Teaching English in Urban Sri Lanka

The Case of Four Government Schools in Colombo

Iresha Madhavi Karunaratne

Abstract

This paper examines the effectiveness of the teaching methodology adopted for teaching English in four government schools in Colombo. The curriculum specifies Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as the teaching methodology that should be used in Sri Lankan schools for teaching English. The data gathered in this study was analysed in relation to three the main principles of CLT, namely use of a variety of teaching materials, reasonable use of the students' mother tongue and a pupil-centred teaching approach. It was observed that the textbook was the sole source of teaching material and classroom activity and that teachers and students depended excessively on the mother tongue during classroom activities. Furthermore, it was also observed that the classrooms were more teacher-centred than pupil-centred. Students were observed to be more comfortable with this 'dominant approach' adopted by teachers. These circumstances hindered the possibility of carrying out an effective communicative classroom as idealised by the proponents of CLT. Teachers' lack of English proficiency and the national examination system which focuses solely on students' reading and writing skills were identified as causing these classroom circumstances. These findings imply a need to improve teacher-training programs and to change the national examination system.

1.0 Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine some aspects of the sociology of English education in Sri Lanka with special attention placed on the classroom-setting. Globalisation has influenced English teaching strategies of Sri Lanka to adopt teaching strategies devised for second language learners in English-speaking Western societies. The present Sri Lankan Government has adopted the communicative approach to teaching English in the government schools (National Institute of Education, 2001). This paper attempts to

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understand the applicability of the communicative approach to teaching English in Sri Lanka.

In post-independent Sri Lanka, several changes were made to the education system introduced by the British rulers. Among such changes was the introduction of free vernacular-media education in all government schools. Consequently English shifted from being the media of instruction[1] to a subject in the wider school curriculum, i.e. the second language (Jayaweera, 1984; Rupasinghe, 1990). Teaching of English as a second language to all Sri Lankans has become a key concern in the country's developmental process of recent years. The greatest problem faced by the nation during the past two decades has been the Sinhala-Tamil ethnic conflict which developed into a devastating civil war, retarding economic and social development of the country. The current education policy, in its attempt to find a solution to this problem, gives priority to the creation of tolerance among children from different ethnic groups (De Mel, 2001). A further goal of education in Sri Lanka is to equip students with the necessary knowledge and technical skills required for the modern employment market (De Lanerolle, 1991; De Mel, 2001). Educational policies of recent years have placed great importance on the teaching of English as an appropriate means of achieving both these goals. The English language therefore, has played and continues to play a distinctive role in the country's development.

1.1 Communicative Language Teaching

Developments of language teaching over recent decades have been strongly founded on the notion of teaching methodology. Among these language teaching methodologies are grammar-translation method, direct method, reading approach, audiolingual method, community language learning, the silent way and total physical response (See Mora, 2002). One of the most recent developments in this field is communicative language teaching.

In Sri Lanka, since the introduction of English to the school curriculum as a second language in the early 1950s, the direct method followed by the grammar-translation

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[1] Some schools established by the British, known as the ‑superior schools‖ (Jayasuriya, 1976), provided an education in the English medium.

method was used for teaching English. The direct method teaches the target language in the target language while the grammar-translation method teaches the target language in the studentsø mother tongue (Mora, 2002; Skela, 1998). These methods have not been successful at improving English proficiency of Sri Lankan school students (Karunaratne, 1993). In its attempts to find a solution for this unsuccessful teaching situation and in keeping up with the global trends in the field of teaching English, the Sri Lankan Government has attempted to adopt communicative teaching practices in the school English classrooms since the late 1980s (National Institute of Education, 1999).

Communicative language teaching places its focus on teaching language -in useø Proponents of this approach, while emphasising the importance of developing -linguistic competenceø in a learner, place greater emphasis on -communicative competenceø (Johnson, 1979; Widdowson, 1979a, 1979b; Wilkins, 1979b). Linguistic competence refers to knowledge about the basic rules of a language (e.g.: grammar, lexis etc.) which a person needs to know in order to use that language. Communicative competence refers to skills other than linguistic which helps learners to place their linguistic knowledge in the social world. For example, it gives the individual an ability to decide the best thing to say in a particular situation.

In achieving the above communicative objectives of language teaching, proponents of the communicative approach recommend several strategies to be used in a language program (See Richards and Rodgers, 2001). The present study is specifically concerned about the following three strategies:

1   Use of a variety of teaching material: The communicative approach involves three types of instructional material: text-based, task-based and *realia* (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). Text-based teaching refers to the use of a textbook in the classroom for teaching and for classroom activities. Task-based teaching involves a variety of games, role-plays, simulations and any other form of classroom activity that reinforces target language communication in the classroom. The final category of material, *realia* refers to authentic teaching material such as newspapers, signs and posters in the target language. According to the proponents of communicative teaching, *realia* is a vital

classroom tool in the attempt to teach language –in useø (Canale and Swain, 1980; Widdowson, 1996).

