

Incorporating Computer-Mediated Communication into Communicative Language Teaching: An EFL Setting*

Abdul Hadi

Department of English Education

Faculty of Education and Teacher Training

State Islamic University (UIN) of State Islamic University of Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau

Email: hadi.hadi@fulbrightmail.org

Abstract

This paper proposes the incorporation of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) in the implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in EFL settings. The basic reason underlying this proposal is that the implementation of CLT in EFL settings has not brought about the expected results promised by its proponents. As Deckert (2004) notes, this failure in the implementation of CLT has often been attributed to inadequacies on the part of EFL teachers. This paper argues that CMC may become a significant part toward success in the implementation of CLT in EFL settings. That is, CMC constitutes a major helping hand to EFL teachers in translating the principles of CLT in their classroom practices. This is especially true when EFL teachers, who are mostly non-native speakers of English, are faced with the challenges to perform teaching responsibilities they are not confident with. These may include pronunciation, conversation skills, writing, or in general being good models as users of English. In addition, success in the implementation of CLT in EFL settings may become more possible due to the nature of CMC which enables students as well as teacher to enjoy authentic learning materials by making use of the sophisticated features of CMC such as audio, video, emails, Moos, online newspapers and magazines, etc. CMC is also believed to help reduce cultural barriers in student-student-teacher interactions during language learning process. A discussion on how CMC can be incorporated into CLT in EFL settings is also presented.

In the area of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), the notion that language is mostly learned for communication has resulted in a widespread implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) all over the world. CLT is seen as “the new and innovative way to teach English as a second or foreign language” (Savignon, 2002, p. 3).

* This paper was presented in the 5th Asia TEFL International Conference at Putra World Trade Centre (PWTC), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, June 2007

There is a high expectation that CLT brings about significant improvement in learners' English language proficiency.

This shift in teaching approach consequently requires changes in some aspects of English Language Teaching (ELT). Changes in teaching materials, procedures, and curriculum are inevitable. New textbooks are written and published to meet the nature of CLT. Teachers are also sent to in-service teacher training programs in order to provide them with new insights and better skills in teaching English. And new curriculum for teaching English as a foreign language is enforced in national education systems.

After a quarter century of the application of CLT for teaching English as a second or foreign language (Savignon, 2002), some questions deserve to be raised for the purpose of evaluation and future improvement. How has CLT helped EFL learners to improve their communicative competence? What are the problems in implementing CLT in EFL context? Are there any possible means that can be used to enhance the result of teaching English as a foreign language using CLT?

In the following sections, we will discuss all the above issues with a focus on the relationship between CLT and Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), which is believed to be a helpful resource in facilitating the teaching of English as a foreign language. Thus, this paper attempts to support the idea of teaching language for communication, which becomes the underpinning of CLT, by incorporating the use of CMC into the implementation of CLT in EFL context.

Communicative Language Teaching and Computer-Mediated Communication: What and Why?

There is no one precise and common definition of Communicative Language Teaching, as linguists, methodologists, and theoreticians put different emphasis on what they call Communicative Language Teaching. Yet, in general, they agree with the idea that the orientation of language teaching should be shifted from teaching about language to teaching to use language appropriately for communication (Berns, 1990).

In addition to emphasis on language use, other features that characterize CLT are:

greater emphasis on fluency and appropriateness in the use of the target language than structural correctness; minimal focus on form with corresponding low emphasis on error correction and explicit instruction on language rules or grammar; classroom tasks and exercises that depend on spontaneity and student trial-and-error and that encourage negotiation of meaning between students and students and teachers; use of authentic materials; an environment that is interactive, not excessively formal, encourages risk-taking and promotes student autonomy; teachers serving more as facilitators and participants than in the traditional didactic role; and students being actively involved in interpretation, expression and negotiation of meaning (Mangubhai, Marland , Dashwood & Son, 2004, p. 292)

These characteristics of CLT are found to be so promising that, as I mentioned earlier, there is high expectation of learners' improved foreign language communicative competence when CLT is implemented in TEFL. However after more or less a quarter century of the implementation of CLT in EFL settings, teachers, researchers, and students themselves find that the improvement is insignificant. Deckert (2004) even describes the situation by writing an article entitled "*Communicative Approach: Addressing Frequent Failure*". As many researchers find out (Hui, 1997, Mangubhai, Marland , Dashwood & Son, 2004, Deckert, 2004), I observed (based on my experience teaching EFL in Indonesia) that CLT is best implemented in western context. This is especially true when socio-cultural, economic, and educational perspectives and differences between European-

American and non European-American countries are taken into consideration. Hui (1997) states that there are five factors that inhibit optimum result of the implementation of CLT in China, which are also almost always true in other countries where English is taught as a foreign language. They are economic factor, administrative factor, cultural factor, population factor, and teachers' qualification. So, how can the problem be solved?

