A Critical Review of the Communicative Language Teaching Implementation in Indonesia

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Abstract

Despite the growing popularity of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), some scholars question if the approach is suitable for Asian learners. Using Musthafa's classic article (2001) as a comparison, this paper investigates challenges dealt with Indonesian teachers in implementing the CLT approach. It specifically aims to see whether CLT-related problems that exist today are still in common or different from its earlier implementation as reported in Musthafa's article. The research documented three main challenges faced by Indonesian teachers to implement CLT. Two of them were congruent with Musthafa's arguments while the other was not discussed in his article. Furthermore, this paper suggests adapting CLT instead of adopting it and the need for professional training to develop the teacher's competence. Finally, it should be noted that this study only reviews the challenges based on conceptual frameworks. Hence, there is a need to conduct further empirical research to strengthen the arguments.

Keywords: Communicative language teaching, CLT, Indonesian curriculum

Introduction

While Communicative Language teaching (CLT) reaches popularity in Western countries, plenty of research has been reported to question its suitability if applied in East Asia (Butler 2011; Hu 2005; Huang 2016; Li 1998; Littlewood 2007). Of these studies, however, there seems limited research that places Indonesia as its main context. Musthafa (2001) indeed has published a conceptual study that discussed the CLT's challenges in Indonesia. Unfortunately, it was published over a decade ago and might need to be updated to keep its relevancy. For this reason, this paper aims to identify the more recent problems of the implementation of CLT in Indonesia. Using Musthafa's discussion as a comparison, it intends to see whether CLT-related problems that exist today are still in common or different from its earlier implementation.

To begin with, this paper gives a fruitful insight into what CLT exactly means. Then, it moves to review the previous studies concerning the challenges to apply CLT in East Asia. The following section traces the journey of the ELT curriculum in Indonesia. It highlights when the CLT is firstly inserted into the curriculum and how it affects a teacher's teaching. Next, it discusses the findings of several articles to gain the current picture of the challenges of CLT in Indonesia. Finally, this paper ends by acknowledging several suggestions and limitations for further research.

Literature Review

Understanding Communicative Language Teaching: Definition and Characteristics

According to Harmer (2001, p.84), Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was defined as "a set of beliefs which included not only a re-examination of what aspects of language to teach but also a shift in emphasis in how to teach". Further, Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011) highlighted the approach from its goal which encouraged the students to use the English language to communicate properly. Hence, to this extent, classroom activities in the CLT approach should be directed to those involving the students to use the target language (Alamri, 2018).

Scholars summarised several characteristics of CLT which distinguished from earlier language teaching approaches. Firstly, the CLT should promote student's communicative competence rather than their knowledge of the linguistic form (Harmer, 2001; Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011; Richards, 2006). Secondly, CLT could be identified by the types of classroom management implemented by teachers. Richards (2006) stated that CLT practices should encourage the students to work collaboratively in a group so that the students had chances to negotiate meaning with their group counterparts. This type of classroom practice was usually supported by non-controlled learning that allowed the students to "trying out and experimenting with different ways of saying things" (Richards 2006, p.4). After that, authentic material is also taken into consideration as it makes the learning process relevant and meaningful (Alamri 2018; Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). As important as that, Harmer (2001) correctly claimed that the information gap was "a key to the enhancement of communicative purpose and the desire to communicate" (see p.85 for further explanation). Therefore, it is necessary to afford a more realistic communication, characterised by a creative and unpredictable response from the interlocutor as frequently occurs in daily communication.

The overview of CLT in East Asian countries

As research has indicated the potential benefits of the CLT's implementation, many countries are keen to adopt it into the curriculum. As an example, research (e.g. Abe, 2013) showed how the Japanese Ministry of Education has taken a strategic step by revising the English language curriculum to put a serious emphasis on oral competencies. To support this mission, the English language has been introduced at an early stage, which is the primary school. This seems fairly useful as it might help junior high school teachers to vary communicative activities in the classroom. At this phase, the target is simply encouraging the students to perform a simple communication. More spontaneous communications are projected to occur at the senior high school level.

Although the curriculum change has given a piece of hope, it has to be said that CLT also causes resistance from some language teachers. For instance, socio-cultural value has been reported as dominant challenges for English teachers (Abe, 2013; Butler, 2011; Huang, 2016; Kam, 2002; Littlewood, 2007). This is particularly referring to the learning tradition which is still somewhat teacher dependent. In this culture, the teacher is frequently perceived as the only resource from which the learners gain knowledge. In China, passivity, student's etiquette, and politeness are common learning customs which are highly appreciated, but ironically against the principles of CLT (Hu, 2005). Meanwhile, In Japanese culture, the students still hold a higher value of, according to Kam (2002, p.7), "perfectionism". It increases the students' hesitation to speak up until they are very certain that the language is grammatically correct. As a consequence, this negative feeling prevents students from gaining an optimal opportunity to practice oral languages.

