

Strengths and Weaknesses of CLT Application in EFL Settings like Pasto

By

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Submitted to the Faculty of Human Sciences

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

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Linguistics and Languages Department

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Resumen

Este documento de investigación tiene como objetivo discutir las fortalezas y debilidades de la aplicación de CLT en Pasto y los diferentes factores que influyen en el éxito o fracaso de la práctica docente al utilizar dicho enfoque. En este texto, se dice que las debilidades se deben a tres razones principales (políticas gubernamentales, estudiantes y profesores) que se dividen en subcategorías para hacerlas más claras. Por otra parte, se argumenta que el uso de CLT es beneficioso para mejorar las percepciones de los estudiantes hacia el aprendizaje de idiomas, la práctica de los profesores en clase, la retroalimentación oral correctiva y, lo que es más importante, para el desarrollo de la competencia comunicativa. El documento se llevó a cabo mediante la recopilación de información de libros y revistas sobre la enseñanza de idiomas, EFL y ESL; y luego, la información fue organizada y escrita como un documento descriptivo. Por lo tanto, la información en este artículo se basa en la autenticidad de los libros citados.

Palabras clave: Enseñanza comunicativa de la lengua (CLT), competencia comunicativa, contexto de enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera, fortaleza, debilidad.

Abstract

This research paper is aimed at discussing the strengths and weaknesses of CLT application in Pasto, and the different factors that influence the success or failure of teaching practice when using such approach. In this text, weaknesses are said to be caused by three main reasons (governmental policies, students and teachers) which are divided in subcategories to make them clearer. On the other hand, the use of CLT is argued to be advantageous for improving learners' perceptions towards language learning, teachers' practice in class, oral corrective feedback, and more importantly, for the development of communicative competence. This paper was carried out by gathering information from books and journals about language teaching, EFL and ESL; and then, the information was organized and written as a descriptive paper. Therefore, the information in this paper relies on the authenticity of the cited books.

Key words: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), communicative competence, EFL settings, strength, weaknesses.

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Introduction

The number of existing language teaching methods and approaches is broad, many of which have been tested and proved to be useful and effective in practice, especially communicative approaches such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Nonetheless, its application in classrooms may need an appreciable amount of time devoted to language teaching and some other “ingredients” that may not be found easily in Colombian schools; this last fact could make teaching practice with CLT a complex activity for some teachers who might want to avoid as they do not know what they could face in their classes. The lack of information about the benefits and difficulties of this approach has caused some teachers not to use it at all. Therefore, this paper will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of CLT application in EFL settings like Pasto so as to prepare teachers and encourage them to “take risks” in their classrooms and use communicative approaches that could bring more benefits than problems.

In order to contextualize the audience, this paper starts describing and establishing the main purpose of this text followed by its limitations and significance. Straightaway, a brief summary of the history of CLT and its definition is given; then, in order to avoid misunderstandings about CLT and its principles, the most common misconceptions regarding this approach are discussed. Having clarified the meaning of CLT, this paper continues with discussing the weaknesses of CLT application in EFL settings where some constraints teachers may find when applying this approach are stated. Right after, its strengths are argued where some advantages of CLT application are found. Finally, and after discussing the positive and negative aspects of Communicative Language Teaching, some useful teaching activities that can help teachers to apply CLT in their classrooms, conclusions and recommendations are given.

Strengths and Weaknesses of CLT Application in EFL Settings like Pasto

This research paper intends to discuss a very common difficulty that English teachers face when teaching this language; such problem is to know the benefits and the difficulties that they could find when applying CLT in their classrooms. Thus, the main objective of this paper is to set, and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of CLT application in contexts like Pasto where English is studied as a foreign language.

Likewise, some specific objectives have been set so as to make sure the main objective can be achieved. Those specific objectives are namely the following:

- To define what CLT is and to clarify its most common misconceptions.
- To establish the most common problems teachers face when applying CLT in EFL contexts like Pasto.
- To set the main benefits that teachers and students can accomplish from CLT application.
- To classify the weaknesses and strengths according to their relevance and basis.
- To provide some useful CLT-based activities to be used in EFL classrooms.

Limitations

The present research paper was carried out starting from some personal and exchanged teaching experiences with some English teachers whose valuable experiences took place in some public high schools in Pasto, Nariño. Notwithstanding, the ideas presented in the text were supported on some Colombian and foreign journals on EFL and ESL.

Therefore, although the claims stated in this writing have been intended to be strongly

supported, they may only be suitable for the context where they were based on (Pasto, Nariño - Colombia) and rely on the veracity of the cited journals and authors.

Significance of the study

The problem stated in this paper came out due to the fact that the importance of English language has increased enormously since it has been claimed to be the current *Lingua Franca*, and therefore, academic, technological, medical, and scientific fields use such language to carry out studies, and write about the latest discoveries they make. Not counting with the fact that learning English is the aim of 53% of students worldwide, and also it is the official language of 85% of the international institutions such as the United Nations (UN) (Sánchez, 2013). Hence, to make students acquire elements that can help them develop the communicative competence in a foreign language in such a way that they can read, speak and understand such language effectively has become one of the main goals of the current Colombian policies (Ley 115, 1994).

Moreover, Communicative Language Teaching has been claimed to be one of the most appropriate practices in EFL settings where English for communicative purposes is sought by students, parents, and the society as a whole (Savignon & Wang, 2006). This situation has led teachers to consider the application of CLT in their classrooms as an effective alternative not only to help students acquire a second language, but also to make their classes interactive and fun rather than monotonous and structural.

