

Advice for a Communicative Learning Environment

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Abstract

Currently the Philippines is the last country in Asia implementing a ten-year education plan providing education until tenth grade before students reach university level. The education change will aid future Filipino professionals to compete globally since it is the recognized standard throughout the world. However, with expanding pressure for EFL teachers to implement new programs and systems it has left a gap between students being proficient academically and communicatively at the same time. The issue continues to increase since inappropriate implementation of activities leave students perceiving the communicative approach as frivolous and unproductive. As a result, students do not appreciate an active learning environment in the classroom.



Introduction

There are only two countries in the world still implementing a ten-year education plan, Angola and Djibouti. This is why the current 2016-2017 schools in the Philippines will make a transition to a K to 12 system. After five years of planning, the determined result of this shift is that the general education college department will have fewer units and most subjects will be transferred to the upcoming 11 and 12 senior high curriculum, stated in CHED memorandum Order No. 20, series of 2013, according to The Republic of the Philippines, Department of Education (2016).

East Asian teachers have been introduced to the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach but according to Hiep (2005), as developing countries, "Gear toward reforming their education systems to meet the demands of modernization, new values may emerge. Local teachers need to continually examine these values and reflect upon how they relate to learner participation, autonomy, and equality in their changing context."

This study is aimed to see if there is a significant difference on the EFL teaching methodology specifically in terms of CLT as perceived by the observer and student perspective. Moreover, the result of the study will serve as feedback useful for the university and administration when planning teacher training objectives for the upcoming K to 12 educational structures. Results will also be considered as needs assessment for teacher training objectives in the Philippines.

Butler (2011) and Kelch (2011) identify the East Asia and Pacific region with unsuccessful implementation of CLT and teachers still face significant challenges even with governments promoting CLT. Butler (2011) mentions three obstacles of CLT implementation in Asia societal institutional constraints. Within the societal institutional constraints, Park (2012) identifies modern western ideologies compared to the traditional Asian values of classroom creating a barrier in the classroom because even with the strong pressure to implement CLT, teachers still have the role of gate keepers possessing all the knowledge and students still passively receive the knowledge from them. Salas, Fitchett, and Mercado (2013) state the concern of disappointment in the class when students had little practice communicating on the subject

matter in meaningful ways. Furthermore, traditional classes have competitive and egocentric nature; whereas, CLT classes have respect, empathy, and perspective collaboration goals.

Another constraint identified by Butler (2011) is classroom since teachers themselves are not confident communicating in English; therefore, facilitating communicative tasks becomes daunting especially when teachers are inadequately trained in applying CLT to the classroom or training has not been provided. Teachers will lose face if they implement CLT and make verbal mistakes or can't respond fast enough to the students when they need guidance (Park, 2012). Hiep (2005) adds educational constraints when applying CLT in terms of the behaviors of international teachers has not yet been fully documented.

The third constraint stated by Butler is societal institutional level constraints which occur because of the exam-based culture. With the immense pressure on students to pass standardized bar exams, the teachers experience an increased amount of pressure to teach to the test instead of using CLT to strengthen communication skills within a given subject (Park, 2012). Parker (2003) shares a suggestion for such concerns by adding progressive discussion in the two forms of deliberation and seminar for group work. Deliberation is focused on finding solutions to controversial issues with a neutral middle standing which is the opposite as typical debate structures in classrooms. Seminars elaborate critical thinking skills of the students with ideas and concepts that students can expand their own understanding of it and learning the art of questioning everything. Parker (2003) adds that these methods help, "Align progressively more demanding dialogue with student's goals and expectations" (p. 1).

Along with seminar, TED-motivated speaking activities helps the students change their mission from a "knowledge receiver to an explorer" since the content is real and not fictional like some classroom drills that are solely for the sake of practice (Li et al., 2015). If the students don't apply the language in real world contexts specific to their field of study, they will not be motivated for the CLT approach. As a solution, TED talks challenge traditional listening-speaking EFL courses by motivating the listener to strengthen their critical thinking capabilities while developing appropriate body language and manners, essential non-verbal language skills, during their own public speaking engagements. Li, Gao, and Zhang (2016) add that TED inspired speaking activities reduce the affective filter and actual give students a scenario where they keep learning and watch

more than one seminar because the content is so satisfying. When students are able to pick their own videos based on their personal preference or career choice the “Affective Filter Hypothesis” (Krashen, 1985) stating in a stress-free environment motivates accelerates language input. Li, Gao, and Zhang state, “To reinforce the effect, students are required to give comments on their performance in the video by themselves and peers as records for their improvement.” With the Ted inspired speaking tasks students become the policy maker, teacher and coach of the learning ideology.

In addition, Butler recommends “communities of learning” beyond the classroom setting. This can also be true for the teachers. Faculty learning communities can end the isolation in teaching and give the instructors changes to communicate in meaningful ways on pedagogical discussions and reflections (Eddy & Mitchell, 2012). Butlers continues that because of the exam-based culture there are less opportunities for English communication inside and outside the class. The shift is important since the Republic of the Philippines, Department of Education (2016), states one of the four mission statements as, “Family, community, and stakeholders are actively engaged and share responsibility for developing life-long learners.” Salas, Fitchett, and Mercado (2013) believe, “Talking to learn across classrooms and communities can empower English learners of all levels with the skills and stances upon which our cultural and political democratic traditions are grounded and upon which our collective futures as open societies depend on.”

