

# Imperialism of communicative language teaching and possible resistance against it from teachers in Vietnam as an English foreign languages context

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**Abstract.** This paper deals with the domination of communicative language teaching (CLT) which has become popular in teaching foreign languages. However, the application of CLT has caused difficulties for students, teachers and administrators. Within the scope of this paper, only teachers are mentioned so that we can see a part of teaching issues when CLT is introduced. The paper also suggests more research should be conducted based upon the factors of students and administrators in order that we can take proper steps in language training in the country.

## 1. Introduction

English, undeniably, has become a phenomenon in the world and it is irresistible language. It spreads the five continents like a magic power. According to Crystal (as cited in McKay [1]), several major factors which ignite the spread of English are colonialism, speaker migration, and new technology created in English-speaking countries. He claims that other intellectual, economic, and cultural factors also play some roles in this flow of English influence on other countries across the globe. There are approximately 70 countries which consider English an official language. The total estimated number of English speakers reaches 580,000,000, not to mention other countries which choose English their foreign language with an estimated 750,000,000 speakers.

In order to maintain its strong spread, a certain system involving methodology and teaching staff will have to take the responsibility. Looking back the history of language teaching, we have experienced different approaches, namely the Grammar Translation Approach, the Direct Method, the Audiolingualism, and most recently Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). CLT owes its popularity to the spread of English and it is supported to be a dominant approach in English Language Teaching (ELT). This issue will be further dealt with in the section of imperialism of CLT.

## 2. Body

### 2.1. What is linguistic imperialism?

The powerful spread of English reminds us of a linguistic imperialism. Phillipson (as cited in Pennycook (2001) [2], defines English

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linguistic imperialism in the way that “[t]he dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages”. To illustrate this view, Crystal (as cited in McKay, 2002) states that there are 12,500 international organizations, 85 % of which consider English an official use. Approximately 85 % of the world film markets are controlled by the United States of America. 99% of the pop groups in English are listed in the encyclopedia of music. The world’s electronic information in English accounts for about 80%. English is used in schools in many countries. To sum up, English penetrates into different areas of politics, economics, culture, and society.

## 2.2. *The imperialism of communicative language teaching*

To begin with, I would like to focus on the development of CLT. Communicative language teaching can be regarded as a phenomenon and a great achievement in the search for better approaches. Savignon (1991) [3] attributes the increasing number of immigrants and workers in Europe, the neo-Firthian system, writings of Jurgen Habermas (1970, 1971), Hymes (1971), Candlin, Edelhoff, and Piepho (1978), Halliday (1978), to the birth of CLT. CLT is also based on the Monitor Model, an “influential model of learning in the second language literature” by Krashen (S.M. Gass and L. Selinker (2001) [4]). McKay (2002) states that CLT gains its popularity as a contrast to audiolingualism totally basing on behaviorist view of language learning and focusing on form of language rather than its meaning. CLT is a communicative approach and its ultimate goal is to develop to communicative competence.

Communicative competence includes grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence, and discourse competence (Hymes as cited in Savignon, 1997 [5]).

According to Tollefson (1991) [6], the spread of English is related to ‘modernization theory’ which claims that “Western societies provide the most effective model for ‘underdeveloped’ societies attempting to reproduce the achievements of ‘industrialization’ ”. Holliday (as cited in McKay, 2002) argues that the spread of CLT is a vivid proof of modernization theory. McKay (2002, p. 109) states, “... English has spread because of the tremendous interest in learning the language, so too in many cases CLT has spread not only because of the promotion of the approach by western specialists but also because educators in these countries have advocated its adoption.” He also adds that CLT promotion has been strengthened by “the tendency to extend the assumptions of Inner Circle [countries where English is a dominant language] about English to other countries” (p. 118) and by a large industry of textbook that is in favour of communicative approaches. Savignon (2003) [7] holds that CLT is being applied and applauded by a number of countries, namely Japan, Hong Kong, Costa Rica, Taiwan, the European Union, not to mention countries where English is regarded as the first language and second language. Some researchers even view CLT as an event of “pedagogical imperialism”.

