Beyond communicative language teaching: What’s ahead?

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Abstract

The emergence of English as a global language, technological innovation and a growing need for learner autonomy are changing the contexts of language learning rapidly and profoundly. Recognition of the current complexity and diversity of these contexts has led some to suggest that we have moved ‘beyond methods’ to a postmethod condition (Kumaravadivelu, 2002), that the quest for a better method has been or should be abandoned in favor of the identification of practices or strategies of teaching designed to reflect local needs and experiences. This paper considers the professional consequences of the challenges facing the language teaching profession in the years ahead. How will the needs and goals of the next generation of learners be met? Will applied linguists continue to assert an expert or authority status in the determination of practice? Or will a postmethod era lead to the recognition of teachers as the professional decision-makers and theory builders that they in fact could be?

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1. A glance at history

Concerned with the exploration of the functions of language as a primary means of human social interaction, linguistic pragmatics offers many promising, practice oriented linguistic fields of inquiry to engage contemporary scholars. Among them, none currently enjoys more lively debate than the field of language pedagogy. Language teachers have been with us for as long as there have been languages. And their engagement with language learners constitutes a fascinating arena for the study of social interaction. This paper takes a brief historical look at the classroom teaching of second or ‘foreign’ language teaching as a backdrop to a consideration of the current phenomenon of what has come to be known as communicative language teaching (CLT). Just what is CLT? Is it a method of teaching? Does it have characteristics that are universally understood and implemented? If so, what are they? Most important, does CLT signal a meaningful and lasting reorientation of
classroom language teaching, or does it represent but yet another swing of the pedagogy pendulum?

Throughout the history of the world, the goal of most naturally occurring or out-of-school language learning has always been the development of useful communication skills to meet needs of immediate or long-term social interaction. With few exceptions, however, the documentation of second or ‘foreign’ language teaching methods focuses understandably on instructed classroom learning. In the West, controversies surrounding how and what to teach in classrooms along with how to assess learner achievement have been documented as far back as the Middle Ages when Latin was the lingua franca. Musumeci (1997) offers instructive examples of 14th through 17th century curricular reforms initiated by gifted philosophers and pedagogues with a goal of teaching Latin as a language of wider communication. Without exception, while their designs were theoretically sound and implementation on a small scale successful, adoption efforts on a broader scale invariably led to a distortion of basic tenets and ultimate failure.

The modern history of school language teaching offers a similar profile. Well into the 20th century, Latin and Greek were the languages deemed proper academic subjects for the schools that mostly boys attended. The study of classical languages was valued as training for the mind, an exercise in logical thought. In the U.S., immigrant groups provided informal Saturday classes in German and other home languages, and upper class girls took lessons in conversational French along with piano and embroidery, but no modern languages were taught in school. When French and German finally gained entry into secondary school programs, the model of instruction was that of Latin and Greek. Translation, memorization of vocabulary lists, and verb conjugation were the norm in what we have come to know as the ‘traditional’ method of language teaching. After considerable debate, university acceptance of modern language study eventually followed. In England, Cambridge did not institute modern language degrees until the 1880s and Oxford some 20 years later. Howatt (1984:134) recounts how the university involvement in determining the content of secondary school programs effectively stifled any reform efforts toward more communicative teaching. Concern for academic ‘respectability’ banned any effort to teach the spoken language and philology took its place.

When the expansive growth of free and universal public education began in the 20th century, the classroom language teaching methods set in these early days offered a ready model. Despite repeated challenges from language educators and, more recently, applied linguistics with a research focus on second language acquisition (SLA), school language programs continued to prove resistant to change, seemingly unable to break away from what educational reform historians have termed the ‘deep structure’ of school and schooling (Tye, 2000).

