Secondary School Teachers' Conception of Communicative Language Teaching: A Case for Masvingo District – Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This study focused on how Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is conceptualized by secondary school teachers in Zimbabwe, using Masvingo District as a case study. The inquiry employed a qualitative research design in which data were collected through in-depth interviews with twenty-four (24) purposively sampled secondary school teachers. The study established that while all the teachers claim to be aware of this approach to language teaching and indeed demonstrate a degree of understanding of what the approach entails, the teachers hold eleven (11) glaring misconceptions about CLT. The paper recommends that the Ministry of Education, Sport, Art and Culture not only monitor the implementation of CLT in the schools as explicitly advocated by the syllabus, but also hold regular workshops with teachers so that ideas are shared on the approach and how best to implement it.

Introduction

This study has been prompted by Mareva and Nyota's (2012) study of English language teaching in Masvingo urban and peri-urban secondary schools, which established that the traditional Structural Approach - based methods such as the Grammar Translation Method, Situational Language Teaching and Audiolingual (Richards and Rodgers, 1995) dominate the teaching of English Language. The study shows that most language items are taught out of context. This is in keeping with Structural Approach-based methods. In the study, Mareva and Nyota further established that the teachers do not tolerate errors from pupils. This is in keeping with Audiolingualism in which language production is "expected to be error free" (Krashen, 1995:129). The inquiry also found out that English Language teachers tend to be central figures in English lessons, which is a major characteristic feature of the Audiolingual Method (Nunan, 1995).The major learning activities observed by Mareva and Nyota in the lessons observed are memorization of structure-based dialogues, repetition, substitution, transformation and translation drills, which are the main activities associated with the Audiolingual Method

(Krashen, 1995). The study by Mareva and Nyota further established that teachers seen to be observed with learners being accurate in grammar and pronunciation, which is one of the main goals of the Structural Oral Approach or Situational Language Teaching (Richards and Rodgers, 1995).

Structural Approach-informed methods dominate the teaching and learning of English Language in Masvingo and, by extension, in Zimbabwe, although the country's examination body, the Zimbabwe Schools Examination Board (ZIMSEC), in its 'O' Level English Language Syllabus (1122) (1996:2) explicitly recommends an approach which is: ". . . intended to provide pupils with the communicative skills necessary for the different roles and situations in which they are likely to find themselves after leaving school . . . to make the learning of the English Language more functional and purposeful . . ." The syllabus is apparently referring to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and goes on to discourage teachers from having pupils learn language structures in isolation.

The study's form is, thus, on how teachers in Masvingo (and the whole of Zimbabwe) conceptualise CLT "which is in current fashion" (Widdowson, 1991:160), an approach which "has been put forth around the world as the new and innovative way to teach English as a second or foreign language" (Savignon, 2002:3).If the teachers understand the basic principles that underpin this approach, the big questions that beg to be answered are: Why are the teachers in Zimbabwe's schools not implementing CLT? Could it be because the teachers have some misconceptions about the approach, misconceptions which result in them shunning it?

According to Hiep (2005), studies by Sato and Kleinsasser (1999) and Thompson (1996) have revealed that if teachers do not thoroughly understand CLT, they easily revert to traditional methods of language teaching. Hiep goes on to say Thompson also found that teachers the world over hold misconceptions about CLT. This view is shared by Lucantoni (2002:12) who observes that "Many teachers claim to follow a communicative approach, but fail to fail to fully understand what is involved."

Thompson (1996) identifies four major misconceptions held by language practitioners over CLT The first misconception; teachers believe CLT means not teaching Grammar. The second is, practitioners think CLT means teaching speaking only. The third misconception is, CLT means pair work, which means role play. The fourth misconception identified by Thompson is, CLT means expecting too much from the teacher.

This study, therefore, sought to establish whether or not teachers in Masvingo hold the same four misconceptions and if they do, if these are the only ones.

