

Learner Role in CLT: Practices in the Higher Secondary Classrooms

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Abstract

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is a learner-centered approach for language teaching and learning. In the CLT context, learner's role changes from that of a passive receiver to an active participant engaging in diverse classroom activities that promote communicative competence. Again, L2 learners are supposed to learn the language by using it for different tasks, and taking part in pair work, group work, role play, and discussion inside classrooms. This study aims to find out gaps, if any, between learner roles as advocated in CLT theory and as practiced by learners in the higher secondary classrooms in Bangladesh while teaching/learning English following this approach, and its relation to poor 'learning outcomes'.

Keywords: Learner role, CLT, higher secondary classrooms, practices, learners

Background of the study

In Bangladeshi secondary and higher secondary educational institutions, Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) was followed for teaching/learning English for a long time. Teaching and learning of grammatical rules and sentence structures was the key target in EFL classrooms. There was no effort to engage L2 learners in meaningful communicative tasks. The shift in the paradigm from GTM to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) occurred in the 1990s. The rationale was to make L2 learners competent in communication so that they can use the language in practical situations and become linguistically equipped for the globalized world. Unfortunately, it was not properly

planned, and readiness of English language teachers and other stakeholders for CLT has been a much-talked-about issue since then. Again, there is a growing consensus in Bangladesh that 'learning outcomes' have been really poor. Many L2 learners have failed to achieve the expected academic result because of poor command over the English language. More and more people are questioning the appropriateness of introducing CLT for teaching and learning English in Bangladesh. In this context, this study aimed to find out gaps, if any, between the learner roles as advocated in CLT theory and as practiced by learners in higher secondary classrooms in Bangladesh while teaching/learning English following CLT, and its relation to poor 'learning outcomes'. Two related issues should be discussed here.

The traditional learner role

Before the introduction of CLT in secondary and higher secondary educational institutions, the role of learners in a language class was restricted as classes were utterly teacher-centered. Learners were supposed to follow their teachers blindly. Jug and mug practice of learning was followed for learning/teaching English where the teacher was the full jug, and teacher's job was to pour knowledge from the full jug to the empty mug-learners.

Thus, 'functional aspect' (Halliday, 1970, p.145) of language use and 'communicative competence' (Hymes, 1972, p. 281) were totally ignored. There was very little oral work and a few written exercises (Richards & Rodgers, 2002). Again, learners' needs, learning styles, preferences, learning goals were not taken into consideration during material selection. They did not have the scope even to suggest the contents of classroom activities. New language materials were introduced by the teacher all the times. Byrne (1986) commented that the teacher was the center of activity at this point.

Then, student practice was strictly controlled by teachers in GTM. There was no or very limited student-student or student-teacher interaction in a class. Learner activities were confined to basically 'presentation and study of grammar rules' (Richards & Rodgers, 2002, p.6). As a result, entire teaching/learning process of English language was rather boring and monotonous.

Learner role in CLT

At the very core of CLT philosophy is Hymes' (1972) theory of what constitutes 'communicative competence' (p. 281). In

CLT, learners have a major role in L2 teaching/learning. The functional aspects of language can be achieved when learners engage themselves in meaningful communicative tasks inside a classroom. Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983) suggest that learners create language 'through trial and error' (pp. 91-93). American poet Walt Whitman said 'he most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher' (as cited in Mclean, 2012, p. 32). Criticizing the dominant role of teachers, Mclean (2012) explains that 'only when the teacher's authority recedes can the learner be thrown back on his own resources' (p. 33). Thus, CLT advocates 'teacher-directed student-centered' (Rance-Roney, 2010, p. 20) L2 teaching and learning.

Again, most of the classroom activities in CLT are carried out around learners. The teacher is supposed to direct the learner-centered class, and work as a guide, a facilitator. Learners often complete different tasks assigned by teachers to engage themselves in real communication using authentic materials and realia. They work in pairs and groups to get these tasks done. Larsen-Freeman (1986) suggests that teachers must make sure that students interact a lot in the classroom among themselves and with teachers. Teachers in communicative classrooms talk less and listen more; consequently, they will be active facilitators of students' learning.

