



Developing a Strategic Task-based Grammar Curriculum in CLT: A Practitioner's Insight

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Abstract

There has been much debate about the role of grammar in the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) classroom and how learners can best learn and acquire grammar proficiency. According to Savignon (2007), “the essence of CLT is to engage learners in communication in order to allow them to develop their communicative competence” (p. 209). Grammar teaching strategies have taken various forms, and are shaped by different contexts to help learners achieve communicative competence. However, is there a strategy that is more effective? In this post-methods era, Littlewood (2014) advocates that theory, research and practice work together to facilitate grammar learning. This paper elucidates how theory and research have shaped curriculum design and details how strategic task design enhances effective grammar learning in the classroom. This paper argues that there is a need to synthesize various grammar teaching-learning approaches to create curricula that effectively address learners' needs in specific learning contexts. The case study showcases a strategically designed curriculum that synthesizes various CLT strategies to facilitate the learning of grammar in a university preparation course for EFL learners.

Key Words: CLT, communicative competence, curriculum design, learning contexts, synthesize, strategies

Introduction

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has gained popularity in Asia where traditional approaches have evidently not succeeded in developing abilities to communicate meaningfully in different social situations (Butler, 2011). However, CLT has its share of detractors. The absence of consensus over the nature of CLT has led to “much disquiet [about its] lack of clear purpose” (Chambers & Norman, 2003). According to Bach & Savignon (1986), the actual implementation of grammar teaching in CLT has been misunderstood and misdirected.

There is therefore a need to revisit how CLT is being perceived and interpreted by practitioners, and more specifically, how grammar is taught in the classroom. Christopher Candlin, in his key note address at the 2013 CELC Symposium, identified the challenge as “(re)finding the right road” (Candlin, 2013). This involves bringing theory, research and practice to work together (Littlewood, 2014).

This paper presents a practitioner's attempt to interpret CLT in an English as Foreign Language (EFL) classroom in an Asian context. It highlights the need to synthesize various CLT approaches to create a curriculum that effectively addresses learners' needs in a particular learning context. CLT is defined here as learning with communicative intent and/or using communicative tasks.

Background

There are various approaches in CLT. Krashen (1982) argues that if sufficiently exposed to “comprehensible input”, natural acquisition will occur eventually over time. Supporters of Krashen hold the view that unlike natural acquisition, learning grammar through formal instruction yields “peripheral, fragile and short-lived” effects (Koshi, 1996, p. 403).

Advocates of formal instruction, however, argue that sufficient focus on grammatical structures need to accompany adequate practice. Jones (2000) warns that without familiarity with grammar structures, students face the “danger” of being confused, mistaken and not being able to make sense of linguistic inputs. Smith (1981) claims that along with sufficient practice, some degree of explicitness when learning grammar may enhance learning. This is especially so in the case of adult learners, as their output needs to conform to academic and professional/corporate expectations (Celce-Murcia, 1991).

There is also evidence to suggest that raising grammar consciousness enhances language acquisition by allowing learners to notice grammatical forms, thus sensitizing them to the structures in the target language. Such awareness (in inductive and deductive learning) also helps students to notice the gap between their grammar use and that of the target language, which in this case is English. This enables them to gradually revise their interlanguage towards target language proficiency (Mishan, 2005). According to Kumaravadivelu (1994), the absence of language awareness “contribute to fossilization” (p 37). On the other hand, “consciousness-raising” learning sensitizes students to the natural use of grammar in context, and not perceive grammar learning as an “isolated phenomena” (Amirian & Sadeghi, 2012, p. 718).

The attention to methodologies (as outlined above) has led to calls for more attention to be given to the contexts of learning. To better adapt to different language learning contexts, these CLT teaching/learning strategies have taken the form of tasks (Kumaravadivelu, 2006), which can range from being instructive to communicative. The task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach, according to Klapper (2003), is an offshoot from CLT that supports acquisition with instruction not only to achieve fluency but also accuracy. TBLT facilitates students’ acquisition of grammar by providing learning opportunities which encourage authentic use in real life application. Such experiences motivate students to tap on and stretch their resources when trying to complete the task, thus developing their skills (Ellis, 2003). This approach has been championed by Bax (2003) who argues that the context should determine what is learnt and how learning takes place. His Context Approach stresses that it is context, not methodologies, that should drive learning.