So far, most of the solutions rely on efforts to improve teachers' qualification (both through pre-service and in-service teacher training programs) and educational policy (which also means improved teaching/learning facilities and payment) (see again Deckert, 2004 and Hui, 1997). In this paper, I propose to use Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) as an alternative to achieve more satisfactory results in the implementation of CLT in EFL settings.

CMC is mostly text-based communications carried out through the use of networked personal computers. Its significance in improving learners' communicative competence is not yet evident until today. But avoiding the use of computers or CMC in today's language teaching is seen as setback because they are believed to be facilitating teachers and learners in creating communication opportunities, which is the primary goal of CLT. Followings are some reasons why CMC should be incorporated in the implementation of CLT in EFL settings:

1. CMC significantly reduces cultural barriers of student-student-teacher communications. In many EFL settings, cultural values and norms in communication are often not in agreement with typical western expressive mode of communication. The use of CMC in teaching and learning process allows students to communicate each other and with their teacher more freely because signs of

breaking cultural norms or values become less evident. This is due to the absence of facial expression and body language and the nature of CMC which enables students to plan what they will say.

2. CMC helps shy and reluctant students communicate freely and more confidently (ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report, 2001). One of the causes of frequent failures in the implementation of CLT is the fact that many EFL students are shy and reluctant to engage in communicative activities provided by teachers. This is partially also related to culture where making mistakes is regarded as an embarrassment and failure. Unlike face to face communication where embarrassment or failure is obvious, CMC makes it possible for students to plan appropriate communication and to hide from embarrassment or failure.
3. CMC provides both teachers and students with variety of authentic teaching/learning materials. Textbooks which are claimed to provide communicative activities for students are often not sufficient and boring for students. CMC which enable teachers to browse for interesting and challenging communicative materials and activities is a very helpful resource for teachers to succeed in implementing CLT.
4. CMC provides native socio-cultural exposures of the foreign language to students. One of the complaints by EFL speakers/writers is that they lack natural communicative competence and that their English is bookish. Current multimedia computer and internet technology, as a part of CMC, enables students to get exposed to native English speakers or writers environment. It is assumed that this exposure will help students to produce native-like communication.

5. CMC helps EFL teachers perform teaching responsibilities which they are not confident with. It cannot be denied that many EFL teachers require improvement in both their linguistic (also socio-linguistic) competence and teaching qualifications. These are prerequisite to successful implementation of CLT. But there are problems that make the efforts for improvement difficult and take long time such as time constraint (tight teaching schedule), rare opportunities to participate in teacher development programs, and limited financial support. Incorporating CMC into CLT, though also requires training and financial support, is less complicated and more efficient in the sense that self-learning for improved teaching capabilities is easier for teachers to do. In addition, many of the roles that teachers have to do can be substituted and performed better by computer technology. These are teaching responsibilities such as providing natural and native communicative activities, telling jokes or humor, showing pictures, creating games, singing songs, etc.

Incorporating CMC into CLT

In EFL settings, investing on computer technology is still problematic due to poor or possibly corrupted educational management and limited financial support. However, more and more computers are coming into schools and universities (at least in the case of Indonesia) but with varying technological capabilities. Therefore, in the efforts of incorporating CMC into CLT, I categorize the EFL classrooms as follows:

1. One computer EFL classrooms

These are EFL classrooms in which both teacher and students take advantage of computer technology for teaching and learning English. Typically, the classroom is equipped with a projector that allows the whole class to have clear view of what is shown from the computer screen. EFL classrooms with internet connection will have more advantages of having actual, native and varying online materials and exposures. To provide chances to get the “feel” of interacting with native speakers, teachers may assign students to work in groups. For example, while a group is collaborating on a chat activity, other groups are assigned to prepare for a letter on certain topics based on material presented online before which later is sent as an email. With this limited resource, teachers are required to plan how real communicative activities for the whole class can be shared fairly. Teachers can also use online materials as part of his teaching or presentation. For sure, this kind of classroom has possibly minimized teachers’ talk, which in the non-CMC CLT is sometimes the norms (See Deckert, 2004).

