

Implementing Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in Cameroon High Schools: Analysis and Perspectives

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Abstract

The past few decades has witnessed a shift of focus in the teaching profession both in Native and some Non-Native settings. The teaching enterprise now rests on the solid assumption that language should be taught for the purpose of effective communication. L2 instruction main concern in the 21st century is to help learners become competent users of the language. The teaching of English aims to help learners possess the essential weapons (required knowledge) for a sound linguistic communication. This knowledge which, it should be recalled, is a prerequisite for effective communication, is technically referred to as Communicative Competence which involves not only linguistic competence, but also sociocultural, pragmatic, strategic, discourse, formulaic, interactional competences (Celce-Murcia:2007). Communicative Language Teaching is judged an appropriate model for learners to acquire communicative competence. However, in some Non Native settings like Cameroon, this method is tends not to be used due to some psychological, pedagogical, social and linguistic factors. The objectives of this paper are twofold: first, it seeks to critically examine some factors that constitute an impediment to the implementation of CLT in Cameroonian high school English classes. Second, it proposes some practical solutions for the implementation of the CLT approach.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching, Cameroon educational system, Communicative competence.

Introduction

The world has become a global village where English is the most common used code among speakers of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. As the privilege language of social interaction, it is very important to be competent in English so as to enhance intelligibility. Every English user must have a knowledge of the way language, a system of subsystem par excellence, functions in a variety of contexts. This goes beyond a simple knowledge of linguistic aspects like grammar, phonology, syntax, morphology and lexicology. Some socio-cultural and contextual aspects should also be taken into account. CLT has become the dynamic power that shapes the planning, implementation, and evaluation of English language teaching (ELT) programmers nearly in all parts of the world (Kumaravivelu (1993). This important role that English plays has led to some important reforms in school curricula, CLT being the most recommended model in the English language classroom the world over. This innovative model was established out of absolute necessity. To Littlewood (2007), CLT saw the light of the day in order to compensate for the limitations of the traditional language teaching methods. Thus, it has been introduced in ESL/EFL settings to improve students' abilities to use English in real-life situations. The model advocates teaching practices that develop communicative competence in authentic contexts (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). What is worth taking note of is that, the theories and practices of CLT face various challenges in ESL/EFL contexts as is the case in Cameroon: a wide range of factors tend to impact the sound implementation of the model. The teaching activity is still based on tradition methods (mostly the Grammar Translation method). The teaching process which should focus on students, is rather geared to the end of year examination.

Background information on Cameroon

Geographically, Cameroon, 'Africa in miniature' par excellence, is a central African country which shares boundaries with more than three countries of the central African sub-region. Thus, the country is bounded to the west by Nigeria, an English speaking country. It shares a border with one Spanish speaking country (Equatorial Guinea). The country is surrounded to the North, South and East by four French speaking countries: to the East, it is bounded by Central African Republic, to the North by Chad and to the South by Gabon and Congo. Demographically, the population of Cameroon is estimated at around 16 million people (Ethnologue: 2003) organised in different ethnic groups. Historically, Cameroon was colonised by three main European countries the first being Germany. The country was under British administration for close to four decades (1884-1918). Unfortunately, as the Germans lost the First World War that broke in 1914, their possessions in Africa in general and in Cameroon in particular, were shared between one French-speaking country and one English-speaking namely France and Britain respectively. France's portion of German Kamerun was called French Cameroon, where French was made the official language. Britain's portion was called British Cameroons, where expectedly English was made the official language Korea (2002). In 1961, British Cameroons obtained its autonomy and decided to form a federation with French Cameroon, which had obtained its independence in the year 1960. This

led to the introduction of English as the joint official language of the federated country (Neba: 1982). Today, French and English are the official languages of the country and they enjoy the same official status. From the linguistic perspective, Cameroon is a veritable Aladdin's cave of languages. According to Chumbo and Simo Bobda citing Tadadjeu (1983:118), Cameroon has the most complex linguistic situation on the entire continent. Todd (1982:7) goes further by considering it as part of the most multilingual nations in the globe. Indeed, an inspection of the different languages (248 at least) that we have in Cameroon reveals that, of the four language families or phyla in Africa, only the Khoisan is not represented in Cameroon. Thus, in this linguistic repertoire, languages are distributed among the three (3) of the four (4) major phyla. These are:

- The Afro-Asiatic phylum represented by the Arabic family of the Northern Cameroon.
- The Congo-Kordofanian phylum to the Southwest represented by the Bantu languages and the West Atlantic subgroup (Fulfulde).
- The Nilo-Saharan phylum represented by Kanuri.

