

The end of CLT: a context approach to language teaching

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In this section we present contrasting views on a topic of current interest. The first article has been reviewed by the Editorial Advisory Panel and accepted for publication; the second is a commissioned response, to which the author of the original article is invited to make a brief reply.

Reactions from readers are particularly sought, either in the form of a letter to the Editor, or as a brief article (no more than 1,250 words), which will be considered for publication in the normal way.

This article argues that the dominance of CLT has led to the neglect of one crucial aspect of language pedagogy, namely the context in which that pedagogy takes place. It argues that it is time to replace CLT as the central paradigm in language teaching with a Context Approach which places context at the heart of the profession. The article argues that such a shift is already taking place, and that eventually it will radically change our practice. It concludes by outlining the features of the Context Approach and discussing its implications.

Introduction

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has served the language teaching profession well for many years. One of the reasons for its popularity—as described succinctly by Mitchell (1994), for example—was its function as a corrective to perceived shortcomings with other approaches and methods, such as Grammar-Translation and the Direct Method. While it has to some extent achieved that aim, ‘traditional’ methods still prevail in many parts of the world, and the benefits of an emphasis on communication are widely accepted in principle by professionals everywhere.

This article will argue, however, that although it has served a useful function in the profession, particularly as a corrective to shortcomings in previous methodologies, CLT is now having a negative effect, and needs to be replaced as our main focus. I shall argue that CLT has always neglected one key aspect of language teaching—namely the context in which it takes place—and that the consequences of this are serious, to the extent that we need to demote CLT as our main paradigm, and adopt something more similar to what I term a Context Approach.

The time traveller

This is a quotation from a young teacher describing his arrival in Japan:

In the manner of H. G. Wells' Time Traveller, I stumbled on a school that had remained oblivious to developments in language teaching, where teachers looked at me strangely when I questioned their obsession with Grammar-Translation and suggested that speaking was the most important skill involved in learning a language.
(Diploma essay)

In my view, this displays an unfortunate attitude: a young and relatively experienced teacher comes to a new country of which he has almost no knowledge. Without any reference to the culture, the learning context, student needs and wishes, and other contextual factors, he immediately judges far more experienced teachers as failing. And what gives him a licence to do so, as he sees it, is the fact that he is a native speaker, and that he is armed with CLT.

This represents an all too familiar attitude. Johnson (2001: 206) presents an almost identical scene, and agrees that it represents a common attitude. However, I suggest that this kind of view is not an accident, but a direct by-product of a mistaken emphasis in the profession which needs to be remedied. It typifies what I shall call the 'CLT attitude'.

The CLT attitude

My real teacher, and Johnson's imaginary one, share the notion that a country without CLT is somehow backward. This in turn rests on the unspoken assumption that CLT is not only 'modern', but is in fact the only way to learn a language properly. This assumption can be found just about everywhere in the profession—as shown by a few examples from my own recent encounters to illustrate the nature and extent of the problem. (Some are anonymous, to spare the speakers' embarrassment.)

Example 1: Czech Republic

A speaker at a teacher development conference in London states that teachers where she works, in the Czech Republic, are 'backward' because they do not use CLT approaches. But she also says with surprise that somehow many students still manage to learn to speak good English, and wonders how this could be? The idea that there could be some *other* way of learning English seems to escape her.

Example 2: A famous ELT author

A world-famous ELT author, at the IATEFL conference in 1997, stated that in methodological terms 'many countries are still in the 1950s'. The implication of this is that they are backward, and therefore less good than 'we' are. No discussion was made of whether or not their methods work—they are simply assumed to be deficient because they are not modern.

Example 3: Holland

A teacher trainer working in Holland states in a workshop presentation that the methodology used in Dutch schools is traditional, and therefore, by implication, backward and bad. But she is surprised to note that many Dutch people seem to end up speaking English well, and says that they do this 'in spite of' their methods. As with Example 1 above, the idea that people could learn English well *without* CLT seems either to escape her, or to be a heresy too serious to admit.

Example 4: Taiwan

A teacher and trainer in Taiwan writes: 'In general the teaching approaches in Taiwan are still a little behind and based on rote learning in comparison with the more modern communicative approaches.' This is in spite of the fact that this teacher's students speak far better English than he speaks Chinese. Again we see the automatic assumptions which I identified above—if you don't have CLT, then you are backward, and you can't learn a language.

The above examples illustrate the fact that many teachers, trainers, and materials writers, not only native speakers, are operating with the CLT attitude. The view seems to be:

- 1 Assume and insist that CLT is the whole and complete solution to language learning;
- 2 Assume that no other method could be any good;
- 3 Ignore people's own views of who they are and what they want;
- 4 Neglect and ignore all aspects of the local context as being irrelevant.

