

A Study on the Communicative Approach to Foreign Language Teaching and Learning in Secondary Education, Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Teaching a language is a complex process which requires application of specific methods in the classroom, in addition to several other aspects. The methodology used by the teacher will determine the kinds of work and activities the students will perform in the class as well as how well or how poorly the learner or learner will be able to grasp and use the language. Thus, it is imperative that the approach used in the classroom meet the needs of the learners. This paper aims to discuss the communicative foreign language teaching approach and its application in the foreign languages teaching (FLT) in the context of Sri Lankan schools.

Keywords- Communicative Approach, Foreign Language, Secondary Education, Sri Lanka, Teaching and Learning

Introduction

The contemporary Sri Lankan youth tend to devote more and more time on learning foreign languages. This trend may be attributed to a range of factors. Among them are, rapid internationalization of trade, education and employment, expanded foreign collaborations in investment projects, and expansion of diplomatic relations. Real or perceived deterioration of socio-economic situation in the country and the resultant urge to gain foreign employment also may have attributed to this situation.

In order to make children learn effectively the teacher has to adopt the right teaching approach. The communicative approach was developed in the early 1970's by the studies of the European Council and the contributions of

many linguists, such as an American psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Robert Langs MD, known as an important psychoanalytic revolutionist and revisionist trained in a classical Freudian psychoanalytic institute in New York City, to the communicative approach and language teaching, and the speed with which it gained popularity among British language teaching instructors, gave the movement a national and international acceptance. “Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)”, which is the most dominant and experienced foreign language teaching method in many current foreign language teaching applications, has been widely used in Sri Lanka as well as in other countries in the world. Moreover, it is regarded as the most reliable and efficient way of teaching a foreign language. However, until recently, very few studies have been carried out in the field in order to interpret the CLT applications and their results in teaching foreign languages in the world.

The purpose of this article is to define tendencies of the main principles of a communicative and competence-based approach in foreign language teaching. The aim of teaching foreign languages in the secondary schools in Sri Lanka is to help the students to communicate effectively in different situations and forum. But in recent times, there have been an outcry that most of the students in secondary schools are not proficient in the use of foreign languages despite the fact that they have spent several years learning the languages. A lot of reasons have alluded to why most of these students still fail in oral and written comprehension in foreign languages.

The teaching of foreign languages cut across the curriculum, in other words, using content from other subjects in the teaching of the skills, and the teaching of grammar in a context with an integration of the language skills. The communicative approach encourages the use of integrated method. The integrated method aims at integrating the teaching of the four language skills: writing, speaking, reading and listening on the one hand, with grammar and literature within the foreign languages curriculum, (Chimombo and Mandalasi,

2000). In this case teachers are to adopt the communicative language teaching approach. This study aims to examine the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach and its applicability in Sri Lankan schools for foreign language teaching in Sri Lanka. In particular, this study attempts to address the following issues.

- Teachers' attitudes on CLT in foreign language classroom
- Challenges encountered and problems caused with application of CLT in foreign language classroom
- Strategies and measures taken to address the challenges and problems associated with CLT in foreign language teaching and learning

Literature Review

What is communicative approach?

The communicative approach to language teaching equips the learner with communicative competence. This is the knowledge of how, when, and where to use what language and to whom. Communicative approach to language teaching makes communicative competence the goal of language teaching and acknowledges the interdependence of language and communication (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Communicative competence is "our tacit cultural knowledge about how to use language in different speech situations, how to interact with different people engaged together in different speech events and how to use language to perform different acts" (Falsod and Connor-Linton, 2006). In essence, communicative competence is our knowledge on what, how, when, to whom and where to use language. According to Brown (2007), communicative competence consists of grammatical competence, discourse competence, social-cultural competence and strategic competence. Grammatical competence refers to the ability to recognize the lexical, morphological, syntactic and phonological features of a language and to make use of these features to

interpret and form words and sentences. While discourse competence deals with the connectedness of a series of utterances, written words and/or phrases to form a text, a meaningful whole poem, telephone conversation or a novel. Social-cultural competence requires an understanding of the social context in which language is used, the roles of the participants, the information they share and the function of the interaction.

Communicative approach in foreign language education.

