

# Communicative Language Teaching in Bangladesh - Is it an Applicable Method in ESL/EFL Context?

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Communicative Language Teaching

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as a modern method was first proposed in England in the 1970s. The core concept in CLT is "communicative competence," a term Hymes (1971) used to refer to one's ability to use language in a social context. The framework for communicative competence proposed by Canale and Swain (1980), later modified by Canale (1983), is considered the most influential definition of communicative competence for language teaching (Savignon, 2002). Their framework for communicative competence includes three components: grammatical competence, socio linguistic competence, and strategic competence. Canale (1983) later added discourse competence as a fourth component of communicative competence. Savignon (1983, 1997, and 2002) proposes that a classroom model of communicative competence should include these four components and maintains that they are interrelated so that they can neither be developed nor measured separately:

“One cannot go from one component to the other as when stringing beads on a necklace. Rather, when an increase occurs in one area, that component interacts with other components to produce a corresponding increase in overall communicative competence (p. 8).”

The essence of CLT is involving language learners in communication to allow them to develop their communicative competence. CLT was regarded as a revolutionary method since it placed an essential emphasis on communication in language learning classrooms. Being an innovative methodology, it rapidly became widespread in the Western countries. Following the popularity of CLT in English-speaking countries, it began to spread all over the world (Ozsevik, 2010, p.1). CLT embraces four language skills by integrating listening, speaking, reading and writing. In

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CLT meaning is paramount, teachers should create authentic environment in the classroom by incorporating interactional activities and meaningful tasks. Another dimension of CLT is “it’s learner-centered and experience based view of second language teaching” (Richards & Rodgers, 1986, p.69).

## **1.2 CLT in Bangladesh Context**

In Bangladesh, grammar-translation method was prevalent in English Classes. In Bangla-medium schools, both public and private, English was mostly taught via the grammar-translation method, with a de-emphasis on speaking until the 1990s (e.g., Hamid & Baldauf, 2008; Hasan, 2004; Imam, 2005). Since the 1990s, there has been a paradigm shift in ESL/EFL teaching in Bangladesh, kindled largely by economic globalization. Bangladesh has developed a new curriculum based on the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach (Hamid & Baldauf, 2008; Hassan, 2004), aiming to develop learners' communicative competence in English (Hamid & Baldauf, 2008). In view of this situation, in 1990, a collaborative venture between British Development for International Development (DFID) and the Government of Bangladesh introduced a new English Teaching Syllabus, which aims to improve students' communicative competence (Hamid 2005; NCTB 2001; 2003; Paul 2004; Rahman, 2007)). It was expected that CLT would 'revitalize' the 'weak' learners' proficiency in English by 'improving the standard of teaching and learning English at different levels of formal education' (NCTB, 2003; Hamid & Baldauf, 2008, p.16; Roshid, 2009). But improvement in the proficiency level of the students is still 'far from satisfactory' (Roshid, 2009; Hamid & Baldauf, 2008; Rahman, 1999 & 1991). Among others, one crucially obvious reason is not implementing CLT principles in the classrooms, although teachers are supposed to do so (Yasmin 2009; Roshid, 2009; Hamid & Baldauf, 2008).

As Sato and Kleinsasser (1999) and Thompson (1996) put it if teachers are not properly oriented to the use of CLT, they rarely practice it in the classroom and follow traditional Grammar-Translation method, which failed to develop the four language skills. The same is applicable to the English teachers of Bangladesh. (See Yasmin 2009; Roshid, 2009; Rahman, et al., 2009; Hamid & Baldauf, 2008).

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However, the application of CLT methods in Bangladesh has not necessarily resulted in the desirable outcomes for improvements in English communicative competence. Islam (2011) observes the teachers' reluctance to promote CLT and indicates that many teachers avoid the few ideas of CLT that they held (p. 384). There are some other reports confirming the similar facts about implementation of CLT in the classroom (Rahman, 1999; Hamid, 2005; Hamid & Baldauf, 2008). Some students have responded negatively to communicative activities, while some teachers have not been confident about using CLT pedagogies. The reform of the teaching of English as a Second Language (ESL) in Bangladesh through the adoption of CLT has aroused considerable debate.

## **2. The Constraints and Difficulties in the Application of CLT in Bangladesh**

Bangladesh is a predominantly monolingual country. In addition, CLT is an innovation of English teaching in Bangladesh; it requires significant change in the whole system related to English education. However, as a western and modern method, the application meets many constraints and difficulties in Bangladesh's ESL/EFL context. The main obstacle to the use of CLT appears to be the mostly grammar-based examination system. The difficulties and constraints that hindered the teachers' attempts to adopt CLT in Bangladesh were divided into four main categories: teacher-oriented difficulties, student-oriented difficulties, difficulties on the part of the educational system, and CLT-oriented difficulties. However, some public English medium universities and schools have adopted CLT, but it is far away from influencing overall Bangladesh education system.

### **2.1 Learners' Resistance in Adopting CLT Method**

The students' goal of learning English is to get high scores in the passing exam, going abroad, getting a good job and so on. Thus, the major concern of the students is how to get a good score in the English tests rather than how to develop communicative competence for real-situation use. Nunan (1989) stresses the use of "activities that involve oral communication, carrying out meaningful tasks, and using language which is meaningful to the learner" (p.194) The Bangladeshi English language students share the same mother tongue and thus do not have the

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immediate need to use English in the classroom. Nor do many of them have this need outside the classroom. The principle of doing tasks in the classroom, which are applicable to the world outside the classroom, is thus questioned. Learners' resistance of CLT is very common in EFL/ESL context. Sano et al. (1984) point out that the Japanese students they studied, generally did not feel a pressing need to use English, so that the goal of communicative competence seemed too distant for them. Shamin (1996) identifies learners' resistance, among other problems, as a barrier to her attempt to introduce innovative CLT methodology in her Pakistan English classroom.