This linguistic situation is further complicated by two languages inherited from the colonial masters and which serve as official languages. These are English and French respectively. Apart from them we equally have lingua franca and one hybrid language, Camfranglais. Kouega (2001:14) confidently lists as many as five lingua franca. These include: Fulfulde in the north and Adamawa regions, Arab Choa in the far north, Ewondo in the Center and South, Duala in the Littoral and Pidgin English in the Western, Littoral and both Anglophone regions (South West and North West).

English in the Cameroon Educational System

In 1961, when Francophone Cameroon federated with the part of the territory under British administration (Kouega 2009), it adopted both English and French as the official languages of the new country and opted for official bilingualism as a sound language policy. Soon after, the Government started looking for appropriate measures for the implementation of the opted language policy. The first domain of interest was that of education. In the East, where French was the main medium of instruction, English became a compulsory subject of the school curriculum. Similarly, in the West where English was the main medium of instruction, French became a school subject. Both systems have been operating in the country since then and today the situation is still the same. Thus, in Cameroon there are two sub-systems of education: the Francophone system and the Anglophone one. Each of the two systems has its specificities.

As the Eastern part of the country was under French administration, most administrative, official, governmental, juridical and social issues were based on the French model. In the French subsystem of education, secondary education lasts for seven years and is organised in two distinctive cycles: the first cycle and the second cycle. The first cycle which lasts for four years is made up of four classes namely: *Sixième*, *Cinquième*, *Quatrième* and *Troisième* abbreviated to *6ème*, *5ème*, *4ème*, *3ème* respectively. In *Quatrième*, one of two other foreign languages that are also used in the domain of education, namely Spanish and German, forms an integral part of the school curriculum and a compulsory official examination subject. At the end of the first cycle, students are awarded a *Brevet d'Etudes du Premier Cycle* (B.E.P.C) when they pass the official examination. In the second cycle, studies take up to three years and students generally specialize in different domains. Some specialise in mathematics and science and others in "Letters". Here, the student obtains two distinctive diplomas: the *Probatoire* in the class of *Première* and the *Baccalauréat* in the last class of the second cycle i.e. *Terminale* (Tle). One main observation: from 6ème to Tle, English is a compulsory school subject and examination paper. The situation is a bit different in the Anglophone subsystem of education.

In the Anglophone subsystem of education, French is also a compulsory school subject from Form One (FI) up to Form Five (FV). Unlike the Francophone subsystem where the lower level or first cycle takes four (4) years, in the Anglophone subsystem, it lasts for 5 years (from FI to FV). Thus, students obtain the *General Certificate of Education, Ordinary Level* (GCE O - Level) in Form Five. The upper secondary level of education (second cycle) here takes only 2 years and students are awarded a GCE A-level upon completion of their studies. What is worth pointing out is that Spanish and German do not form part of the school subjects like in the francophone section.

General approach to the notion of Communicative Language Teaching

Communicative Language Teaching derives from a multidisciplinary perspective that includes, at the least, linguistics, psychology, philosophy, sociology, and educational research. The focus has been the elaboration and implementation of programs and methodologies that promote the development of functional language ability through learners' participation in communicative events (Savignon (2002). In his famous book entitled *Principles of language learning and teaching*, Brown (2007) offered four interconnected characteristics as a definition of CLT. The author stressed that in a typical CLT context:

- (a). Classroom goals are focused on all of the components of communicative competence and not restricted to grammatical or linguistic competence.

(b). Language techniques are designed to engage learners in the pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaningful purposes. Organizational language forms are not the central focus, but rather, aspects of language that enable the learner to accomplish those purposes.

(c). Fluency and accuracy are seen as complementary principles underlying communicative techniques. At times fluency may have to take on more importance than accuracy in order to keep learners meaningfully engaged in language use.

(d). In the communicative classroom, students ultimately have to use the language productively and receptively, in unrehearsed contexts (p. 241).

Understanding the framework of CLT

Berns (1984:5) writes in explaining Firth's view that:

Language is interaction; it is interpersonal activity and has a clear relationship with society. In this light, language study has to look at the use (function) of language in context, both its linguistic context (what is uttered before and after a given piece of discourse) and its social, or situational, context (who is speaking, what their social roles are, why they have come together to speak).