Making connections – bringing strategies together

From the above, it is obvious that CLT is still evolving. As criticisms surface, new approaches are suggested. CLT is constantly being defined and re-defined. How do these new insights and perspectives, and the changes that follow, translate into classroom practice? How do practitioners judge which is the better approach?

This paper argues that practitioners should not be looking at a particular approach to provide “a one size fits all” approach to grammar teaching. Judgment should not be based on the merits or demerits of one approach alone. Instead, CLT should be perceived as an approach which is versatile and dynamic, but yet is held together by its core objective of helping learners acquire

communicative competence. Savignon (2007) views it in a “kaleidoscope fashion... tumbling to form different yet always-intriguing configurations” (p. 217). Practitioners can then tap on different options to put together a curriculum tailored to suit particular students with specific needs in unique learning situations.

To do this, practitioners should reflect and consider what is worth adopting rather than simply follow a prescribed course of action. They should not compare one approach with another but instead see how different approaches can be synthesized to harness their respective strengths to create a curriculum that best meets the learners’ needs. Bachman and Savignon (1986) “urge the profession to consider how they might best embody the abilities (they) believe (the) students want and need, to provide a basis for the development of teaching and testing methods that are appropriate to those needs” (Bachman & Savignon, 1986, p. 389).

Therefore, “a more flexible framework of principles and procedures” (Littlewood, 1999) is needed to effectively meet learners’ needs. This has resulted in practitioners adopting “principled eclecticism”, defined as “making deliberate choices from a range of approaches according to the context” (East, 2015, p. 12) which allows them to be adapted to sociocultural demands “across the world and across time” (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 63). This is especially important in the Asian context where conflicts may arise between the Western premises of CLT and Confucian norms (Butler, 2011). These factors should determine how best a curriculum can be customized.

An effective curriculum for grammar teaching needs therefore to take into consideration the following:

- the effectiveness of the strategy when used with other applications/strategies
- learners’ needs and goal(s)
- the learning context

There is thus “no best method” (Prahbu, 1990, p. 163). There is no single method that best suits every student’s needs, especially in a multi-cultural classroom. Successful learning involves the bringing together of various CLT approaches to meet diverse learning styles and needs.

This paper suggests the development of curriculum using an “omni” approach. More than a “multi” approach which practises various CLT strategies concurrently, the “omni” approach synthesizes various complementary CLT strategies. These strategies reinforce one another to form a coherent system to maximise learning opportunities and amplify learning outcomes. Such an approach allows the curriculum to reconcile teaching methods with contextual factors.

The following case study demonstrates how the “omni” approach was adopted in the design and execution of a language course that is offered to pre-matriculation students at a Singapore university.

Case study: A Language Bridging Program

This program is offered by a Singapore-based university to prepare foreign students for undergraduate studies. The 22 week programme takes place in 2 phases: Phase 1 (7 weeks) strengthens students’ language foundation, and Phase 2 (15 weeks) aims to equip students with sufficient Academic English proficiency to cope with academic studies in an English medium

university. The program also prepares these EFL learners to communicate in order to function and perform in an English-speaking environment.

The program adopts a thematic approach that enables students to learn and apply their skills in an interactive classroom environment. Students learn more effectively by moving away from textbook learning to become more independent critical thinkers; it empowers these learners to better manage information and communicate effectively. According to Heinman (2014), meaningful themes promotes critical thinking as students participate in meaningful discourse to transform the way they learn. In Phase 1, themes are selected to give students a better understanding of the nature of communication, and in Phase 2, subject-related themes such as business ethics, marketing and risk management are chosen as content to facilitate the learning of Academic English (see Table 1).