Reform efforts have persisted nonetheless. Today in the 21st century, following a flurry of enthusiasm for the ultimately discredited audio-lingual method (A-LM) (see Savignon, 1983, 1997), so-called communicative language teaching (CLT) has become a buzzword in discussions of the practice and theory of second and foreign language teaching. The appeal is seemingly worldwide. And yet, when it comes to curricular design and implementation, there persists widespread confusion and debate. With the emergence of English as a global language, and with technological innovation and a growing need for learner autonomy challenging language teaching programs worldwide, an examination of the basic tenets of this much heralded ‘new’ approach to classroom teaching and the current practice-oriented reform efforts it has inspired is instructive. Viewed with an awareness of the centuries long history of language pedagogy, such an examination may offer valuable insights for future theory building in this dynamic field of linguistic pragmatics.
2. Linguistic theory and classroom practice

The essence of CLT is the engagement of learners in communication in order to allow them to develop their communicative competence. The elaboration of what we know as CLT can be traced to concurrent 20th-century developments in linguistic theory and language learning curriculum design both in Europe and in North America. In Europe, the language needs of a rapidly increasing group of immigrants and guest workers along with a rich British linguistic tradition that included social as well as linguistic context in the description of language behavior (Firth, 1930; Halliday, 1978) led to the development of a syllabus for learners based on notional-functional concepts of language use. With sponsorship from the Council of Europe, a Threshold Level of language ability was proposed for each of the languages of Europe in terms of what learners should be able to do with the language (Van Ek, 1975). Functions were based on the assessment of learner needs and specified the end result or goal of an instructional program. Concurrent development within Europe focused on the process of classroom language learning.

In Germany, against a backdrop of social democratic concerns for individual empowerment, language teaching methodologists took the lead in the development of classroom materials that encouraged learner choice (Candlin, 1978). Their systematic collection of exercise types for communicatively oriented English language teaching was used in teacher in-service courses and workshops to guide curriculum change. Exercises were designed to exploit the variety of social meanings contained within particular grammatical structures.

At the same time, in paradigm-challenging research on adult classroom second language acquisition, Savignon (1972) used the term communicative competence to characterize the ability of classroom language learners to interact with other speakers; this ability to make meaning was distinguished from their ability to recite dialogues or to perform on discrete-point tests of grammatical knowledge. At a time when pattern practice and error avoidance were the rule in language teaching, this study of adult classroom acquisition of French looked at the effect of practice in the use of coping strategies as part of an instructional program. By encouraging the students to ask for information, to seek clarification, to use circumlocution and whatever other linguistic and non-linguistic resources they could muster to negotiate meaning, to stick to the communicative task at hand, teachers were invariably leading learners to take risks, to speak in other than memorized patterns. The coping strategies identified in the Savignon study became the basis for the subsequent identification by Canale and Swain (1980) of strategic competence in their now classic classroom framework for communicative competence. Published in the inaugural issue of Applied Linguistics, the Canale and Swain framework provided what would prove a pedagogical breakthrough in extending the description of language use and learning in terms of more than just sentence-level structure that had remained the focus of audiolingualism. The three components it identified were grammatical competence, or linguistic competence in the restricted sense of the term as used by Chomsky, sociolinguistic competence, or rules of usage, and strategic competence. Canale (1983) subsequently identified discourse competence as a distinct fourth component.

CLT thus can be seen to derive from a multidisciplinary perspective that includes, at least, linguistics, psychology, philosophy, sociology, and educational research. The focus has been the elaboration and implementation of programs and methodologies that promote the development of functional language ability through learner participation in communicative events. Central to a representation of CLT, however, is the understanding of language learning as both an educational and a political issue. Language teaching is inextricably tied to language policy. The selection of methods and materials appropriate to both the goals and context of teaching begins with an analysis of learning in a given educational setting.
3. Discourse competence and English as a global language

Along with a better understanding of the second language acquisition process itself, the emergence of English as a global or international language has had a profound influence on language teaching, confronting language teacher education with new demands worldwide.

