

An Overview of Approaches to English Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT

The present article reviews several approaches to teaching the English language that many English teachers may have embraced in their teaching praxis. It looks at communicative language teaching (CLT), task-based language teaching (TBLT), content and language integrated learning (CLIL), content based instruction (CBI), and post-method approaches. Although critics over particular teaching approach exist along with the description of their advantages, the fact that English language learners aspire to develop their proficiency level remains crucial, and this is where English language teachers play a key role.

1. INTRODUCTION

Whilst developing learners' intercultural literacy and identity has become increasingly relevant to today's language classroom practices (Mercieca, 2014), such as English, fostering learners' language skills through various classroom activities also remains important. Hence, to support teachers' endeavor in engaging learners in communicative classroom activities, Dobinson (2012) suggests that teachers need to regularly examine current developments in educational research so that they can critically respond to and contribute positively to addressing the multiple issues involved in teaching English. Therefore, it is considered relevant to provide succinct overview of teaching approaches that English language teachers across classroom in the world may have been using. For this reason, brief definition as well as characteristics of such approaches are outlined. These approaches, among others, are communicative language teaching (CLT), task-based language teaching (TBLT), content and language integrated learning (CLIL), content based instruction (CBI), and post-method approaches.

This article is divided into seven sections. The first section is the introduction, followed by CLT and TBLT, two approaches that many ELT teachers in Asian countries reported to use in their classroom (Littlewood, 2007). The discussions on CLIL, CBI, and post-method approaches which help provide insights into the shifts in understanding teaching

communicatively in the 21 first century follow afterwards. This article ends with a summary.

2. COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

Communicative language teaching or CLT is one of the most well-known approaches in the ELT arena. Among a number of English language teaching approaches, CLT is the one that is embraced by many English teachers in Asia and all over the world (Littlewood, 2007). Hymes (1972), who coined the term CLT, claimed that understanding a language involves more than understanding a set of grammatical, lexical, and phonological rules. In CLT-driven classroom pedagogy, language learners should be helped to develop other areas of ability, such as those that can be found in sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence, if teachers wish to see their students use the language effectively and appropriately.

Within CLT-based instruction classrooms, the development of communicative competencies is achievable. CLT offers a wide range of activities, such as storytelling and information gap filling, which promote meaning-focused communication (Harmer, 2007). Bax (2003) added that other activities within such classrooms, such as pair and group work, promote fluency and student-based interactions. These sorts of activities, according to Jones (2004, p. 37), can provide learners with an opportunity "to improve

proficiency and break out of the vicious circle of language anxiety". In fact, when learners are personally engaged in meaningful classroom activities, L2 acquisition can take place (Musthafa, 2001).

CLT application in English language classrooms needs to be carefully considered, however, when it is related to a context where the language is used as an additional language. Account needs to be taken of the way English language learners attempt to position themselves as users of a target language situated in a classroom context, confined by some variables, such as learning styles and learning goals.

3. TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING

TBLT is another commonly used English language teaching approach. It is considered to be a development of CLT (Littlewood, 2004; Nunan, 2004). The use of this approach strengthens some pedagogical principles and practices common to CLT, such as an emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language, the provision of opportunities for learners to focus on language and the learning process (Nunan, 2004). Central to this linkage is the task, which is defined as various classroom activities that encourage learners to interact using the language they are learning and which focus on expressing meaning (Nunan, 2006). The difference between an activity and a task is that tasks are "the real-world activities people think of when planning, conducting, or recalling their day" (Long, 2014, p. 6). Some examples of tasks in the TBLT-driven classroom may include ordering food by phone, buying groceries or visiting a doctor.

Tasks in TBLT classrooms also have some other characteristics. Ellis (2003) describes tasks as encouraging learners to bridge gaps in information by using certain sets of linguistic resources that the learners can choose. These gaps, according to Prabhu (1987) can include information gaps, reasoning gaps and opinion gaps. Accordingly, the outcomes that the learners expect to be able to make should not be something that are solely related to linguistic features, but non-linguistic features as well. The use of these kinds of tasks helps promote language acquisition because learners can choose which grammar constructs or lexical items they need to complete the tasks (Harmer, 2007). In fact, because the tasks are learner-centred, learners may find ways to maintain their learning passion as they are familiar with the kinds of tasks they have to deal with in the L2 context.