It is within this wider curriculum that grammar is embedded. Grammar fundamentals are strengthened in Phase 1 before more complex discourse patterns are introduced as students deal with content-related language in Phase 2, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The grammar component (Phases 1 and 2)

Phase 1 – Laying the foundation	Phase 2 – Application in Academic English
Duration – 7 weeks	Duration – 15 weeks
Theme – Communication	Theme – Various topics such as ethics, marketing, etc.
Grammar Task – Presentation of basic grammar concepts (1) Pre-presentation (2) Presentation (3) Post-presentation	Grammar Tasks – Text production + knowledge construction through discussion and negotiation (1) Grammar clinic (2) Peer evaluation (3) Self-evaluation
Work organization - Group work	Work organization – group work > pair work > self-correction and self-reflection

Grammar learning is integrated into classroom discourse to give students wider exposure and more opportunities for application. This “grammar in context” approach helps students appreciate that grammar is vital to communicative competence in an academic setting. Heinman (2014) argues that through enhancing critical thinking skills, students’ learning is “transformed” (p. 114) by developing new attitudes and schemas. He defines critical thinking skills as “thinking logically about an issue and finding problems in how others argue about that issue (in this case, grammar)” (p. 114). In this particular context, students’ learning is enhanced through classroom discourse, when their perspectives are broadened and their understanding deepened.

A collaborative learning environment creates hands-on learning opportunities which facilitate grammar acquisition. Interactive tasks integrating listening, speaking, reading and writing skills provide students with opportunities to apply the grammatical forms they have learnt. Sheen

(2003) believes that “any treatment of grammar should arise from difficulties in communicating any desired meaning” (p. 225). Ellis (2006) believes that negative evidence (eg. corrective feedback) enhances grammar learning. Collaborative learning gives students valuable opportunities to generate dialogue about grammar in order to solve problems and make decisions. Such experiences enhance learning by facilitating the construction of knowledge and the negotiation of meaning.

Learners Needs – Students’ profile

The class comprises 15 students who come from China, Indonesia, Vietnam and Myanmar. These students have different cultural backgrounds, and were taught in different educational systems, ranging from local schools teaching language using more traditional approaches to international schools using more communicative approaches. Given the above sociocultural diversity, there is a need to cater to their different learning styles. Despite the differences, they share commonalities in levels of proficiency and limited exposure to Academic English.

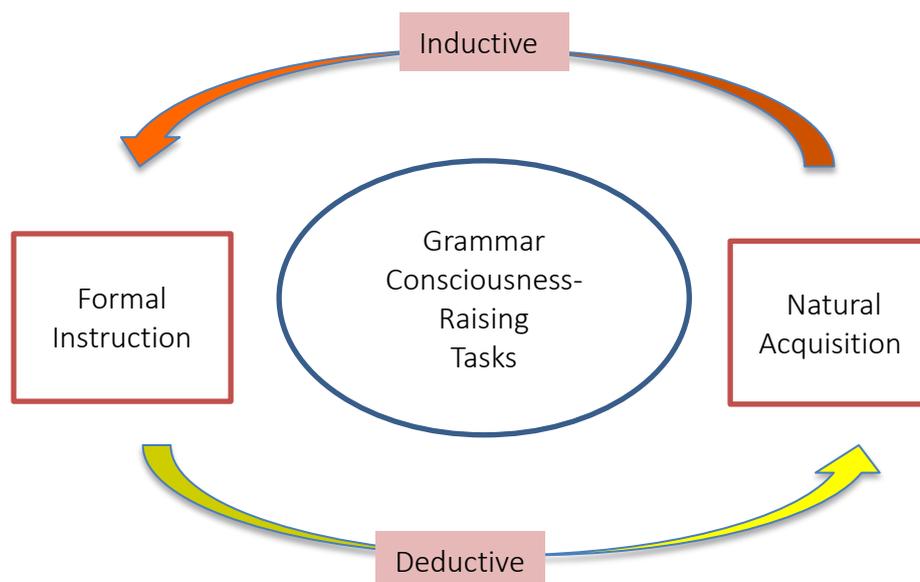
These students are selected based on their SAT results, and many are close to attaining their target of 1900 (composite score) and 600 (writing score) to be eligible for university application. There is therefore a basic level of proficiency in this group. However, most of them are unable to interact effectively in social situations and many learnt grammar by memorizing rules and structures for testing purposes. Having been raised in non-English speaking backgrounds in Asia, they lack exposure and practice as they have limited opportunities to interact in an English-speaking environment. The aim of the program is to get these students to acquire communicative competence, defined as the ability to use language appropriately in a given social context (Hymes, 1972). This comprises grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic and strategic competence (Canale & Swain, 1980). Moreover, they need to develop Academic Literacy skills to ease their transition into an undergraduate classroom in an English medium university. Students need to communicate as “educated individuals” (Koshi, 1996, p. 406).

