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Communication-oriented language teaching: Where are we now? Where do we go from here?

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In its early days, CLT was widely promoted as suitable for all contexts, but many questions have since been raised about what it really means and what versions of it (if any) are suited to specific learning situations. Experiences in Asia, where educational traditions and current realities often contrast strongly with those where CLT originated, have provided a major impetus for this questioning and the process has been reinforced by developments in the wider context, such as the postmethod perspective in language teaching and the decline of centre-to-periphery conceptions of modernization. CLT now serves not so much as a label for a specific approach as an umbrella term to describe all approaches that aim to develop communicative competence in personally meaningful ways. It also provides a framework for defining issues that research and exploratory practice need to address in the years ahead.

1. Introduction

Communicative language teaching (CLT) is now some 40 years old. Will it conform to the old saying that 'life begins at 40'? Or have we now reached, as Bax (2003) argues, 'the end of CLT'? There is no lack of arguments on both sides. Over the years CLT has led us to address a lot of important issues and opened up a lot of opportunities, which we can now take further. But it has also created a lot of problems and dilemmas, both theoretical and practical. This paper aims to take stock of this situation by looking at where these 40 years of experience have left us and, above all, where we go from here. It does this by asking three main questions:

- Where have we come from with CLT?
- Where are we now with CLT?
- Where do we go from here?

Especially in the last two decades, much discussion about teaching language for communication has referred to 'task-based language teaching' (TBLT) rather than CLT.

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In this paper, as in, for example, Nunan (2004: 10) and Richards (2005: 29), TBLT is viewed as a development within CLT, in which communicative 'tasks' have special roles and special prominence as a focus for planning, learning and teaching. Some specific contributions of TBLT are clearly presented by Norris (2009).

2. Where have we come from with CLT?

2.1 What is CLT?

Since the early 1970s CLT has figured large in discussions of foreign language teaching. Hunter & Smith (2012), in an enlightening analysis of the common keywords in articles published in one UK-based journal (*ELT Journal*), show how by the period 1981–1986, 'communicative' ideas and terminology had gradually climbed to a dominant status in ELT professional discourse. At the same time Hunter & Smith's analysis also refutes any idea that there was a general consensus at that time concerning the nature of a communicative approach and that there was a 'unitary' CLT in the 1980s. This lack of consensus has been confirmed in the years since then. Some twenty years later, Harmer (2003: 289) still writes that 'the term [CLT] has always meant a multitude of different things to different people' and Spada (2007: 272) begins her survey article on CLT with the comment that the meaning of CLT 'seems to depend on whom you ask'. Hall (2011: 93) expresses similar views.

Uncertainty in the realm of principles carries itself over (with much more disorienting implications) into the realm of classroom practice. For example, the ten teachers of Japanese in Australia who were observed and interviewed by Sato & Kleinsasser (1999: 501) saw themselves as adopting a communicative approach but 'held varying, even fragmented, views' about what that meant. The most common conceptions were that it meant learning to communicate in the L2, focusing mainly on speaking and listening, teaching very little grammar and spending a lot of time preparing activities. In their actual practice, however, the teachers 'were rarely guided by their conceptions of CLT' (p. 510) and mainly adopted a teacher-fronted approach with little interaction amongst students. Likewise in East Asia, according to Ho & Wong's (2004: xxxiv) summary of fifteen national surveys, CLT has been implemented in various ways 'with the term almost meaning different things to different English teachers'. The most common understanding has been that it means teachers including communicative activities in their repertoire and giving learners opportunities to practise the language skills taught (Ho 2004: 26). Thompson (1996) surveyed teachers from a range of countries and found conceptions similar to those of the teachers in Australia: that CLT means using pair or group work, teaching only speaking, not teaching grammar, and a lot of hard work for the teacher.

2.2 CLT's dual identity

One source of uncertainty about the meaning of CLT is that from the outset, it has existed in two different versions. These versions correspond roughly to two main sources of CLT

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that became prominent in the 1970s: a communicative perspective on LANGUAGE and a communicative perspective on LEARNING.