Justification of study

The Zimbabwe School Examinations Council (ZIMSEC) 'O' Level English Language syllabus recommends the Communicative Approach to the teaching of English as a Second Language

(ESL) but teachers in Masvingo, and presumably in Zimbabwe, evidently prefer structural methods as found out by Mareva and Nyota (2012). This study was, therefore, necessary since it focused on attempting to establish to what extent the teachers understand this approach which they apparently fail to implement.

Research questions

The study is, thus, guided by the following research questions:

(a) How is CLT conceptualized by the ESL teachers in Masvingo?
(b) Do the teachers understand CLT fully or do they hold some misconceptions?

Methodology

The inquiry adopted a survey design which employed a qualitative paradigm to enable the researchers to find, through interviews, how secondary school teachers in Masvingo District conceptualise Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).

Population, sample and sampling

The target population for the study was all practicing male and female college and university-trained teachers of English in Masvingo District. Their qualifications were either a Certificate or Diploma in Education (CE/Dip.Ed) and /or a Bachelor of Arts (BA) and/or a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) in English. Ten schools were then purposively sampled so as to include two urban day secondary schools, two mission boarding schools,
two rural day schools, two private (elite) boarding schools. From the eight schools, twenty-four teachers were then purposively sampled for interviewing, on the basis of being trained teachers of English.

Data collection technique

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide because of its flexibility since the researcher does not enter the interview with a list of predetermined questions and at the same time, gives the interviewee a degree of power and control over the course of the interview (Nunan, 2008). Interviews were audio-taped, to be transcribed later.

Data analysis and presentation

Data were analysed and grouped according to themes that enabled the researchers to establish how ESL secondary school teachers in Masvingo conceptualise CLT. The data were presented through narratives, direct quotes and tables.

Literature Review

Communicative Language Teaching

Next the researchers focus on the Communicative Approach and explain some of its salient features. Partly as a reaction to the weaknesses of the structural, grammar-based methods described above, especially the Situational Language Teaching which had risen to prominence arose the Communicative Approach or Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Richards and Rodgers, 1995; Lucantoni, 2002). The approach was partially a reaction against the artificiality of 'pattern- practice' and also against the belief that "consciously learning the grammar of a language will necessarily result in an ability to use the language" (Yule, 1999: 193).

CLT is based on a theory of language as a system of expression of meaning, the primary function of language being interaction and communication (Nunan, 1995). Mhundwa (1998) also stresses the importance of meaning in CLT, which is what motivates learners to master the target language. There is a subservience and subordination of form to function. The focus is on communicative competence rather than on linguistics or grammatical competence. According to Hiep (2005), the term communicative competence was first coined by Hymes, to refer to learners' ability to use the language being learnt appropriately in a given social encounter. The term was then refined by Canale and Swain (1980), who saw communicative competence as comprising grammatical, sociolinguistic discourse and strategic competence. Grammatical competence involves knowledge of grammar rules. Sociolinguistic competence involves an understanding of the social context where communication takes place. Discourse competence is the ability to understand an individual message and how its meaning relates to the whole text or discourse. Strategic competence refers to strategies one employs so as to achieve successful communication.

Another characteristic of CLT is that classroom communication is planned and presented in ways that stimulate real life situations (Mhundwa, 1998), Richards and Rodgers (1995) give examples of functional communicative activities as giving and following directions, solving problems, using clues, conversations, dialogues, role plays and debates, all of which should not be memorized since speech, by its very nature, is spontaneous. Such communicative activities facilitate co-operation and group work is one of the techniques that stimulate natural language activity in discussion and conversation (Brumfit, 1984). There is need for students to interact more with each other than with the teacher because CLT is both learner-centred and experience- based.

Richards and Rodgers (1995) observe that in CLT there should be no prespecification of what language the students will use and Mhundwa (1998) sees the topic and communicative goals of students as the major determinants of CLT content. The content should, therefore, be determined by the speaker or writer (language learner) in relation to demands of a specific task (Brumfit, 1984).

