally, the “collectivist” social ideals of classrooms in many Asian settings do not harmonize well with the individualistic emphasis of CLT. Of these several conflicts, the cultural conflict regarding the expected roles and relationships between teachers and students has been extensively discussed (e.g. Cogan, 1996; Cortazzi, 1990; Ryan, 1995). The roles of teachers and students are regarded as one of the most important components in teaching methodology, and these are variously reflected in different methodologies (Richards & Rodgers, 1986, 2001). Indeed, teachers and learners are the main participants in the classroom—an assertion that justifies the need for further and more serious examination of this issue. However, notwithstanding the importance of the teacher-learner relationship, I will focus my discussion on the role of learners as those who directly experience what happens in the classroom, and on their experiences as a direct influence on learning process and outcome.

In CLT, learners are expected to be negotiators and active participants
Also, they are expected to interact more with each other than with the teacher (Richards & Rogers, 2001) and to express their own original thinking. The learner, say advocates of CLT, can no longer be seen as an empty vessel, which a teacher can arbitrarily fill with new knowledge or behaviour, as was the tendency, according to critics, of earlier grammar-translation and direct methods, and structural or audio-lingual approaches (Holliday, 1994b). Also, CLT expects learners to be actively engaged in various forms of activities such as pair and group work and to learn to negotiate meaning through them (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983; Littlewood, 1981). This is what Howatt (1984) calls the ‘strong’ version of CLT, meaning “language is acquired through communication” and “using English to learn it” (p. 279). Thus, the active role of the learners is essential in CLT, since lesson success is dependent upon how much the learners actively participate in the class.

This expected role for a student in CLT is very different from the one traditionally accepted, and therefore can be highly problematic in Japanese junior and senior high school classrooms. As LoCastro (1996) states, the Japanese education system puts Confucianist emphasis on the general good at the expense of individualism. In essence, the Japanese classroom convention is for lessons to be teacher-fronted, teacher-centered, and based on a lecture method employing grammar translation; the teacher is expected to do most of the talking, as the learners listen passively. During each lesson the learners note down every word of the lecture (or as much of it as they can) to faithfully reproduce it in the examinations. They rarely answer voluntarily and will only talk if asked by the teacher (Rohlen & Ketendre, 1996). This style of pedagogy does not give priority to creativity and focuses on the reproduction of learnt material in examinations as a measure
of successful teaching and learning. Also, since the teacher is the authority, unexpected learner talk is regarded as disruptive behaviour and is held to reflect a lack of teacher control. This is reflected in Japanese students’ tendency of being quiet in class and asking questions individually after class.

Japanese students are accustomed to playing a passive role which contrasts with what is expected in CLT classrooms, as Ike (1995) claims that they feel more comfortable when they are buried within a group and try not to attract too much attention to themselves. In fact, based on my teaching experience, many teachers have shared stories about the discomfort the students display when required to ‘perform’ language tasks. Rather than stimulating authentic communication, these activities often generate self-conscious, hesitant and inaudible responses.

It could be argued that, in Japanese classrooms, this attitude reflects the so-called ‘culture of conformity’. People are socialised from an early age in the family and their first language speech community, and culture is deeply embedded (Carson, 1992 ; Miller, 1995). Culturally, Japan is a group conscious country and conformity is more highly regarded than individuality. According to Rohlen and Ketendre (1996), studies in child socialisation have found that Japanese mothers tend to make more use of outside forces in showing disapproval of their children’s behaviour than their western counterparts. Indeed, from an early age this is manifested in parents’ warnings to their children that conspicuous behaviour invites ridicule, or they are “being watched” by an unidentified, seemingly ubiquitous “someone.” Also mothers also typically invoke the Japanese concepts of hazukashii (“ashamed”) or okashii (“strange”) to emphasize to their children that their behaviour does not meet with normal expectations
Consequently, Japanese people grow up very conscious of other people’s reactions. Indeed, conformity is the norm in the society. Matsumoto (1988) notes that “[w]hat is of paramount concern to a Japanese is not his/her own territory, but the position in relation to the others in the group and his/her acceptance by those others” (p.405). Also, Mao (1994) expresses a similar view that “Japanese tend to be more aware of the connections they have as members of their social groups, and therefore, they tend to be more conscious of the consequences of their actions on other members of their groups” (p. 467). Thus, Japanese people tend not to like to behave differently from others, and tend to be concerned about or influenced by how other people behave, or think of them.

The culture outside the classroom affects the students’ behaviour in the classroom. In the school context, this conformity is mediated through the relationships which students develop with teachers, and more significantly with their peer group. While the influence of peer pressure has been identified in a wide variety of cultures, the Japanese emphasis on conformity clearly intensifies its effect. Related to the culture of conformity, the findings from Sasaki’s (1992) study indicate that Japanese junior high school students preferred activities such as watching a video, listening to tape recordings or repeating after the teacher to those such as performing a dialogue or making a conversational skit in front of other classmates.