The communicative perspective on language is primarily about WHAT we learn. It proposes that when we learn a language we are primarily learning not language structures but language FUNCTIONS (how to 'do things with words'). These communicative functions came to play a central role in syllabus design (Wilkins 1976) and methodology (Widdowson 1978). The ELT world (especially the part influenced by the UK) came to be dominated by so-called 'functional' or 'communicative' courses, in which students would practise expressing functions (such as 'making suggestions') and then use them in 'communicative activities' (such as pair work, role-play, discussion and the use of authentic materials; see, for example, the course book by Abbs, Ayton & Freebairn 1975 and activities discussed in Johnson & Morrow 1981). As Morrow & Johnson (1983: 4) put it in a book of papers from a seminal conference that they organized in 1978, in those days 'functional syllabuses seemed to offer an automatic solution to all the problems of language teaching'.

At about the same time, the communicative perspective on learning focused attention on HOW we learn and especially on our natural capacities to 'acquire' language (both L1 and L2) simply through communication and without the direct help of a teacher. These ideas were embodied in proposals such as Krashen & Terrell's (1983) 'natural approach', which was based on the belief that only natural acquisition processes can lead to effective language learning; Prabhu's (1987) 'communicational language teaching', which insisted that conscious learning and error correction have no place in the language classroom; and 'humanistic' approaches (e.g. Moskowitz 1978), which emphasized the importance of engaging learners in communication in which their whole personality is invested.

'Communication in the classroom' (the title of an influential book edited by Johnson & Morrow 1981) was the practical implication of both perspectives. But if we focus only on the communicative perspective on LEARNING, we may draw the conclusion (as many have done) that involvement in communication is sufficient in itself for learning and that we should not make any use at all of 'traditional' techniques such as explanations, drills or question-and-answer practice. This has often been called (after Howatt 1984: 287) the 'strong' version of CLT. The communicative perspective on LANGUAGE, on the other hand, still leaves open the possibility that teachers might present and practise individual items (in a communicative context) before or after students use them for communication. This has often been called (again, after Howatt 1984: 287) the 'weak' version of CLT.

These two versions of CLT have very different implications for how language is best learnt in the classroom and for the role of the teacher. Both versions require the teacher to be a creator and organizer of communicative activities – a requirement that presents new roles for teachers and learners in traditional classrooms – but the weak version presents a more familiar overall framework through its recognition of controlled and analytic learning. Allwright & Hanks (2009: 47–49) offer an interesting perspective on how the 'much less challenging ideas' of this weak version (which they see embodied in Littlewood 1981) 'solved the commodity problem' because it could form the basis of published course books. However, they argue that it hindered the 'radical rethink about learners' that the strong version might have stimulated, if it had been commercially viable.

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2.3 CLT in the classroom

For many years, confidence in the new communicative approach seemed to know no limits. From its origins in what Holliday (1994) termed 'BANA' (British – American – New Zealand – Australian) classrooms for adult learners, it was quickly exported to other countries which needed to cope with an urgent need for competent communicators in English. In these countries it would become the official policy for teaching at all levels and in all contexts. The surveys by Nunan (2003) and Ho & Wong (2004) show how CLT became the dominant model for official language teaching policies and a central pillar of government rhetoric in (respectively) the Asia-Pacific region and East Asia.

Changes in policy and rhetoric are of course easy to formulate, but the practical challenges which they entail are often more problematic. Some of the challenges which the change to a communication-oriented approach has presented to teachers in traditional classrooms are summarized by Wang (2007: 10). She writes about China, but her comments are also mirrored in accounts from other countries. Within a short period, teachers have been expected to develop new practical skills for classroom teaching, change how they evaluate students, develop the ability to adapt textbooks, use modern technology and improve their own language proficiency. To implement these new practical demands, they have had to make major changes in attitude and approach: to change their conception of their own role from that of a transmitter of knowledge to that of a multi-role educator, and to change their conception of language learning from one based on knowledge acquisition to one based on the holistic development of competence.