This study employed both qualitative and quantitative types of research using a descriptive survey method and participant observations with a descriptive reference sheet. The respondents of this study were all fourteen English teachers and eighty of one hundred third- and fourth-year students majoring in English under the School of Education, Arts, and Sciences, Language Department during the Academic Year and Summer Year 2015-2016 at the University of Saint Louis, Tuguegarao City, Cagayan, Philippines. The total number of student participants was established using the Slovin’s formula at 0.05 margin of error to ensure a reasonable accuracy of results.

This study utilized two separate methods for teacher and student participants. A peer-observer reference sheet was used patterned from *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy* by Brown (2007) used during and after the Commission on

English Language Program Accreditation process (CEA) in 2015 at California Polytechnic English Language Institute (CPELI), College of the Extended University at California Polytechnic University, Pomona. However, modifications were made by the researcher to suit to the country and culture of the participants. The revised teacher observation form was used to evaluate the presentation and implementation of teaching methods. To determine the extent of CLT of English teachers, the four-point Likert's scale was used in the form to guide the observer in answering the questions. The four categories included: exceed expectations, meets expectations, needs improvement, and not applicable.

After collation of the observation results, a self-made questionnaire was distributed to the student participants after the researcher oriented them on the objectives of the study. After the participants answered the seven questions on the survey the answers of all respondents were tallied. To triangulate the findings of the data from the observations and surveys, two focus group discussions were conducted separately to half of the participants, seven teachers and forty students.

Discussion

In response to the teacher observations the area of highest concern is applied appropriate principles of EFL learning and teaching methodology such as: scaffolding, repetition, adhering close to the 80/20 rule, pair work, group work, drills/practices, peer-teaching/peer-coaching, group work, appropriate wait time, and a variety of task based activities. Out of fourteen teachers, ten teachers were rated as needs improvement due to the traditional teacher-centered methodology being employed such as student recitation drills. Teachers asked a knowledge-based question and students raised their hands until one was called on to stand up and recite the answer. Some of the ten teachers created groups to work in but ended up not helping with English with any of the four integrated skills and was more about visual arts instead of a task-based approach focused on outcomes-based education. It is recommended that teachers utilize the 80/20 rule, peer-teaching/peer-correction, and a variety of task-based activities as an

alternative means of assessment. However, three teachers exceeded expectations and one met expectations, which shows CLT methodology was taught to the respondents.

Teacher observation results correlate with the student survey responses since 85% of students feel only somewhat confident speaking English. Furthermore, students said they would feel more nervous rather than excited if the survey was conducted as an interview instead of being written. In spite of those results, sixty-nine of the one hundred participants stated they preferred an active learning environment where they typically communicate more than the teacher or as much as the teacher during class. Most students said they would like to “enhance speaking skills” this way. Students who do not prefer the CLT approach stated, “Students might just make noise instead of learning.” Surveys also show that the majority of students perceive their English classes contain less than half of the class time dedicated to English.

Another area that CLT promotes is implementing an engaging warm-up activity related to what students will learn. Unfortunately, twelve of the fourteen English teachers did not include warm up activity and began their classes with a statement or question about the topic of the last meeting. For example, “What did we do last class?” or “Last class we discussed ____.” In order to achieve successful CLT a five to fifteen warm up activity task based on what was previously learned would make a better approach for the start of a communicative environment. This strategy could lead to students communicating more in class since forty-five out of eighty students view less than half the time of English classes is given for students to communicate with each other.

When students were asked to name and describe one or more activities in English classes that involved the community or any off-campus extension, thirty of the eighty students responded “none”. The other students instead wrote activities that were based in class or on campus. Therefore, zero of the eighty students were provided opportunities to practice English in an authentic real-world environment. In reference to the observation sheet, nine of the fourteen teachers were given “not applicable” for the question if they provided students opportunities to practice outcomes independently outside of class. Also, during the observations nine of the fourteen teachers were given “needs improvement” or “not applicable” on goals were connected to authentic “real life situations”. These findings on presentation and implementation

of teaching methods may be linked to the reason students are nervous and only “somewhat confident” to speak English, even though in the Philippines English is the target language for classroom instruction starting in grade three.

Conclusion

School and government policies don’t match what is actually going on in terms of teaching in the classroom. Teachers may know what CLT means but revert back to using traditional pedagogy, so students do not overpower them with superior language skills. Teacher training sessions with specific criteria to ensure effective CLT will produce educators who are able to facilitate lessons with outcome-based learning activities which also reduce the affective filter. To overcome such barriers teacher must reform ineffective tasks with demanding yet achievable exercises that heed in the enhancement of language proficiency and conversational skills simultaneously. Workshops that demonstrate, through example, activities with the advancement of social and academic skills also containing practical real-world objectives would be highly beneficial as a teacher training program. As a result, teachers would develop productive social communities with increased participation while reducing anxiety allowing students to converse and collaborate with others effectively throughout their professional career.

Conclusion

It is recommended in the Philippines that teachers guide the students how to communicate in meaningful ways using TED talks as a tool to strength their confidence. After it is also recommended that the teachers implementing the new speaking strategy make a community of practice where they can discuss and document successes or failures with the new activity. Also, teacher should involve their community and give the students chances to speak outside of class once they are more confident communicating in authentic ways. In the end,

teachers will be able to adapt the guided activities to their specific subjects and tackle the challenges of CLT in the multicultural era.

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