With specific reference to English, CLT includes recognition that the norms followed by those in the “inner circle” of English language users, to adopt the terminology proposed by Kachru (1992), may not be an appropriate goal for learners (Pennycook, 2001; Savignon, 2001, 2002, 2003). Moreover, in a post-colonial, multicultural world where users of English in the “outer” and “expanding circles” outnumber those in the inner circle by a ratio of more than two to one, reference to the terms “native” or “native-like” in the evaluation of communicative competence is simply inappropriate. Even the decision as to what is or is not one’s ‘native’ or ‘first’ language is arbitrary and seems best left to the person concerned.

The influence of community values and attitudes on instructional programs can be found in language programs worldwide and is often precipitated by economic or political events. Individuals differ markedly moreover in their reactions to learning a language for communication. Some may welcome apprenticeship in a new language and view it as an opportunity. For others however the need to find new ways of self-expression may be accompanied by feelings of alienation and estrangement. When two or more languages come together, two or more persons come together. And the engagement that follows invariably involves issues of power and identity. When asked what it was like to write in English, Korean novelist Yun (1998), replied that it was “like putting on a new dress.” Writing in English makes her feel fresh, lets her see herself in a new way, offers her freedom to experiment. Her sentiments stand in sharp contrast to those of the protagonist in a short story by novelist Salman Rushdie:

Give me a name, America, make of me a Buzz or Chip or Spike. . . No longer a historian but a man without histories let me be. I’ll rip my lying mother tongue out of my throat and speak your broken English instead (Rushdie, 2001:75).

With respect to cross-varietal differences in the English language, documentation to date has focused most often on sentence-level lexical and syntactic features. Consequently, attempts such as the Educational Testing Service (ETS) Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) to represent norms for a ‘standard’ English for international communication reflect a primarily lexical and syntactic emphasis (Lowenberg, 1992). Differences in the way genres are constructed, interpreted and used extend well beyond lexical and syntactic variation. Such differences are currently thought of as discursive in nature and included in discourse competence, the fourth component of communicative competence as identified by Canale (1983).

The hegemony of essentially Western conventions at the levels of discourse and genre is not easily represented or challenged. Pressures for a “democratisation” of discourse practices (Fairclough, 1992) have in some settings resulted in genre mixing and the creation of new genres. In professional communities, however, conformity to the practices of an established membership continues to serve an important gate-keeping function. The privilege of challenging generic conventions becomes available only to those who enjoy a certain stature or visibility. With particular reference to the academic community, Bhatia (1997) summarizes the situation as follows:

Much of the academic discourse still fails to acknowledge the sources of variations, especially those of marginality and exclusion, giving the impression that there is, or should be, no variation in the way genres are constructed, interpreted and used (p. 369).
4. Sociocultural contexts of competence

For sociolinguist Berns (1990), a definition of a communicative competence appropriate for a given group of learners should reflect sociocultural contexts of language use. Similarly, the selection of a methodology appropriate to the attainment of communicative competence requires an understanding of sociocultural differences in styles of learning. Curricular innovation is best advanced by the development of local materials which, in turn, depends on the involvement of local classroom teachers.

Her summary of the core tenets of CLT is unambiguous and theoretically sound (Berns, 1990, cited in Savignon, 2002:6):

1. Language teaching is based on a view of language as communication. That is, language is seen as a social tool which speakers and writers use to make meaning; we communicate about something to someone for some purpose, either orally or in writing.

2. Diversity is recognized and accepted as part of language development and use in second language learners and users as it is with first language users.

3. A learner’s competence is considered in relative, not absolute, terms of correctness.

4. More than one variety of a language is recognized as a model for learning and teaching.

5. Culture is seen to play an instrumental role in shaping speakers’ communicative competence, both in their first and subsequent languages.

6. No single methodology or fixed set of techniques is prescribed.

7. Language use is recognized as serving the ideational, the interpersonal, and the textual functions, as defined by Halliday, and is related to the development of learners’ competence in each.

8. It is essential that learners be engaged in doing things with language, that is, that they use language for a variety of purposes, in all phases of learning. Learner expectations and attitudes have increasingly come to be recognized for their role in advancing or impeding curricular change.