There are numerous reports, from a range of countries, of the practical problems that teachers in primary and secondary schools have encountered in implementing CLT, especially with large classes and limited resources (e.g. Li 1998 and Jeon 2009 in South Korea; Carless 2004 in Hong Kong; Hu 2005 in China; Hiep 2007 in Vietnam; Nishino & Watanabe 2008 in Japan; Orafi & Borg 2009 in Libya; see also surveys of a range of East Asian countries in Ho & Wong 2004, Littlewood 2007 and Butler 2011). The reported problems relate especially to the domain of communicative activities (or 'tasks'), in which students exchange messages with the teacher or with each other, and include:

- Classroom management is demanding, especially with large classes, and teachers may fear losing control.
- Unpredictable communication may make excessive demands on the language skills of teachers who themselves have had limited experience of communicating in English.
- Pair or group work requires teachers to develop new organizational skills and adopt a less overtly dominant role in the classroom.
- In such work, without constant monitoring, students may communicate in the mother tongue or use only minimal English, rather than extending their English competence.
- The holistic learning that occurs in communicative activity contradicts common conceptions of school-based learning as involving item-by-item progression through a syllabus.
- These conceptions also support the traditional view of teachers as transmitters of knowledge rather than as facilitators who try to develop learner independence.

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- Teachers often face a contradiction between an official public policy which advocates CLT and a pencil-and-paper examination system which tests discrete items.
- As a result, they often face resistance both from students and from parents, for whom examination results are understandably of paramount importance.

Butler (2011: 36) classifies the challenges which face teachers into '(a) conceptual constraints (e.g., conflicts with local values and misconceptions regarding CLT/TBLT); (b) classroom-level constraints (e.g., various student and teacher-related factors, classroom management practices, and resource availability); and (c) societal-institutional level constraints (e.g., curricula and examination systems)'. Jeon (2009) finds a similar pattern in the issues identified by Korean teachers (smaller classes, more training and more supplementary materials were the most important) and also proposes specific ways of addressing them.

3. Where are we now with CLT?

Since the early euphoria that surrounded CLT, experiences such as those described have brought a more sober assessment. In East Asia, in the words of Ho & Wong (2004: xxxiv), 'there has been much criticism of an unquestioning acceptance of CLT techniques'. Hiep (2007: 196) believes that teachers in many parts of the world reject 'CLT techniques transferred from the West' and Hu (2005: 67) also advises that we should not try to impose CLT on teachers but should 'encourage them to adopt an eclectic approach. . .to meet the demands of their specific teaching situations'. Bax (2003) announces 'the end of CLT' and advocates a 'context approach' in which the first priority is to analyse the context before deciding on a teaching approach.

Richards & Rodgers (2001: 173) point out that many of the characteristics usually ascribed to CLT 'address very general aspects of language learning and teaching that are now largely accepted as self-evident and axiomatic throughout the profession'. Harmer (2007: 70) adopts a similarly broad perspective when he suggests that CLT now functions as 'a generalized "umbrella" term to describe learning sequences which aim to improve the students' ability to communicate' in contrast to 'teaching which is aimed more at learning bits of language just because they exist – without focusing on their use in communication'. Hiep (2007: 196) formulates what he calls 'the spirit of CLT' in terms compatible with Harmer's: CLT 'proposes a focus on learning', 'holds that learning is likely to happen when classroom practices are made real and meaningful to learners' and 'sets the goal of language learning to be the teaching of learners to be able to use the language effectively for their real communicative needs'.

These and other accounts, together with experiences such as those mentioned in the previous section, indicate that as a ready-made package of ideas and classroom techniques which can be applied anywhere, CLT has now experienced the same fate as the proclaimed 'best methods' of the past. However, it still provides a conceptual framework centred on the need to orient our teaching towards learners' communicative goals and to design meaningful experiences which lead towards these goals. Also, the specific ideas and techniques that it has

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generated have enriched the repertoire that teachers can draw on as they develop their own context-sensitive pedagogy.