Nonetheless, Colombian distinctive features that typify its contexts may turn into a barrier that could make using CLT in classrooms an indeed complicated task for English teachers; although the benefits that the application of such approach may bring for students when studying English could also have a great value for students as well as for the society in general. Thus, the relevance of this research paper consists in discussing the strengths and weaknesses that the application that Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) could have in

high schools in Pasto, where English is studied as a Foreign Language (EFL) so as to give an approximate insight on the use of this approach.

Brief History of Foreign Language Teaching (FLT)

By the sixteenth century, learning Latin and Greek was the core of foreign language learning; notwithstanding, those languages started to be replaced by “new languages” such as English, Italian, and French due to the fact that their relevance rose over the time (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). By that time, the main purpose of foreign language learning was to learn and analyze external aspects of language rather than the language in use, and as a result, the methodology used for many years to teach Latin was adopted to teach the “new languages”.

That methodology was known as the ‘Grammar Translation Method’ (GTM) which assumed that if a language was learned, “it was in order to read its literature, or in order to benefit from the mental discipline and intellectual development that result from foreign-language study” (Stern, 1983 as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 1986, p. 3). Grammatical Competence, which Richards (2006) defines as the knowledge of making sentences and organizing them into an acceptable structure was the main objective of such language teaching method. Thus, activities such as drills, text translation, and the study of grammatical rules, which were graded according to their complexity, prevailed. Nonetheless, by the 1940s, Grammar Translation Method started to be strongly criticized as it was thought that its excessive focus on grammatical aspects made students skillful translators, “but left them quite ignorant of how the language might be used in everyday conversation” (Yule, 2010, p. 189).

By the World War II, the need of fluent multilingual interpreters and translators led to the establishment of a new language-centered method which was known as Army Specialized Teaching Program (ASTP) that was put into operation in 1942 (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). This was because it was thought that the learning of formal language structures may lead

students to master the language use, so the main objective of this method was to train people to master the use of certain grammar rules and drills. Therefore, pre-sequenced and pre-selected linguistic structures were taught, and practiced in classrooms (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). This new language teaching method caught applied linguists' attention as its procedures represented a huge change from the traditional way of teaching languages. This new methodology would be named later as the American Approach, as many American universities took it as a model for their language teaching programs, yet by the mid-1950s it was re-named as Audio Lingual Method (ALM).

Applied linguists, however, started to criticize ALM since they claimed that the success of Audio-lingual method "derived from the intensity of contact with the target language rather than from any well-developed methodological basis" (Richards & Rodgers, 1986, p. 45). The problem laid in the fact that while the main objective of the Audio-lingual method was to develop native-like pronunciation, and know basic grammar patterns of the target language, the desire was teaching language to use rather than mastering grammatical aspects and memorizing decontextualized drills that did not have any similarity with real oral communication (Yule, 2010). As a result, the need of looking for a method that could teach students to actually communicate in real contexts increased.

In 1971, British scholars started to think about a method that could lead students to learn to communicate effectively in the foreign language, and that could meet students' needs. This search for effective language teaching practice led to the creation of a new method that would be designated as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).

Definition of CLT.

First and foremost, the major notion to be considered when talking about CLT is communicative competence, which Chomsky (1965, cited in Brown, 2000, p. 43) referred to as the knowledge of the language system. However, his conception did not consider language

variables as he thought about an ideal speaker-hearer interaction where hesitation, shifts, mistakes, and other deviations were not included. Hymes (1972), however, argued that communicative competence is not limited to grammatical rules mainly because it refers to the ability to understand, adjust, and use the language effectively in different unrehearsed situations. Hence, and taking into consideration Hymes' (1972) contribution, it can be said that communicative competence is the knowledge which allows the speaker to communicate effectively with others. In this, knowing the language system is important, but not enough due to the fact that communicative competence requires the speaker to know how, when, and what to say as well as to know, understand, and adjust to language features such as the situational context, speakers' roles, and non-verbal cues like distance, gestures, or postures (Savignon, 1976).

On the other hand, it must be said that there is a big difference between an approach and a method since, according to Edward Anthony (1963 as cited in Brown, 2002, p.9), the former is a collection of assumptions that treats aspects related to language learning and teaching; whereas the latter is a systematic plan that is based on an approach to present the language which can be suitable for different audiences and contexts. It means that while a method has a specific predetermined plan that must be followed without taking into account possible class asides. An approach has a group of assumptions on what language learning involves, but does not have any specific plan or activities to be followed; on the contrary, classroom activities must be prepared depending on the course, and the students' needs.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has been seen as a broad concept, as since its creation in the 1970s, it has been defined by many linguists who provided their own perspective on this approach. Richards (2006), for example, defines CLT as a set of assumptions where many different aspects intervene; such aspects are closely related to the objectives stated for language teaching, the use of suitable activities that foster language

learning, and the different ways learners learn a language. Notwithstanding, Littlewood (2013) asserts that there is not an exact definition of CLT due to the fact that it can be taken as an umbrella term mainly because its principles can serve as basis for many approaches whose goals are to make students develop the knowledge related to grammatical rules of a language, and the ability to use them effectively in communicative situations; knowledge which Hymes (1972) referred to as communicative competence. In this sense, the application of CLT approach aims at helping students master the four different language dimension that constitutes what communicative competence actually is. Such dimensions are grammatical competence which refers to the accurate use of grammatical structures in a language, sociolinguistic competence which is about the contextualization of learner's speech; discourse competence that is related to the interpretation of the message, and finally, strategic competence which refers to the capacity for overcoming communication problems (Canale & Swain, 1980 as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 1986, p.71).