Another feature of CLT is that it discourages over-correction of language errors by the teacher as it distracts from the message (Brumfit, 1984). This is a view shared by Brown (1987) who believes in the absence or infrequency of error correction so that language learners are not discouraged in their endeavor to communicate. Corder in Richards (1974) goes to the extent of viewing errors as being useful to both the teacher and the learner. To the teacher errors determine how far the learner has progressed towards the language learning. To the learner, errors are evidence of learning.

In CLT the teacher assumes the role of facilitator, guide, participant, resource organizer, recourse himself, learner needs analyst and counselor. Covert rather than overt teaching is the norm (Richards and Rodgers, 1995). During the performance of an activity, students should not normally be aware of intervention by the teacher as teacher but as a communicator (Brumfit, 1984). This emphasizes the role of the teacher as a participant. Yet another important aspect of CLT is its advocacy for the judicious use of the learners' native language in the learning of the target language. The use of translation and code- switching where learners need or benefit from it is permissible (Richards and Rodgers, 1995).

CLT treats language in context rather than as isolated units of meaning. Classroom activities are aimed at the situational and contextualized use of particular language (Piepho in Candlin, 1981). In light of this, Allen and Spada in Jordan (1983) call for the provision of rich highly contextualized linguistic input to language learners. CLT, therefore, discourages drills and rote learning which, by their nature, are not normally contextualized.

As for teaching materials in CLT, Richards and Rodgers (1995) advocate the use of realia, that is, authentic materials drawn from real life. These could include magazines, advertisements, newspapers, maps, pictures, graphs, charts and objects. It is around that realia that communicative activities can be built. Nunan (1995) refers to these as task based materials that play the primary role of promoting communicative language use.

Finnochiaro and Brumfit (1983) in Richards and Rodgers (1986) give the following twenty-two (22) distinctive contrasting features of CLT and one of its predecessors, the Structural Audiolingual Method:

Audiolingual Method	Communicative Language Teaching
1.Attends to structure and form	Meaning is paramount
2.Demands memorization of structure-based dialogues	Dialogues, if used, centre around communicative functions and are normally memorised.
3.Language items are not necessarily contextualised	Contextualisation is a basic premise.
4. Language learning is learning structures, sounds or words.	Language learning is learning to communicate

5. Mastery, or "over-learning" is sought	Effective communication is sought.
6. Drilling is a central technique	Drilling may occur, but peripherally.
7. Native-speaker-like pronunciation is sought	Comprehensible pronunciation is sought.
8. Grammatical explanation is avoided	Any device which helps the learners is accepted – varying according to their age, interest, etc.
9. Communicative activities only come after a long process of rigid drills and exercises	Attempts to communicate may be encouraged from the very beginning.
10.The use of the student's native language is forbidden	Judicious use of the native language is accepted where possible.
11. Translation is forbidden at early levels.	Translation may be used where students need or benefit from it.
12. Reading and writing are deferred until speech is mastered.	Reading and writing can start from the first day, if desired.
13. The target linguistic system will be learnt through overt teaching of the patterns of the system	The target linguistic system will be learnt best through the process of struggling to communicate.
14. Linguistic competence is the desired goal	Communicative competence is the desired goal (i.e. the ability to use the linguistic system effectively and appropriately).
15. Varieties of language are recognized but not emphasised	Linguistic variation is a central concept in materials and methodology.
16.The sequence of units is determined solely by principles of linguistic complexity	Sequencing is determined by any consideration of content, function, or meaning which maintains interest.
17. The teacher controls the learners and prevents them from doing anything that conflicts with the theory	Teachers help learners in any way that motivates them to work with the language.
18. Language is habit" so errors must be prevented at all costs.	Language is created by the individual often through trial and error.
19. Accuracy, in terms of formal correctness, is a primary goal.	Fluency and acceptable language is a primary goal: accuracy is judged not in the abstract but in the context.
20. Students are expected to interact with the language system, embodied in machines or controlled materials.	Students are expected to interact with other people, either in the flesh, through pair and group work or in their writing.
21. The teacher is expected to specify the language that the students are to use.	The teacher cannot know exactly what language the students will use.
22. Intrinsic motivation will spring from an interest in the structure of the language.	Intrinsic motivating will spring from an interest in what is being communicated by the language.