Probably none of the teachers above would say this explicitly, but my point is that this attitude is an almost unconscious set of beliefs. It is impossible to prove this in the space available, but I suggest that this attitude is widespread, and counterproductive for all concerned, and for students especially. I would further argue that the root of the problem lies in CLT itself, and that the solution is clear—to demote CLT to second place.

Methodology

What might be the cause of this attitude? I suggest that it lies in an obsession with CLT and its priorities. As the name suggests, CLT's main focus is on communication in various ways, perhaps as a pedagogical aim, perhaps as a means towards an aim, perhaps as both means and aim. We could list other priorities—reference to Littlewood (1981) or Mitchell (1994), say, gives us fluency, purposeful communicative activities, student–student interaction (e.g. pairwork and groupwork), and so on.

This list focuses on one main area—the area of the teacher's role and chosen methodology. We may choose to call CLT an approach rather than a method, but this cannot disguise the fact that in one way or another its priorities relate ultimately to methodology. This is apparent both in its discourse and in the way in which teachers around the world conceptualize it—CLT is seen to be about 'the way we should teach'. After all, it is Communicative Language *Teaching*, not Communicative Language *Learning*.

This implicit focus on methodology leads us to ignore one key aspect of language teaching—namely the particular *context* in which it takes place. When we emphasize what the teacher must *do*, and start our list of solutions with methodological issues, we thereby give off the message that the solution to the problem of teaching is a methodological one—and that therefore, by extension, the solution is not to do with the context in which we happen to be working. In other words, the message which CLT gives to teachers is this:

The Communicative Approach is the way to do it, no matter where you are, no matter what the context.

No-one has ever expressed it like that, of course. In fact, some writers have explicitly said that we must take account of the context in implementing CLT (and we will come to them later), but sadly, they have become irrelevant. This is because the *discourse* of CLT constantly sends out the message to teachers and educators that the priority is for the teacher to generate communication—while the context is not mentioned. Further, it gives out another, more powerful message—that the solution to classroom problems is to be found in *method* rather than anything else. In my view, these twin messages have a damaging effect on the profession, in that they inevitably imply that context is less important, or incidental, or to be taken for granted—that CLT works no matter what the context. Hence the CLT attitude we saw above.

To put it differently, if communication is at the top of the list, and with it methodology in general, then everything else must be of secondary importance. The learning context may be *claimed* to be important, but since it is not top of the list of priorities, it is, in practice, considered as of relatively minor importance.

Here we have the main problem of CLT—by its very emphasis on communication, and implicitly on methodology, it relegates and sidelines the context in which we teach, and therefore gives out the suggestion that CLT will work anywhere—that the methodology is king, and the magic solution for all our pupils. By focusing our attention on what the teacher should do, it inevitably draws attention away from the context in which the teacher is operating.

Towards a Context Approach

To show this more clearly, let us set out the CLT attitude in contrast with what I will call the Context Approach. This approach disagrees fundamentally with the CLT attitude by arguing that methodology is *not* the magic solution, that there are many different ways to learn languages, that the context is a crucial determiner of the success or failure of learners. We can show the contrast like this:

CLT approach	Context approach
CLT is the complete answer.	We must consider the whole context.
If we don't have CLT, then we can't learn a language.	Methodology (including CLT) is just one factor in learning a language.
No other factors count in learning a language—only teaching methodology.	Other factors may be more important.
If you don't have CLT, then you are backward.	Other methods and approaches may be equally valid.

The effects of the CLT attitude

I suggest that this promotion of method (and the accompanying CLT attitude) at the expense of context is observable throughout the profession. We have seen its impact on teachers' and trainers' attitudes above. In teacher training we see short training courses which are precisely the same for a trainee going to work in Vietnam as for the

trainee going to work in Angola, and the message is that by learning about methodology you will be all right *no matter what the context*. Examination of the syllabus of such courses shows that methodology dominates, and more importantly, is placed at the beginning, middle, and end, with little emphasis on enabling teachers to interpret and deal with aspects of the classroom, or with whatever social or national context they might meet. (Rockwell 1998)

A different planet

The example of Dominic vividly illustrates the contrast between these two attitudes. Dominic was a teacher who had been working in Japanese secondary schools for some years when he decided to do a one-month teacher training course at a well-known training centre. When I interviewed him he reported that the main focus was on methodology, and that he was expected to follow a fairly strict pattern of teaching:

‘basically the PPP method ... you were assessed on the way that they were trying to put it across’

I asked whether the course related at all to the teaching he had just been doing in a Japanese school nearby:

‘the differences between my environment and the [course], well I mean it was like a different planet’

On the course he was expected to follow ‘a set way of going about a set pattern of teaching’. But since the course was run in Japan largely for teachers working in Japan, surely it would make reference to the local context, and encourage teachers to look at the context—at students’ attitudes, at parents’ wishes, etc.—as a key feature?