4. Where do we go from here?

From a logical perspective there would appear to be four main strategies for language teachers to adopt. They form a cline, overlapping and merging into each other. One approach is to simply aim to adopt CLT as faithfully as possible in whatever form is advocated by the local educational policy. This is the case when teachers evaluate aspects of their practice according to whether they are 'really' doing CLT rather than whether they contribute to successful learning. Some of the teachers in Sato & Kleinsasser (1999) spoke in these terms. The second is to retain CLT as a reference framework but adapt it as appropriate to suit specific contexts. Thus Carless (2004) and Mitchell & Lee (2003) describe how teachers in Hong Kong, South Korea and the UK may reinterpret communicative tasks as 'contextualized practice' or 'teacher-led interaction' rather than activities in which learners negotiate meaning with each other. In the third approach, teachers may retain their traditional approach as a pedagogical framework but integrate elements of CLT into it. This is the strategy of the Chinese teacher in Zheng & Adamson (2003). He retains his familiar role as a knowledge transmitter and includes traditional techniques such as grammatical explanations, memorization techniques and pattern drills. However, he integrates new ideas by including more interaction, eliciting more creative responses from the students in his classes, and contextualizing these not only in situations provided by the textbook but also in the students' personal experience. Finally, teachers may break free altogether from concepts such as 'traditional' and 'CLT'. They choose ideas and techniques from the universal, transnational pool that has been built up over the years and evaluate them, not in relation to any notion of CLT, but according to how well, in their own specific context, they contribute to creating meaningful experiences which lead towards communicative competence.

With this fourth perspective, the notion that CLT is a distinct methodology disappears. Ideas and techniques from whatever source – so-called traditional, so-called CLT, or indeed any other source – constitute a common pool on which teachers can draw in order to design classroom practices which are real and meaningful to their learners and help learners towards fulfilling their real communicative needs. This aligns with the suggestion of Beaumont & Chang (2011: 291) that the CLT/traditional dichotomy may 'inhibit methodological development' and it is better to define learning activities in terms of their learning outcomes and their 'potential to make a contribution to the general goal of learning a language, i.e. successful communication' (p. 298). It is also consistent with the views reported above that CLT now functions mainly as an 'umbrella term' for learning sequences that lead towards communication (Harmer 2007: 70) and that what is now essential is not any specific set of ideas and techniques but 'the spirit of CLT' (Hiep 2007: 196).

One may go further and question whether it is now useful to use the term 'CLT' at all, particularly since, as we saw in section 2, it is not only ambiguous but also often carries the misleading message that there is some real and proven version of CLT to which a teacher should try to conform, even if his or her intuitions say otherwise. In an earlier paper

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(Littlewood 2004: 325), I proposed 'communication-oriented language teaching' ('COLT') as an alternative term, which is uncontroversial about the goals of teaching (successful communication) but implies more flexibility regarding the means (which will vary with context). That is the term that will be used in the final section of this paper.

5. Communication-oriented language teaching (COLT): Some issues and challenges for its future

In this section I will suggest five areas in which research and exploration may contribute in important ways to developing firmer foundations for COLT. There are, of course, so many potential areas that any choice is necessarily subjective. However, the five areas have all been the focus of extensive debate over recent years, so the subjectivity is less than it might seem. They are all 'macro-level' areas which involve the development of strategies in key domains. The first two might be called 'meta-methodological' (by analogy with 'meta-cognitive') in that they concern the conditions in which a postmethod pedagogy might be developed. The others focus on classroom methodology more directly and involve major concerns that permeate all teaching. They are areas in which no teacher can avoid making decisions (conscious or subconscious) and implementing them, on a moment-by-moment basis, through specific 'micro-level' strategies and techniques developed to suit his or her own teaching situation. This micro-level exploration becomes the focus of context-specific exploration (e.g. through action research).

5.1 Exploring principles for a 'postmethod' pedagogy

The many decades of debate and experimentation in the field of language teaching methodology have left teachers with an immense range of learning activities to choose from. Self-contained 'methods' such as audiolingualism and situational language teaching came under attack but at least they offered principles for selecting from this range. In the current 'postmethod' era (e.g. Kumaravadivelu 2006, Allwright & Hanks 2009, Littlewood 2011), in which no unified method provides principles to guide this selection, WHAT principles should guide it?