Source: Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983) in Richards and Rodgers (1995:67-68)

Findings and discussion

Interviews with the twenty-four (24) teachers unearthed that they were all aware of the syllabus specifications that CLT be adopted in the teaching of English so as to make the learning of the language more functional and purposeful. However, fourteen teachers (%) conceded that they have not taken CLT on board, while ten (%) said that they have only partially implemented the approach. This is because of what the teachers perceived as 'weaknesses' of the approach, 'weaknesses' which could actually be stemming from a plethora of misconceptions the teachers hold about CLT. Sato and Kleinsasser and Thompson cited in Hiep (2005) established that failure to fully comprehend CLT culminates in teachers abandoning the approach. Interestingly, all the twenty-four teachers claimed to have been exposed to CLT at teachers' training colleges and at university.

Twenty of the interviewees correctly observed that in CLT, focus is on communication or communicative competence, hence use of interactive techniques such as pair work, group work, role play, simulation, and games, as espoused by Richards and Rodgers (1995). Twenty of the interviewees rightly alluded to the fact that CLT is based on what Wilkins (1987) refers to as language functions such as greeting, criticizing, inviting, complaining, congratulating, requesting, arguing, and disagreeing. Nevertheless, the teachers lamented that language functions are infinite and so are difficult to exhaust. In relation to this, Al-Humaidi (2011) that the various categories of language functions are overlapping and not systematically graded like the structures of the language. In addition, Al-Humaidi criticizes the functional-notional syllabus for placing heavy demands on language learners.

Twenty (20) of the participants correctly conceptualized CLT as a paradigm that foregrounds meaning, but decried the fact that Zimbabwe's education is examination-oriented and that the 'O' Level English Language examination does not tolerate errors even where meaning is clear. This could be one of the reasons why the teachers are shunning the approach (Mareva and Nyota, 2012).

Twenty of the teachers correctly pointed out that in CLT, language is taught in context, a CLT tenet highlighted by Piepho in Candlin (1981); Allen and Spada in Jordan (1983); Nunan (1995); Richards and Rodgers (1995), and others. However, the teachers' interpretation of 'contextualisation' was not really correct as shall be seen in the section of the findings that focuses on misconceptions about CLT.

Twenty-two teachers aptly showed an awareness of the fact that CLT requires the teacher to be novel and resourceful in lesson preparation, as CLT calls for use of a wide variety of learning aids that instigate and sustain communication. The authentic materials drawn from real life are what Richards and Rodgers (1995) refer to as realia, and Nunan (1995) calls task-based materials.

An almost unanimous observation by the interviewees, twenty-three (%) teachers, was that CLT is learner-centred rather than teacher-centred, as emphasized by **Savignon** (**2002)**, and Richards and Rodgers (1995) who say covert rather than overt learning should be the norm. However, some of the teachers' interpretation of learner-centred in CLT was controversial, as shall be seen later in this digest.

In spite of the teachers' flashes of awareness of what CLT entails, the interviews with teachers also identified a number of misconceptions that teachers in Masvingo, and therefore Zimbabwe, hold about CLT. These are presented and discussed below:

Misconception 1

CLT implies the teacher abdicates his role as a teacher (twelve (12) teachers).

Perhaps the misconception stems from the fact that CLT is viewed as a learner-centred approach. However, this does not necessarily mean that the teacher plays a passive role and leaves learners to their own devices. Richards and Rodgers (1995) identify the teacher's role in CLT as needs analyst, counselor or group process manager.

Misconception 2

CLT eschews the teaching of grammar (thirteen (13) teachers).