## **2.2 Teachers Incompetence in Conducting CLT**

In the process of educational reform, it is often assumed that change is natural and inevitable, yet for teachers, "learning a new skill and entertaining new conceptions create doubts and feelings of awkwardness or incompetence" (Fullan, 1991, p. 46). How to promote the application of this modern teaching method becomes a challenge task to those teachers under a conservative context.

## **2.3 The Low- Level Language Proficiency**

As the goal of CLT is to develop the students into communicatively active users of English, it requires higher level of English teachers with adequate language proficiency and mastery of the major principles of applying CLT. According to Burnaby and Sun (1989), one of the major problems in conducting CLT class lies in English teachers' deficiencies in oral English and sociolinguistic and strategic competence. As the majority of English teachers in Bangladesh are non-native speakers of English, it is even more difficult for them to practice CLT completely and accurately. Choudhury (2006), working with English language students at a private university in Bangladesh, noted that even after 12 years of English education, students cannot communicate effectively and "are failing to develop an acceptable level of English proficiency" (p. 85). One of the main reasons is teachers' lack of proficiency in CLT.

The baseline study of English Language Teaching Improvement Project (ELTIP) in Bangladesh, conducted in 1998, found the majority of teachers practicing traditional modes of teaching in their classrooms. The findings from the proficiency testing results of the same survey also

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demonstrate a miserable picture of the overall English language proficiency of the learners as well as the teachers. One of the baseline studies done by English in Action (EIA) project in 2008-9 on the spoken English competence of the students, teachers and adults found that the spoken English competency of most Bangladeshi students, teachers and community adults was at a basic level (P. 14). It was reported that even after many years of schooling many students had not progressed beyond the initial stage of speaking in English (p. 26). The study also revealed that the teachers were unable to teach effectively the higher levels of the communicative English curriculum due to their poor English language skills. Another study undertaken by EIA project observes that in most English classes at secondary and primary schools, teachers follow instructive and top down model of teaching and there was little use of interactive method. As qualifications of more than 80% teachers at primary level are either SSC or HSC and many of them are not properly trained in English teaching, the question of quality is a far cry. Many Bangladeshi English teachers only know some basic grammar and vocabulary, they are not able to speak English fluently or interact with native speakers. Nor can they create authentic meaningful activities and tasks for the students. Thus, use Bangla to teach English linguistic forms (grammar-translation method) are more acceptable for them.

### **3. Sociocultural Factors in Bangladesh**

#### **3.1 The Influence of Teaching Traditions**

The essential characteristics of the Bangladeshi view of language learning are memorization, repetition, habit formation, and the quantitative accumulation of knowledge. In a typical classroom, a teacher is the controller and knowledge giver, and the students are passive knowledge receivers, which is severely contrast to the principles of CLT- teacher should be more of a facilitator, advisor, observer and co-communicator (Richards and Rodgers, 1986). If the teachers do not drill their knowledge to the students, or if they give autonomy to the students or making activities in the classroom, they will be criticized as unqualified teachers. From the students' part, they always hold skeptical view of those activities and games in classes. They are more comfortable with the learning style of listening to the teachers and take notes. Jones' empirical study (1995) reveals that Chinese students assume that a responsible and qualified teacher is the one who always transmit knowledge to students.

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### **3.2 The Influence of Mother Tongue**

As mentioned above, Bangladesh is predominately-monolingual country. Following independence, English, which hitherto enjoyed an official status, was relegated to the role of a second language, while Bangla, spoken by 98% of its population, was chosen as a sole official language of the state (Imam, 2005). Only Bangla is given the official status. English is taught as a second or foreign language in the education system. However, it has a long historical attachment with English due to British colonial rule. Bangladeshi EFL teachers may consider that the contextual and cultural differences do not prevent students from learning English in Bangladesh even though CLT developed from Western countries. The major obstacle of adopting CLT hinders its uses in day-to-day life. One of the major reasons is the influence of mother tongue and using English in public areas as a signal of “show off”.

### **4. The Present Situations of Teaching English in Bangladesh**

The present unsatisfied situations of English education in Bangladesh are the major impediment the application of CLT. First, a typical Bangladesh classroom contains at least 50 students, and there are only 45 minutes in one English class. According to Jin (2007) each student could potentially speak in each class less than 1 minute, it is impossible for English teachers to conduct CLT well in this large volume of classroom. Other factors such as lack of investment in the classroom infrastructure especially in rural countries and lack of authentic materials, which focus on cultivating student’s communicating ability instead of grammatical rules, are also great obstacle in the innovation towards CLT.

### **5. Conclusion**

CLT was introduced to Bangladesh when the traditional grammar based approach was considered as responsible for student’s inability in the communicative use of English. However, as a Western-oriented method, the application of CLT encounters many difficulties and constraints. More and more educators started to doubt if CLT is applicable in EFL context, such as in Bangladesh. In this paper, the present study mainly discussed the major problems in adopting CLT- the resistance from students, the inability of the teachers, the sociocultural factors and the present situation in Bangladesh. CLT in Bangladesh is still far reaching to accomplish.

Scholars and government should take steps to apply CLT in the context of Bangladesh and more

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work should be done whether it is applicable in the aforementioned scenario or not, and if it is, so what should be done to imply it more effectively and appropriately.

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