Difficulties In Applying Communicative Language Teaching In Teaching Grammar.

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Abstract
Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has gained popularity in the field of foreign language teaching. Numerous studies have been conducted integrating CLT into teaching the four language skills and language knowledge. Nonetheless, little is known about the utilization of CLT in grammar instructions in junior high schools in Dong Nai province. This research aims to explore the teacher's attitudes towards CLT and their problems in applying CLT in grammar teaching. Triangulation was employed to carry out this small research. Data showed teachers hold positive attitudes. Their constraints on delivering grammar lessons were identified. Recommendations are then offered with the hope of making grammar instruction more effective.
Keywords: *communicative language teaching, grammar instructions, constraints.*

I.   Introduction

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was officially introduced to junior high school English teachers by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) in 2000 as part of the educational reform. New teaching materials that employ the most recent teaching method have been circulated nationwide with the hope of enabling learners to effectively communicate in a foreign language. However, teachers encounter problems in different sessions, such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, and language focus, when using the new materials. Questions relating to these areas are left unanswered. This small project attempts to identify problems when implementing CLT in grammar instruction.

Justification and background

Working as a key teacher who is responsible for supporting junior high school teachers to use the new textbook more effectively, the author realized that things need to be done to solve problems while we can do very little about the curriculum. I therefore decided to choose this topic because of the following reasons: Firstly, grammar has an important place in both progress and achievement tests. Teachers tend to return to the traditional method since they believe that they can provide learners with more explicit rules, which can boost learners' scores on written tests. Secondly, from my learning and teaching experience, grammar presentation in isolation with elaborate explanations does not help learners with their language production. That means they can recite the rules well but not use the language appropriately. Thirdly, there is almost no study of this area conducted in this context, Vietnam, where the new textbooks are approved and become laws for all secondary teachers to follow.

Communicative Language Teaching in Vietnam

Since the early days of CLT in Vietnam, it has drawn the attention of both Vietnamese and foreign researchers. Le (1999) reports that the pedagogical contexts in Vietnam are both supportive of and constraining communicative teaching practices. He also concludes that the three obstacles to the implementation of CLT are: 1. a predetermined syllabus with prescribed textbooks; 2. the class size and teaching schedule; and 3. a low level of support in terms of resources and teaching materials.

What is more, Bock (2000) examines the use of CLT theory by expatriates in Vietnam. He argues that the major difficulties resulted from students, teachers, and the educational system. Difficulties caused by students are most frequently mentioned (139 references) as compared with those from the educational system (89 references) and classroom teachers (65 references). From these findings, he suggests ways to implement CLT successfully. He wrote:

"Changes are needed in students and classroom orientations. In addition, if Western teachers insist on using CLT in the classroom, they must be well-trained, and they must help Vietnamese students adapt to this new way of learning." (Bock 2000, p. 28)

Grammar instruction and communicative language teaching.

The role of grammar in CLT and how grammar should be taught have been discussed by many researchers. Grammar, one of the four components of communicative competence, is important and best acquired when it relates to learners' communicative needs and experiences. (Lightbown and Spada 1993; Ellis 1997; cited in Savignon, 2002).

Burgess and Etherington (2002) are interested in approaches to grammar teaching in EAP contexts. Their research shows the teachers' approval of the Focus on Form approach because students taking EAP courses are supposed to have good knowledge of grammar that can help them with their language production.

Similarly, to maximize Chinese students' benefits from grammar instruction in CLT, Min (2004) emphasizes the combination and balance of implicit and explicit grammar instruction within meaningful, authentic, and communicative contexts.

In sum, there seems to be little study of difficulties in applying CLT to teaching grammar in Vietnam, where grammar has held a central place in language teaching. Hopefully, this small research project will contribute to enhancing the teaching and learning of grammar in junior high schools.

Research aims

This research attempts to explore teachers' attitudes toward CLT and their implementation in grammar lessons. The second aim is to discover the difficulties in applying CLT to teaching grammar. Finally, some solutions will be provided to help them deliver grammar lessons more effectively.

Defining CLT

CLT, as Carter and Nunan (2001, p. 219) define it, is an approach to language teaching that highlights "the use of language by learners for communicative purposes in a range of contexts and real settings." Key components of CLT emphasized by different authors are the authenticity of texts, contextualization of language items, and creative and practical activities. They also incorporate other features of CLT, such as the use of pair and group work, the employment of both deductive and inductive methods in teaching grammar, and the emphasis on practice fluency rather than accuracy (Larsen-Freeman, 1986; Richard &Rogers, 1986; Nunan, 1991; Brown, 2001).

II.   Methodology

The participants consisted of thirty randomly chosen English secondary school teachers of English living in the city as well as in the country and having various teaching conditions. The reason for choosing participants in different areas is to strengthen the validity of the research.