Cook (1993) opined that the Krashen's theory to second language acquisition has five related hypotheses. The theory stipulates that the learners of second language acquires the rules of language in a predictable order; this is called the natural order hypothesis. This means that the way we learn a second language, is the same way we acquire our first language. The second hypothesis is the acquisition and learning hypothesis. In this hypothesis Krashen distinguishes learning from acquisition. On the one hand, acquisition is described as a 'natural' process where there is no conscious focusing on linguistic forms and the minimal condition for acquisition is participation in natural communication situations (Krashen, 1992 cited in Johnson, 2001). For the later, learning is described as a conscious process and it usually takes place in the language classroom. It is particularly characterized by error correction as well as rule isolation (Krashen, 1992 cited in Johnson (2001).

According to Brown (2004), the communicative approach to language teaching has the following characteristics; firstly, the classroom goals are focused on all the components of communicative competence and not restricted to grammatical or linguistic competence. Secondly, language techniques are designed to engage learners in the pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaning purposes. This means that when teaching foreign languages, the teacher needs to bring real life situations into the classroom which will help the students to use the language outside the classroom. The idea

is that the students should not have problems when they meet the same situations outside the classroom. The language that should be used should be functional and not just explaining the structure of the language.

According to Larsen (2003), everything in a CLT class possesses a communicative intent. From the various examples of communicative situations such as buying a ticket and going shopping, it can be inferred that communicative approach focuses on the functions of language. In other words, a CLT class entails teaching and learning social functions and does not focus on linguistic structures and forms.

The main goal and philosophy behind the inception of CLT was the “teaching of communicative competence” (Richards, 2006). CLT was developed to provide language learners with the ability to use the target language in the real life conditions. In other words, it would enable the learners to satisfy the needs they have to handle a communicative situation effectively. Situations can be exemplified as when a learner needs to buy a ticket, do shopping, invite, invite a friend to a party or make an appointment with a doctor. The activities in a classroom that is run through CLT are based on the needs of learners in real life communicative situation whether in written or spoken communication. Even the grammar taught in a CLT class is based on the needs of learners in real life communication and “according to the functions being taught” (Richards, 2006). For example, “I would like” is taught in a CLT class when a learner needs to make an order in a restaurant.

The other characteristic of the communicative approach to language learning according to Lansem-Freeman (2000) is that students frequently working in groups or pairs tends to transfer meaning in situations in which one person has information that the other lacks which helps for interaction and appropriate use of the right language. In this way, students are able to learn new information at the same time acquire the language skills. The working together in groups or pairs also help for participation in the class activities as opposed to the teacher

doing all the work alone. This process, no doubt will address some of the problems that the teachers of foreign languages face when teaching foreign languages language such as; low level of students participation in the teaching and learning activities, students' failure to use correct grammatical structures in both spoken and written work; inadequate materials; and poor background of students in foreign languages.

The review of the related literature on CLT provides ample proof of its usefulness in foreign language teaching. Here, a need arises to evaluate the feasibility of applying a communicative approach in those non-native countries where traditional methodology is still being used in FLT.

Research Methodology

Sampling

The research sample is consisted of 55 teachers and 22 students who are engaging in foreign language teaching and learning in secondary schools. Sri Lanka. To select the participants of the study, a simple random sampling method was used. All the teachers participated for this study are engage in Chinese and French language teaching at the secondary schools in Colombo and Gampaha districts, Sri Lanka. The teacher participants selected for this study, are both male and female teachers from public and private schools. Similarly, they were between 25 and 46 years old and almost all the teachers who participated for this study had six months to twenty two years' experience in learning foreign languages. The students participated for this study were both male and female leaners who are learning Chinese and French as a foreign language.