With the rapid development of TBLT in the ELT world, especially in Asian countries, TBLT has enjoyed recognition from teachers, lecturers, and

researchers. Its application is not only present at the school level, but also in tertiary institutions, particularly in English language teacher education programs. Yet, how and when to use TBLT to teach English has been largely debated. Sato (2010), for instance, claimed that TBLT may not be a suitable approach for teachers to teach a pre-specified language structure or grammar. This has implications for countries like Indonesia, where English tests for Indonesian learners of English often consist of grammar or structure tests. As Sato (2010) posited, TBLT is not designed to assist students in these types of examinations. This approach might be suitable for assisting students to communicate, but assessment of successful performance in the target language cannot be done using paper-based tests. In other words, when TBLT as the sole approach to language teaching is chosen, there are some consequences that national language planners need to face.

4. CONTENT AND LANGUAGE INTEGRATED LEARNING

CLIL has become increasingly popular among teachers and researchers in ELT, especially in Europe. Coyle, Holmes and King (2009, p. 6) define CLIL as "a pedagogic approach in which language and subject area content are learnt in combination". Marsh (2002, p. 28) describes it as an approach that provides learners with "the experience of learning non-language subjects through a foreign language". These definitions, however, do not portray CLIL as similar to the concept of bilingual education or, within the field of ELT, English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Unlike these two concepts, CLIL-based classrooms require learners to attend to learning content and language in a continuum, a fundamental characteristic which is not apparent in bilingual education and ESP classrooms (Anderson, McDougald & Medina, 2015). In the CLIL classroom, learners are given the opportunity to improve proficiency level in the language they learn as well as to expand their knowledge about particular subject areas (Anderson, McDougald & Medina, 2015).

A classroom that employs CLIL as an approach to learning is commonly recognised by its distinct activities. In the CLIL-based classroom, Marsh (2002) posits, teachers develop any activity that draws on the use of an additional language as a tool to teach other non-language subjects, such as history and arts. Any activity within the CLIL classroom is generated from a forward curriculum design (Banegas, 2015). The design of this curriculum, according to Richards (2015), begins with discussion about input, followed by determining the process and the outcomes. The decision about teaching methods can be undertaken when syllabus selection has been resolved (Richards,

2015). The teaching methods chosen should clearly reflect three outcomes, namely, “content-related learning outcomes”, “language-related learning outcomes that support the acquisition of content”, and “outcomes related to general learning skills” (Mehisto, Marsh & Frigols, 2008, p. 101, as cited in Banegas, 2015). In brief, CLIL-driven activities do not only focus on improving horizons of knowledge but also the language skills that are needed for carrying out various communicative purposes.

CLIL has been adopted as a teaching approach across countries throughout the world. In Europe, for example, CLIL as a teaching approach has become an important component of the curriculum used widely across all levels of education (Coyle, 2007; Temirova & Westall, 2015). Further, Georgiou (2012) asserts that the adoption of this approach into school curriculum does not only happen throughout Europe, but also Asia and South America. Coyle (2007, p. 546) suggests that the primary reason for the vast development of CLIL is that it “focuses on integrating content and language learning in varied, dynamic and relevant learning environments built on ‘bottom-up’ initiatives as well as ‘top-down’ policy”. That is why CLIL for many scholars is seen as “a major educational innovation, an innovative methodology, an umbrella term for a variety of educational practices, a new educational model, a new form of education” (Macianskiene, 2016, p. 131).

In the Asian context, the use of CLIL is evident within the ELT domain. Yet, because it is seen as a newly emerging approach in the region, CLIL has not fully drawn a great deal of attention (Yang, 2014). Research shows that there are only a few Asian countries to date that demonstrate the use of CLIL in their curriculum. In Taiwan, for instance, the government has mandated the implementation of CLIL at the tertiary education level, aiming to promote “the internationalisation of education and students’ future employability” (Yang, 2014, p. 362). As Yang (2014, p. 362) put it:

As of 2013, there were 92 CLIL degree-based programmes in 29 universities, all of which received an external MOE evaluation in 2012, except for those which had been accredited by professional organisations such as the Association to Advanced Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). This first trial evaluation mainly focused on evaluating the administrative and input levels, namely, the curriculum design, teaching quality and resource provisions.