Then, CLT does not target mastery of language forms rather it emphasizes the processes of communication; consequently learners find themselves in different roles in a L2 class (Richards & Rodgers, 2002). Explaining the role of learners, Breen and Candlin (1980) comment as follows:

The role of learner as negotiator – between the self, the learning process, and the object of learning – emerges from and interacts

with the role of joint negotiator within the group and within the classroom procedures and activities which the group undertakes. The implication for the learner is that he should contribute as much as he gains, and thereby learn in an interdependent way. (p. 110)

Finally, a teacher-directed learner-centered class scenario is advocated in CLT where learners' role is 'to construct meaning and interact with others in authentic contexts' (Rance-Roney, 2010, p. 20). Cooperative learning is another key feature of CLT where learners work in teams to build knowledge and achieve tasks through mutual interaction (Rance-Roney, 2010). Thus, in a climate of trust and support in the classroom, learners are expected to contribute (Belchamber, 2007).

Thus, it is apparent that as far as the role of L2 learners is concerned, GTM and CLT advocate totally opposite directions; GTM is teacher dominated while CLT is a teacher-directed learner-centered approach. In this context, this study aimed to find out whether Bangladeshi higher secondary L2 learners carry out their expected roles in classrooms.

Research question

- What roles do L2 learners actually play in the higher secondary classrooms while learning English through CLT?

Research methodology

Both quantitative and qualitative approaches were adopted for this study. The data collected with the questionnaire has been analyzed quantitatively. Based on the literature reviewed a questionnaire was used to collect responses from the higher secondary students for this study. While

preparing the questionnaire, utmost attention was paid to the roles of learners as advocated by CLT. The questionnaire consisted of fifteen (15) questions. Again, the student participants who answered the questionnaire were higher secondary students of different colleges of Bangladesh. This sample group consisted of eighty (80) students both male and female. The student participants were in the age group of 15-20. They came from both rural and urban areas of Bangladesh. Finally, it could have been more satisfactory to work with a larger sample size. There is doubt as well whether all the respondents could comprehend the questionnaire appropriately.

Data presentation, analysis, and findings

Research question

- What roles do L2 learners actually play in the higher secondary classrooms while learning English through CLT?

Responding to qn.1, only few learners (16.25%) said that their teachers always or very often asked them what they wanted to learn in English language classes; many learners (38.75%) told teachers sometimes asked; however, a major portion (45%) of the learners reported that teachers rarely or never asked them what they wanted to learn. Thus, many learners have *no say* in the selection of content in L2 classes. In reply to qn.2 on communication in English in classrooms, not a single student (0%) claimed that they always communicated in English with their classmates/teachers; only very few learners (6.25%) very often did that; 23.75% of the learners sometimes communicated in English. On the other hand, most of the participants (70%) informed that they rarely or never communicated in English with their

classmates/teachers. Thus, learners' inadequate use of the target language inside a classroom remains a serious hindrance for effective L2 teaching/learning. CLT advocates that L2 learners should use the target language most often.

Then, replying to qn.3 on class activities/tasks, only 1.25% of the participants reported that they did their L2 class activities/tasks in pairs; again, only 6.25% of them worked in groups; interestingly, 92.5% told that they did their class activities individually. As such, the bulk of the learners do not get opportunity to interact with their classmates. Qn.4 asked whether learners were given enough opportunities to use English in the class. Less than one third (30%) of the respondents told they always or very often got enough opportunities to use English; many learners (38.75%) sometimes did so; however, 31.25% of the learners said they rarely or never got enough opportunities to use English. So, very often learners are not given enough opportunities to use English in the class. Responding to qn.5 on participation in role plays, only a small portion (10%) of the learners said that they always or very often took part in role plays in the English class; 18.75% of the learners sometimes did that; but most of the learners (71%) rarely or never took part in role plays. This proves that in spite of vast significance of role play in CLT, many learners do not get the opportunity to practice it.