Table: 1 Demographic information of the participants

		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	4	7.27%
	Female	51	92.72%
Teaching experience	1 – 4	46	83.64%
	5 or above	9	16.36%
Organizational Setup	Public	48	87.27%
	Private	7	12.72%
Qualification	BA/ B.Ed.	44	80%
	MA / M.Ed. / M.Phil.	11	20%

Table: 2 Demographic information of the student participants

		Frequency	Percentage
	Male	6	84.21%
	Female	16	15.79%
Foreign language	Chinese	10	45.45%
	French	6	13.33%

Data collection

The research instruments used in this research study consists of questionnaires of 55 foreign language teachers and the interviews. The participants were given the questionnaires personally, and they were given enough time to complete and return them to the researcher. The questionnaires with three parts was developed for the survey study. The first part of the questionnaire related to the demographic information (Table 1). The second and third part of the questionnaire comprised on a Likert scale each of them had five options, i.e. Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Neutral (N), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD). The two parts in the Likert scale dealt with the teachers'

perception of the theory and usage of communicative approach in teaching foreign languages and their perceived difficulties in its application in Sri Lanka (Table 2-3). With the aim of deriving the results of the survey and exploring students' perceptions about the applicability of CLT in foreign language classroom, a semi-structured interview was conducted by the researcher. The purpose of interview was to fill the gaps, if any, in information collected through the questionnaire. The number of students engaged in this informal discussion of the approach was twenty two. Their selection was made according to a simple random sampling method. Data was also collected through observation. The observation involved assessing the classroom environment and setting, the number of students in each class, the availability of teaching materials such as textbook, the use of Chinese in the group, pair and class discussion and assessing the level of students' language.

Data analysis procedure

The qualitative and quantitative data collected was read through to make sense of the themes, ideas, relationships and categories that emerge from the data. By listing the themes, ideas and concepts, coding categories were developed. The data was coded and sorted out on the coding categories. Finally, the conclusions were made by listing the ideas and concepts related to the field.

Results

Results of the survey

The data obtained through the questionnaire was analyzed using the percentage for every item. Based on the teachers' responses, the foreign language teachers' attitudes of CLT in foreign language classroom were analyzed as follows:

Table: 3 Teacher's attitudes of the communicative approach.

No.	Items	SA	A	N	D	SD
1	CLT is learner centered approach.	12.73%	56.36%	21.82%	9.09%	0%
2	Students resist in active participation in communicative activities.	16.36%	38.18%	27.27%	10.91%	7.27%
3	CLT focuses only on speaking.	7.27%	20%	32.73%	23.64%	16.36%
4	CLT gives less importance to reading and writing.	16.36%	34.55%	27.27%	10.91%	10.91%

Above analysis shows the percentage of the teacher participants and their level of agreement in terms of each item under the theme of teacher's attitudes of the communicative approach in foreign language education. As shown in table 3, the data reveals that the items in which the foreign languages teachers in Sri Lanka showed highest level of agreement are item 1, 69.09%, followed by item 2, 54.54%, item 4, 50.91% and item 3, 27.27%.

The results suggest that the majority agreed that the CLT is learner-centered approach. Following this, the item of "students resist in active participation in communicative activities" is reported as the second most popular attitude related to CLT approach among foreign language teachers. For the rest of items, 4 and 3 respectively, the foreign language teachers in Sri Lanka's general education system also represent a higher level of agreement than disagreement. Among the four items, item 3, CLT focuses only on speaking is believed to be the least popular attitude. Thus, this data gathered through the questionnaire could be assumed that the foreign language teachers in the general education

system agree with the total items as their attitudes of the communicative approach related to foreign language teaching in Sri Lanka.

The following table related to the teachers' perceived difficulties in implementing the CLT approach in the area of teachers, students and the Sri Lankan general education system.

Table 4: Teachers' perceived difficulties in implementing the communicative approach

No.	Items	SA	A	N	D	SD
1	CLT required high proficiency of the teacher.	30.91%	38.18%	16.36%	10.91%	3.64%
2	Teachers have limited resources and time.	43.64%	32.73%	16.36%	5.45%	1.82%
3	Teachers lack training and full understanding of CLT approach.	25.45%	32.73%	10.91%	16.36%	14.55%
4	Students have low proficiency in foreign languages.	14.55%	20%	38.18%	23.64%	3.64%
5	The exciting syllabi is not suitable for communicative activities.	21.82%	41.82%	25.45%	5.45%	5.45%
6	CLT is not suitable for existing examinations system in Sri Lanka.	27.27%	34.55%	25.45%	10.91%	1.82%
7	Classrooms are not equipped with sufficient learning aids for CLT.	16.36%	23.64%	36.36%	12.73%	10.91%
8	Overcrowded class is a hurdle for CLT.	23.64%	45.45%	23.64%	7.27%	0%

The above data analysis shows the percentage of the teacher participants and their level of agreement in terms of every item related to the difficulties while implementing the communicative approach. The data in the table 4 shows that the item in which the teacher participants represent the highest level of

agreement is item 2, 76.37%. This shows that most of the foreign language teachers think that applying CLT is difficult due to limited resources and time. However, the item in which the teachers show the lowest level of agreement is item 4, 34.55% , which means only few teachers think that the cannot apply CLT in foreign language teaching due to students' low proficiency in foreign languages comparing with other items.