Another issue that might be paid attention is to do with teacher's matters. Plenty of research shows that Asian language teachers are not quite competent to speak English confidently (Abe, 2013; Butler, 2011; Huang, 2016; Kam, 2002; Li, 1998; Littlewood, 2007). In addition to that, a study in Korea (Li, 1998) indicated that the teachers were experiencing a lack of sociolinguistic and strategic competence. In other words, even if the teachers had adequate oral competence, sometimes, the teachers were still dealing with the questions that they were not familiar with, e.g. about English culture. Often, it appeared unpredictably. As a consequence, Li reported that the teachers felt stressed because, as a teacher, they were demanded to answer the questions straight away.

CLT Practices in Indonesia
CLT in Indonesia's Curriculum

It was in Curriculum 1984 when the communicative approach was first adopted into the English language teaching curriculum in Indonesia (Dardjowidjojo, 2000). At that time, despite claimed so, the implementation was commented far from communicative. It was proven from the syllabi and textbook that they still had a strong sense of Audio-Lingual Approach.

To respond to this criticism, the communicative-based curriculum has undergone several revisions. It started in curriculum 1994 (meaning-based) after the government began to include local content into the curriculum. It aimed to lead the learning became meaningful, as the name suggested. In this curriculum, reading became the main priority of the learning objectives (Renandya, 2000; Riadi, 2019). Then, it was completed in the curriculum 2004 (competency-based). The characteristic was its focus that intended to develop the communicative competence for both "oracy and literacy" (Agustien 2004, p.10). Standard competences and indicators were used as criteria to indicate whether the students had reached the learning outcome or not. Those who met the criteria were awarded to pass the English subject and vice versa.

In curriculum 2006 (school-based), the teachers were given the freedom to design their teaching process. The government's role was to set several minimum standards that the students must

achieve at the end of their learning process. Later, the teachers selected some of them based on their students' needs. Finally, the latest curriculum was introduced in 2013, so-called Curriculum 13 (K-13). This curriculum focused on the development of student's character resulting in the decrease of teaching hours and content for English language subjects at a senior high school level (Riadi, 2019). A theme-based teaching approach was implemented in this curriculum aiming to help students enhance their competence based on their interests. For English subjects, the students were expected to acquire certain linguistic functions, particularly those which could be implemented in the student's day-to-day communication such as reading magazines. As other earlier curricula, K-13 also created a heated polemic among educators, some of which were insufficient information distributed to teachers and teacher's inability to improve or scaffold limited materials provided by the government.

Current Challenges Faced by English Language Teachers in Indonesia

This section discusses more recent challenges encountered by language teachers in Indonesia. At least there were three main challenges faced by Indonesian teachers to implement CLT in the classroom. Two of the challenges were congruent with those reported in Musthafa's article (2001). One last challenge was least discussed in his article; thus, it is considered worthy to be mentioned in this section. In order to provide an up-to-date discussion, the author only reviews Indonesian-context articles that were published after 2006, when the two latest curricula were launched. With regard to any CLT discussion that refers to the curriculum before them, the author will use Musthafa's article (2001).

Teacher-related Challenges

The biggest challenge of CLT in Indonesia possibly comes from teacher dimension. As in other Asian countries (e.g. Huang, 2016), some English teachers in Indonesia do not feel quite confident to speak English continuously with their students (Marcellino, 2008). In the early of CLT in Indonesia, Musthafa (2001) gave a caution regarding this lack of qualified teachers. As the approach has gone this far, this aspect seemingly does not indicate remarkable progress. Even, Lie (2007) found an interesting fact in an ELT conference, where all participants were English teachers and all papers submitted should be in English. Surprisingly, major participants presented their paper in their first language and so did with the audience that posted a question at the end of the session.

From that example, we doubt if teachers use the English language in their classroom communication. Holding a role as a facilitator and monitor, the teacher's tasks are not merely preparing and controlling classroom activities. Sometimes, they also need to take part in the conversation as the student's interlocutor. It is unfortunate if the English teachers keep using their first language in such conferences wherein they have a golden opportunity to practice the English language. Given this reality, it appears difficult to expect the students from gaining an optimal communicative exposure.

Curriculum-related Challenges

If the teachers and the students are the most vital players who directly convert the concept of CLT into a practical application, the curriculum is deemed as an indirect dimension that influences teacher's philosophy about how they will carry out their teaching. As part of the curriculum regulation, the national examination is one of the controversial issues under this dimension (Sulistyo, 2009). Since curriculum 1994, researchers (e.g. Musthafa, 2001) criticised that the national examination did not properly address the communicative goal stated in the curriculum. The major shortcomings were its grammatical focus and multiple-choice type. In fact, Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011) suggested that a communicative assessment ideally was not limited to measure accuracy, but also to give a balanced portion for fluency.

Moreover, a national examination is often used as the only standard to measure students' competence (Dworkin 2009). Frequently, a failure to pass this final examination makes not only the students but also the teachers stressed. Thus, the focus during this period can be assured merely on how to pass the exam. Li (1998) described the teachers in Korea were "under pressure" and it made them to fully concentrate "to teaching test-taking skills and drilling students on multiple-choice grammar items" (p. 692). Similarly, a study conducted in Indonesia by Furaidah *et al.* (2015) reported that exam-oriented mindset has heavily influenced the classroom activities in secondary schools. Particularly in the final year of each junior and high school, the teacher would drill their students with monotonous and teacher-centred activities.