CLIL application in Japan’s ELT settings is also apparent. Uemura (2013) indicated that the integration of this approach into Japanese language teaching

started in 2011, and this integration is predicted to be very significant in the future because of the increasing number of international students studying in Japan. In fact, this increase in overseas students’ participation in Japanese universities is not the sole reason why CLIL is gaining recognition. It also has a range of other perceived benefits. According to Sasajima and Ikeda (2012), as cited in Uemura (2013), CLIL is currently perceived to be the most compelling option for language teaching because the previously employed approaches, such as audiolingualism, grammar translation, and communicative language teaching, have so far yielded unsatisfactory results. This shows that CLIL is seen as having distinct features that allows teachers to approach teaching practices from different points of views.

Despite all the perceived advantages of the CLIL approach, critiques about this approach also persist. Coyle (2007), for example, claims that one of the potential weaknesses of CLIL is its flexibility. This scholar believes that because there are many ways in which CLIL can be applied into different teaching contexts, no single clear guidance about implementing the approach is available. In fact, Coyle (2007) maintains, in each teaching context, the curriculum of CLIL can be different, but the design of it should be done meticulously. Likewise, Georgiou (2012) asserts that miscommunication between teachers, policymakers and researchers can occur because of the way they define the principles of CLIL. Georgiou (2012) maintains that the widespread application of CLIL into classrooms in different contexts may lead to a misapplication of the approach itself because those involved in CLIL teaching may be concerned more with being seen to be exercising the approach which has so far gained popularity in many countries, rather than truly adopting the approach itself.

Research shows that there are a number of ways of anticipating the potential problems of the application of CLIL. First, as reported by Coyle et al. (2010) and Georgiou (2012), it is imperative to design a clear framework of CLIL application so that it is adaptable to various contexts without necessarily ignoring its core principles. Second, it is crucial to ensure that CLIL application also considers learners’ uses of their first language as a bridge that aids in their learning (Naves, 2009, as cited in Georgiou, 2012), and that teachers involved in CLIL practice are adequately prepared (Georgiou, 2012). In brief, although CLIL can be applied in various settings to complement existing teaching approaches, its application remains in need of thorough consideration.

5. CONTENT-BASED INSTRUCTION

Another language teaching approach that has become popular in the 21st century is CBI or content-based instruction. In CBI, the term content refers to “the integration of content learning with language teaching aims” (Snow, 1991, p. 462). Snow (1991) and Schleppegrell, Achugar, and Oteiza (2004) believe that CBI suggests that learning a language and mastering the particular content of a subject should occur in tandem. This belief, according to Lyster and Balingier (2011), as cited in Channa and Soomro (2015), challenges the perspective which sets language teaching apart from content teaching, such as communicative language teaching and task-based language teaching.

Central to CBI is the characteristic of learning a language and a subject matter or content at the same time. The impact of this characteristic can be significant. As Schleppegrell, Achugar, and Oteiza (2004, p. 67) put it, in a CBI-driven classroom, “teachers can build students’ knowledge of grade-level concepts in content areas at the same time students are developing English proficiency”. For instance, so the argument goes, language learners of English who begin learning some everyday useful phrases may also be able to learn something else, such as how to describe a cultural item and what to say when meeting new people (Schleppegrell, Achugar & Oteiza, 2004). The opportunity for learners to immerse in this type of learning and improve the quality of the learning is supported by the fact that CBI content is challenging and meaningful and that it allows language acquisition to take place. In other words, CBI can provide learners with the opportunities to access meaningful input, which is influential to their language learning improvement.

CBI is widely used all over the world. These programs fall into two continuum: “content and language integration” (Met, 1999, as cited in Channa & Soomro, 2015, p. 4). The two continuum have different characteristics. For instance, the first continuum, content integration, suggests that teachers use the target language to teach content and to assess learners’ mastery of content, whereas the second continuum, language integration, asks teachers to use content for target language learning and to assess learners’ on language proficiency. This means that whilst language learning is not a priority in the first continuum, it is crucial in the second continuum (Channa & Soomro, 2015). Channa and Soomro (2015, p. 4) further describe these continuum as having six programs, namely “total immersion” (located on the very left side of the continuum), “partial immersion”, “sheltered courses”, “adjunct model”, “theme-based courses”, and “language classes with frequent use of content for

language practice” (located on the right side of the continuum).