Also, lack of participation is not exclusive to Japanese classrooms. According to a study of student responses to teacher questions (White & Lightbown, 1984) conducted in Canada, for example, out of an average of 200 questions asked in a fifty-minute lesson 41 percent received no response. However, this phenomenon is particularly pronounced with Asian students, who are generally considered to be more reserved and reticent than
their Western counterparts (e.g. Chaudron 1988; Sato 1982). In this respect, it can be assumed that asking Japanese students to initiate utterances in a classroom involves a significant cultural re-orientation.

5. Suggestions for implementing CLT in Japanese classrooms

Language teaching is a complex social and cultural activity; educators must understand the socio-cultural context in which language teaching is situated and must acknowledge that learners are psychologically complex individuals. As Allwright (1996) has suggested, “teachers and learners cannot simply choose between the pedagogic and the social pressures and opt to allow themselves to be influenced by one set of pressures rather than the other” (p.223). Thus, while research indicates that interaction is very important in learning a second language (e.g. Ellis, 1994), the crucial significance of cultural factors should not be disregarded.

However, this does not necessarily mean that the inappropriateness of CLT in the Japanese culture will negate the theory itself and the possibility of its introduction to and effective use in English language classrooms in Japan. In order to reconcile CLT and cultural practice, it is very much needed to “adapt rather than adopt CLT into their English teaching” (Li, 1998, p.696). Understanding the difficulty of maintaining the delicate balance between the social and pedagogic is vital in order to develop a pedagogy more appropriate to local conditions, as “no teaching approach will work unless it is accepted by both teachers and students” (Tudor, 1996b, p.278). With the problematic issues discussed in the previous section in mind, I will make a few suggestions that might help Japanese learners of English benefit as much as possible from this approach.
1) Teachers must realize that there exists cultural conflict between the traditional classroom practice and the one which CLT presupposes, and should try to adjust their way of teaching considering the expected conflict with which learners will be faced as they adopt the new roles described in the previous section. This does not mean teachers are alone responsible for this cultural re-orientation in the classroom. However, CLT postulates that teaching is learner-centered, and teachers should be responsive to learners’ needs and interests (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983); it is also crucial for teachers to understand the concept and principle of CLT and to adapt their teaching in culturally appropriate ways. Moreover, considering the teacher as an authoritative figure in a traditional Japanese classroom, the teacher should, at least, take initiative to successfully implement this approach rather than denying this teaching method because of its cultural conflict. Teachers’ positive attitudes toward the role change (for example, showing their willingness to facilitate learner-centeredness) will positively influence those learners. As Li (1998) rightly states, citing Taylor (1983), “teachers using CLT should avoid adopting a teacher centered, authoritarian posture” (p.679).

2) On implementing CLT in Japan, teachers should employ what Holliday (1994b) and Howatt (1984) call the “weak” version of CLT, rather than the “strong” version. According to Howatt, this version of CLT provides learners with more chances to use the language for communicative purposes and can be described as “‘learning to use’ English” not “‘using English to learn it’” (p.278). Holliday (1994b) also suggests this version puts an emphasis on learning about how
language works, for example, in written texts. Here, learners are expected to work on language problems collaboratively and they do not have to engage in actual communication using the target language.

Employing the weak version of CLT will enable the teacher to employ a more communicative way of teaching grammar such as grammar-consciousness-raising tasks (Fotos, 1994). That is, the “weak” version will be more easily tailored to each classroom depending upon cultural appropriateness and the contextual needs, particularly in a context such as Japan where more grammatical knowledge is required for university entrance examination.

3) In a CLT classroom, students must be made to feel secure, non-threatened and no pressure for making mistakes. In CLT classrooms, as opposed to the traditional language classroom, learners are expected to actively participate in activities in a pair/group. Therefore, a good classroom atmosphere is essential for successful implementation of CLT. In addition, teachers should consider how a pair/group will be formed as group dynamics influence the learning process and product (Dörnyei & Murphy, 2003).

6. Conclusion

We need to recognise that the classroom is a place for students not only to study the target language but also to develop their relationship with the teacher and peers. Consequently, students are inevitably very conscious of others, and are quite anxious about falling outside of their culture of learning. This is especially so in Japan where great importance is attached
to conformity. However, this is not to suggest that differences do not exist between individual students and between classes. Each classroom is unique in the particular dynamics that exist among the participants in the lesson. These and other socio-cultural factors need to be considered when new teaching approaches are proposed, and western methodologies need at least to be tailored to suit local circumstances. In short, teachers must develop a “locally appropriate version of the communicative approach” (Tomlinson, 1990, p. 36).

Notes

1 Many suggestions have been made in terms of components of communicative competence (e.g. Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Canale & Swain, 1980).
2 As Richards and Rogers (1985) state, CLT has no single advocate and leaves “much greater room for individual interpretation and variation than most methods permit” (p.83). Consequently, there are various interpretations (see Spada, 2006).
3 In CLT, teachers are not regarded as authoritative figures. Instead they are expected to play a role as a ‘facilitator’, ‘independent participant’ in classroom activities, ‘organiser’, ‘guider’ and ‘researcher’ (Breen & Candlin, 1980, p.99). Also, Richards and Rodgers (2001) interpret the roles as ‘needs analyst’, ‘counsellor’ and ‘group process manager’ (pp.167-8).
4 Japanese students’ use of silence is another cultural issue in a classroom (see Harumi, 2000).

References