Numerous sociolinguistic issues await attention. Variation in the speech community and its relationship to language change are central to sociolinguistic inquiry. Sociolinguistic perspectives on variability and change highlight the folly of describing native speaker competence, let alone nonnative speaker competence, in terms of “mastery” or “command” of a system. And learner language systems show even greater instability and variability in terms of both the amount and the rate of change. Sociolinguistic concerns with identity and accommodation help to explain the construction by bilinguals of a “variation space” which is different from that of a native speaker. It may include retention of any number of features of a previously acquired system of phonology, syntax, discourse, or communication strategies. As is the case with learner attitudes, the phenomenon may be individual or, in those settings where there is a community of learners, general.

Such sociolinguistic perspectives have been important in understanding the implications of norm, appropriacy, and variability for CLT. They continue to suggest avenues of inquiry for further research and materials development. Use of authentic language data has underscored the importance of context, such things as setting, roles, and genre in interpreting the meaning of a text. A range of both oral and written *texts in context* provides learners with a variety of language experiences, experiences they need to construct their own variation space, to make determinations of appropriacy in their own expression of meaning. “Competent” in this instance is not necessarily synonymous with “native-like.” Negotiation in CLT highlights the need for interlinguistic, that is, intercultural awareness on the part of all involved (Byram, 1997).
Better understanding of the strategies used in the negotiation of meaning offers a potential for improving classroom practice of the needed skills.

Although we have become accustomed to thinking of communication in terms of two channels, oral and written, such distinction is far from neat and is becoming increasingly blurred. The rapid expansion of electronic messengerie, has led to the development of styles that appear at once to be both written and oral. Norms of appropriacy in this new medium continue to evolve and will undoubtedly show considerable fluctuation before they achieve some semblance of stability. To be sure, language use is governed by norms. But just as we have seen with regard to discourse style and genre, language practice is also creative and evolves with time in response to changes in communicative needs and opportunities. Established norms are forever susceptible to challenge. When it comes to Internet communication, we are still on day one.

5. Sociocultural competence for a dialogue of cultures

Consistent with a view of language as social behavior, sociolinguistic competence is, as we have seen, integral to overall communicative competence. Second or foreign language culture and its teaching have of course long been a concern of language teachers. But if early research addressed the possibility of including some aspects of culture in a foreign language curriculum (for example, Lado, 1957), most recent discussion has underscored the strong links between language and culture and their relevance for teaching and curriculum design (Valdes, 1986; Byram, 1989; Damen, 1990; Kramsch, 1993, 1995, 1998). So dominant has become the view of culture and language as integral, one to the other, that the term sociocultural has come to be substituted for the term sociolinguistic in representing the components of communicative competence (Byram, 1997, Savignon, 2002; Savignon and Sysoyev, 2002).

Interest in teaching culture along with language has led to the emergence of various integrative approaches. The Russian scholar Saphonova (1996) has introduced a sociocultural approach to teaching modern languages that she describes as “teaching for intercultural L2 communication in a spirit of peace and a dialogue of cultures” (p. 62). In addition to the grammatical, discourse, and strategic features of language use in the L2 curriculum, Saphonova places particular emphasis on the development of sociocultural competence.

Dialogue of cultures is a term introduced by Bakhtin (1981, 1986), a philosopher who sees dialogue as the very essence of humanity and mutual understanding. As the term is used here, culture is seen to be a concentration of all other meanings (social, spiritual, logical, emotional, moral, esthetic) of human existence (Bibler, 1991:38). Elaborating on these two concepts, scholars have suggested that culture can be seen as a special form or link of interaction between civilizations and epochs. Seen in this way, culture exists only in the special relationships between past, present, and future in the history of humankind. For example, inasmuch as it provides a link of the present with both the past and the future, the 20th century can be seen as a period of interaction between the cultures of the 19th and 21st centuries. Given the dialogic nature of culture, we cannot fully understand one culture in the absence of contact with other cultures. Thus, dialogue can be seen to be at the very core of culture, where culture is understood as a dialogical self-consciousness of every civilization.