In addition, in CLT, teaching is carried out under the assumption that language will take care of itself which means that as long as teachers engage students in problem-solving activities using the target language, learning will increase by itself (Allwright, 1979 as cited in Harmer, 2001, p.71). For that reason, and in order to develop the aforesaid competence, some of the most prevailing activities in CLT are role plays, problem-solving, information-gap, pair and group work activities since such exercises can engage students in real communication through the use of impromptu dialogs. These activities aim not only at developing learners' speaking and listening skills, but also reading and writing, as they are argued to occur simultaneously in real communication. In this way, this approach suggests an extreme re-set on what is expected to be learned by students, and on how to teach a language as there is a focus on meaning rather than form, since the approach is founded under the premise that students should not be taught grammar explicitly, but should be taught to

communicate, and in this process, they can acquire grammar rules as part of communication (Yule, 2010). Thus, students are allowed to make some mistakes as long as they do not interfere with the meaning of the message.

Misconceptions about CLT

Although for some people CLT seems to be a very easy concept to define, according to Harmer (2003 as cited in Littlewood, 2013, p. 2), “the problem with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is that the term has always meant a multitude of different things to different people”. This number of meanings has led to many misunderstandings which are mainly associated with the teaching focus, what is taught in this approach, what is and what is not allowed when applying CLT, etc. Such misconceptions have fostered a CLT application which is very distant from its real principles, and as a result, have turned it into a not very effective approach. (Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999 as cited in Littlewood, 2013, p.2). Therefore, those CLT misconceptions are taken and clarified as follows:

Firstly, it is said that the main objective of CLT is to develop communicative competence, so the focus on meaning becomes the core of language teaching, and form is left out under the assumption that “a grammatical focus will usually prevent real communication using the second language.” (Krashen, 1982, p. 26). Notwithstanding, it is feasible and pertinent to teach both language structures and communication at the same time due to the fact that learners can gain advantage from studying grammatical aspects considering that they are as important as communication because they both intervene in language production. In this sense, Thompson (1996) affirms that the absence of explicit study of grammar is not a principle of CLT as students who lack grammar show lower performance on communicative tasks than those who have had certain focus on form (Savignon, 2002). Likewise, Wu (2008) says that British linguists who created CLT aimed at an approach for language teaching in

which communication was included, but it was not created for the exclusion of language form study since even though the focus on form does not drive to learning immediately, it can help students acquire new information later (Ellis, 1992 as cited in Thompson, 1996).

Secondly, as it is thought that only listening and speaking skills should be taught, teachers tend to concentrate on these two skills to teach English in order to improve students' performance in the target language (Thompson, 1996). Savignon (2002), however, affirms that "the concern of CLT is not exclusively with face-to-face oral communication. The principles apply equally to reading and writing activities that involve readers and writers in the interpretation, expression, and negotiation of meaning" (p. 22). Hence, the development of reading and writing skills should be taught, and the teaching of such skills can start from the very beginning if required (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983).

Thirdly, the use of students' native language is thought to be banned under the assumption that the more students are exposed to a language, the more fluent they will become in such language (Wu, 2008). Nevertheless, Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983) suggest that in CLT, the use of students' native language or any other tool can be used as long as they gain advantage of it. Furthermore, according to Wu (2008), the usefulness of using the L1 lies in the balanced use of L1 and L2 in such a way so that learners can understand what is expected from them and increase their L2 knowledge as well; he supports his thesis by citing Swain and Lapkin (2002) who carried out a case study in which they proved that the use of the L1 helped students develop tasks, and therefore, make much more progress in the L2.

Lastly, teachers tend to believe that resources such as translation or drilling should not be used in CLT, but using pair and group work is essential. Notwithstanding, Savignon (2002) clarifies that in spite of the usefulness that group work activities have shown to foster communication among students, they cannot be taken as essential when applying CLT, as

they are part of the wide variety of activities to be applied in class. Likewise, Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983) affirm that translation as well as drilling may be used in class when necessary; and traditional materials such as grammar-based books can also be taken by teachers to teach communication since as Savignon (2002) states, “what matters is the teacher’s understanding of what language learning is and how it happens” (p. 22).

Weaknesses of CLT application in EFL settings like Pasto

Although the application of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in high schools in which English is studied as a Foreign Language (EFL) could have many benefits for learning English because of its communication-based instruction, the number of constraints teachers may face when applying such approach is considerable as well. Especially, taking into account that Colombian Educational Program is taken from extremely different contexts. Therefore, those teachers who are willing to apply CLT in their classrooms may (to some extent) struggle with different difficulties associated with three educational aspects: governmental policies, students and teachers.

Weaknesses Associated with Governmental Policies

As the main purpose of Colombian Government is to make its citizens bilingual, people who are able to communicate effectively in English, the MEN (Ministerio de Educación Nacional) created The National Bilingual Program in agreement with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, and Assessment (CEFR). This program was originally planned for the period 2004 to 2019 with the purpose of improving the quality of English language teaching at all educational levels, it has been modified recently for the period 2018 to 2025. The goal of this educational plan was that by 2010 students in high schools should have a B1 or pre-intermediate level (Cárdenas, 2006). Consequently, at that time students should have been able to read, write, speak and

understand the main idea of speeches, and dealing with familiar topics. In the same way, teachers should have a minimum of B2 (Intermediate) level which means that they should be able to understand the main idea of complex speeches and take part in discussions dealing with many different topics (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment, p. 24).