The Grammar Curriculum

This grammar curriculum aims to help students use grammatical and discourse structures accurately and appropriately. It emphasizes the interdependence of communication and grammar, and facilitates the learning of grammar and discourse in meaningful and purpose-driven contexts.

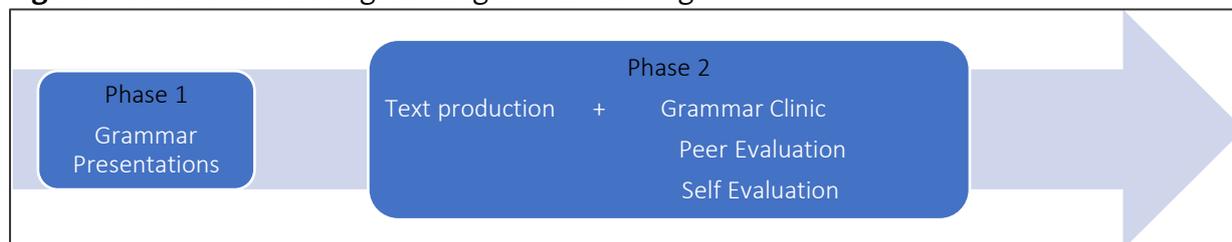
In this context, the grammar teaching curriculum synthesizes various CLT methodologies (see Figure 1) to cater to the needs of students in this multi-cultural classroom. It is embedded in the wider curriculum that is designed to provide these learners greater exposure and more learning opportunities to enhance communicative competence.

Figure 1. Grammar learning/teaching methodologies in CLT



Phase 1 requires students to plan and deliver presentations on grammar fundamentals. In Phase 2, students develop academic literacy skills as tasks require more cognitive complexity. As grammar structures and discourse patterns become more complex and sophisticated grammar clinics, peer and self-evaluation tasks not only raise awareness to how grammar is used in Academic English, but also help students see how they themselves use grammar (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Series of tasks designed for grammar learning



Phase 1 – Grammar Presentations

In Phase 1, learning is a dynamic process that requires students to apply their grammar actively and meaningfully. The Grammar Presentation task is assigned to students in Week 2 of the program and presentations begin in Week 3. The objectives of the task are to revisit grammar fundamentals, and to cultivate proactive learning mindsets in order to create a collaborative learning culture. The following set of instructions were given to students:

Assignment – Grammar Presentation

Instructions

The grammar presentation requires you to work in teams of 3. Each team will undertake the task of explaining a grammar concept to the class. (The teacher will assign the topics.)

The benefits are that you will

- gain a better understanding of the grammar rules
- apply the rules appropriately
- take responsibility for your own learning and become independent learners
- learn to work with others in a team
- hone your presentation skills.

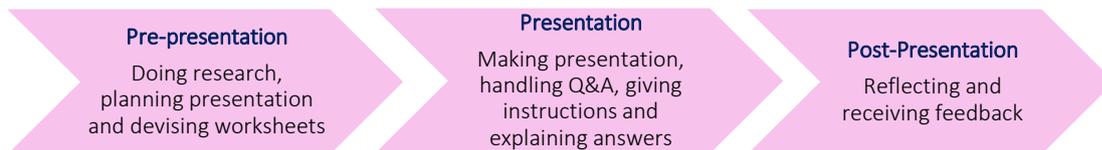
Each presentation should include

- clear explanation of the rules (with appropriate examples)
- a Question and Answer session
- a short quiz to reinforce learning, and
- detailed justification of the answers

Do remember to pitch your presentation and quiz at a level appropriate to your audience.