‘No, really, no it was not really geared to that ... I mean the context of things was basically up to the teacher to try and apply the methodology to contexts.’

So how did he actually cope with the pupils when he went back to teaching? Where did he get the skills to deal with the local context?

‘Self taught ... just being in the environment and observing.’

This seems to me typical of short training courses, and at the same time lamentable. Surely a key part of good teaching is understanding and being able to analyse and reflect on the culture, the classroom, the pupils’ needs, and so on—yet these things were not touched on during his course—he was just left to work it out for himself. The assumption behind this—again—was that the key is methodology, and that context is secondary, to the extent that it is completely up to the teacher to deal with.

By contrast, a Context Approach insists that while methodology is important, it is just one factor in successful language learning. As Prabhu (1990), says, it may be that the ability to learn a second language is an inherent human characteristic, but it is becoming clearer that contextual factors such as affect (Arnold 1999) hugely influence that ability. In fact, many aspects of the context—such as students’ attitudes, cultural expectations, and so on—are clearly at least as important as

teaching method. Any training course should therefore make it a priority to teach not only methodology but also a heightened awareness of contextual factors, and an ability to deal with them—in fact, to put consideration of the context first and only then consider the teaching approach.

The CLT attitude also dominates in materials production. We see coursebooks and methodology books produced for the ‘global market’—the implication being that ‘if you do it like this it will work anywhere’. There are commercial reasons for this, of course, but the ultimate effect is that the teaching context is relegated to a position of insignificance; by implication, teachers are licensed to ignore local variables, or else to pick them up and sort them out as they choose—they are not important enough to waste attention on (Tomlinson 2001).

What about other approaches?

The Lexical Approach

Other approaches show a similar marginalization of context. If we set out the priorities of the Lexical Approach, for example, the list would obviously start with lexis in various forms (Lewis 1997). The emphasis this time is not on methodology but on language system—and similar problems arise, since now methodology, being ousted from the top, seems to become relatively marginal. In the Lexical Approach, as with CLT, the learning context is by definition treated as secondary. The hidden message of this is once again:

‘... the Lexical Approach is the approach to follow no matter what the context—it will work, and it will work anywhere.’

As with CLT, it is unimportant whether proponents of the Lexical Approach deny this in principle—the point is that the discourse of the Lexical Approach, in placing lexis as its top priority, inevitably gives out the message that context is by definition less important. It gives out the message that the approach is context-independent, and will work in every classroom, every country, and with every student.

Approaches to language teaching

The arguments above allow us to see approaches to language teaching according to the type of priority which is given main emphasis. We have approaches which are:

a *methodologically-driven*, including the Direct Method, CLT, and others, giving priority to methodological matters.

We also have:

b *language-driven* approaches such as the Lexical Approach, Grammar-Translation, and others, which give priority to one or more aspects of language.

Both of these types of approach effectively treat context in the same way. By placing something else first, they by implication marginalize context. It will now be clear that this emphasis on methodology in the one case, and on a language system in the other case, causes problems, derived from the very strong implication in both cases that context is secondary.

Paradigm shift?

I am not claiming that the Context Approach represents something completely new. On the contrary, context and contextual factors are high priorities for many teachers and writers. Good teachers naturally take account of the context in which they teach—the culture, the students, and so on—even when they hold that CLT is essentially the answer.

In the ELT literature, too, context has long been recognized as crucial to language learning, and yet neglected. See, for example, Breen (1986), and Bowers and Widdowson (1986), where the writers discuss adapting methodology to suit particular contextual circumstances on the assumption that CLT has rather neglected contextual factors, and needs tweaking.

Holliday (1994) goes further in the same direction, as have other authors (e.g. in Coleman 1996). Others have questioned the possibility of ever finding a 'best' method (e.g. Prabhu 1990). Nunan, in a recent article looking ahead to the new millennium, remarks that:

the 'methods' movement—the search for the one best method, would seem to be well and truly dead. (Nunan 2001)

These discussions, however, have tended to operate *within* the dominant CLT paradigm, and/or to offer no real alternative to CLT. They seem to assume that although there may be no single best method, the answer must still be a methodological one. This seems to me a failure to recognize that with methodology at the forefront of the profession, context will always be marginalized to the detriment of learners.

This is where a real paradigm shift—if English language teaching can be grand enough to merit one—will truly occur, namely with the dethronement of CLT and its priorities as the ruling paradigm, and the explicit enthronement of context instead. In this new order CLT will still play an important role, but will only be invoked, if at all, when all contextual factors in the particular classroom, with those particular students, in that particular country and culture, have been fully assessed. No longer will it be assumed by anyone that CLT (or the Lexical Approach or any other) will work no matter what the context. On the contrary, context will be the very first thing to be taken into account before any methodological or language system decisions are taken. Nor do we need to assume (despite Prabhu 1990) that each context will necessitate a directly derivable method of its own—an eclectic approach may well be the best way to deal with a varied classroom.