2 Reasonable use of the studentsø mother tongue in the classroom: Recent trends in the field of linguistics emphasise that use of the studentsø mother tongue in language teaching and learning is a linguistic human right of the students (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1994; Sridhar, 1994). Therefore, the proponents of the communicative approach have given due recognition to the studentsø mother tongue in their teaching strategies. Many researchers have identified the studentsø mother tongue as a *resource* in the language classroom (Cook, 1999; Crawford, 2004; Moodley, 2007; Turnbull and Arnett, 2002). Translation is seen as a useful pedagogical device and therefore, a reasonable use of the mother tongue is recommended (Richards and Rodgers, 2001; Widdowson, 1979b).

3 Pupil-centred teaching approach: Communicative language teaching also involves a teaching approach that is more pupil-centred than teacher-centred. A reconstruction of the traditional teacherøs role is expected in a classroom functioning under the principles of communicative teaching. Traditionally, a teacherøs role was to provide correct models of language and corrective feedback (Littlewood, 1981; Nunan, 1989). Communicative language teaching requires a shift from this teacher-centred approach (teacher as instructor) to a pupil-centred approach (teacher as facilitator of learning). A teacher is expected to be willing to put his/her studentsø learning needs ahead of his/her own behaviour (Brumfit, 1984; Savignon, 1991). Hence it is expected that the students would be allowed to take an active role in the language classroom.

1.2 The Sample and Procedure of Data Collection[2]

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[2] This paper discusses a portion of data gathered for my Ph.D. thesis (Karunaratne, 2003).

Four schools belonging to the highest rank (1AB)[3] of the school hierarchy in Sri Lanka were selected for study. The student sample consisted of 187 female students and 179 male students. The sample consisted exclusively of students learning in the Sinhala-medium in school. The students were from Grade 9 classes (students who are 14 years of age) and two classes from each school were selected for study (in total 8 classes). The teachers who taught English to this sample of students included seven female teachers and one male teacher.

Two methods of qualitative data collection were utilised in the study. Firstly, semi-structured interviews were carried out with the school principals and the teachers who taught the sample of students. The second type of qualitative data collection method used was non-participant observation. Observations had to be non-participant, as the observer/researcher had no formal training in the teaching of English. The researcher spent one calendar month in each school. It was expected that 20 lessons in each class could be observed during this period. But the actual number of lessons observed in one class was less than 20, a situation caused by frequent teacher absenteeism and various administrative decisions of the school. The researcher ideally wanted to sit among or behind the students but the problem of space in classrooms did not allow this. Therefore, the researcher sat in front of the class facing the students. Note taking was the only method adopted for recording interview and observation data.

1.3 The English Classroom

In this study, the observation notes taken by the researcher was analysed in relation to the three principles of communicative language teaching described previously. The primary objective of the school English course is success in the English paper at the General

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[3] The government schools are divided into four categories (presented in descending order of hierarchy) (Balac and Aamot, 1999: 10):

Type 1AB (schools with all streams that include arts, science and commerce in the General Certificate of Education-Advanced Level classes. The Advanced Level examination is the compulsory school terminal national examination and university entrance examination.)

Type 1C (schools having only arts and commerce streams in the A/L classes)

Type 2 (schools having classes from year 1 to General Certificate of Education-Ordinary Level only. The Ordinary Level examination is an optional school terminal national examination.)

Type 3 (schools having classes from year 1 to year 5 or year 8)

Certificate of Education Ordinary Level Examination[4]. This is a "reading and writing" examination. The English syllabus, nevertheless, highlights the importance of preparing students for secondary goals beyond the GCE O/L examination. These secondary goals-national unity and future work opportunities (National Institute of Education, 1999)- would require students to develop communicative abilities in English. Therefore, the data analysis in this paper focuses on the above principles of communicative language teaching, while acknowledging the primary importance of success at an examination based on reading and writing skills. The data will be analysed under three main themes, namely, textbook-based teaching, classroom activities and the role of the teacher.