If a teacher with high ability classrooms still has a probability to employ communicative activities occasionally, the teachers with low-level classrooms do not have such an option. "The SLOWs (low-level classrooms) tend to focus more on one activity, that is, the drilling activities" (Furaidah *et al.* 2015, p.49). The purpose is to make the students accustomed to the type of question in the national examination. Hence, they become well-prepared in the real test. The common procedure is doing the multiple-choice questions and checking the answers. During these activities, the learners hold minor roles and have little opportunity to

practice their oral language besides simply mentioning their answers, in turn, to be checked by the teachers.

Then, the implication for CLT becomes obvious. The confinement of national examination has made the teachers, what Sulistyo (2009) called, "powerless". In other words, although the Curriculum 2006 lessens the curriculum's chain, and the teachers have realised that they should teach language functions, the high demand to pass the examination has driven them again to use traditional methods.

Cultural-related Challenges

This section was not much discussed in Muthafa's article. Nevertheless, since long, learning tradition has been incriminated as another factor that hinders the teachers to teach with CLT. As discussed in the literature review, researchers doubt whether CLT is effectively applicable in society who hold higher group awareness, like Eastern culture. Marcellino (2008, p.63) defined the Indonesian learning environment as "apathetic". There was little oral participation in the classroom. The students were passive, silent, and obedient. They were rarely questioning the knowledge they received from the teachers. According to Adi (2011), the pattern of the teacher-student relationship in the classroom was formal in which representing superiority and inferiority. In this communicative pattern, he added that the students "are not encouraged to interrupt, must respond positively, and speak in a flat intonation" (Adi 2011, p.83). Hence, it is not surprising if Zainil (2013) claimed in his study that classroom interaction was too dominated by teachers with a ratio of 80:20.

Interestingly, some research comes up to counter this Western vs Eastern argument. Using her case in China, Liao (2004) believed that basically, teachers have been familiar with Western teaching approaches. She stresses that the previous approaches such as the Grammar Translation Method and Audio Lingual Method were originally from Western as well. Butler (2011) followed up this argument by saying that the view of pathetic and passive Asian students did not automatically describe what happened in the classroom. To support this argument, he reviewed several articles that showed how the students in the different parts of Asia had positive attitudes towards CLT, for example in Japan, Taiwan, and Vietnam. Therefore, he concluded that it was not judicious to overgeneralise "the role of traditional cultural values in shaping Asian classroom practices at all grade levels across Asia" (p. 40).

Suggestion

Faced with these complicated challenges, the hope to bring CLT into the Indonesian classroom is not completely close. To start the suggestion, this research recommends Indonesian teachers to consistently develop their self-competence, for instance by attending training or seminars. Though it is not the only focus of CLT, oral language competence is often cited to lessen their confidence to communicate intensely with the students. Hence, it seems beneficial if the training could devote one or two hours just to focus on developing their communicative competence. While necessary, the training may include technology supports. Aritonang (2014) has reported a study in Indonesia involving teachers in a blended classroom atmosphere. The report suggests that such an atmosphere may increase the teacher's level of confidence to speak English.

Furthermore, since the tendency of the Asian learning custom is rather passive and obedient, despite remaining a debate, a radical shift of focus from teachers to learners appears to increase a reluctance for both parties. Thus, the change should be made in a gradual process. The teachers still need to embed the values of Eastern teaching tradition contained in the traditional method. In other words, instead of abandoning the GTM and ALM, the teacher may use them to enrich supplementary methods for CLT. Positively, such combinations were supported by previous studies suggesting that the teachers may keep using drilling and memorization techniques but with "more interaction and more creative responses from the students" (see Littlewood 2007, p.246 for more examples).

Conclusion

The growing trend to adopt CLT has raised wind of hope for English language teaching in Asia. Indonesia is not an exception. However, it did not automatically mean that the teachers run CLT smoothly in the classroom. Using Mustafha's article as a comparison, it can be observed that some challenges that appear in the 1990s are still present until today. The teacher's competence and the national exam are two examples that are elucidated in his article and appear again in this paper. This finding indicates that not much regulation change has been made by the related stake-holder, both for teacher's development and national exam regulation. If this phenomenon remains the same, this is likely what Renandya (2000) has predicted 20 years ago that the progress of ELT, or perhaps CLT in this paper, will not much improve. He said "it is not that we do not know the problem … [but] these are problems which are so huge that their solutions demand a comprehensive restructuring of the national policy … "(p.126).

Finally, as a result of the discussion, this paper proposes several suggestions such as the need to adapt CLT instead of adopting and the need for professional training to develop the teacher's

competence. In addition, it should be noted that this study only reviews the current challenges based on conceptual frameworks. Hence, to fill the gap, there is a need to conduct empirical research to strengthen the arguments.

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