Why another approach?

If writers and teachers have already accepted that context is important, as we have said, then do we really need another Approach? The answer must be yes, since without an explicit focus on context, it will always be secondary. Language teaching everywhere will benefit from fuller attention to the contexts in which it operates, and teachers will only devote this attention when they are explicitly empowered, educated, and encouraged to do so. As things stand, they are not empowered by the dominant paradigm to address context directly, nor are they encouraged to do so—on the contrary they are implicitly and in practice *discouraged* from such matters by the emphasis on methodology. As a result,

teachers' ability to evaluate and deal with key aspects of the teaching context is left largely to chance or to their own devices—which is surely a deplorable situation.

This situation will only change if the profession places context at the top of its list of priorities. In effect that means the adoption of an approach which does this explicitly. Hence my argument that:

- a we are in the middle of a shift towards an emphasis on context in language teaching;
- b this is an important step in the move to more effective teaching;
- c this will only be fully effective if the CLT paradigm is broken down; and therefore
- d the profession should adopt a Context Approach, or equivalent, for the sake of teachers, and ultimately of learners throughout the world.

Sketching out a Context Approach

I noted that there are many signs within the profession of increasing attention to context. If the profession goes further, and explicitly adopts a Context Approach in some form, it will need to realign its approaches to teaching, training, materials production, and language testing over several years. Within the scope of this short article I cannot explore the full ramifications of these changes, but I can indicate in a broad way where the priorities will lie, and how that might affect our practice in general.

The procedure

If we examined the priorities of the Context Approach as we did with CLT above, we might construct something like the procedure in Appendix One. The first priority is the learning context, and the first step is to identify key aspects of that context before deciding what and how to teach in any given class. This will include an understanding of individual students and their learning needs, wants, styles, and strategies—I treat these as key aspects of the context—as well as the coursebook, local conditions, the classroom culture, school culture, national culture, and so on, as far as is possible at the time of teaching.

With all these factors given their full importance as far as possible in each situation, the teacher will then identify a suitable approach and language focus. The decision will depend on the 'context analysis'. It may be that an emphasis on grammar is useful to start with, or an emphasis on oral communication. It may be that lexis will come first. It may be that groupwork is suitable, or a more formal lecture mode. The approach will probably be eclectic, in order to meet varied learner needs. All this will take place within a framework of generating communication—CLT will not be forgotten. But it will not be allowed to overrule context. Then, as the lesson unfolds, the teacher will aim to be as attentive as possible to contextual factors, and will prioritize these over methodological aspects.

Training

Training courses using this approach will still give basic methodological principles for novice teachers to follow, but within a strong, explicit framework of 'contextual awareness'. They will develop 'context analysis

skills', helping trainees to decide on an appropriate teaching approach for each case, as well as the ability to adapt that approach over time. Teaching materials, in turn, could be 'localized' along the lines suggested by Tomlinson (2001).

Conclusion

As I said above, this proposal is not radically new. Good teachers everywhere pay attention to context; good training courses pay attention to context. However, the dominance of methodology in general, and CLT in particular, means that their attention to context is secondary, and often haphazard. Novice teachers, as we have seen, fight against context when they should be working with it.

It is therefore time for the profession to place methodology and Communicative Language Teaching where they belong—in second place—and recognize that the learning context, including learner variables, is the key factor in successful language learning. How precisely we proceed thereafter will be for the profession to discuss and develop. But until we start on that process explicitly and deliberately, and admit that CLT needs to be deposed in favour of context, we will continue to sell our students short.

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Appendix 1
The Context Approach
to language
teaching—priorities
and procedures

First priority: context			
Step 1 Teacher will develop analytical tools for analyzing and understanding the learning context			
Step 2 Teacher will analyze the context carefully and systematically as far as possible. This includes enhanced awareness of these areas, for example:			
Individuals	Classroom culture	Local culture	National culture
Personal differences	Group dynamics	Regional differences	Political context
Learning styles	Group motivation	Status of teacher and students in community	Religious context
Learning strategies	Classroom environment	Attitude and behaviour of parents	Social context
Personal motivation	School environment	Local environment	National environment
<i>etc.</i>	<i>etc.</i>	<i>etc.</i>	<i>etc.</i>

Adapted from Holliday (1994)

The above analysis would always have priority over the next two areas:

Second (or third) priority: teaching approach This may involve decisions related to methodological aims and means, including decisions relating to: syllabus, classroom seating, materials, methods, student groupings, etc.

Third (or second) priority: language focus This will involve decisions related to the aspect of language to be focused on, such as lexis, for example, or phonology, or grammar.

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