1.3.1 Textbook-based teaching

Classroom teaching in the sample schools was entirely or mostly textbook-based. The distinction between the syllabus and the textbook described by the proponents of the communicative approach (Wilkins, 1979a) was not observable in these classrooms. A syllabus is a *list* of objectives to be achieved and a list of things to be taught in a course. A textbook *suggests* systematic ways of accomplishing these objectives (Ur, 1991). The main function of a textbook is to provide guidance for teachers (Choudhury, 1998). Therefore, conceptually the syllabus and the textbook do not necessarily coincide with each other. This was not the case in the Sri Lankan schools studied. The Grade 9 English syllabus in Sri Lanka specifies a textbook that lays out the boundaries of the teacher's task. It is expected that teachers would act freely within these boundaries. For example, teachers are expected to design their own classroom activities and assessments. For teachers observed in the present study, the textbook provided more than mere guidance. It was virtually the sole source of classroom activities, assessments, information, grammar and vocabulary. In other words, it was the only teaching material for teachers and the only source of information and of language practice for students. For teachers and (therefore) students, the textbook *was* "the syllabus"

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[4] This examination will be called the GCE O/L examination here onwards.

Teachers were very much concerned about completing the syllabus in order to prepare students for school term tests. For them, completing the syllabus meant the completion of the textbook. Of the eight teachers observed, five teachers expressed their concerns about completing the textbook on time in order to help their students obtain a good pass at the GCE O/L examination. Instances of teachers rushing through a lesson at the expense of improving studentsø linguistic and communicative knowledge were commonly observed during the present study. Some teachers assigned large amounts of textbook-based activities as homework to students in their attempt to complete the textbook. For these teachers, finishing the textbook seemed to be the bulk of their responsibility. The Grade 9 textbook focuses mainly on developing studentsø writing and reading skills due the importance of these skills at the GCE O/L examination. But the syllabus states that teachers should also focus on developing studentsø listening and oral skills (National Institute of Education, 2001). When teachers focus on completing the textbook instead of the actual syllabus, this indirectly takes away studentsø opportunities of listening to or speaking English in the classroom.

Another disadvantage of excessive dependency on the textbook was the inadequate use of non-textbook-based teaching material in the classroom. Research has established that pictures are a useful tool in a language classroom especially in explaining unfamiliar cultural factors (Canagarajah, 1993; McKay, 2000). Though the use of pictures was rare in the classrooms observed, when used, pictures proved to be a useful classroom tool. Pictures were used in two classrooms for explaining the textbook lesson on ±the seasonsø The use of pictures helped the teachers explain climate-related nouns such as snow and dessert to the students. On both occasions when pictures were used in the classroom the students were observed listening, answering and paying attention to teachers. Hence pictures were effective at explaining conditions that are unfamiliar to both teacher and students and in holding studentsø attention.

The communicative approach also involves the use of authentic (*realia*) material in classrooms (Clarke, 1989). However, in the classrooms observed such material was rarely used as a result of the importance given to the textbook. When used, the teachers seemed to

lack the knowledge and training to make these materials useful for students. For example, two teachers brought English newspapers to the classroom for the lesson "Newspapers". One teacher used newspaper advertisements to introduce catch phrases to the students while the other used a newspaper article to describe the difference between the *noun* "extract" and *verb* "extract" On both occasions, the newspapers and their content were not the primary focus of discussion within the classroom. The authentic material, in this case, was not integral to the improvement of students' linguistic or communicative competence.

Electronic teaching aids are another classroom tool recommended by the communicative approach (Kramsch, 1993). Such tools were never used in the classrooms observed even when facilities such as televisions, video players and cassette players were available in the schools. Two schools in the sample had photocopying facilities. One of these two schools also had a well-equipped computer laboratory. These facilities were not utilised by any of the teachers for reasons not explored in the current study.

Similar to teaching materials, classroom activities were also mainly from the textbook. The use of non-textbook classroom activities was extremely rare. When used, such activities showed a remarkable increase in the extent of student involvement in and enthusiasm towards the lesson. However, the importance attached to the textbook by the teachers seemed to lead them towards ignoring or being unconcerned about the positive effects of such material and activities.

Two factors could be triggering this extreme dependency on the textbook. Firstly, the primary goal of this entire language program, the GCE O/L examination, focuses on the textbook and on reading and writing skills. Teachers *have to* teach the textbook in order to prepare students for this examination. Many other researchers too have pointed out that having an examination as the course-objective applies several restrictions to teachers (LoCastro, 1996; Savignon, 1991; Shamim, 1996). This responsibility of familiarising students with the textbook takes away any incentives for teachers to choose the content of their lessons. The students also *seem* content with the knowledge that they are being prepared for the GCE O/L examination.