The task is divided into 3 parts (see Figure 3). Seven presentations take place over 4 weeks.

Figure 3. Grammar task in Phase 1



To achieve the following task objectives, an “omni” approach was taken. Various CLT strategies were combined to facilitate multi-dimensional learning in a collaborative environment.

The objectives of the task are:

1. to revisit grammar fundamentals in order to strengthen the foundation

Students need to acquire more sophisticated language structures to handle abstract and complex academic content (DiCerbo, Anstrom, Baker & Rivera, 2014). It is important to then strengthen the basics of grammar before they are able to perform tasks that require more complex structures. Active discourse is encouraged in the question and answer session and during the quiz. Learning is enhanced as students challenge one another, defend and justify their views, and arrive at plausible outcomes. Moreover, the cultural diversity enriches the learning experience. Students deepen their understanding when they compare error patterns and notice how mother tongue interferes with the way their peers from different countries use grammar.

2. to cultivate proactive learning mindsets

Students are encouraged to take ownership of their learning. They are empowered to make decisions on the content and its delivery. Positive feedback will encourage them to progress confidently. Constructive feedback will encourage reflection and give direction to their learning process.

3. to create a collaborative learning culture

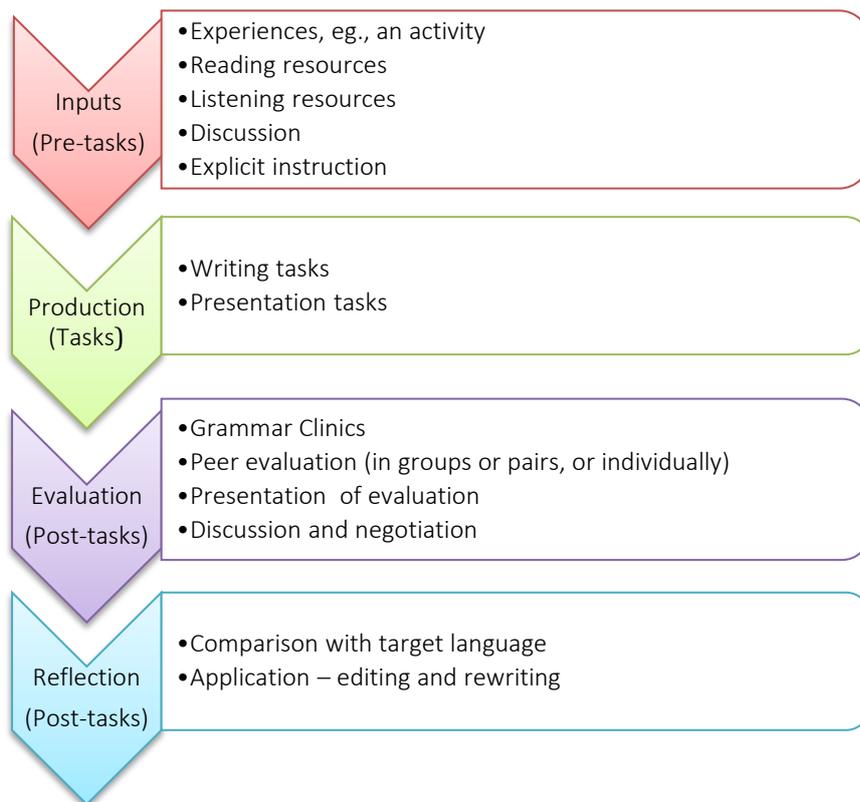
Working in teams to complete this task builds a culture that promotes collaborative learning. Students have many opportunities to connect with one another both intellectually and interpersonally, thus strengthening community of learning. Students adapt and learn together as differences are managed, and trust is built.

Phase 2 – Grammar in Context + Grammar clinics, peer and self-evaluation

While Phase 1 lays the foundation, Phase 2 provides opportunities for practice and application in various academic contexts.