The emergence of a focus on sociocultural competence can be seen today in European nations generally. The free flow of people and knowledge within the European Union has increased both the need and the opportunity for language learning and intercultural understanding. In response, there is increased attention to learner autonomy in language education. Network-based computer-mediated communication (CMC) is increasingly being used to create discourse
6. What CLT is not

The widespread promotion of a jumble of materials and activities labeled ‘communicative’ has understandably resulted in some uncertainty as to what are and are not essential features of CLT. A theoretically grounded representation is thus strengthened by a brief clarification of what CLT is not.

CLT is not concerned exclusively with face-to-face oral communication. The principles of CLT apply equally to reading and writing activities that involve readers and writers engaged in the interpretation, expression, and negotiation of meaning; the goals of CLT depend on learner needs in a given context. CLT does not require small group or pair work; group tasks have been found helpful in many contexts as a way or providing increased opportunity and motivation for communication. However, classroom group or pair work should not be considered an essential feature and may well be inappropriate in some contexts. Finally, CLT does not exclude a focus on metalinguistic awareness or knowledge of rules of syntax, discourse, and social appropriateness.

CLT cannot be found in any one textbook or set of curricular materials inasmuch as strict adherence to a given text is not likely to be true to the processes and goals of CLT. In keeping with the notion of context of situation, CLT is properly viewed as an approach, or theory of intercultural communicative competence to be used in developing materials and methods appropriate to a given context of learning. No less than the means and norms of communication they are designed to reflect, communicative teaching methods will no doubt continue to be explored and adapted.

7. CLT and teacher education

Considerable resources, both human and monetary, are currently being deployed around the world to respond to the need for language teaching that is appropriate for the communicative needs of learners. In the literature on CLT, teacher education has not received adequate attention. What happens when teachers try to make changes in their teaching in accordance with various types of reform initiatives, whether top-down ministry of education policy directives or teacher generated responses to social and technological change? In a decided shift from earlier efforts to implement audio-lingual methodology through a top-down, theory to classroom approach, an increasing number of language teaching methodologists are turning their attention to the practical understanding of the participants themselves. Empirical engagement with informants serves to validate claims of a pragmatic focus for language pedagogy, bringing it more closely in line with other fields in the general discipline of linguistic pragmatics. A number of recent reports of reform efforts in different nations provide a thought-provoking perspective on language teaching today as the collaborative and context-specific human activity that it is. Such first-hand observation provides valuable insights for researchers, program administrators, and prospective or practicing teachers who work or expect to work in these and other international settings.

7.1. Curricular reform in Japan

Several recent studies have focused on curricular reform in Japan. Redirection of English language education by Mombusho, the Japan Ministry of Education, includes the introduction of communities across geopolitical boundaries (see, for example, Brammerts, 1996; Chiu and Savignon, 2006).
a communicative syllabus, the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program, and overseas in-service training for teachers. Previous encouragement to make classrooms more “communicative” through the addition of “communicative activities” led to the realization by Mombusho that teachers felt constrained by a structural syllabus that continued to control the introduction and sequence of grammatical features. With the introduction of a new national syllabus, structural controls were relaxed and teachers found more freedom in the introduction of syntactic features. Wada (1994:1), a university professor and senior advisor to Mombusho in promoting English language teaching reform in Japan, explains the significance of these efforts: “The basic goal of the revision was to prepare students to cope with the rapidly occurring changes toward a more global society.” The report urged Japanese teachers to place much more emphasis on the development of communicative competence in English. However, subsequent exploration into how EFL teachers learn to teach in a particular context (Sato, 2002) has highlighted the context-specific nature of teacher beliefs which may place an emphasis on managing students, often to the exclusion of opportunities for English language learning.

7.2. High stakes public examinations in Hong Kong and Costa Rica

Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, Cheng (2002, 2005) has documented the influence of a new, more communicative English language test on the classroom teaching of English in Hong Kong. In keeping with curricular redesign to reflect a more task-based model of learning, alternative public examinations were developed to measure learners’ ability to make use of what they have learned, to solve problems and complete tasks. However, the findings of Cheng’s ambitious multi-year study showed the washback effect of the new examination on classroom teaching to be limited. There was a change in classroom teaching at the content level but not at the more important level of method.