Such a conception clearly reveals that the primary function of language is communication. This need for the use of language for communication led in the 1970s to the emergence of Communicative Language Teaching also known as the Communicative Approach. This method advocates the teaching of language for communicative purposes; not just for the purpose of passing an examination. History has it that this method is essentially a product of educators and linguists who had grown dissatisfied with the Audio-lingual and Grammar Translation methods of foreign language instruction. In fact, educators and linguists felt that students were not learning enough realistic, whole language. They did not know how to communicate using appropriate social language, gestures, or expressions; in brief, they were at a loss to communicate in the culture of the language studied. Communicative Language Teaching, that makes use of real-life situations that necessitate communication, saw the light of the day out of that absolute necessity. Communication is a process, it is insufficient for students to simply have knowledge of target language forms, meanings, and functions. Students must be able to apply this knowledge in negotiating meaning (Larsen-Freeman 2000: 123). This is in line with Savignon's (2007) observation that, regardless of how distant or unspecific the communicative needs of the learners, every program with a goal of communicative competence should pay heed to opportunities for meaningful language use, opportunities to focus on meaning as well as form.

The approach in CLT is learner-centred. This learner-centered approach gives students a sense of "ownership" of their learning and enhances their motivation (Brown: 1994). Learners are actively engaged in negotiating meaning by trying to make themselves understood and in understanding others within the classroom procedures and activities (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). This does not mean that teachers are sidelined in the process. Their role is that of a facilitator. The teacher is also a co-communicator who engages in communicative activities with the students (Larsen-Freeman: 2000). In addition, the teacher acts as analyst, counsellor, and group process manager (Richards & Rodgers:1986).

Widdowson's view of Communicative Language Teaching

According to Widdowson, language should be taught not just for the purpose of knowing how language as a system is internally organised. He views language learning not merely as acquiring the knowledge of the theoretical aspects of language, but also as acquiring the ability to use language to communicate in concrete situations. The author is of the view that knowing a language is more than simply knowing how to understand, speak, read, and write sentences, but how sentences are used to communicate. "We do not only learn how to compose and comprehend correct sentences as isolated linguistic units of random occurrence; but also how to use sentences appropriately to achieve communicative purposes"(Widdowson: 1978). The purpose of teaching to learners is to allow them to become competent speakers of the language that is speakers who are capable of producing adequate ways of speaking that each situation demands and of making use of the rules for their own ends (Widdowson 1983).

According to Widdowson, the idea that once competence is acquired, performance will take care of itself is false (Widdowson: 1972). He states that six or more years of instruction in English does not guarantee normal language communication. (Widdowson: 1973). He suggests that communicative abilities have to be developed at the same time as the linguistic skills; otherwise the mere acquisition of the linguistic skills may inhibit the development of communicative abilities. Widdowson's idea seems to be influenced by Hymes' thought that children acquire not only the knowledge of grammar, but also the knowledge of appropriateness. Hymes points out that children acquire knowledge of sociocultural rules such as when to speak, when not to speak, what to talk about with whom and in what manner, at the same time as they acquire knowledge of grammatical rules. "Children develop a general theory of speaking appropriately in their community from a finite experience of speech acts and their interdependence with sociocultural features." (Hymes: 1972). Taking this into account,

Widdowson strongly suggests that we need to teach communicative competence along with linguistic competence.

To make the discussion of teaching both linguistic and communicative competence clear, Widdowson distinguishes two aspects of performance: “usage” and “use”. He explains that “usage” makes evident the extent to which the language user demonstrates his knowledge of linguistic rules, whereas “use” makes evident the extent to which the language user demonstrates his ability to use his knowledge of linguistic rules for effective communication. (Widdowson: 1978). He also distinguishes two aspects of meaning: “significance” and “value”. *Significance* is the meaning that sentences have in isolation from the particular situation in which the sentence is produced. *Value* is the meaning that sentences take on when they are used to communicate. (Widdowson: 1978). Thus acquisition of linguistic competence is involved in use. Widdowson suggests that the classroom presentation of language must ensure the acquisition of both kinds of competence by providing linguistic and communicative contexts. Linguistic context focuses on usage to enable the students to select which form of sentence is contextually appropriate while communicative context focuses on use to enable the students to recognize the type of communicative function their sentences fulfil. Widdowson suggests that the selection of content should be made according to its potential occurrence as an example of use in communicative acts rather than as an example of usage in terms of linguistic structure (Widdowson: 1978). Grammar must be based on semantic concepts and must help a learner to acquire a practical mastery of language for the natural communicative use of language.