Nevertheless, although the MEN claims that the CEFR is a flexible and adaptable framework for Colombia since its teaching practices are applicable, and its goals are attainable, the adoption of such approach does not go with Colombian students' needs, but on the contrary, it was taken relying on international educational trends, neglecting the local knowledge, and referring to it as obsolete and inappropriate (Usma, 2009). Furthermore, such standards cannot meet the educational needs of a developing country like Colombia and its cities, specially Pasto, Nariño since its economic, political, cultural and social characteristics are extremely different from those in Europe where it was first developed (Ayala & Álvarez, 2004). In this sense, Cárdenas (2006) points out,

“The reality established in the CEF would have to be contrasted with the conditions of Colombian educational institutions, namely, infrastructure, curriculum organization, use of foreign languages in the academic and cultural domains of the country, working hours and competences of language teachers. English is not the natural code to mediate communication in Colombia, a country with about 41.2 million people and more than 3 million internally displaced persons, the highest number of any country in the Western Hemisphere, and second world-wide, after Sudan. Thus, tracing frameworks for the Colombian context would have cultural, logistic and economic implications” (p, 3).

Accordingly, if it is considered that there are noticeable differences among Colombian regions, even though they are part of the same country, it is quite complicated to take a

foreign model created in developed countries from Europe, and expect it to work in the same way in this context that vastly differs with those settings. Besides, the adoption of CEFR in Colombia is based on studies carried out in advantaged high schools from the most important cities in this country, assuming that they represent the whole Colombian educational system. Nonetheless, teaching must take into account learners' differences considering that their abilities, strengths and ways of learning are different from other's (Jacobs & Farrell, 2003 as cited in Richards, 2006, p.25). Likewise, the governmental economic investment is not the same for every school, so whereas students from private high schools have access to some different technological resources such as computer rooms, laboratories, videos, and other tools that foster learning, the majority of public schools lack such kind of elements, so the only available resource they possess is the teacher and a whiteboard. Moreover, the dearth of teachers with an appropriate training in language teaching is another disadvantage public schools bear (Ayala & Álvarez, 2004). Thus, private and public schools must be taken as two separate worlds with different population and needs (Gonzales & Quinchía, 2003 as cited in Ayala & Álvarez, 2004, p.16), and hence, the outcomes obtained in Europe after the adoption of the CEFR cannot be compared to the results that the adoption of such framework may generate in Colombia.

Size of the class.

The second problem teachers face when teaching English with CLT is associated with the size of the class, since many classrooms are often crowded with students. In Pasto, for example, the number of students in each classroom ranges from thirty and forty students, or in some cases, even more. Consequently, it is an indeed complicated task for teachers to provide L2 learners opportunities to produce comprehensible output in large classes in spite of their importance (Yule, 2010). This is because if teachers try to manage a communicative and interactive class with large groups, just a small part of the class might participate while

the rest of students might not be able to say anything. According to a study carried out in Taiwan by Chang and Goswami (2011), most English teachers agree that "... it is challenging to use CLT in the classroom with more than 50 students because they have to give every student opportunities to practice English... it is hard... to monitor all the students and offer advice to each of them during communicative activities" (p.9). Besides, The problem that Yule (2010) states gets even worse in Pasto since, if it is complicated to give L2 learners opportunities for using language, it is even more difficult to provide those opportunities for foreign language students whose vocabulary and language skills are more limited.

Time devoted for English classes.

In addition to the aforesaid limitation, the time devoted to teaching English is not enough time for students to learn, and for teachers to teach the large group of students they have in classes. In *Bases para una nación bilingüe y competitiva*, the MEN cites a study carried out by Eurydice Network on education in which it is said that European students start to study a foreign language since the age of eight, studying five to nine hours per week, for eight years on average. Then, the MEN says that in Colombia students start to study a foreign language since the age of eleven, studying three hours per week, for six years; 720 hours altogether which, according to the Ministry of Education, are enough time for learners to develop effective performance in the foreign language (Al Tablero, MEN, 2005).

However, according to Chang and Goswami (2011), Taiwanese teachers think that limited time is the biggest problem for CLT to be applied in classrooms, since preparing and engaging students in communicative activities is a time-consuming task that they cannot develop, as they must carry forward the teaching schedule. Besides, the time devoted for English teaching in Colombia is much less than the time devoted for the same activity in Europe, thing that could make the difference between the Colombian and European learning outcomes even bigger. Despite such time difference and the great economic, political,

cultural and social differences that exist between European countries and Colombia, the MEN expects to achieve the same results that European countries got. What hinders the attainment of such aims is that if in developed countries like European ones, students need such a great amount of hours to achieve a good language proficiency, in developing countries like Colombia, where English is used only in classrooms, time for English teaching should be much more than the time devoted in Europe, but the reality is totally opposing.

Students' weaknesses.

Students' culture.

Another disadvantage is that it may be difficult for students to become used to participating actively in class, owing to traditional cultural beliefs on education that students have inherited, which says that they must learn only what teachers teach, so they do not make any effort to participate or give their opinion in class. Ellis (1996, as cited in Harmer, 2001, p.94) points out that there are some mismatches between the facilitator role assumed by teachers in CLT practice and students' expectations of the authoritative teacher that their culture approves. The main problem here is that students are not well prepared for an approach that makes them the focus of the language teaching process and asks them to communicate in a foreign language, an approach in which they feel uncomfortable and misplaced (Harmer, 2001).

Notwithstanding, Chang and Goswami (2011) assert that in certain way, learners' passiveness in classrooms is the teacher's fault as they have taught students to sit quietly and follow their lectures. Therefore, encouraging students to communicate may become a challenge for teachers, since developing communicative competence is not a vital aim for students, but getting good grades is essential. Accordingly, some Taiwanese teachers asserted that "...students study for grades because they are told grades are important. Also, in our

culture, people believe the teachers who can raise the students' grades are good teachers. Although CLT can help the students' long-term English development, it cannot increase the students' grades in a short time" (Chang & Goswami, 2011, p. 9). Even though the Taiwanese context is quite different from the Colombian one, this claim can possibly fit Colombian classrooms. Thus, perhaps, that is the reason why students are reluctant to participate in tasks that do not represent a clear option for getting high grades.