A multi-case study in Costa Rica, a small nation with a long democratic tradition of public education, offers yet another view of the influence of public examinations on classroom teaching. Quesada-Inces (2001), a teacher educator of many years experience, explored the relationship between teaching practice and the Bachillerato test of English, a national standardized reading comprehension test administered at the end of secondary school. Although teachers expressed a strong interest in developing learner communicative ability in speaking and writing English, the reading comprehension test was seen to dominate classroom emphasis, particularly in the last two years of secondary school. The findings match what Messick (1996) has called “negative washback,” produced by construct under-representation and construct irrelevance. In other words, the Bachillerato test of English does not cover all the content of the curriculum; ultimately it assesses skills less relevant for the development of learner communicative competence than those skills that go unmeasured.

7.3. English in Taiwan

Looking at another Asian setting, Wang (2002) describes the use and teaching of English in Taiwan. Adopting a sociocultural perspective on language use and language learning prerequisite to pedagogical innovation, Wang considers attitude, function, pedagogy (Berns, 1990), and learner beliefs with respect to classroom teaching practice. Paralleling the 1997 move to early English education in South Korea, an island-wide initiative in Taiwan to promote CLT in schools has led to the introduction of English at the 5th grade level. In addressing a gathering of university professors of English, the Harvard educated mayor of Taipei has affirmed his ambitious goals for
the city (Savignon, 2002). He would like to make Taipei a bilingual environment, with all signs in English as well as in Chinese. To underscore the need for English if Taiwan is to remain economically competitive, he makes specific reference to the TOEFL scores of students in mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore. The very presence of the mayor at a professional meeting of English teachers signals a recognition of the need for cooperation in attaining goals of communicative competence. Wang summarizes the findings of her study as follows:

> Much has been done to meet the demand for competent English users and effective teaching in Taiwan. Current improvements, according to the teacher experts, include the change in entrance examinations, the new curriculum with a goal of teaching for communicative competence, and the island-wide implementation in 2001 of English education in the elementary schools. However, more has to be done to ensure quality teaching and learning in the classrooms. Based on the teacher experts’ accounts, further improvements can be stratified into three interrelated levels related to teachers, school authorities, and the government. Each is essential to the success of the other efforts (Wang, 2002:145).

### 7.4. Language Teaching in the U.S.

The launching of the project ‘Goals 2000’ marks the first time in U.S. history that the federal government has addressed issues of curriculum and assessment. The National Standards for Foreign Language Learning (NSFLL) are represented in terms of five different goal areas known as The Five Cs: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. Each goal area consists of two or three standards and sample progress indicators for grades 4, 8 and 12. The drafting of these standards was guided by the project’s statement of philosophy:

> Language and communication are at the heart of human experience. The United States must educate students who are linguistically and culturally equipped to communicate successfully in a pluralistic American society and abroad. This imperative envisions a future in which ALL students will develop and maintain proficiency in English and at least one other language, modern or classical. Children who come to school from non-English backgrounds should also have opportunities to develop further proficiencies in their first language. (American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2000:1, emphasis added).

Together, the Five Cs reflect a focus on what learners can do with the language. They represent a holistic, communicative approach to language learning, signaling a move away from the pedagogical representation of language ability as consisting of four skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing and components such as grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation to encourage consideration of the discourse and sociocultural features of language use. Culture is viewed as integral to language (see Atkinson, 2002; Savignon, 1983, 1997; Hall, 2002).