One approach to this question is to start from experienced teachers' 'sense of plausibility' (Prabhu 1987) and develop a 'teacher-generated theory of classroom practice' (Senior 2006: 270). Breen et al. (2001) followed this approach when they worked from 18 teachers' accounts of their own practices and their reasons for adopting them. They found reasonable consensus on 'a dozen' principles, such as taking account of individual differences and making it easier for students to remember what is taught.

Ellis (2005a, 2005b) and Erlam (2008) worked in the opposite direction, starting not from classroom practice but from principles of second language acquisition (SLA). Based on research into SLA, they proposed ten 'principles of instructed language learning': for example, that teachers should take account of individual differences and ensure that learners develop both a rich repertoire of formulaic expressions and a rule-based competence. After spelling

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out how each principle might be expressed in actual classroom practice, Erlam (2008) and her co-researchers observed and interviewed teachers in New Zealand to see if their teaching practice did in fact provide evidence to validate the principles.

A third approach is taken by Kumaradivelu (2003) and Littlewood (2004). These writers have proposed frameworks to guide classroom practice based on accumulated classroom experience as well as current language teaching theory. Kumaradivelu's (2003) framework consists of ten 'macro-strategies' for language teaching: for example, that teachers should maximize learning opportunities, facilitate negotiated interaction and contextualize linguistic input. These strategies are to be implemented through specific practices suited to the local context. Littlewood's (2004) five-category framework locates activities in relation to the goal of communicative competence (non-communicative learning; pre-communicative language practice; communicative language practice; structured communication; authentic communication). A second dimension – task-engagement – reflects the essential role of motivation and involvement in every category of activity. The framework has proved a useful basis for teachers to analyse their specific practices and work towards a more communication-oriented classroom (Deng & Carless 2009).

The first of these approaches (based on teachers' sense of plausibility) takes teachers' common sense and current expertise as its starting point but does not yet open up ways in which teachers may examine this expertise and develop it with the benefit of new insights and perspectives. The second (based on principles of SLA) offers new insights from theory and invites teachers to use them to examine their current practice but does not in itself offer ways to evaluate the outcomes. The third attempts to match successful shared professional experience with theory that might illuminate its key features in order to make it generalizable across situations. All of these approaches are complementary in exploring principles for a postmethod pedagogy under the general umbrella of COLT.

5.2 Exploring ways of linking practice with theory and research

It is clear from the previous section that top-down approaches, in which policy-makers and other non-teaching 'experts' legislate on how language is best taught, have lost their validity. Every teacher is the best expert in his or her own situation but can draw insights from others (theorists as well as teachers) and test them in this situation. This means that in the search for postmethod principles and practices discussed in the previous section, it is of paramount importance that theory, research and practice work together on a basis of equality.

Akbari (2008) emphasizes the importance of bridging this gap between the 'community of practice' of language teachers and the 'academic discourse community' of theorists and researchers. A major aim of Erlam's (2008) project, mentioned above, was to make the research relevant and accessible, as the resulting material was used for input and discussion in seminars around the country. In this way both researchers and teachers could engage with it, benefit from each other's expertise and develop a shared discourse.

The final determinant of successful language teaching is, of course, not the conceptual frameworks with which theorists and researchers work but the frameworks of theories, beliefs and assumptions with which teachers work in their particular classrooms. An important means

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for renewal in a postmethod pedagogy is therefore collaborative research in which teachers and theorists/researchers work together from the outset (for example, through procedures such as those described in Burns 2010) to identify and explore issues and problems that require attention. But with or without the collaboration of research specialists, teaching is itself a process of exploration: for each class, a teacher predicts the outcomes of his or her interventions and observes the results. What we typically call 'research' means simply that a person explains and justifies the predictions more explicitly, describes the interventions more systematically and measures the results more precisely. Every teacher is in a position to take these steps and engage in 'exploratory practice' (Allwright & Hanks 2009).