## 2.3. *Possible resistance from teachers against CLT in Vietnam as an EFL context*

Vietnam is not an exception from the spread of English and CLT. Since the introduction of *doi moi* (renovation)

implemented through the open-door policy, English has gained its priority over other foreign languages, namely Russian, French, and Chinese, because the Vietnamese Party and State realise its significant role in modernisation and industrialisation. At the Central Party Committee on education in December 1996, English was officially regarded as the first foreign language to be taught in schools. In addition, more people both young and old learn English for several reasons, namely job-seeking, travelling, and further education. In brief, English can bring them a better life and bright future.

In the field of English teaching, Vietnam has experienced a gradual shift from the old tradition way of teaching to more up-to-date ones. Communicative Language Teaching is in the list of new ways of teaching. Many schools and universities are attempting to employ CLT into syllabus design, examinations, and teaching. However, these attempts face resistance from language policy-makers, researchers, teachers and learners. Within the scope of the paper, I would like to focus on the possible resistance against CLT from teachers in Vietnamese as an EFL context. I will deal with the teachers' misconception of CLT, their methodology, the relationship among them, the relationship between teachers and learners, teachers' training program, and their salary.

#### *- Teachers' misconception of CLT*

Since the birth of CLT, communicative competence has been further discussed by Savignon, Celce-Murcia *et al* (inspired from Canale and Swain), Bachman, and Brown. It is interpreted in different perspectives. Sato & Kleinsasser (1999) [8] state that different interpretations of CLT are originated from these different perspectives. Therefore,

misconception of CLT is inevitable. According to Thompson (1996) [9], the misconception is that CLT means not teaching grammar, teaching only speaking, completing pairwork, and expecting too much from teachers. To some extent, it is also the case with several teachers in the English Department of VNU - CFL (Vietnam National University, Hanoi - College of Foreign Languages). Before CLT was introduced, grammar had been the main discussion in the classroom. Teachers taught grammar and learners learned English through grammar. However, when the Department changed its policy of language teaching, CLT was given top priority. All the teachers in the Department had to and still have to adjust themselves to the new tendency. Grammar is no more treated as an important part in the classroom. What the teachers are trying to do is increase the students' talking time. Among new and old-fashioned teachers, there is a big challenge because they actually do not know what exactly CLT means or they only have some general idea about CLT. One of my colleagues says it is believed that "the main function of language is to communicate and the main purpose of language teaching is to help students communicate in English" and in practice it focuses on "language skills rather than on language knowledge, communication tasks." Another one says CLT means:

*Teaching language using the approaches so that students will be able to use the language in the real communicative situations, meaning teaching with focus on language functions rather than the grammar, using more simulations, role plays, and games.*

Another opinion is that

*I understand CLT as the language teaching method which sees the aim of language teaching*

*as for the purpose of meaningful communication, and language as the means for that purpose. The focus of language teaching, therefore, is on the language in use with all the 'stuff' that go with it like linguistic & sociolinguistic knowledge, communication strategies, etc. rather than on the language by itself.*

*- Teachers' methodology*

Traditionally, teachers are considered to be the most powerful person and the centre in the classroom. This viewpoint is influenced by Confucian ideology. Le (1999) [10] states the environment of English learning in Vietnam can be compared to "a cultural island where the teacher is expected to be the sole provider of experience in the target language". Hall (1998) [11] states:

"Teachers who view themselves as leaders of communities of inquiry, who view students as active agents in the learning process and thus take their involvement seriously, are more likely to engage their students in intellectually challenging interactions. Teachers who perceive themselves as authorities of knowledge and students as passive recipients of their knowledge are more likely to use the standard I-R-E. [I: Teacher initiates; R: Students response; E: Teacher evaluates]".