Exploring some principles of CLT

CLT as a sound theoretical framework in the ELT enterprise could better be understood with regard to its principles. Berns (1984:104) provides a useful summary of eight principles of CLT:

1. Language teaching is based on a view of language as communication. That is, language is seen as a social tool that speakers use to make meaning; speakers communicate about something to someone for some purpose, either orally or in writing.
2. Diversity is recognized and accepted as part of language development and use in second language learners and users, as it is with first language users.
3. A learner’s competence is considered in relative, not in absolute, terms.
4. More than one variety of a language is recognized as a viable model for learning and teaching.
5. Culture is recognized as instrumental in shaping speakers’ communicative competence, in both their first and subsequent languages.
6. No single methodology or fixed set of techniques is prescribed.
7. Language use is recognized as serving ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions and is related to the development of learners’ competence in each.
8. It is essential that learners be engaged in doing things with language—that is, that they use language for a variety of purposes in all phases of learning.

Mazhar (2006) in the article *CLT and the 21st Century*, discusses five categories in which the CLT (authentic material reliant) curriculum is based. These include:

- 1- Language Arts: It includes teaching of English through different activities.
- 2- Language for Purpose: This means teaching language for communication with due consideration to the learner’s purpose of communication.
- 3- Personal Language: This looks at the learner as an individual with a pre-defined set of psychological strands. This must not, as it cannot, be overlooked while shaping curriculum, as it demands certain respect for the learner.
- 4- Theatre Arts: This implies teaching through role-plays, giving the learner an opportunity to play many roles to understand the meaning in real context.
- 5- Beyond the Classroom: This focuses on bringing the learners to an environment beyond the classroom so as to acquaint them with the language used in various real life situations and contexts. For example if they visit a courtroom trial, an auction proceeding, etc., they will get to know real language, used there.

Factors impeding the implementation of CLT in the process of teaching in Cameroon

Though CLT is the model that is recommended in the teaching enterprise in Cameroon, a wide range of factors hinder its implementation. Such factors are psychological, pedagogical, social, and linguistic. They are critically discussed below.

Psychological factors

Two main psychological factors hinder the implementation of CLT in the English classroom in Cameroon high schools namely: students’ negative attitude towards English and their lack of motivation to learn English.

Students’ negative attitude towards English

A large scale of French-speaking learners in Cameroon tends to adopt a disquieting, nonchalant and uncaring attitude towards learning English (Sibarah 1999). This reticence could be attributed to the fact that only a minority of the Cameroonian population speaks English. Actually, English and French, which are the two

official languages of the country, do not have an equal official status because the French language is far more officially used than the English language and is spoken by the majority of Cameroonians. As Jikong (1976) remarks French has such a high tight grip on the students that it is just impossible for them to be permeable to any other language, irrespective of the important role the new language may play for their success. As a result of this, most students are quite passive in class. They do not participate in classroom discussions.

Students' lack of motivation to learn English

Ellis (1997), in an overview of research on language learners motivation asserted that "motivation affects the extent to which language learners persevere in learning, what kinds of behaviour they exert, and their actual achievement". In Cameroon, most learners have unfavourable attitude towards English, especially French-speaking Cameroonian learners. This lack of enthusiasm as concerned second language learning is due to the lack of communicative purpose: most learners see no need to learn English, no veritable utilitarian or material aims as they could carry out every communication transaction in French. Most learners feel that they can do without English in their daily life as well as their social activities.

Pedagogical factors

A good number of pedagogic factors hinder the use of CLT in the English classroom in Cameroon. Such factors are taken up in turn below.

Examination/tests-oriented teaching

In most Cameroon high schools, the teaching of English is geared towards the end-of-year official examinations as well as sequential tests. As such, only aspects of written communication (grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension and essay writing) are taught in the classroom. The teaching process seeks to help students develop skills in writing only. All communicative skills are totally downplayed. Many teachers tend to orientate their teaching towards the different methods that can help students develop writing skills in order to tackle the various aspects of the English paper with relative ease and pass their examinations.