To change this belief and encourage students to participate actively in class and to learn on their own is, perhaps, the strongest and the most difficult drawback that teachers have to deal with when applying CLT. This is because students' reluctance to communicate does not rely on "intelligence, knowledge, or creativity" but it is a matter of students' culture (Harmer, 2001, p. 94). Thus, teachers may be forced to fight against students' prior experiences which are not only influenced by what they live in classrooms, "but also by a broader social, economic, and political environment in which they grow up. These experiences have the potential to alter classroom aims and activities in ways unintended and unexpected by policy planners or curriculum designers or textbook producers" (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 174). Hence, as Alistair Pennycook (1998) has said, 'we need to see English language teaching as located in the domain of popular culture as much as in the domain of applied linguistics' (as cited in Harmer, 2001, p. 94).

Students' Socio-economic situation.

Another problem related to students is that there are some problems with student's environments that affect their performance in the academic field; one of those problems is related to low socio economic status. Students' socio-economic situation is defined by parents' monthly incomes, education and occupation (Akram & Ghani, 2013). According to Yuet (2008, as cited in Akram & Ghani, 2013, p. 407), the influence of such aspect on

education lies in the fact that low-income parents do not have enough time to promote students' cognitive development since they are engaged in fulfilling basic needs.

Furthermore, these parents may not be able to foster reading habits on children because of their poor reading skills; therefore, children's aspiration for their future might be low as well. Ayala and Álvarez (2004) assert that unlike rich parents of private schools students who can supply children with notebooks, pencils, textbooks, and some other elements that facilitate learning, low-income parents of public schools students cannot do so. They also add that learning might not be a priority since unemployment and violence in students' families lead them to work so as to help their families pay their expenses; and as a result, they may not care about school subjects.

In addition, learning English language might not be appealing for Colombian students since they may think that they do not need English because of their country's location and mobility. Unlike European countries which border on countries whose language is different, Colombia borders on Spanish-speaking countries (except for Brazil); hence, learning another language is not a priority for them as they can go to the neighboring countries and speak their native language without facing any problem. Moreover, English might be taken as an unimportant tool for students considering that the only way students could use such language is by traveling to English-speaking countries; however, Colombians' socio-economic situations make traveling abroad very difficult for them.

Teachers' weaknesses.

Unqualified teachers.

Educational problems are not only related to students, as on many occasions there are teachers who are not trained to teach languages, or do not have enough knowledge to carry out such activity. According to Sánchez (2013), Colombia has a deficit of about 32.000

English teachers. The main reason for such deficit is because such profession is not appealing to people, as the salaries newly graduated teachers receive are 28% lower than other newly graduated professionals' salaries such as accountants, business administrators or economists, and almost 40% lower than engineers' salaries (Barón, 2010 as cited in Sánchez, 2013, p.22). Therefore, in Colombia, many teachers who are in charge of teaching English are also teachers of other subjects such as physical education, mathematics, Spanish, social sciences, among others (Cadavid et al., 2004); so they do not know what they need to teach, and consequently, they often give students lectures focused on grammatical aspects of language rather than teaching students for language performance.

On the other hand, in agreement with the MEN, English teachers should be on B2 (Intermediate) English proficiency level, and the newly graduated English teachers should be on C1 (pre-advanced) level, but the Colombian reality is quite different from the expected. According to recent studies carried out in Bogotá and Cundinamarca during 2003 and 2004, 63% of the tested teachers from Bogotá were between A1 and A2 English proficiency level, 35% were between B1 and B2 level, and only 14% were between C1 and C2 English proficiency level. However, the situation in other municipalities from Cundinamarca was even worse, since 76.6% of the teachers was between A1 and A2 level, 21% was between B1 and B2 and only 13, 8% was between C1 and C2 level (Cárdenas, 2006, p. 3). Moreover, the scores obtained in Saber Pro test in 2011, demonstrated that 36% of the students who took that test achieved the B+ (B2, C1 and C2) English level, 41% were in B1 level, 9% were in A2 level, 8% were in A1 level and 6% were in A- (students who cannot achieve the basic level) (Sánchez, 2013, p. 20).

Accordingly, managing a communicative class in English using CLT may be an almost impossible challenge for these teachers, and developing communicative competence in English may remain as an unachievable dream for students. This is because, teachers cannot

teach what they do not master (language performance in English), and in doing so, they may feel insecure and uncomfortable; so that is, perhaps, the reason why many teachers tend to shout students down if there is any situation that challenges their English knowledge.

Therefore, these teachers may not encourage students to enjoy learning, but rather to feel annoyance towards it, as the experiences learners live in class can change students' perceptions towards learning; consequently, if such experiences are bad and against their expectations, they may feel disappointed to learning, and thus, learning may be interfered (Horwitz, 1988 as cited in Savignon, 2002, p.6).

Inappropriate teachers' training.

Another strong limitation to teach English with CLT is the inappropriate teachers training because it is focused on theoretical knowledge, so it does not prepare teachers to deal with real educational problems. A survey conducted by Chang and Goswami (2011) revealed that more than 90% of the teachers believe that the inadequate teacher training is one of the most important factors that make the application of CLT in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms fail. Thus, even though the theoretical knowledge is important for teachers' practice in classrooms, it cannot solve the whole problems teachers face in real teaching practice, basically because such theoretical bases are presented and rehearsed with other teachers. One of the interviewees pointed out:

“I have attended some workshops that focused on demonstrating activities.

The participants in the workshop are all English teachers who have high English proficiency and are willing to participate in group work. Thus, they are able to develop good ideas and express their ideas. However, unlike the situations in the workshops, our students with limited English abilities are not able to do this in the classrooms. I think workshops should include discussion on how to apply CLT in

different conditions, so the teachers do not feel frustrated when they go back to their classrooms” (Chang & Goswami, 2011, p. 8).