Again, answering qn.6 on sharing their opinions with classmates, a certain number (30%) of learners responded that they always shared their opinions with their classmates; 28.75% of the learners very often did so; 30% of the learners sometimes did that; more than 11% learners rarely or never shared their opinions with classmates. Thus, learners are eager to share their opinions with their classmates; teachers have to properly structure this

sharing. In reply to qn.7 on participation in group activities, a meager portion (10%) of the participants told that they always or very often took part in group activities in the English class; 26.25% of the learners sometimes did so; however, many learners (more than 63%) rarely or never took part in group activities. This again depicts the fact that many learners are deprived of interactive classroom activities in L2 classes.

Moreover, in response to qn.8 on giving feedback on classmates' work, more than 16% of the learners told that they always or very often provided feedback on their classmates' work; 32.5% of the learners sometimes did so; however, more than 51% of the participants rarely or never gave feedback on classmates' work. Peer feedback is very helpful for engaging the learners in real communication in the target language, and building confidence among themselves but many teachers ignore this. Answering qn.9 on contribution in the English class, more than 51% of the learners said that they contributed in their English class; 40% of the learners sometimes did so; about 9% of the learners told that they rarely or never contributed in English class. Learners' contribution is one major feature of CLT. If given opportunities, most of the learners would like to contribute in their L2 class. Qn.10 asked whether learners practiced writing in their English class. About 49% of the learners said that they always or very often practiced writing; 28.75% of the learners sometimes did so; about 23% of the respondents rarely or never practiced writing in English class. In a CLT class, learners are supposed to practice the four skills of a language in an integrated way. This is a positive development that many learners practice writing in their L2 class.

Next, replying to qn.11 on materials preparation for the English class, only

3.75% of the learners told that they always or very often prepared materials for their English class; 6.25% of the learners sometimes did so; an overwhelming majority (90%) of the learners informed that they rarely or never prepared materials. Thus, most of the learners have no role in preparing class materials. If students are involved in materials preparation for their L2 classes, it would certainly increase their motivation and interest for L2 learning. In answer to qn.12 on teachers' delivery of lectures, the bulk (95%) of the respondents told that teachers always or very often delivered lectures in their English class; 3.75% of the learners said sometimes teachers did so; only 1.25% of the participants said teachers rarely or never delivered lectures. If teachers deliver lectures in L2 classes, learners would never get the opportunity to practice the target language; again, there would be no interaction among the learners; it would, therefore, certainly lead to poor learning outcomes.

Finally, responding to qn.13 on nature of learning, half of the learners (50%) told that learning in their English class was collaborative; other half opined that it was individualistic. If the class is not collaborative, L2 learners would not get the scope to perform the roles as advocated in CLT. Thus, learners would behave as 'island' in their L2 classes leading to more and more isolation among them. Answering qn.14 on in-class talking time (TT), only a tiny portion (6.25%) of the learners told that most of the talking in English class was done by students; on the other hand, a major portion (93.75%) of the participants informed that teachers did most of the talking in their English class. Hence, teachers do not let learners interact and communicate in classes making it virtually teacher-dominated. In reply to the last question, the bulk of the learners (92.5%) told that their English class was teacher-

centered; only a meager 7.5% of the participants reported that it was student-centered. This fact confirms that many teachers still have the mindset of dominating L2 learners inside classrooms.

The gaps between CLT theory and practice

The data analyzed above shows some gaps between learner roles as advocated in CLT theory and as practiced in higher secondary classrooms in Bangladesh while teaching/learning English following CLT. Firstly, most of the learners (about 84%) have little or no say in the selection of contents/learning points in L2 classes. A significant number of learners (70%) rarely or never communicate in English with their classmates/teachers to develop communicative competence (Hymes, 1972). Then, instead of working in pairs and groups, the bulk of the learners (92.5%) do their class activities individually. A notable portion of learners (31.25%) rarely or never get enough opportunities to use English in the class. Again, most of the learners (71%) rarely or never take part in role plays. Similarly, more than half of the learners (63%) rarely or never take part in group activities as recommended by Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983). Next, half of the learners (51%) rarely or never give feedback on classmates' work.