A second factor that produces the afore-mentioned dependency on the textbook could be teachers' lack of English proficiency. For example, three teachers in the sample unreservedly expressed their desire to learn *more* English. Linguistic knowledge has been considered very important in a language teacher's knowledge-repertoire, especially for conducting a communicative language classroom (LoCastro, 1996). But many Sri Lankan teachers of English lack this competency even after some years of pre- or in-service training (Karunaratne, 1993; Murdoch, 1994). Researchers have pointed out various strategies adopted by such teachers to conceal their lack of English proficiency from the students (See Allwright, 1996; Coleman, 1996; Prabhu, 1987). The present study identifies teachers' dependency on the textbook as one such strategy.

1.3.2 Classroom Activities

The communicative approach involves a range of classroom activities as a source of language practice for students. Such classroom activities, it is argued, should have some missing information that needs to be acquired by communicating with another person who has that information (Johnson, 1979). These activities are broadly divided into two categories; namely pre-communicative and communicative (Littlewood, 1981). Pre-communicative activities include grammar and quasi-communicative activities (such as drills and role plays) that are required for subsequent communicative activities. Communicative activities engage students in actual communication with others. All activities observed in this study stopped at the pre-communicative stage without moving on to the communicative stage.

The most common type of tasks observed in this study was meaning-focused. These are activities that engage learners in understanding, extending or conveying meaning by handling their linguistic (grammar) knowledge as demanded by the situation (Prabhu, 1987). Within meaning-focused activities is a sub-category identified as information-gap activities that require learners to transfer information from one person to another (Prabhu, 1987). In the present study, information-gap activities mainly took the form of oral or written comprehension questions related to a text or role-play in the textbook.

Information-gap activities, though common, were not of the nature indicated by communicative language teaching. That is, the information that was exchanged was not unknown to either students or teachers and therefore, 'doubt' the essence of information-gap activities (Johnson, 1979), was non-existent. The information has already been *read* in the classroom and therefore, most of the information required by the teacher could be picked up from the textbook. The same was true of the comprehension questions given in the textbook. Such questions granted limited opportunities for students to engage in independent language production, i.e. communication.

1.3.3 <u>Mother Tongue Dependency</u>

The teachers' and students' excessive dependency on the mother tongue was another problem related to the classroom activities. The tendency of both students and teachers to revert to the mother tongue very often in the classroom hindered the oral communicative objectives of classroom activities. Teachers differed in the extent of mother tongue usage in the classroom. Some teachers did almost all their lessons in Sinhala while others resorted to Sinhala when they thought it to be easier for them and students.

The use of the mother tongue by teachers seemed to fulfil two classroom requirements. Firstly, they used Sinhala in any teaching situations that seemed difficult for them to handle in English. Here the students' mother tongue is used not as a resource to help students but as a resource to make the 'teachers' job easier' (Skela, 1998). Such instances also suggested problems related to teacher's English proficiency. Secondly, teachers used Sinhala to explain grammar and instructions for classroom tasks. These can be considered situations of using mother tongue as a 'resource' to improve students' target language comprehension.

Observations related to mother tongue usage of the students showed that all students, irrespective of their English fluency, preferred to speak in Sinhala with each other during classroom activities or when interacting socially. Similarly the majority of students (except the students who were fluent in English) used Sinhala in all their interactions with the teacher. The majority of students showed signs of reluctance or shyness to speak in

English in the classroom. This may have been due to a lack of confidence. Evidence of such a lack of confidence and its inhibiting effects has been a recurrent observation in this study. Students' lack of confidence was most noticeable at times when they were reluctant to even ‒read out‒ something in English from the textbook.

Proponents of the communicative approach recommend the use of pair or group work as a strategy for making students communicate in the target language (Pica, 1988, 1996). But research has found that the tendency shown by students to revert to the mother tongue hinders the communicative objectives of such group activities (Holliday, 1994). This was true also of the present sample. Another problem with group activities, as pointed out by Pica (1988), is the tendency for the entire group to depend on one fluent student to find the answer for the activity. In the present sample, at times one fluent student in the group was seen working out and writing the answer on behalf of the group. Both these factors are consequences of students' lack of English fluency and confidence.

The discussion shows that students' mother tongue is an indispensable ‒resource‒ in the English classroom of Sri Lankan schools. It is indispensable because it functions as a ‒comfort zone‒ for both teachers and students who have to communicate and teach/learn in a non-native language. This comfort zone, in fact, makes the classroom more communicative by eliminating the disadvantages of not knowing English. Excessive use of Sinhala, however, seems to take away the opportunities these students have to improve their ability to communicate in English. This excessive dependency on the mother tongue could also be caused by the fact that all other school teaching and other school related interactions occur in the Sinhala medium. Using Sinhala in the classroom seems to have become a ‒second nature‒ for these teachers and students.