5.3 Exploring optimal combinations of analytic and experiential strategies

The analytic–experiential continuum is discussed at length by Stern (1992) as a key dimension in language teaching. Some of the most significant strategic decisions that classroom teachers have to make concern the complementary functions of analytic and experiential strategies. This issue is at the heart of the distinction between the 'weak' and 'strong' versions of CLT discussed above (the latter affirming that analytic learning is not necessary) and is also central to considering the roles of accuracy-based and fluency-based activities (Brumfit 1984). More recently, much research has addressed the role that form-focused instruction plays in facilitating language learning and the kinds of form-focused instruction that are of most benefit in particular circumstances (see Loewen 2011 for a recent review). For Norris (2009: 580), a major contribution of task-based language teaching is that it can consolidate analytic ideas from a 'focus on forms methodology' and experiential ideas from a 'focus on meaning methodology' into an 'integrated approach'. In a similar way, the 'communicative continuum' mentioned above proposes a methodological framework for moving between analytic (non-communicative and pre-communicative) activities to experiential activities (structured and authentic communication).

These proposals are based on most teachers' intuitions – which are also supported by empirical evidence – that both analytic and experiential learning are important. However, the optimal balance between different kinds of activity from the analytic–experiential continuum remains very much an area for individual intuition. Of course this balance will always be determined by the teacher in his or her specific context but it is also an area in which research can seek to propose new possibilities and investigate their likely effects on learning.

5.4 Exploring ways to deepen and personalize the content of L2 communication in the classroom

Much of the language use that occurs in the communication-oriented language classroom does not, as a teacher interviewed by Gong & Holliday (forthcoming) puts it, 'seem to touch the hearts of the students'. Pennycook (1994: 311) goes so far as to write of the 'empty babble of the communicative language class'. This is clearly an overgeneralization, but it alerts us to the superficial nature of much communication in COLT classrooms, in which students

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are often given a steady diet of activities like 'planning a party' which will never take place or 'giving directions to the station' on the map of a non-existent town. Gong & Holliday report on how students in a remote village in rural China were asked to talk about their weekend activities through examples such as 'go to see a movie, go to an art museum, or go to piano lessons in a coaching school'. None of these opportunities existed in their lives and, not surprisingly, they had nothing to talk about.

Hanauer (2012: 106) is an eloquent advocate of the need to put the 'living, thinking, experiencing and feeling person at the centre of the language learning process' and 'make language learning a personally contextualized, meaningful activity for the learner'. The exploration of more strategies for doing this is a key task for the future of COLT. Hanauer himself proposes procedures for incorporating poetry writing. Gong & Holliday emphasize the need to base tasks on content which is relevant to learners' lives and interests and which will help them become 'multicultural citizens' who can communicate about their own and other cultures and express their own views. Other proposals include linking language development to other subject content (Wesche & Skehan 2002), developing project work (Legutke & Thomas 1991) and using drama techniques (Maley & Duff 1978). The 'three generations of tasks' described in Ribé & Vidal (1993) offer a possible framework for deepening task engagement: the first 'generation' focuses only on communicative development, the second on communicative and cognitive development and the third adds the dimension of global personality development. Engagement may also be encouraged through collaborative learning techniques which increase learners' responsibility for contributing to group interaction (McCafferty, Jacobs & DaSilva Iddings 2006; Littlewood 2009). Zhang & Head (2010) report on a project in which a teacher was able to increase students' sense of personal engagement by including them in joint decision-making about the topics and activities in their course. In the context of more controlled language use, there is a range of techniques for personalizing practice by relating it to students' own identity (Griffiths & Keohane 2000). All of these proposals provide a basis for further widening the options at teachers' disposal.