In Medellin, a city that has some commonalities with Pasto, the situation is similar to the aforementioned one, since according to Cadavid et al. (2004), in addition to the scarce teachers’ English performance, teachers lack knowledge of the subject matter and previous teaching training that may help them solve classrooms difficulties. Another Taiwanese survey respondent pinpointed that learning teaching skills to apply CLT is not enough, as students’ attitudes may not go with what teachers expect, and as a consequence, teachers may feel frustrated and turn to the use of traditional language teaching methods (Chang & Goswami, 2011).

Assessment.

The last disadvantage of CLT application is related to the way teachers assess students’ improvement since teachers might have to change from the traditional assessment to a new one. The traditional form of assessing students measures how much students know about grammar and how well students pronounce English sounds; such assessment was widely used by teachers, as its base on grammatical aspects provided teachers the possibility of evaluating what students should know with ease. The problem with CLT application lies in the fact that teachers might feel displaced as there is not any universal scale to assess language performance because of its vagueness (Savignon, 2002). Thus, changing to a more modern assessment method could be difficult for teachers, considering that “there has been an uncertainty about how to evaluate students’ communicative competence since... Unlike the form-based written tests, the assessment of CLT involves students’ spoken communication. Since there is no ready-made tool for speech assessment easily available... it is challenging to evaluate the students’ production” (Chang & Goswami, 2011, p. 10).

In spite of the importance that the feedback on mistakes have on language learning, it is not advisable to give students a large amount of corrective feedback. This is because error correction may have adverse effects on learners, as when teachers correct a huge amount of mistakes, they may overwhelm students, and consequently, they may make students feel embarrassed, angry, inhibited, and inferior, not mentioning that it is a time-consuming task for English teachers, too (Truscott, 1999 as cited in Martínez, 2013, p.266).

Strengths of CLT application in EFL settings

Development of communicative competence.

On the other hand, CLT has many advantages as well that could counterbalance the previously-mentioned weaknesses. One is that, unlike older approaches that focused on grammar, or the teaching of drills for specific purposes, CLT aims at developing students' communicative competence. According to Yule (2010), "Communicative competence can be defined as the general ability to use language accurately, appropriately, and flexibly" (p.194). Hymes (1972), also synthesized the elements that intervene in communication using the acronym SPEAKING in which such factors are explained:

Setting refers to the place and time in which the communicative event takes place.

Participants refer to speakers and hearers and their role relationships.

Ends refer to the stated or unstated objectives the participants wish to accomplish.

Act sequence refers to the form, content, and sequence of utterances.

Key refers to the manner and tone (serious, sarcastic, etc.) of the utterances.

Instrumentalities refer to the channel (oral or written) and the code (formal or informal).

Norms refers to conventions of interaction and interpretation based on shared knowledge.

Genre refers to categories of communication such as lecture, report, essay, poem, and so forth (as cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 9).

In this way, in CLT, learners are taught to indeed speak in real life contexts, and these communicative elements are mastered through language use rather than through the explicit academic study of them. This teaching practice takes place because, according to the input hypothesis stated by Krashen (1982), structures must not be the focus of language learning since they are acquired through the language in use. In the same way, Harmer (2001) asserts that people need only three elements to learn a language: exposure to language, motivation to communicate, and opportunities to use such language. Likewise, some other authors such as: Halliday (1973), Allwright (1984), Prabhu (1987) and others agree that learning another language is fostered by spontaneous communicative events created by teachers, but in which students take active roles, since the events in which learners are asked to cope with language are learning in themselves. Moreover, when developing communicative competence, learners can become effective speakers not only in the L2 but also in the L1, as they interact in a friendly environment that gives them self-confidence to use any language.

Learners' roles.

As far as learners are concerned, CLT suggests an extreme change from the methods that have been used for many decades, since in this approach, learners are assumed to be active and autonomous participants that try to communicate as much as possible in order to develop fluency in the foreign language. This is because "CLT emphasis on viewing language as a system for communication; it also takes into account the fact that learning is likely to be more efficient if the learners have an opportunity to talk about what they are learning" (Thompson, 1996). The positive change here, lies in the fact that in the past, students were not allowed to make mistakes or work on their own so as to avoid mistakes fossilization (Prabhu, 1987 as cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p.153). Notwithstanding, Kumaravadivelu (2006) asserts that studies have demonstrated that pair and group work have had a bigger and more positive influence on language learning than teacher-students

interactions' influence since the opportunities for negotiation of meaning are much more. Such negotiation of meaning among students and teachers is paramount for developing communicative competence in the foreign language since, in CLT it is affirmed that learning is fostered by the exposure to the target language, as it is "the result of unhampered participation in a meaningful setting" (Harmer, 2001, p. 70).

Teachers' roles.

Regarding teacher' roles, in CLT he/she plays a very different role, since the teacher is seen as a guide, and not as a director. According to Richards (2006), in CLT, teacher is a co-learner due to the fact that he/she facilitates students' language learning through the application of different strategies. It means that it is the teacher who guides learners when they have any problems, clarifies doubts and fosters interaction among learners; however, he/she is not a controller that handles teacher-fronted classes where he is the focus of the language learning process. Breen and Candlin (1980, cited by Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 120-121) claimed that a communicative teacher plays two main roles in his/her classes. The first role is as a facilitator, who engages students in communication and fosters students' interaction among themselves, and different activities and texts. A second role that emerges from the first one is the teacher as an interdependent participant that depends on the rest of the participants in class. Besides, Breen and Candlin add two secondary roles entailed in the first two roles, such roles lead the teacher to become an organizer and a language resource which means that the teacher coordinates the class and acts as a resource of knowledge for students. The second role is the teacher as a guide; in this, the teacher is who clarifies doubts and advises students so as to complete task and attain positive outcomes. Thus, it is the teacher's duty to create a friendly environment in order for students to gain confidence, and he/she must be encouraging rather than hostile and disheartening.