1.3.4 The Role of the Teacher

The communicative approach involves a teaching strategy that is less dominated by the teacher, providing opportunities for students to contribute to what they learn and how they learn it (Nunan, 1989). It has been argued that such a student-centred approach would lead to a friendly and supportive learning environment that minimises classroom anxiety for

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students (Littlewood, 1984). In the sample schools, this communicative principle had been adapted to suit the Sri Lankan teacher-student requirements.

All the teachers in this study were *traditional* teachers. Here, the word traditional denotes the dominant role taken by teachers within the classroom (Nunan, 1989). Teaching was done mainly from the front of the class. In every classroom, the teacher did most of the talking[5]. Student obedience in all classrooms meant complying with the teacher's expectations. Most of the time, teachers taught the textbook and expected students to participate within the frame of the textbook. When teachers were not strict[6] to the extent of forcing students to comply with them, most students drifted away from the lesson without engaging in any activities. Therefore, teacher-dominance and strictness were necessary factors in these classrooms for learning to take place.

Judging from comments made by students regarding the teacher in informal conversations with the researcher, students preferred such dominant and strict teachers. Students' preferences for teachers were also linked to teacher's use of Sinhala in the classroom. The teachers who were extremely strict also used more or some Sinhala in their teaching. A combination of these two factors seemed crucial to becoming a "preferred" teacher. Use of the mother tongue in teaching seems to neutralise the strictness of the teacher. When teachers appeared lenient, but also used the mother tongue, the effect on students' behaviour was not the same as the strict type of teacher. Such lenient teachers had problems of retaining students' attention. Therefore, it seemed that considerable teacher dominance and frequent use of the mother tongue were necessary factors for becoming an effective teacher.

In conclusion, the present study shows that a dominant approach to English teaching has more potential of bringing successful language acquisition in the Sri Lankan context. Two reasons related to the learning culture of Sri Lanka could be leading to this

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[5] In this study classroom dominance was defined as "who does most of the talking in the classroom"

[6] Teacher strictness was defined in reference to punitive measures and reward dealt out by the teacher in order to engage students in learning activities. Punishment was either verbal or physical.

situation. Firstly, the students have got accustomed to such a teaching environment from a very early age. All school teaching takes a similar approach. Secondly, the Sri Lankan cultural practice of compliance with authority or adults could be reinforcing the teaching practices in the English classroom.

1.4 Conclusions and Implications of the Study

The study points out several difficulties encountered by the four schools studied in implementing the communicative approach. These difficulties are partly caused by certain characteristics embedded in the learning culture of the country:

1 Much emphasis is placed on the textbook because of its importance at national examinations.

2 Students and teachers seem accustomed to using the mother tongue in the English classroom because the wider school curriculum is in the mother tongue medium.

3 Students and teachers seem comfortable with a teaching approach that attributes a dominant role to the teacher in the classroom also because other school teaching occurs within a similar framework.

Adding to these difficulties is the lack of English proficiency possessed by teachers and students. Their lack of English proficiency also seems to result in the excessive dependency on the textbook and the mother tongue. Furthermore, students seem reluctant and shy to speak in English during English lessons due to their lack of English proficiency. This seems to obstruct group work which would enhance their ability to communicate in English.

These findings suggest possibilities for challenging a widely held view that the English course is relatively well implemented in the urban schools that are superior in physical and human resources (De Silva and De Silva, 1990; Rupasinghe, 1990). However,

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the purposive nature of the sample studied here inhibits any generalisations about the entire Sri Lankan school system, that is, the situation in rural and deprived urban schools has not been examined in this study. The findings raise considerable doubt about the communicativeness of an English lesson in these schools where social conditions, teaching conditions and physical facilities are claimed to be inadequate. The expectation that communicative language teaching would be effectively implemented in 'privileged' urban schools was challenged, as was the expectation that teachers would be well qualified.

The findings of this study have several implications for education policy planners of Sri Lanka. It indicates the necessity of improving the English teacher-training programs and the national examination system for the successful implementation of communicative language teaching methods. English teacher training should focus more on improving English proficiency and communicative teaching abilities of English teachers. Communicative activities cannot succeed if the teacher does not possess at least a reasonable level of English fluency. Furthermore, the success of any improvements to educational programs depends on whether the suggested change is reflected in the examination process. If the examination system does not test students' oral communicative skills, students' motivation to speak English in the classroom will not improve and teachers will continue to ignore oral communication in the classroom.

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