Undeniably, the model of I-R-E is still so popular in the majority of Vietnamese teachers. In other words, the teacher-centered approach still plays a key role in language teaching. Meanwhile, CLT (Savignon, 2003) by definition regards learners as the center in the classroom. Therefore, there exists a potential conflict between I-R-E and CLT.

*- Among teachers*

Hargreaves (1992) [12] claims, "teachers do not develop their strategies and styles of teaching entirely alone... Over the years these colleagues develop ways of doing things, along with whole network of

associated educational beliefs and values in response to the characteristic and recurrent problems and circumstances they face in their work".

The *cultures of teaching* which Hargreaves (1992, p. 217) defines as "beliefs, values, habits and assumed ways of doing things among the communities of teachers" has a powerful effect on teachers. CLT is not really a popular thing for old teachers who have still applied the Grammar Translation method and those who begins teaching and are eager to apply new things into their teaching may face resistance. In other words, there is clearly a pedagogical conflict between teachers using traditional methods and those applying new methods. Paradoxically, the old experienced teachers have a very powerful influence on the new inexperienced ones.

From my observation, the idea of sharing teaching materials and experience among teachers is still not taken into serious consideration. Several explanations can be made. Possibly, Vietnamese teachers are living in the world of competition. They want to be the best teachers and regard what they know about language and teaching as a secret. Or no precedent of sharing among teachers has been created. It is also likely that sharing is not really important in the teachers' mind.

Worse still, teachers feel uncomfortable or reluctant when their colleagues attend their class. Teachers only let others to attend their lessons when they are close friends or when they have to sit for examinations or when they are inspected by educational officials. CLT (Savignon, 1997) requires teachers and students to build a community of learning and teaching where there is no fear of failure and where sharing is for common interests.

*- Teachers and students*

In the classroom, teachers and students interact so that teaching and learning can take place. Teachers have to deal with different types of students. The main duty of teachers is to design activities to cater their students' different levels of proficiency, needs, and interests. Since CLT was introduced, the teacher's roles have been taken into consideration. Breen and Candlin (cited in Richards and Rodgers (1986) [13]) claim:

"The teacher has two main roles: the first role is to facilitate the communication process between all participants in the classroom, and between these participants and the various activities and texts. The second role is to act as an independent participant within the learning-teaching group... A third role for the teacher is that of researcher and learner, with much to contribute in terms of appropriate knowledge and abilities, actual and observed experience of the nature of learning and organizational capacities."

Le (1999) states:

"In general, students of English in Vietnam fall into three major categories in terms of needs. Some view English as a tool for more attractive and lucrative employment opportunities; others need a good knowledge of English to study further at universities or colleges. The majority of students, however, learn English just to pass the national examinations. These students do not have an obvious communicative need. All they need is a sufficiently good knowledge of grammar and vocabulary of the target language to pass the national grammar-based and norm-referenced examinations."

The problem that CLT teachers often face is when their learners have no communicative needs. CLT (Savignon, 1997) is a communicative approach which aims at developing communicative competence

(including grammatical competence, sociocultural competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence). My colleagues who are so in favour of CLT often complain that their students tend to treat communicative activities as games and from this point of view they do not seem to learn anything in order to pass the examinations. Under this pressure, many teachers resort to traditional methodology. They provide students with knowledge of grammar and grammar exercises dominate the classroom environment.

CLT can also be described as a learner-centered approach and Weimer (2002) [14] argued that when applying this approach, teachers may face resistance from students. Take my case as an example. I have been teaching English at the College of Foreign Languages – Vietnam National University, Hanoi for nearly 6 years. The college's main function is training teachers and interpreters. Once, I applied the technique "*Let your students teach their class*" proposed by Ogawa and Wilkinson (1997) [15] in the class of 24 first-year students to renew teaching and learning environment. Later on, I had both positive and negative feedback. Better students said they loved the activity because it gave them a chance to prove themselves. Others complained that they had more work and difficulties in carrying out the activity and they were even frightened of it.

