Adapting Communicative Language Instruction in Korean Universities

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This article attempts to provide tips and techniques for the novice EFL instructor to introducing communicative based instruction in contexts long dominated by audio-lingual and grammar translation approaches to language learning.

Introduction

This article examines the application of communicative language teaching (CLT) at the tertiary level in Korea. Since the 1990's Korean educational language policy makers have embraced CLT as the means of achieving heightened communicative competence and intercultural understanding, however the transition from the long dominant grammar translation approach of language learning to the communicative approach has posed countless challenges for both instructors and students. This paper outlines the divergence between the communicative approach and traditional audio-lingual methods of foreign language learning. Practical suggestions for adapting CLT in the university classroom are then discussed.

Background

Many years have passed since the introduction of the Communicative Language teaching approach in Korea, however, despite curriculum reform and passage of time, many remain skeptical of the effectiveness of communicative methodology in the Korean English language classroom. At the public school level, there are various challenges in delivering a communicative based curriculum: the lack of teacher training in the communicative approach; linguistic barriers faced by Korean English language teachers in delivering communicative based activities leading to an over-reliance on the L1 (native language); a divergence in traditional instructional styles and subsequent students' learning styles which have focused on structure, form, and grammar and a less structured meaning based approach reflective of communicative activities; the use of an inductive approach to teach grammar, vocabulary and phonology; insufficient exposure to correct L2 (target language) thereby reducing the development of self-proficiency and error correction. What this means to the English instructor at the college level is that students enter Freshman English courses with little experience in communicative language learning. Hence, the challenge that college instructors face is two-fold; increasing the learner's communicative proficiency, and also teaching a new method of learning where language is "acquired" as opposed to "learned".

Language learning, Language Acquisition and CLT

Language Learning

Krashen (1982) makes a clear distinction between language learning and language acquisition. The former has long been linked to the traditional approach of language study generally practiced in second language education in high schools worldwide, Korea being no exception. In the traditional approach, where a language is consciously learned, attention is focused on the language in its written form and the objective is for the student to understand the structure and rules of the language through the application of intellectual and logical deductive reasoning (Krashen 1982). A key feature of this approach is the emphasis on form (accuracy) as being of greater importance than the communication (fluency). Consequently, one develops a solid understanding of grammar and linguistic form in the absence of equivocal practical usage.

Acquiring a language

Conversely, language acquisition refers to the process of natural assimilation involving intuition and subconscious processes. Here, the learner is an active participant using the L2 in the production of real interactions. This approach is similar to the way children learn their native tongue, a process that produces functional skill in the spoken language without theoretical knowledge (Krashen 1982). Learners develop familiarity with the phonetic characteristics of the language as well as its structure and vocabulary. This process facilitates comprehension, the capability for creative communication and for the identification of cultural values. Arguably, much of this approach is reflected in the principles of communicative language teaching.

Principles of CLT

At the outset, it should be noted that the issues facing educators in implementing CLT is not limited to the Native English teachers and non-native speaking teachers in the Korean context but similar monolingual EFL contexts. Those familiar with theoretical principles of CLT may already know that CLT emerged in the 1970's in the West. To review, the theoretical basis of CLT can be characterized as:

1. a focus on communication through interaction;
2. the use of authentic materials;
3. a focus on the learning process as well as the language itself;
4. belief that learners' own experiences can contribute to learning; and
5. a linkage between language learning in the classroom and real-life activities (Nunan 1991 in Butler 2005 pg. 424).

Ultimately, the fundamental principle of communicative language teaching is that in order to develop language ability, learners must be engaged in doing things with the language.

Challenges to Implementing Communicative Based Instruction

A Traditional Knowledge Based Orientation

Since established practices for English language learning have centered on form-focused instruction, the implementation of meaning-focused communicative activities in Korean classrooms presents a shift in both teaching and learning strategies. The indirect approach of CLT relies heavily on the learner's ability to interactively negotiate meaning, with new linguistic forms being acquired incidentally during this process. Therefore, applying these principles in the classroom requires new classroom techniques and activities. Additionally, these principles call for new roles for teachers and learners. Instead of relying on activities that demand accuracy, repetition and the memorization of sentences and grammatical patterns, these new activities require learners to negotiate meaning and to interact meaningfully in the L2.

The Importance of Form and Structure

Unfortunately, students with an orientation towards accuracy, form and structure may be unclear about the instructional objectives, learning process and means of evaluation, leading to confusion, frustration and alienation. Consequently, caution should be taken in curriculum and lesson development to ensure that tasks and materials are designed for the appropriate level and build on skills already developed. Since English language education in the Korean middle and high school system has long focused on vocabulary expansion, grammar and structure, students may demonstrate a strength and preference for form-focused instruction. By incorporating form focused tasks and activities into the communicative classroom students can apply traditional learning strategies and styles to produce meaning. For example, prior to engaging in an oral activity, instructors should review the basic vocabulary and grammatical expressions and allow students the opportunity to prepare notes before inviting oral responses. Subsequent written homework can reinforce the communicative language objectives of the lesson.