In the course of Phase 2, students complete an average of three writing/presentation tasks per week. The objectives of the tasks are to facilitate the acquisition of common grammar and discourse structures in Academic English; understand the process of critical discourse; and develop independent learning.

Figure 4. Learning Flow in Phase 2



**** These activities are usually pair or group tasks**

Like in Phase 1, CLT methodologies are synthesized to provide a comprehensive learning experience (see Figure 1). Together with a multi-skills approach involving the integration of listening, reading, speaking and writing, the learning process becomes seamless. This makes the experience authentic. Grammar learning becomes an integral part of pre-task, task and post-task activities (see Figure 4). The objectives in this phase are:

1. to facilitate the acquisition of common grammar and discourse structures in Academic English

Academic English refers to “the language used in school to help students acquire and use language” (DiCerbo et al., p. 448). Attention to grammar is crucial in preparing these students for their academic studies. One of the hallmarks of academic genres is the length and complexity of sentences (DiCerbo et al., 2014).

Findings show that explicit instruction of grammar has positive results in the context of Academic English (DiCebro et al., 2014). To facilitate acquisition, explicit grammar teaching takes place alongside reading, listening and discussion to provide sufficient exposure to grammar and discourse patterns common in Academic English. Specifically, these include structures in rhetorical patterns like definition, classification, comparison, cause-effect, problem-solution and argumentation.

2. to make learning a process of critical discourse

Critical discourse develops critical thinking and process skills. The rigors of such a learning process is helpful as the students need to move on from grammar fundamentals to more unfamiliar and complex structures.

Critical discourse is encouraged to create an “authentic” learning experience. The pre-task, task and post-task activities require students to consistently engage in meaningful discussion and negotiation which generates critical discourse. The outcomes of these tasks cannot be predicted. Interaction therefore is real and not simulated, and the outcomes are not orchestrated and contrived. This dynamism facilitates “real” learning.

The grammar curriculum constantly provides opportunities for such critical discourse to take place. Grammar clinics offer a way of doing this. These sessions are carried out when one group of students critiques another group’s work. The focus is on errors in aspects of grammar and discourse structure that the students make, especially those that affect the clarity of meaning. Once the evaluation is completed, students share their feedback in a presentation. This leads to a discussion involving the rest of the class creating opportunities for meaningful interaction to take place; students engage in purposeful learning as they debate and negotiate in an attempt to arrive at a clear position.

3. to promote independent learning

The critical discourse facilitates critical thinking and processing skills through debates and negotiations, and the giving and receiving of feedback. Such activities encourage reflection of one’s own understanding and abilities. Students gradually gain awareness of how to use the target language and discover how they can improve. Eventually, students take ownership of their learning as they will have gained experience and sufficient exposure to decide on how they want to continue learning. Their learning will be driven by their own learning context, not by a particular methodology.

Discussion: A marriage of complementary strategies

The above grammar curriculum brings together various CLT approaches. It synthesizes CLT methodology while taking into consideration learners’ needs and the learning contexts. It is both student-centred as well as content-centred. This “omni” curriculum encourages multi-dimensional learning, emphasizing different CLT elements at different times. This allows the dynamism of the context to direct the learning. Yet, it ensures that enough attention is placed on each element to provide a holistic learning experience. It allows practitioners to tailor a curriculum that is shaped by the learning context, and adapted to suit the needs of the students.

An “Omni” Approach

By bringing together complementary CLT approaches, the curriculum meets the diverse learning needs of students in this multi-cultural classroom. Those with analytical learning styles can benefit from the explicit explanation of the grammar structures while those with more intuitive learning inclinations can acquire grammar structures through exposure.

TBLT may be criticized for its primary focus on communication which may result in an “anything-goes-as-long-as-you-get-the-message-across” approach (Savignon, 1983, as cited in East, 2015). In these grammar tasks, acquisition takes place when students use language to perform different functions ranging from presenting to evaluating. At the same time, they need to effectively convey meaning when explaining grammar rules and discourse patterns as subject content.