As far as the method is concerned, triangulation was employed for this study since no single method was considered to be the best. Brown and Rogers (2002, p. 243) assert that if data are examined from two perspectives, the possibility of getting credible findings will be maximized. First, questionnaires were sent to teachers a week in advance so that they had time to think about the topic and prepare for the subsequent interviews. Questionnaires, in Nunan's words, are more amenable to quantification, cheap, and easy to answer. They are good ways to collect information (Cohen & Manion, 1989; Weir & Roberts, 1994). Moreover, questionnaires are believed to be more reliable since they are anonymous, and this encourages greater honesty (Cohen 2000, p. 269). Questionnaire items included closed and open-ended questions; the former is easier to collate and analyze, and the responses to the latter will more accurately reflect what the respondent wants to say (Nunan 1992, p. 143).

Appointments were then made for returning the questionnaire and having an interview. Semi-structured interviews were carried out to obtain further information through several open-ended questions. Semi-structured interviews, according to McDonough, provide more flexibility and freedom (McDonough, 1997, p. 13). Interviews are greatly favored for features such as adaptability, rich information, and personal contact (Weir & Roberts, 1994). In addition, with the support of the interviewer, they enable respondents to get more involved and provide more reliable answers because ambiguous items can be clarified or elicited by interviewers (Cohen 2000).

III.   Findings and discussions

Teachers' attitudes towards CLT

To find out teachers' attitudes towards CLT in grammar lessons, teachers were asked to put their answers on a scale of three levels (agree, neutral, and disagree).

Question number	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
1. CLT helps learners better understand and use grammar	22 (73 %)	5 (17%)	3 (10%)
2. CLT motivates learners to use language	21 (70%)	5 (17%)	4 (13%)

Table 1: Teachers' Attitudes Towards CLT

22 of 30 participants (73%) held quite a positive view of CLT, considering its effectiveness. Many of them have at least watched a demonstration lesson prepared by MOET or observed a colleague during the annual teaching competition, or they have tried when being observed. This must be a good sign since they have been strongly influenced by the grammar-translation method. It takes time for a belief that affects their teaching to be changed. Noseworthy (2004) states that it takes more time to change classroom practice than to change a belief about language teaching. This very positive attitude, together with favorable teaching conditions and relevant support, will certainly lead to innovation in teaching. Moreover, Le (2004) asserts that the application of new teaching models should be gradual, as education is seen as a process, not a product (p. 31). The gradual introduction of any new teaching models aims to assist learners in getting used to the new methodology. Our pupils seem to have quite short-term goals, namely to pass the end-of-term tests. Anything that is not related to the final test becomes meaningless to them. Therefore, the change in the teaching method also depends on the learners. If they can perceive the progress made, e.g., by boosting their scores on the tests, they will be more motivated, and this undoubtedly turns out to be a great encouragement for teachers.

The application and difficulties

To see how much CLT has been implemented in grammar lessons, teachers were asked to put it on a scale showing their frequency of employing aspects of CLT. There is also an opportunity for their justification. This follow-up part aims to identify problems or constraints impeding the implementation of CLT.

Question number	Always	often	Sometimes	Seldom	Never
3. Setting up contexts	5 (17%)	4 (13%)	5 (17%)	6 (20%)	10 (33%)
4. Using authentic texts	2 (7%)	3 (10%)	2 (7%)	3 (10%)	19 (63%)
5. Doing pair/group activities	12 (40%)	11 (36%)	4 (13%)	2 (7%)	2 (7%)

The table shows the application of CLT in grammar lessons. The most frequently applied technique is the use of pair and group work. Twelve replies (40%) showed their strong approval, and eleven (36%) favored this useful way of teaching and learning. According to them, there are several interactive grammar practice activities in the course books; thus, there is no excuse for classroom teachers to exclude them. Pair and group work may be the only way to establish interaction within a community or classroom. Communicative purposes cannot be achieved if there is no communication in language classrooms. Lack of opportunities for language practice can result in demotivation, as warned by Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983) (cited in Brown 2001). Lawtie (2001) makes a similar assertion:

"If learners do not have opportunities to practice the language, they soon lose interest in learning. Only when learners use language can they measure how much progress has been made and they adjust their learning".

More specifically, talking about the interaction in grammar teaching, Glisan and Drescher (1993) confirm that grammar instruction benefits learners only if they are placed in real contexts and interact with the target language.

Four respondents (14%) (never or seldom) disputed this technique, which is considered to be noisy and time-consuming. Moreover, they claimed that learners can never acquire the standard language through pair and group work as they do not always interact with more competent peers. This is true to some extent; however, learners themselves can benefit more since they better understand and support each other from my viewpoint.