This misconception agrees with one of the four misconceptions identified by Thompson (1996). "This approach encourages the abandonment of teaching language structures, which is inconceivable. The syllabus actually has a list of language structures that ought to be covered. I don't understand how a language can be taught exclusive of its grammar," said one of the teachers. This teacher's belief is actually misleading because communicative competence, the goal of CLT, has grammatical competence as the starting point and then entails other competencies, namely sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence (Canale and Swain, 1980). Savignon (2002) seems to be in agreement with this by positing that while engagement in communicative activity is seen as central, this involvement necessarily requires attention to form. In the same vein, McDonough and Shaw (2000) in Lucantoni (2002) are of the view that it is not possible to engage in purposeful communication in language without being able to formulate the structures of that language well.

Misconception 3

CLT means pair work and group work in every lesson (eleven (11) teachers).

"Pair work and group work in every lesson becomes boring and monotonous," lamented one teacher. This misconception agrees with Thompson's (1996) finding, that many language practitioners think CLT means pair work, hence role play. Savignon (2002) acknowledges that

group tasks have been found helpful as a way of providing increased opportunity and motivation for communication, but warns that group or pair work should not be considered an essential feature of CLT and will be inappropriate in some contexts. Lucantoni (2002) seems to be in agreement with this by insinuating that the learner needs not be always communicating with other students in the classroom, but with the teacher or with an 'unseen' audience, such as when writing a letter to someone, or when reading authentic material taken from, or closely based on, sources which students themselves might come across.

Misconception 4

CLT places too much emphasis on the development of speaking and listening skills at the expense of reading and writing (sixteen (16) teachers).

While one of the misconceptions identified by Thompson (1996) is that CLT means only speaking, teachers in Masvingo have added the listening skill. "By advocating pair work, group work and role play as central techniques, CLT is clearly promoting speaking and listening skills, skills which are, after all, largely not examined at 'O' and 'A' Level in Zimbabwe," opined one of the interviewees. This observation, while seemingly correct, is erroneous. Abbas, Aslam and Yasmeen (2011) contend that CLT develops all four skills, inclusive of oral proficiency and fluency. Savignon (2002) also explains that the principles of CLT apply equally to reading and writing activities that engage readers and writers in interpreting and negotiating meaning.

Misconception 5

Material for CLT is scarce and expensive (seventeen (17) teachers).

"My school is a poor rural school which cannot afford material for CLT. My school has no money to buy charts, newspapers, magazines, radios, tape recorders, and other material that would enable me to implement CLT," said one teacher. While it is true that CLT calls for use of a wide variety of learning aids that stimulate communication, the aids need not be expensive as anything from real life can do. Learners themselves could be asked to bring to the classroom realia I form of signs, magazines, advertisements, newspapers, maps, pictures, graphs and charts (Galloway, 1993).

Misconception 6

CLT means the language teacher should ignore learners' errors (sixteen (16) teachers).

"I find this approach to language teaching inapplicable to Zimbabwe because it (CLT) suggests that the teacher should ignore learners' errors. This is ridiculous because for the pupils to do well in the 'O' Level English Language (Paper 1) in which I am a marker (examiner), they have to produce compositions which are free from errors," said one participant. This teacher is actually misguided, because in reality CLT does not discourage teachers from correcting learners' errors

but what it discourages is over-correction, as it might stifle or distract communication (Brumfit, 1984; Brown, 1987).

Misconception 7

CLT places too many demands on the part of the teacher (fourteen (14) teachers).

This misconception tallies well with one of the misconceptions identified by Thompson (1996).While it is true that in CLT the teacher has to be resourceful, CLT actually does not place too many demands on the part of the teacher because, according to Breen and Candlin in Richards and Rodgers (1995), the teacher's role is merely to facilitate communication between all participants in the classroom, and between the participants and the various activities and texts. The teacher's other role is to act as an independent participant within the communicating group, the latter role implying a set of "secondary" roles for the teacher. It may, therefore, be safe to conclude that CLT actually weans the teacher from the rigours of taking centre stage in the language learning classroom, rigours associated with the Structural Approach, a view shared by Larsen-Freeman in Galloway (1993) who observes that teachers in communicative classrooms will find themselves talking less and less and listening more and more.