Bringing together form, function and meaning creates a holistic learning experience. The “omni” nature of this approach not only draws students’ attention to function and form, but also allows them to see form in relation to function and how these work together to create meaning. For instance, in Phase 1, form, function and meaning come together when they plan and deliver their presentations. During peer evaluation and grammar clinics in Phase 2, error analysis usually addresses effect (miscommunication of meaning affecting function) and cause (grammar and discourse forms). This raises grammar consciousness within a particular learning situation. Such negotiations are student directed as they challenge and negotiate in an attempt to discover how language works. The multicultural diversity in the classroom adds an interesting dimension to the learning as students notice differences in error patterns, and examine how first language interference affects their use of grammar. The authenticity of such interaction increases engagement and motivation.

Bax (2003) calls for a paradigm shift away from methodology towards a more context-driven approach. This “omni” approach allows the context to drive learning. The blurring of the lines dividing various methodologies makes learning less orchestrated. Learning thus takes place both inductively and deductively, but how it transpires in the classroom will depend on the dynamics of classroom discussion. Learning therefore is directed by the context, and is not driven by any particular methodology.

Furthermore, the learning opportunities created by the “omni” approach empower students eventually to take ownership, and decide how they want to proceed on their learning journey. Students understand the role of grammar in effective communication, but more importantly, they understand how they themselves use grammar and are able to evaluate and improve their proficiency. This process of self-discovery helps learners to move towards autonomy. Eventually, learning is not just directed by the context in the classroom, but by the students’ own learning context.

The Role of the Teacher

Will the move away from teacher-directed learning to a more fluid and context-driven environment mean that the role of the teacher has been diminished? On the contrary, the role of the teacher in orchestrating and directing the various activities in an “omni” classroom is more important than ever. The teacher is more than the executor of the curriculum. His/her job is more than just to deliver the lessons. Instead, the teacher is instrumental in making an “omni” curriculum work. An effective teacher is therefore one who manages the elements of the process of teaching that include “vision, design, interactions, outcomes and analysis” (Shulman, 1998, p 5).

In this Asian context, the teacher needs to bridge the cultural gap between more westernized expectations of classroom behavior and students’ Asian values (Butler, 2011). Classroom behaviors such as sharing ideas and opinions, debating and giving feedback do not come naturally to many of these students; but it is such behavior that makes the curriculum successful. Without

spontaneous discussion, and honest feedback, the authenticity of the tasks will be compromised and “real” learning cannot take place. The teacher needs to cultivate a class culture in which students trust and respect one another enough to be open and honest.

The “omni” approach brings together various CLT approaches and this extends beyond the curriculum into classroom practices. Given that most of the students are used to teacher-centred classroom practices, the lack of teacher guidance may result in directionless discourse, or no discourse at all. Students may not know how to proceed. The teacher needs to know when and how to intervene, and to do so in an unobtrusive manner. Prabhu (1990) argues that there is a need for teachers to develop “a sense of plausibility” (p 172). He stresses that it is only such awareness and intuition that differentiate mechanical instruction from productive teaching. In the context of an “omni” approach, the teacher needs to be an observer analyzing what the students know, or do not know, and what they are able to do, or not in order to direct the learning.

When intervention is needed, the teacher has to initiate, participate or mediate as a member of the learning community, not an authority figure; the teacher takes the role of an expert and a resource provider. To fulfill these roles effectively, a teacher would need to tap on various CLT approaches to respond to classroom situations in order to fulfill these roles effectively.

Conclusion

Research has shown that there are many approaches to grammar teaching in a CLT context. These various approaches offer practitioners a range of possibilities that can be harnessed to enhance teaching effectiveness. Practitioners need to tap on this wealth of knowledge and resources to make sense of their own experiences, and to make informed pedagogical choices to best suit the needs of learners. This paper showcases an initiative that brings together theory, research, and practice. It argues that CLT can be most effective when it adopts an “omni” approach and allows curricular design and contexts to fashion frameworks that meet students’ specific needs. As I have attempted to show in the case study, grammar teaching, critical discourse and independent learning can be achieved through this approach with the teacher playing the combined role of observer, participant and resource provider.

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