Overcrowded classrooms

Cohen and Manion (1983:221) pointed out that "a careful attention to seating arrangement contributes as effectively as any other aspect of classroom management and control, to overall success with a class subsequently". In most Cameroon secondary schools, however, students are not seated comfortably. Overcrowded classrooms is a challenge facing most Cameroon high schools. In fact, most teachers at this level of education generally complain, saying that teaching conditions in such environments are not good at all. Some of the sad experiences faced by both teachers and learners include noise making, inadequate participation in the lesson by students sitting at the back, difficulty in catching cheating students, lack of total control of the classroom by the teacher. All these problems definitely hamper effective implementation of CLT. The classroom in Cameroon does not favour better teaching/learning conditions. A single classroom may comprise more than one hundred students. It is challenging to use CLT in the classroom with more than hundred students. Student opportunities to practice the language are not provided for.

It is quite difficult to monitor classroom activities in such classes

Limited teaching hours (time constraints)

Limited teaching hours is another pedagogic factor that hinders the implementation of CLT. In fact, the English language as a school subject in the Francophone subsystem of education is limited to 3 or 4 hours a week. Thus, teachers tend to use that time to teach aspects that are generally tested in classrooms and official examinations. Most of them complain that such a time frame is insufficient with regard to the program they have to cover. Even seven hours will not be sufficient to handle different aspects of language effectively. Therefore, they do not have enough time to complete communicative tasks.

Linguistic factors: the influence of background languages

The most important linguistic factor that we will like to point out here is the influence of students' background or first acquired language(s), Cameroon being a linguistic melting pot.

Weinreich (1953) was apparently the first to suggest that the mutual influence of a bilingual's two languages on each other is inevitable. In Cameroon, most students continue to use their first acquired language in the classroom. Most learners continue to speak French which acts as a lingua franca in the French-speaking part of Cameroon (80% of the population use it in most of their interactions) in the English classroom. They find difficulties to shelf it and this is highly problematic in implementing CLT as CLT requires students' fluency in the English language.

The lack of necessary resources

Implementing CLT requires adequate materials, as a lot of communicative activities are involved. Unfortunately, in Cameroon, most classrooms at the secondary level of education do not have the necessary equipment for a sound implementation of CLT: there is no audio-visual materials or any other ready-made tool for speech assessment. There is no language laboratories in Cameroon high schools. The spoken dimension of language

which is of prior importance in CLT therefore tends to be neglected as a result of this paucity of the necessary resources.

Social factors

There are some social constraints like high familial, learners and school authorities' expectations for academic success. Most course instructors teach English under pressure from the school authorities. In the teaching activity, they should incorporate only aspects that can help students better tackle questions in the official examinations with relative ease. Most teachers generally report that whenever they incorporate communicative activities in the teaching process, they are treated as "irresponsible".

Some recommendations

With regard to the above factors, some recommendation should be made for a better implementation of CLT in the English classroom in Cameroon.

First and foremost teachers should motivate students to learn English. This, we hope so, will help them develop a positive attitude towards it and they will be more enthusiastic in learning the language. Students will no longer shy away from the activities where speaking is involved as is generally the case in most high schools now.

Second, students' communicative competence should be tested in Cameroon official examinations. This might be in two forms: the examinations may be organised in two phases namely the written part and the oral one. Or, in the official examination English paper, in addition to the usual sections on grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension and essay writing, a section called *communication* should be added.

Third, since English should be taught both for written and spoken communication, the time allocated to English courses should be increased so that teachers would not neglect any particular aspect. Since French, for example is taught for four (6) hours, it might be reduced to three (4) hours. The other two hours could be attributed to English. Though such a time frame may still be insufficient, it will all the same help teachers accomplish a lot of activities involved in CLT.

Fourth, as the environment where CLT is to be practised should be appropriate enough, we would like to stress that classrooms should be well equipped. Cameroon government should invest in education. In each high school, there shall be language laboratories with audio-lingual materials where some activities involved in CLT can take place.

Finally, teachers and school officials should create an English environment in the school to increase students' opportunities to practice English. In the English classroom, the use of French as well as students' mother tongues should be strictly forbidden as CLT requires students' proficiency in English.

Conclusion

This paper critically examined the different factors that impede the implementation of CLT, a language teaching approach which focuses on the teaching of language for communicative purposes. It is believed that such factors will be looked at by the school administrators and policy makers a sound implementation of CLT in the English classroom in Cameroon. If all the propose measures (as well as the other alternatives) are taken into account, we hope that CLT will be well implemented and students will become proficient speakers of English.

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