Research, however, continues to show a disconnection between the theory explained in university methods classes and classroom teaching practices. Despite the long-standing success of immersion programs of various kinds, first in Canada and then in the U.S., there persists considerable confusion among classroom teachers and their students as to the meaning of CLT. International students who come to U.S. universities for a Master of Arts degree in the teaching of English as a second language (MATESL) degree with a goal of learning to teach English, must often look hard to find examples of CLT in local schools. Burke (2006) documents the difficulty of getting pre-service teachers trained in strategies of communicative language teaching to
implement these same strategies when they make the transition to secondary school classrooms. Not surprisingly, a study of the Spanish learners in these same classrooms recorded a incomplete and no doubt not uncommon understanding of CLT.

On the whole, these world language students do understand communicative language teaching and the reasoning behind it, even if some of them consider one of its potential components, namely complete immersion, too difficult. As Michael from Sharon’s class said, ‘If you just sit there, you’re not going to learn. Interaction is key.’ There was however some confusion among Sam’s students between communicative activities and activities that are just plain fun. When the questionnaire prompted them, ‘Describe a communicative activity that you would enjoy doing in your classroom,’ four of the students responded by writing about fast-paced games or inventive forms of positive reinforcement. One student suggested his class do ‘something with a ball. If you get a question right or answer how you’re supposed to, you get a shot, or be rewarded with food.’ One of his classmates brought up ‘the shouting game’ where the teacher gives two teams identical stacks of note cards with vocabulary words on them and assigns each team member a number; the teacher calls out an English word and a number, and the student assigned that number has to hold up the card with the Spanish equivalent on it and pronounce the Spanish word correctly.

While these games might be included in a communicative curriculum, they are not in themselves communicative (Stilson, 2004:30–31).

The integrative, communicative perspective of language development reflected in the NSFLL has underscored the overriding need for U.S. education to promote cross-cultural awareness. This need is perhaps best conveyed in the words of students themselves. As an introduction to the concept negotiation of meaning (Savignon, 1983, 1997), participants in a freshman seminar at the Pennsylvania State University were each paired with an international graduate student for purposes of exploring cultural differences and similarities. They were asked to note the communication problems they encountered along with the strategies they and their partner devised for dealing with them. Among other things, they were asked “Would you like social behavior, community, and scholarly conduct to be a bigger or smaller portion of the first-year seminar?” Their responses included the following (Savignon and Sysoyev, 2005:358):

- It is very easy for someone in a specific culture to limit themselves from the views of outsiders. Many people do not have the opportunity to see different cultures. This seclusion causes misunderstanding in why people are different. When given the opportunity to view another culture, much can be learned. Not just about the different culture, but how the other culture views you. This project gave me a small look into Chinese culture, but also a chance to see how my culture is viewed.
- Alex and I met in the HUB [the campus undergraduate student center] for most of our interactions. We would start off by enjoying a meal just leisurely talking and then we would begin our introspection. Alex first told me about some of the difficulties he had understanding American undergraduates, specifically black people. I didn’t know whether or not to take offense to this, being a member of the black community, because it was such a generalization. But, because I doubted he meant it in a derogatory way, I just laughed it off and we continued our conversation.
- I learned a lot from Jin, in particular, about the Korean language and culture. I was always under the impression that Korean was much like any other Asian language, particularly Chinese. After some in depth comparisons, I discovered that my original thoughts were quite incorrect.
• I met and spoke with a man from a country I had heard of but never really thought of. ...and learned quite a bit about the culture in [Turkey] that I never knew before. ...[Battal] surprised me several times with remarks about the political situation in America that I had not even thought of. ...While his difficulty with English made him appear somewhat less able to discuss things in depth, after awhile it became obvious that he was incredibly intelligent and very able to talk in depth, with some help.
• Yes. Too many damn racists on this campus. I’m sorry too many ignorant people. They need to be aware of their ignorance.