The Role of Grammar

Many CLT practitioners may also undermine the role of grammar in developing language proficiency. Grammatical knowledge is also an element of communicative competence and for a language user to communicate effectively, all skills are necessary, since they are inter-related and build upon each other. However, with low levels of exposure to meaningful language, Korean

EFL students may have difficulty developing grammatical form through an unfocused approach, especially if a large part of their exposure to L2 comes in the form of their classmates' production of L2, which may contain many errors. As noted by Krashen (1982) the tendency of Asian students to self-correct based on their conscious application of grammar rules leads to over-correction. For Asian students, grammar is an essential tool in building confidence, language knowledge and fluency. In the classroom setting, despite students' interest in the lesson, discussion topic or subject matter presented in the English classroom, most students will be less inclined to speak if they are not confident with their oral language skill. Therefore, students' reliance on grammatical and form focused instruction should not be completely abandoned in the CLT classroom.

Increased Listening and Speaking and the Use of Authentic Materials

Of course, grammar and writing instruction alone is not sufficient for effective oral and aural outcomes. Increased listening exposure to native language use is also essential in acquiring knowledge of idiomatic expressions. Unfortunately, EFL contexts present a unique circumstance for foreign language learning in that there is usually low exposure to native language usage. It should be recognized that while most students at the tertiary level have been studying English for several years in the public education system, many have received minimal oral and auditory instruction in the L2. Instructors of the Freshman English Conversation Class may observe what Krashen' refers to as the "silent period". In this phase, learners are unable to separate meaningful sound segments and determine meaning. The potential demoralizing effects of unsuitable listening and oral tasks which overwhelm students include the inhibiting of classroom participation, and the quashing of motivation and confidence to succeed in learning. Nunan (1998 in Kim and Margolis 2000 pg. 42) contends that "a second language is learned most effectively in the early stages if the pressure for production is taken off the learners" reinforcing the need to adequately prepare learners before expecting the reproduction of correct language use. To prevent the demoralizing effects of pressuring students into incomprehensible tasks and activities, ELT materials must reflect the level and needs of the student. Therefore, teachers must be cautious in modifying classroom activities and instruction so as not to make language learning unduly challenging with unrealistic goals.

Recommendations

Teach Fours Skills: Writing, Reading, Listening and Speaking

Instructors may consider integrating four skills into the lesson and curriculum rather than relying solely on activities designed to develope oral proficiency. For example, begin the class with vocabulary building focusing on pertinent phrases, expressions, and terms of the lesson. Provide students with handouts, or allow student to write down the key vocabulary and definitions, meanings, and associative terms in both L1 and L2. Writing requires more attention than passive listening; it breaks down complex ideas, and reinforces the new information, which increases retention. The point is that you want the students to understand and remember the vocabulary therefore simply presenting new vocabulary without adequate explanation and clarification fails to provide students with the necessary time, thought and reflection to process, digest and retain the new words. Similarly, drawing on four skills; reading, writing, listening, and speaking provides students with the opportunity to work independently to evaluate their progress in understanding, replicating, and reproducing the language forms taught. The teacher may also choose to vary the type of activity from task based, to content based or process based. When using task based activities, the tasks should be assigned with different objectives (focusing on fluency, accuracy, content, reading comprehension, writing, grammar, listening, problem solving, discussion strategies).

Combine Instructor Lead and Student Centered Approaches

While communicative competence is often measured by the ability to engage in natural conversation, for lower level learners the notion of participating in a one hour group discussion in the L2 may be unrealistic, inappropriate and ineffective for language development. This type of lesson requires advanced vocabulary, sufficient knowledge of grammar structures and motivation to express ideas in the L2. For lower level learners, combing instructor lead and student centered approaches can be achieved by shifting from teacher presentation to pair work, group work and individual work. Incorporating, pair, group and class work also allows students to engage with others, sharing information, and practicing the communicative skills of listening and speaking.

Don't Abandon Grammar and Individual Work

For students accustomed to a structured learning environment, the ability to self assess progress through independent tasks fosters a sense of self-proficiency, self-regulation and likewise informs the students of the learning goals he/she has achieved through the lesson. Reading comprehension tasks, grammar, vocabulary, written tasks and listening tasks with closed answers incorporates traditional learning strategies which students are accustomed to and well versed in performing, yet can also reinforce the themes, vocabulary and grammar structures taught in the lesson.

Monitor Pair and Group Work

Monitor the students during pair and group speaking activities. Circulating around the classroom creates the sense that the students are being watched. The notion of surveillance will reduce L1 use and direct students to the assignment at hand. But don't just walk around; stop and observe each pair or group. Listen and provide clarification/feedback/error correction. Again, making students aware of your presence reinforces the purpose and objective of the assignment. Furthermore, ensure the activities don't go on too long by setting time limits at the commencement of the activities. To wrap up, call on students to demonstrate what they have practiced to the class. This is most effective when students are informed at the outset that they will have to present their practice to their peers. Students may appreciate the mild social pressure to perform competently motivating learners to concentrate on the assigned activity and put forward their best performance.

Conclusion

Despite the many challenges of implementing a communicative based curriculum to lower level learners at the tertiary level, teachers do not need to abandon the communicative approach entirely in classroom instruction. However, it should be recognized that the rigid application of the CLT principles may be inappropriate for varying levels. At the tertiary level, which has been the focus of this paper, communicative tasks may be unduly challenging for most who have received minimal oral and receptive instruction and so teachers should provide ample listening exposure, with the incorporation of writing and form-focused instruction to the conversation class. Such an approach reduces the reliance on teacher lead instruction allowing students to learn independently at home through writing, reading and listening practice. Moreover, teachers should identify and draw awareness to concrete short terms goals which can be more readily observed and evaluated by students. Many students may be unaware of their progress, strengths and weaknesses. If students are familiar with the structure and criteria essential for effective communication, they will be better able to direct the learning strategies to the desired goal.

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