Mistakes conception.

Another positive aspect of CLT is that learners are allowed to make mistakes because these are seen as a natural stage that every second language student must go through and overcome (Richards, 2006). Unlike the traditional language teaching methodologies where mistakes were claimed to be negative for students as they hindered language learning, so they must be avoided; in Communicative Language Teaching, learners' grammar and pronunciation mistakes are not important, but the meaning of the learner's message is essential (Yule, 2010). According to Yule (2010), learners' "errors" are not learning hindrances, but rather are hints of learning since they reveal students' willingness to communicate in the target language. Furthermore, Kumaravadivelu (2003) affirms that mistakes are learning opportunities, since teachers must take advantage of them to foster interaction in the classroom. This aspect could change the students' thought of ineptitude about themselves that grew because of the wrong and rude error-correction that some teachers have applied in high schools for many years. "Error correction has the immediate effect of putting the student on the defensive. It encourages a strategy in which the student will try to avoid mistakes, avoid difficult constructions, and focus less on meaning and more on form. It may disrupt the entire communicative focus on an exchange" (Krashen, 1982, p.75). Instead of such rude correction, when students are speaking in the foreign language they should not be explicitly corrected, but should be corrected in such a way so that learners do not feel being attacked or scolded. The corrective feedback should be provided respectfully and bearing in mind students' personalities in order to avoid students to feel embarrassed (Martínez, 2013).

If teachers take such positive attitude towards mistakes, they may make students feel confident and, as a result of this, students may be willing to participate more.

Useful activities for CLT application in EFL classrooms

Using CLT in classrooms might seem to be a difficult task for English teachers, regarding the numerous classes and the short time devoted to language teaching. Not counting on the fact that some teachers might think this approach requires resources such as videos, audios, computers and internet access for learning to be successful (Chang & Goswami, 2011).

However, that kind of materials might be scarce in many public schools in Pasto, so creating activities, which engage students in using the target language inside the classroom, using the available resources is essential for teachers.

Nonetheless, one big advantage of CLT application is that it is not confined to a set of fixed activities, but there are a number of activities and materials which could help teachers to apply it in order for the class to be much more enjoyable for students and teachers as well. Thus, the following activities might be some good examples of the great range of engaging tasks for students.

1. **Three-word conversation:** This task is intended for intermediate-level (high school) students who are divided into groups of three to five. Its main purpose is to practice and remember previously-reviewed vocabulary which can be related to many different topics such as sports, jobs, daily routine, school elements, etc., and the only materials needed are some pieces of paper with some words written on them. In this task, each student is given three words associated to the topic the teacher wants to focus on, and all the members in the group should work together for three to four minutes to organize a five-minute conversation in which each member uses the three words he/she was assigned. The teacher should be a “language supplier” who provides extra vocabulary that students might need to carry out such activity. Once students have finished the activity, they are to act out the conversation. Finishing this task may take between forty to fifty minutes as the number of groups to be assessed in the class may range from six to ten.

Learners' grammar structures and fluency are important parts of the speech; however, in order to assess the students' performance in this task, the teacher should focus only on the students' ability to use the target vocabulary in the correct contexts rather than focus on any other part of the speech as vocabulary use is the core of this task.

2. Brainstorming miming: This is a warm-up activity which focuses on progressive tenses and it is a good and fun tool for students to learn how to use them and learn new vocabulary as well. It can be useful for beginners or advanced students as the complexity of the exercise may be determined by the tense to be studied (present continuous, past continuous, present perfect continuous, etc.). In this activity, the teacher chooses a word-category, e.g. sports, jobs, leisure activities, etc. Students, for their part, need to think about a word or phrase associated to the category assigned by the teacher and take turns to go in front of the class. The student who goes first asks the teacher: *what are you doing?* The teacher answers to the question by saying the word/ phrase he thought about, but while he says the word/phrase, he mimes another different activity. Right after, the student who asked the question to the teacher needs to go in front, and then a second student asks the same question: *what are you doing?* The first student in front makes a response to the question with the word/phrase he thought about while acting out the activity the teacher said previously. For example, Student 1 asks the teacher: *what are you doing?* If the teacher answers *I'm playing tennis*, he needs to mime a different activity like swimming. Subsequently, the student 1 needs to go in front and Student 2 asks the same question. Next, the student 1 needs to answer to the question using his own phrase, i.e. *I'm climbing a mountain*, but while doing so, he has to mime the activity the teacher said: swimming. Thereon, a third student asks the question, and student 2 says his word/ phrase while playing out what student 1 said and so on.

This useful activity can be used at any time in the class, and it may take from twenty to twenty-five minutes to be completed as each students may spend up to thirty seconds thinking

about and performing the verb phrases. Moreover, it does not need any materials, but encourages the students to use their own bodies to show what they are asked to. Considering that this is a warm-up activity, the teacher can use it to introduce the grammar topic to be studied without giving grades; although if he wants to assess students' performance, he should focus on the learner's ability to use the grammar tense and make complex sentences using it.

3. Group storytelling: This activity can be used with intermediate to advanced (high school) students, and its main purpose is to practice the speaking skill as well as to foster creativity inside the classroom by using narrative tenses (past simple, continuous and perfect). Students are organized in one long line on one side of the room, and try to get to the other side by taking one step at the time. The teacher starts giving a short introduction to a story which is to be completed logically by students. Then, each student needs to add one sentence which should connect logically to what has been said previously so as to complete the story. The challenge here lies in the fact that each student has very limited time (no more than fifteen seconds) to think about a completely new and improvised sentence. Every time the student provides a cohesive sentence, he is allowed to take one step towards the other side of the room. However, if the student's sentence does not connect to what the others have said before, he/she must stay in his position. The first student to get to the other side of the classroom is the biggest storyteller, and therefore, the winner.