Each of the programs mentioned above has different principles in its application. For instance, in the immersion program on the left side, the target language is the medium of instruction and exposure to its uses is limited to the classroom context, with support by bilingual teachers (Channa & Soomro, 2015). The right side program, in contrast, suggests that a classroom that aims at teaching content for language learning should create a link to the students’ learning (Channa & Soomro, 2015), which helps facilitate target language learning. This facilitation is doable because learners can see a connection between what they learn and what they do in the classroom, which encourages them to see their learning as a useful endeavour (Channa and Soomro, 2015). On the other hand, unlike the two programs that are located on the left and right side of the continuum, the programs located in the middle of the continuum show that the extent of learning content and learning language vary. This means that to some extent each of these programs may have more focus on content than language improvement, or vice versa.

6. POST-METHOD APPROACHES

In language pedagogy, the emergence of the notion of post-method approaches to language teaching is believed to be related to how currently employed methods operate and what the results of these methods are. As Kumaravadivelu (2001, p. 537) stated, the development of post-method pedagogy is influenced by the “repeatedly articulated dissatisfaction with the limitation of the concept of method”. This shows that there remain some holes in the implementation of a variety of teaching methods across language classrooms. Kumaravadivelu (2001) believes that this situation has encouraged scholars to either push the limits of the methods and then develop teaching strategies, or focus on improving language teacher education programs. The former consequence is later recognised as the embryo of a post-method pedagogy, “a three-dimensional system consisting of three pedagogic parameters: particularity, practicality, and possibility (Kumaravadivelu, 2001, p. 538). All these parameters are interrelated with one another.

To understand their relationship, it is helpful to look at how each of these parameters is defined. First of all, particularity means uniqueness, and in a language teaching situation, this means taking into account the local context, which can be related to a specific group of teachers teaching a specific group of students with specific learning goals (Kumaravadivelu, 2001). In fact, citing Howatt and Widdowson (2004), Tasnimi (2014) suggests that the local context should not be

ignored by any teachers claiming to embrace post-method pedagogy; that it should be incorporated into their classroom teaching practice. Such an embrace indicates that within the framework of post-method pedagogy in language teaching, no single teaching method is seen as superior to the other because its application is context-dependent.

The second parameter is practicality. Kumaravadivelu (2001, p. 540) defines this framework as pointing to “a much larger issue that has a direct impact on the practice of classroom teaching, namely, the relationship between theory and practice”. Kumaravadivelu (2001, p. 540) believes that theory and practice should go in tandem because they form “a dialectical praxis”. This belief is rooted in the existing phenomenon of today’s classroom pedagogy whereby teachers are encouraged to adhere to any theories prescribed by professionals or government, whilst the teachers’ voices regarding their teaching practice is often put aside (Kumaravadivelu, 2001). The curricula of many countries, such as Indonesia, is centralised, meaning that the government designs the curriculum to be the guideline for schools. This prescribed curriculum helps the government in educational-related evaluation to develop an overall description of the result of the curriculum implementation across educational institutions.

The third parameter is possibility, which refers to the issue of power and dominance. Drawing on this framework, Kumaravadivelu (2001) argues that language teaching should not only be positioned within the classroom boundaries, but also outside the boundaries, and the social and political influences in the society. In fact, any impact which grows out from teachers or students’ classroom interaction can be socially or politically influenced by their life experiences (Kumaravadivelu, 2001). This suggests, that, for example, any given method a teacher uses in the classroom may not work well when it is confronted by students’ perceptions of this method.

7. SUMMARY

This article has discussed five different approaches that many English language teachers in the classrooms across linguistically different contexts may have employed in their classrooms. Despite the existing critics over particular teaching approach along with the description of their advantages, what remains crucial is the fact that English language learners, in particular, in many classrooms are in the need of developing proficiency level in a language they are learning, and this is, again, where English language teachers play a key role. Not only providing opportunities for their learners to improve English proficiency level, but also assisting the learners to build confidence in putting the language they learn

into practice that should be embraced by the teachers from the initial stage of their teaching praxis.

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