It is also possible that there are one computer EFL classrooms that do not have internet connection. When this is the case, teachers may use communicative CD-ROMs or save some interesting and communicative materials from the internet outside the schools for his teaching. Presenting something using computer is always interesting and stimulate feedbacks from students although in the absence of internet connection. In both cases, teachers’ creativity in preparing, designing or modifying the materials available is required. Through time, teachers, as well as students, will find more and more ways how they can make use of the availability of computer in their classroom for promoting communication in the foreign language.

2. Computer lab EFL classrooms.

These are EFL classrooms that have better technological resources. This kind of EFL classrooms provide more opportunities for students to communicate and interact in English, not only with their classmates and teacher but also with native speakers of English. Since more opportunities to use computers are available to students, teachers need to have a maximum but flexible control of what students are doing with the computers. Computers with internet connection, especially in developing countries where English is taught as a foreign language, arouse young learners' curiosity to wander in the cyber world and ignore the objective of their presence in the classrooms. Teachers are required to assist their students in achieving maximum benefits from learning in computer lab EFL classrooms.

Among the most important considerations in such this circumstance are ability to provide purposeful, challenging, and interesting communicative activities and design of the computer lab EFL classrooms. The first consideration, in addition to a goal to inhibit students from wandering in the cyber world, is also concerned with the temptation to rely too much on the sophistication of computers that teachers do not feel the need to plan class sessions carefully. Whatever sophisticated technologies are available for teaching and learning, teachers' ability in planning and designing purposeful and interesting activities is always needed, otherwise the objective of teaching and learning will not be achieved. On the other hand, design of computer lab is believed to affect mode, and consequently the result, of student-student-teacher interaction and communication (ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report, 2001). If aimed to be used for teaching a foreign language using CLT, the designs of computer labs must be made in such a way that allow students to cooperate and collaborate. Traditional design of computer labs, in which all

chairs face to the front of the class, may become an inhibiting factor toward student-student-teacher's interaction, communication, and collaboration.

As it is in one computer EFL classrooms, computers in computer lab EFL classrooms may not have internet connection due to lack of financial support or unavailability of internet service provider in some places. Again, the option of using CD-ROMs or saving materials from the web and then put them into computers in the labs is always a possibility. There are still many things that can be done with non-wired computer labs to promote communication in English. Moreover, many computer labs may have Local Area Network, which is quite helpful for teachers.

In some EFL settings such as Japan and Korea where internet- connected computers are becoming more and more easily accessible in people's life, the implementation of CMC-incorporated CLT may be continued beyond classrooms' walls and course schedules. There is bigger space (time and place) for student-student-teacher interaction and communication for the purpose of developing students' communicative competence. But teachers always have key roles in managing the availability of CMC in order that fruitful teaching and learning outcomes can be gained.

Conclusion

In EFL settings, the implementation of CLT is in need of innovation and modification. Instead of adapting CLT to EFL settings' socio-cultural, economic, educational background, which is hard and may undermine the spirit of CLT, administrators, teacher educators, and teachers should consider making use of the sophisticated computer technology in implementing CLT. The natures of computers or CMC, as mentioned above, help

communication and interaction in English to occur freely. It is one feature that EFL teachers have struggled for for years but with unsatisfactory accomplishments.

The incorporation of CMC into CLT certainly requires positive participation from administrators, teacher educators, and teachers. Administrators need to manage EFL education in such a way that CMC is available for foreign language learning in schools and universities. Teacher educators are supposed to be aware of the role of CMC in foreign language learning so that they can equip teachers and teacher trainees with adequate skills for incorporating CMC into CLT. Teachers themselves are supposed to be innovative and creative in the implementation of CLT and do not depend too much upon invitations to participate in teacher training programs. CMC is not only a tool for learners to learn but it is also for teachers. There is plenty of information and guidelines available online for teachers to develop their teaching skills. If managed properly, CMC can help administrators, teacher educators, and teachers to enhance learners' proficiency in English.

There will be some limitations and hindrances, though. But continuous efforts for improvement will also result in better ability in manipulating the sophistication of computer technology for more successful implementation of CLT in EFL context.

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