8. Directions for future research

In each of the studies included in this brief overview, the research was both initiated and conducted by local educators in response to local issues. While each study is significant in its own right, they are by no means comprehensive and can only suggest the dynamic and contextualized nature of language teaching in the world today. Nonetheless, the settings that have been documented constitute a valuable resource for understanding the current global status of CLT. Viewed in kaleidoscopic fashion, they appear as brilliant multi-layered bits of glass, tumbling about to form different yet always-intriguing configurations. From these data-rich records of English language teaching reform in the early 21st century four major themes emerge, suggestive of the road ahead:

(1) The highly contextualized nature of CLT is underscored again and again. It would be inappropriate to speak of CLT as a teaching ‘method’ in any sense of that term as it was used in the 20th century. Rather, CLT is an approach that understands language to be inseparable from individual identity and social behavior. Not only does language define a community; a community, in turn, defines the forms and uses of language. The norms and goals appropriate for learners in a given setting, and the means for attaining these goals, are the concern of those directly involved.

(2) Related both to the concept of language as culture in motion and to the multilingual reality in which most of the world population finds itself is the futility of any definition of a native speaker. The term came to prominence in descriptive structural linguistics in the mid 20th century and was adopted by language teaching methodologists to define an ideal for language learners. Currently, sales by British and American presses of profitable publications for learners and teachers of English as a global language are aided by lingering notions that ‘authentic’ use of English somehow requires the involvement of a ‘native’ speaker.

(3) One cannot help but be struck by the richness of the data found in many of the texts, including surveys and interviews with teachers. As is true within the social sciences more generally, we are increasingly aware that in our attempts to discern system or rationality, we have been led to focus on certain observable patterns while at the same time disregarding all that defies classification. Long (1990) made a similar observation over a decade ago with respect to SLA research generally, “What emerges from a study is far less than what was observed because researchers eliminate what they consider to be irrelevant detail and draw attention to recurrent patterns” (651). Just as the implementation of CLT is itself highly contextualized, so, too, are the means of gathering and interpreting data on these implementations.

(4) Time and again, assessment appears to be the driving force behind curricular innovations. In many settings, demands for accountability, along with a positivistic stance that one cannot teach that which cannot be described and measured by a common yardstick, continue to
influence program content and goals. Irrespective of their own needs or interests, learners prepare for the tests they will be required to pass. High stakes language tests often determine future access to education and opportunity. They may also serve to gauge teaching effectiveness. And yet, tests are seldom able to adequately capture the context embedded in collaboration that is the stuff of human communicative activity. A critical reflexive analysis of the impact of tests on language teaching practice, then, would seem a good place to enter into a consideration of how language teaching practices in a given context might be adapted to better meet the communicative needs of the next generation of learners.

9. Conclusion

Recognition of the complexity and diversity of language learning contexts has led some to suggest that we have moved ‘beyond methods’ to a postmethod condition (Kumaravadivelu, 2002), that the quest for a better method has been or should be abandoned in favor of the identification of practices or strategies of teaching designed to reflect local needs and experiences. If so, will applied linguists continue to assert an expert or authority status in the determination of practice? Or will a postmethod era lead to the recognition of teachers as the professional decision-makers and theory builders that they in fact could be? Confrontation of so-called ‘real world’ issues in language teaching as in linguistic pragmatics generally requires careful documentation of social interaction where and when it takes place. When it comes to methods of language teaching there is clearly no one size that fits all. However, through the careful building of data sets from a wide range of contexts such as those sketched briefly above, researchers should aim to arrive at a more powerful set of theoretical principles to inform practice. As Bygate (2005) notes, the ability of applied linguists to interact with authority in addressing real world problems rests at least in part on the knowledge we accumulate through work with participants in a range of contexts. The role of applied linguists becomes clear moreover when we consider that “the functioning of language in the context of real work problems and what we do about it are issues which are not about to go away and which no other discipline is available to address” (p. 579).

That said, the empowerment of language teachers as both practitioners and theory builders is essential in addressing the language needs of the next generation of learners. The extent to which a holistic, interactive, and learner-oriented CLT conception of language use and language learning can be implemented in classroom teaching practices will depend ultimately on the ability of applied linguists, practitioners, and policy makers to work together. Only through a collaborative critique of current programs with systematic exploration of alternative options can there emerge a sustainable evolution of the policies and practice of language pedagogy in the larger cultural context.

References