The overall results suggest that, the foreign language teachers believe that they find difficult in implementing CLT due to the various factors, especially due to the limited resources and time.

Results of the interview

Table: 5 Student's attitudes on CLT in foreign language classroom

Item	Attitude	Number of Students	Percentage
1	Time is not sufficient to practice CLT.	17	77.27%
2	Existing curricular does not promote CLT.	10	45.45%
3	Teaching and learning materials should give more attention on practicing communicative approach in classroom.	18	81.82%
4	Teacher should encourage the students to use communicative approach in foreign language learning.	15	68.18%

The data analysis reveals that the item in which the student participants represent the highest level of agreement is item 3, 81.82% (18), this shows that, the majority of foreign language learners in Sri Lanka's general education system consider teaching and learning materials play a vital role in practicing communicative approach in classroom. Among the 4 items, the least number of interviewees (45.45%) believe that the existing curricular of foreign languages does not meet the requirements of CLT.

Discussion

The graduates with good communication skills are in a better position to explore new avenues in this highly economized and technological society. In the scope of FLT, communicative skills related to the foreign languages highly important to strengthen international relationships in 21st century era. Sri Lankan learners in secondary schools lack in foreign language communication skills, and the use of traditional learning methodologies is one among other causes for shortcomings beyond the 21st century era educational goals. Although students in general education system in Sri Lanka take foreign languages such as Japanese, Chinese, French, Hindi, German, Korean and Russian as an optional subject from grade six to nine and even as an compulsory subject for Ordinary level and Advanced level stage, yet they cannot communicate well in so-called foreign languages.

The teachers' proficiency in the use of target language is a must. There was a general argument about the lack of teachers' training programs and learning resources in Sri Lanka. It was revealed that most of the teachers know the theory of CLT, but how to use this approach creating real life situations in the classroom is important. As majority of the teachers have identified, CLT is a learner centered approach which cater the learning needs of the learner. Akram & Mehmood (2011), stated that, CLT enhances the learners' confidence and it

gives a sense of satisfaction to the teacher as well in the sense that s/he is successful in making the students use the foreign language in their conversation. The other major argument was the lack of resources and time to practice CLT. Normally, the teacher may have 120 minutes per week to teach a foreign language in classroom. Therefore, they find difficulties by lacking time to conduct communicative activities in TFL classroom.

The data was also revealed that, the students' proficiency in foreign languages and their willingness and motivation for participation in classroom activities are considerably low. The students' motivation for learning can change the environment and their motivation comes from different sources. According to the above data analysis, the examination system of Sri Lankan general education system, insufficient learning aids are also considered as the main difficulties of implementing the communicative approach in FLT in Sri Lanka. It was revealed that the current examination system of Sri Lankan general education system does not support the use of CLT approach. It is focused on writing skill and other language skills are not evaluated. As a result, the authentic language learning is hampered. Another argument was about the existing foreign language syllabi which is mostly based on teacher-centered learning. Most of the interviewees also stated that, for the implementation of the communicative approach, they need a syllabi based on learner-centered syllabi also based on applied linguistics. It is also stated that the overcrowded foreign language classrooms are hectic. As the foreign language teachers have to handle more than forty students in one class, they cannot apply any other teaching methods rather than using the traditional lecture method. The responded also showed their concern with the lack of computers and other technological devices in the foreign language classroom. Therefore, the FLT based on traditional methods is non evitable in current general education system, Sri Lanka.