5.5 Exploring the role of the mother tongue in the language classroom

A practical issue that almost continuously engages teachers' decision-making in the classroom is the role (if any) that they should accord to the students' mother tongue. The 'monolingual principle' – that only the target language should be used – has been enshrined in most of the methodological proposals that have influenced language teaching over the last century. In many contexts (e.g. Hong Kong and the UK) it is official policy to teach only in the target language or at least to use the mother tongue only as a last resort. In some other contexts (e.g. Mainland China and South Korea), teaching through the mother tongue has been accepted practice, but official policy now urges teachers to exclude it. In spite of official demands, many teachers are nonetheless accustomed to using the mother tongue extensively, sometimes as much as 70% or even 90% of the time (see the review in Littlewood & Yu 2011).

The monolingual principle is now being actively questioned on a number of grounds. Few people would disagree that, since the classroom is the only source of input for many

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students, the overriding aim should be to establish the target language as the main medium of communication. To achieve this aim, however, they also acknowledge that the mother tongue can be a major resource, as it 'launches, as it were, the pupils' canoes into the foreign-language current' (Butzkamm 2003: 32). At the affective level it can provide psychological reassurance. In term of teaching strategies, it opens up a wide range of options at all stages. At the presentation stage, for example, it can convey meaning efficiently and enable students to progress more quickly to the stages of internalization and active use. At the practice stage, it can provide effective stimuli for students to use and expand their full foreign language competence. At the production stage, it can help to create contexts where the foreign language has a meaningful role, such as when students brainstorm ideas for a story in the security of their mother tongue and later write it in the foreign language. In ways such as these, the mother tongue can serve as a natural bridge between the two languages, offer a sense of ownership over learning, and help satisfy the need to personalize communication.

Exploration of effective ways of using the mother tongue as a resource for learning whilst establishing the foreign language as a means of communication is thus another key area in which teachers and researchers need both to clarify essential principles and seek to widen the repertoire of strategies in COLT.

6. Conclusion

In its early days, CLT was perceived (and marketed) by many as a new and unquestionable orthodoxy. As a package of ideas and techniques, it was exported around the world with the support of the full paraphernalia of the ELT industry (textbooks, advisors, training courses, native-speaker teachers, and so on). Bax (2003: 280) writes of what he sees as the 'CLT attitude' that accompanied this endeavour: 'assume and insist that CLT is the whole and complete solution to language learning; assume that no other method could be any good; ignore people's own views of who they are and what they want; neglect and ignore all aspects of the local context as being irrelevant'. Gupta (2004) speaks of this experience from the receiving end at a university in India.

This conception of CLT emanating from the 'centres' of the ELT world to outposts in the 'periphery' corresponds to wider conceptions of modernization and globalization at that time. Those processes were conceptualized mainly as unidirectional, in which ideas and forms are transmitted from centre to periphery; 'when the centre speaks, the periphery listens, and mostly does not talk back' (Hannerz 1992: 219). Gradually, however, as described by Schuerkens (2004: 19–23), with the increase of cultural self-confidence across the world, these centre-to-periphery conceptions of globalization and modernization have been overtaken by ones in which all participants have a voice: 'inflowing cultural forms and meanings' combine with 'existing local forms and meanings'. Innovation and diversity reflect local conditions, as they result from the 'creative mixture of 'global' elements with local meanings and cultural forms'. Schuerkens characterizes this as a 'cosmopolitan conversation of humankind' (p. 15).

The need to support this 'creative mixture' of global and local elements characterizes the stage that CLT (or COLT) has now reached. In itself, the term does not refer to a single well-defined approach but rather, in the words of Richards & Rodgers (2001: 173) quoted earlier,

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to 'very general aspects of language learning and teaching that are now largely accepted as self-evident and axiomatic throughout the profession'. Indeed it may be anachronistic – perhaps a legacy of the long search for a single 'best method' – that we feel the need for a label at all, rather than simply talking of 'successful language teaching', the nature of which will necessarily vary from context to context. But if that need exists, the most valuable contribution of COLT in the globalized world is not to refer to a supposed 'method' (which does not exist in reality in any case) but to serve as a loose conceptual framework – using the notions of Apparudai (1996, also discussed in Holton 2005) as a transnational 'ideoscape', an ideational landscape – for a truly 'cosmopolitan conversation' about second language pedagogy, in which all may participate with equal rights.

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