This activity can be used as a fun speaking exam as it asks the students to speak, listen, improvise, and invent past stories out of something they have just known about. It does not require any materials, but it does provide the teacher with language proficiency sample to evaluate the students accurately. When assessing students, the teacher could take into account the way learners use narrative tenses, pronunciation, fluency (it can be the time students spend inventing and stating their sentences), and accuracy. Although there is not a time limit

to be allotted, finishing this activity may take one hour or even more as it depends on the number of students and the length of their intervention.

4. **Alternative ending:** This activity can be used with intermediate to advanced (high school) students, and its main objective is to assess learners' writing skills. It is important to remark that this activity might take a long time as it asks students to read a tale and create something new out of this, so it is advisable to spend two fifty-minute classes on it. Therefore, to carry out this task, the teacher should choose some tales or stories whose beginnings and crux are handed out to students in the first class; however, he should not give them their endings since learners' duty is to read the story, and then write an alternative ending which needs to include all characters, and solve the conflict stated in the story. In this activity, the students may spend a long time (up to an hour) reading, taking notes, organizing ideas, and inventing their own denouement while the teacher supports and guides their progress. Each student is to tell his/her ending to the class once this activity has been finished which may take forty minutes more.

Even though it is possible to assign the same tale to every student, it is recommended to choose one different story for each learner as it prevents the class from becoming a tiring, repetitive reading session that focuses on the same book and characters. Finally, it is noteworthy to say that this activity does not only help the teacher to assess writing skill, but it can also be useful to evaluate reading comprehension since it requires the students to understand and complete the assigned story.

Teachers should only remember that the activities to be used in class may vary depending on the context and the students' needs; however, the tasks the teacher chooses must be designed to engage students in using language for hugely meaningful purposes in unrehearsed situations. Moreover, organizational language features as well as accuracy may not be

considered as important as fluency to keep students motivated for language production (Brown, 2000).

Conclusions

Having discussed the advantages and disadvantages of CLT application in high schools from Pasto, it can be said that Colombian educational policies seem to go in the opposite direction to language teaching aims. Too short time to teach highly numerous classes where students appear not to be interested in learning at all, and the lack of proficient English teachers may strongly support teachers' reluctance to try new teaching alternatives, and as a result, English classes may become grammar-study sessions rather than communicative language learning rooms. Moreover, the misleading belief that communicative approaches depend on some fixed activities that do not help students to develop reading and writing skills, leave out grammatical aspects, and restrict the use of students' native language, has led teachers to think that this kind of teaching alternatives are not a good option for them.

This previously mentioned situation has led teachers not to consider to use CLT approach in class, in spite of the fact that some people consider it to be one of the best language teaching approaches, as its hindrances seem to widely outnumber its benefits. However, teachers should consider that the future outcomes would be really valuable, and the objective of making learners effective communicators could become true. It is a fact that CLT application could be very complicated at the very beginning as changing students' attitude towards English learning, overcoming social-economic barriers, and taking great advantage of a very short time, and making students used to playing a new different role is a huge challenge for teachers. Nonetheless, this text shows that some of the most relevant problems teachers may face are associated with students and teachers themselves; but in the end, planning and managing classes, organizing activities, getting outcomes, and leading students

to communicative situations depend on teachers' skills and willingness to do so; therefore, some of those difficulties can be solved inside the classroom.

In this sense, teachers should not limit their classes to a set of activities, or a set of topics; instead of that, they should try to make their classes creative places where students can feel they are taken into account, and their interests and likes are important; that is to say:

“...learners ought to be active, not just reactive, in class. They should be encouraged to ask for information, seek clarification, express an opinion, agree and/or disagree with peers and teachers. More importantly, they should be guided to go beyond memorized patterns and monitored repetitions in order to initiate and participate in meaningful interaction” (Kumaravadivelu, 1993, p.12).

The variety inside classrooms not only helps students improve language learning, but it can also make classes more interactive and amusing for students and teachers themselves.

Recommendations

This research paper has stated different aspects of CLT application, namely weaknesses which were provoked by distinct factors, and strengths which show really valuable advantages. Notwithstanding, so much information has not been studied yet, therefore, the following recommendations are given to improve language learning and teaching practice.

Firstly, governmental policies for language teaching should not be confined to follow a plan that was designed deliberately by external people who do not know the kind of students teachers will work with. That is to say, English teachers should be able to create their syllabi and lesson plans based on their own students and backgrounds so as their aims to meet students' needs.

Secondly, one of the most discouraging things students can find is monotonous and boring classes; therefore, teachers should try to look for different materials and dynamics that can make them feel important in the learning process. In this sense, using authentic materials such as newspaper articles, news broadcast, T.V. series, and others should stop being unusual elements, but become very common resources.

The third recommendation is closely related to the previous one as using authentic materials may not work well enough if teachers rely on boring activities that could waste the use of those materials. For that reason, teachers should try to organize new different activities such as spelling competitions, singing contests, theater performances, board games which can help students practice the target language, etc. This is because that kind of activities could encourage students not only to practice more to do the activity well, but also to learn and acquire what they practice and perform.

Finally, CLT application in Pasto should be studied further as there are many aspects that have not been included in this project, for example, students' opinions about communicative approaches, teachers' perceptions about CLT feasibility, how to include authentic materials, board games, class performances in CLT successfully, etc.

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