Misconception 8

CLT aims at achieving native-like pronunciation in second language learners (nine (9) teachers).

"CLT seeks native-like pronunciation in learners. Achieving this is no mean feat, given that the majority of English Language teachers in Zimbabwe are themselves second language speakers of English," said an interviewee. While in Canale and Swain (1980) in Hiep (2005) believe that linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competencies are competencies a native speaker controls, Alptekin (2002), also in Hiep (2005) claims that the native-speaker norm of communicative competence is not only utopian and unrealistic but also constraining. In agreement, Savignon (2002) believes that the terms 'native' and 'native-like' in the evaluation of communicative competence inappropriate in today's world where nonnative speakers of English outnumber native speakers by at least two to one. Savignon ads that it is now recognized that native speakers are never 'ideal' and vary widely in range and style of communicative abilities. In relation to this, Abbas, Aslam and Yasmeen say in CLT, focus is on understandability rather than native-like pronunciation. Also, Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983) in Richards and Rodgers (1995) state that in CLT, comprehensive pronunciation is sought.

Misconception 9

Contextualization means only using language structures in phases and sentences (thirteen (13) teachers).
This is a misconception because contextualization actually goes beyond the phrase and the sentence. It implies learning language in texts.

Misconception 10

CLT rejects use of drills in language learning (nineteen (19) teachers.

While it is true that drills are a major feature of Audiolingualism (Yule, 1999), CLT does not actually reject the use of drills but discourages it. According to Richards and Rodgers (1995), in the CLT classroom drills may occur, but peripherally.

Misconception 11

CLT forbids the learners' use of their native language (sixteen (16) teachers).

This is not true, as Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983) in Richards and Rodgers (1995) advocate for judicious use of the learners' native language as one of the tenets of CLT.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study has established that teachers are aware of the ZIMSEC 'O' Level English Language Paper 1 (1122/01) specifications that CLT be adopted as the approach to teaching the subject. CLT was understood to focus on communicative competence where interactive techniques such as pair work, group work, role play and games are used in the CLT classroom. Teachers conceptualized it as a paradigm that foregrounds meaning and contextualised teaching, where a wide variety of learning aids that instigate and sustain communication (preferably those drawn from 'real life') are used. Such would place serious demands on the teacher, who is called upon to be resourceful and novel in lesson preparation if the classroom is to remain lively. The interviewees also showed an awareness of CLT as a learner-centred approach where the student is expected to take centre stage in the learning process.

However, the interviews with twenty-four teachers unearthed eleven misconceptions which suggest that the implementation of CLT in secondary schools in Zimbabwe remains controversial. It was held that CLT implies that teachers abdicate their roles since the approach is 'learner-centred'. They also said that the approach encourages the abandonment of teaching grammar and lamented the boredom and monotony associated with the routine of employing group work, pair work, simulation and games in every lesson. The teachers bemoaned that CLT places too much emphasis on the development of speaking and listening skills at the expense of

reading and writing with a high probability of teachers ignoring learners' errors in such a situation. They perceived materials for CLT as "scarce and expensive", thus placing too much burden on the teacher who is expected to organize classroom activities and find various resources for use. In spite of the majority of English Language teachers in Zimbabwe being themselves second language speakers, they are expected to teach students to achieve native-speaker-like pronunciation, a challenge which teachers perceived to the unachievable. Furthermore, they said such challenges are compounded by the fact that CLT rejects the use of drills and the learners' native languages. These misconceptions indicate that the full implementation of CLT in secondary schools in Zimbabwe is difficult to achieve (so there is need for corrective measures to be taken).

From the foregoing, the researchers recommend that there is need for follow-ups by the responsible Ministry of Education, Art, Sport and Culture to ensure full implementation of CLT as prescribed by the syllabus. There is also need for school, cluster, district, provincial and national-based workshops on English Language teaching where CLT, which they consider suitable for their own conditions, is adopted until such a time when the system is capacitated to fully implement the approach.

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