In sum, most teachers who highly support this technique found no difficulties in organizing pair and group work instead of the arrangement of fixed chairs and tables.

Concerning contextualization, the findings from both questionnaires and interviews were not encouraging for teacher-trainers. Five teachers *always* (17%), four teachers (13%) *often*, and another five (17%) *sometimes* set up situations to introduce grammar. A low rate of implementation of this important component of CLT partly explains teachers' complaints that pupils seem to forget the grammar learned and we have to keep revising. Without context, grammar is like random notes of music that are heard and then forgotten (Goodey 1997). Grammar must be presented and practiced in contexts; otherwise, the meaning can never be complete (Glisan & Grescher 1993; Goodey 1997; Felix 1997).

Why is this principle not frequently employed by teachers? A variety of reasons are given in support of their reactions. Firstly, they found it difficult to build a situational context using the model sentences in the textbook, as those models seem strange to teachers and learners in local contexts. Secondly, there are four or five grammar points in one lesson; therefore, they can't set up different contexts. To fulfill their duty, they return to the traditional classroom practice of giving rules, the forms, and doing coursebook activities. This teaching method, as they believe, serves the purpose of testing.

The most worrying thing about the findings is the use of authentic materials, which are considered the most striking features of CLT. Nineteen teachers (63%) never use material of this kind in real-life contexts. As our pupils learn a foreign language in a non-native-speaking context, real texts are useful. To attain the goals "to

develop the skills and attitudes to use English for access to science and modern technology" (cited in Nguyen and Crabbe, p. 130) set by MOET for secondary education, exposure to the target language is crucial. Dubin (1986) puts great emphasis on the use of authentic texts when he says that if fluency is to be achieved, learners need ample practice with it. Tomlinson asserts that authentic texts can provide meaningful exposure to the language as it is typically used (cited in Carter & Nunan 2001, p. 68). The reasons given for not using real text are also varied. "Authentic texts are difficult to understand; these texts are not beneficial to pupils; there is no time to utilize them since we must do all the course book exercises; otherwise, we will be blamed." What can be inferred is that the strictly supervised use of the textbook may deprive learners of the opportunity to expose themselves to the real language. Also, one of the many hindrances is the current testing system. Tests with a strong emphasis on grammatical structure in isolation do not encourage teachers to use authentic materials.

To sum up, teachers have a favorable attitude towards CLT and would like to apply this new method. However, a variety of constraints hinder their implementation of CLT in teaching grammar.

In the following part, some recommendations will be made for improving the situation.

IV.   Conclusions and recommendations

This research has shown that secondary school teachers of English in Dong Nai province have a positive attitude toward CLT in grammar lessons. Moreover, the major problems include setting up contexts and the lack of authentic texts. Based on the findings of the literature review, the author highly recommends these suggestions to make grammar instructions more effective.

To deal with the problem of building a lead-in, classroom teachers should be more flexible in using textbooks. Adapting textbook activities is necessary to make the teaching more relevant to the local context, as proposed by Schneider (2005).

"To make language focus effective in a community-oriented lesson, it is necessary to go beyond the decontextualization and sentence-level presentations of grammar that dominate many pedagogic materials, because if students are going to understand the place of language in real discourse situations, they have to begin seeing how speakers' and writers' grammatical choices reflect and construct those situations" (Schneider 2005, p. 299).

As mentioned earlier, most teachers found it difficult to set up a situational context for each grammatical structure. I suggest teachers should create a link that can include more than one grammar point in context. For example, in Unit 8 (Grade 8), three grammatical structures are: *should, conditional sentences*, and *indirect questions*.

Conversation 1:

Teacher "Do you like pop music?"

Students: "Yes, I do"

Teacher: "If you like pop music, you go to My Tam's concert."

Conversation 2:

Teacher "Do you like jazz?"

Students: "What did you say?"

Teacher: "I ask if you like jazz."

However, the efforts of classroom teachers would not be enough to make changes. More support from education administrators should be provided so that they can implement the new teaching method that is supposed to be used. More specifically, the strictly controlled use of textbooks should be banned. If classroom teachers had freedom and flexibility in using the materials, there would be opportunities for more real-life, relevant, and suitable texts and tasks that could be found elsewhere or shared among participants in the workshops. Most importantly, the method of testing should also be altered to encourage teachers to apply the new method.

As for interactive activities for grammar practice, drills that have been widely used by language teachers should be conducted in a meaningful and purposeful way (Larsen-Freeman 1997). To take advantage of drilling, teachers may get students to say real things about themselves, provide them with a situation that implies the structure, or let them add something of their own. The findings of the research also reveal many effective activities for grammar production, such as information gaps, games, songs, and real-life stories. The use of these activities will contribute a great part to increasing motivation in grammar lessons as well as to enable learners to use grammar with their language production.

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