#### *- Teachers' language training program*

Usually, teachers' training programs are held at different levels of educational institutions, namely schools, universities, municipal/provincial Department of Education and Training, and Ministry of Education and Training. Besides, there are several foreign-funded educational organizations such as UNESCO, British

Council, IDP, which also offer seminars, workshops, conferences, and teaching materials. In general, when they take part in these programs, CLT is not only the issue that is discussed. Rather, a structural curriculum still holds its irreplaceable role. Even when CLT receives attention, it is not clearly expressed. It can be said that there have been no large-scale discussions on CLT. This situation is just the same as that of Australia where Sato and Kleinsasser (1999) conducted their survey into the practical understanding of CLT. They claim, "Teachers who attended a teacher development course gained some ideas about CLT but did not seem to have very thorough explanations of what CLT meant" (p. 511).

#### - Teachers' salary

Salary for teachers is a big issue in Vietnam. Even though their salary ranks the second in the list after military officers. However, the salary is not enough for their living, let alone their teaching career. Teachers' salary varies from the elementary level to tertiary level. On average each teacher receives a salary from VND 1,000,000 to VND 4,000,000. Because they have to work extra time or extra job to earn more money, they do not spend sufficient time on their lesson plan, scientific research, and other training programs. This problem is shared by Pham (2006) [16] who claims that he has to earn extra money as a freelance translator because of the modest salary as full-time lecturer at the university, which leaves him little time to carry out research. CLT requires teachers to be engaged seriously in teaching a language. Teachers not only prepare lessons before the classroom, teach during the lesson, but also get contact with learners outside the classroom. To make the matter worse, CLT teachers have to reproduce the activities which do not carry any communicative

purposes in the book. Glisan & Drescher (as cited in Kleinsasser (1996) [17] claims:

"... despite today's widespread acceptance of teaching language for oral communication, current textbook grammar is still a reflection of classical grammatical rules based on formal, written language".

In brief, within their inadequate salary teachers will find it a big challenge to apply CLT.

### 3. Conclusion

So far I have argued that CLT is an event of pedagogical imperialism. However, it faces resistance from teachers in Vietnam as an EFL context because of their misconceptions of CLT, their methodology, the relationship among teachers and between teachers and students, their training program and salary.

This paper hopefully gives language policy-makers food for thought in Vietnam before they introduce the communicative curriculum into language classroom. They should pay due attention to the present situation of teachers. The unanswered question is what should be done to increase the quality of teachers' profession and their life. The paper also helps raise teachers' awareness of applying CLT. There are still risks they have to face inside and outside the classroom.

The paper also suggests that future researches should be conducted into the possible resistance against CLT from language policy-makers, researchers, and learners so that a comprehensive view of CLT will be formed. The future of language teaching in Vietnam will experience tremendous changes in the flow of methodology. CLT globally can be considered a fashion. However, when it is

placed into a local context of a specific country, much still needs to be done. Undeniably, whether or not any approach proves effective depends so much on a harmonious combination of policy-makers, researchers, teachers and learners in a specific context.

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## Sự bành trướng của phương pháp dạy học theo đường hướng giao tiếp và những khả năng chống lại từ phía giáo viên Việt Nam trong bối cảnh tiếng Anh là một ngoại ngữ

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Bài viết này đề cập tới sự thống trị của việc giảng dạy ngoại ngữ theo đường hướng giao tiếp (CLT). Đây là một trong những xu thế phổ biến trong việc dạy ngoại ngữ hiện nay. Tuy nhiên việc áp dụng đường hướng này gặp phải những khó khăn xuất phát từ phía giáo viên, sinh viên, và người quản lí. Trong khuôn khổ bài viết này, yếu tố giáo viên sẽ được bàn đến để chúng ta thấy một phần của bức tranh giảng dạy khi áp dụng đường hướng này. Bài viết cũng gợi ý những nghiên cứu tiếp theo liên quan đến sinh viên và người quản lý để chúng ta sẽ có những bước đi đúng đắn trong việc đào tạo ngoại ngữ trong nước.