By studying the above data, we can have a clear understanding that the communicative approach is better than all the other traditional methods currently remain in the FLT classrooms in general education system of Sri Lanka. The survey study of this research proved the fact that, if provided with suitable and sufficient conditions, Sri Lankan foreign language learners in secondary education can improve their communicative ability. The use of CLT approach has shown to increase the motivation for foreign language learning. It was shown that the Sri Lankan foreign language teachers are willing to incorporate communicative activities in classroom. The identified impediments in applying the communicative approach teacher training, students' hesitation in the use of target language, grammar based examinations, overcrowded classrooms and the lack of appropriate materials. However the teachers in this study were found to be enthusiastic to apply the communicative approach.

The communicative approach gives the opportunity to the students to speak more in the foreign language class setting, through the use of the group or the pair work. Through these activates they are able to interact and acquire the language skills, which is the goal of communicative language teaching. In other words, when the learners are engaged in a task they will learn to speak out their ideas at the same time learn to listen to the other students of the class.

Since the communicative approach does not seek to achieve accuracy in foreign language education but the ability to express oneself, it gives the learners the courage to express themselves. As Krashen opined, that knowledge of the rules of grammar will not help in the acquisition of second or foreign language, instead it makes learners not to be anxious in the mastery of grammar rather strive to communicate the ideas, making language acquisition easy. This agrees with Krashen's affective filter hypothesis which argues that the best acquisition will occur in an environment where anxiety is low and defensiveness absent (Brown, 2007).

In communicative language teaching and learning, grammar is not the starting point. Teachers are expected to teach grammar through materials in the environment such as pictures and other visual aids to communicate effectively. Although communicative approach in foreign language classroom has its own difficulties, it can be implemented as one of the appropriate methods in foreign language learning in Sri Lanka. The self-confidence of the learners is a main factor which is emphasized by communicative approach through activities such as, role play, group, or pair work. Comparing this method to traditional methods, teachers do not have the authority over the students in classroom. They just provide a situation in class for learners to communicate and share their knowledge.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Considering the research questions of the study, it can be concluded that, the purpose of CLT is to enhance the communication competency of the foreign language learner. The techniques used for foreign language teaching, thus, are based on communicative and authentic means. The communicative approach presents many advantages for foreign language learners to acquire foreign languages by using the language itself being exposed to authentic language as much as possible.

According to the opinions and discussions above, we can say that communicative approach as a language teaching method, particularly as a foreign language teaching method for this study, is too idealistic to be practiced in Sri Lankan general education system, due to the overall targets expected from the foreign language teaching curricula. The survey study included in this research proved the fact that, if provided with suitable conditions, secondary school learners in Sri Lanka can increase their communicative ability. The use of the CLT approach has shown to increase motivation for foreign language

learning. The survey study also signifies the possibility of implementing the CLT approach in Sri Lanka. The respondent teachers showed their willingness to incorporate communicative activities in classrooms.

The identified impediments in applying the communicative approach are teacher training, students' hesitation in the use of target language, over-crowded class rooms, grammar-based examinations, and the lack of appropriate materials. However, the teachers in this study were found to be enthusiastic to apply the communicative approach in the classroom. They appeared hopeful that the problems associated with the implementation of the CLT approach in Sri Lanka can be overcome. The government authorities and other stakeholders need to understand the importance of using the CLT approach for helping learners become well versed in foreign languages. The syllabi for foreign languages teaching may be revised accordingly. The teachers should be provided computers and they should have enough time to prepare their material for teaching. Teachers' training programs also should include the use of technology in teaching and a focus on increasing communication on the part of learners should be emphasized.

Today, the main concern of the most of the learners of foreign languages is whether they are able to use the independently and fluently in a variety of real life communicative situations such as when someone is on a trip, on a meeting, or in a restaurant. If accuracy and correcting grammatical errors are also taken in to consideration in CLT, fluency and accuracy are yielded simultaneously though this approach, Thus, as the communicative competence in foreign languages is an international goal, further research in this area should be conducted on a large scale. The application of the communicate approach should be tested not only in general education system but also in different stages in education. Further work also needed in syllabi and curricular adaptation for the CLT approach.

It's a limitation of this study that the present study focuses on applying CLT in general education system in Sri Lanka. It is thus suggested that the future researches should survey the usage of CLT in higher education system, Sri Lanka. The differentiated and larger sample representing teaching of all the foreign languages should be considered in order to obtain a more inclusive and overall picture of CLT in foreign language classroom in Sri Lanka.

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