Again, almost a quarter (23%) of the learners rarely or never practice writing in the English class. Further, an overwhelming majority (90%) of the learners rarely or never prepare materials for their L2 class. The bulk of the learners (95%) reveal that teachers always or very often deliver a lecture in their English class. Half of the learners (50%) claim that learning in their English class is collaborative; on the other hand, other half opines that it is individualistic. According to a major

portion (93.75%) of the participants, teachers do most of the talking in their class which contradicts with the idea of Larsen-Freeman (1986). Finally, most of the learners (92.5%) confirm that their English class is teacher-centered.

Implications for L2 teaching and learning

To begin with, teachers need in-service training on their role and learners' role in L2 classes as advocated by CLT. Learners must know what they are supposed to do in a communicative English class from their teachers. While selecting class contents, L2 learners' preferences and suggestions should be taken into consideration. Then, learners must be encouraged to use the target language as much as possible inside a L2 classroom. To ensure use of the target language, interaction among the learners has to be given high priority. So teachers should create enough opportunities for learners to use English in the class (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). Again, learners must take part in role plays and group works (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983). Thus, learners' eagerness to share their opinion with their classmates can be properly structured. Then, the nature of activities in L2 classes has to be interactive (Rance-Roney, 2010). Moreover, learners should get the opportunity to provide peer feedback on classmates' work. Learners have to be involved in preparing class materials. In any case, teachers should not deliver a lecture in a language class. A collaborative classroom environment would motivate the learners for language learning (Belchamber, 2007). Teachers-talking-time (TTT) has to be reduced (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). Therefore, teachers have to make the class learner-centered (Rance-Roney, 2010).

Conclusion

There were a lot of expectations when CLT was introduced in L2 classrooms in Bangladesh leaving behind Grammar-Translation Method. Apparently, it has failed to fulfill those expectations. One of the probable reasons might be, as supported by the findings English language teachers have ignored or have not appropriately comprehended the CLT-advocated role of learners in L2 classes. As a new approach CLT demands a new mindset from all the stakeholders. However, the preceding approach of GTM has been still at work particularly regarding role of learners inside L2 classrooms. As a result, learners are not allowed, to a great extent, to perform their expected roles in L2 learning/teaching. The learning outcomes, not surprisingly, have been poor. For changing this dismal scenario, in L2 classrooms learners have to play more active roles.

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Appendix A

Table 01: Data collected from the respondents with the questionnaire

Qn. No	Questions	Percentage of Learners' Responses				
		Always	Very often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
1	Your teacher asked you what you want to learn in your English class...	2.5%	13.75 %	38.75 %	27.5 %	17.5 %
2	In your English class you communicated in English with your classmates/teachers	0%	6.25%	23.75%	25%	45%
3	You were given enough opportunities to use English in the class.....	22.5%	7.5%	38.75%	20%	11.25%
4	You took part in role plays in English class.....	1.25%	8.75%	18.75%	27.5%	43.75%
5	You shared your opinion with your classmates.....	30%	28.75%	30%	8.75%	2.5%
6	You took part in group activities in English class	3.75%	6.25%	26.25%	12.5%	51.25%
7	You gave feedback/evaluation on your classmates' work.....	2.5%	13.75%	32.5%	17.5%	33.75%
8	You contributed in your English class.....	32.5%	18.75%	40%	7.5%	1.25%
9	You practiced writing in your English class.....	27.5%	21.25%	28.75%	16.25%	6.25%
10	You prepared materials for your English class.....	2.5%	1.25%	6.25%	20%	70%
11	Your teacher delivered a lecture in your English class.....	88.75%	6.25%	3.75%	1.25%	0%
12	Learning in your English class was	Collaborative/cooperative		Individualistic		
		50%		50%		
13	Who did most of the talking in your English class?	Students		Teacher		
		6.25%		93.75%		
14	Your English class was	Teacher-centered		Student-centered		
		92.5%		7.5%		
15	In your English class activities/tasks were done...	In pair	In group	Individually		
		1.25%	6.25%	92.5%		