Community Language Learning – a reappraisal

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Abstract

Community Language Learning is a method developed by Charles Curran during the 1950s at Loyola University. As part of the Confluent Education movement it enjoyed a brief period of vogue until supplanted by the Communicative Approach with its more sophisticated views of language and the language acquisition process. This paper seeks to reappraise the main procedure of Community Language Learning as a learner-centred 'task' within a current, task-based approach, drawing on present-day definitions and views of second language acquisition. Based on empirical research using the task, learner attitudes are also explored.

Introduction

Swan (1985: 87) characterizes the sound of a new breakthrough in language teaching theory as 'a scream, a splash and a strangled cry as once again the baby is thrown out with the bathwater'. In recent decades we have experienced this time and again as new theories and methods are developed which demand that teachers reject their existing beliefs and practices in favour of new ones based on the most current 'research' findings, which are often lacking in rigorous empirical support. As changes take place, many once-discredited tasks such as translation, pattern drills, and dictations have made comebacks, albeit in a radically different methodological framework as our knowledge about language learning takes new paths. This cyclical pattern of re-contextualization of classroom activities has ensured that much of what was of value in 'traditional' language teaching methodologies has been taken into account in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory and practice although the re-evaluation of the so-called 'alternative' methodologies, particularly humanistic methods such as Charles Curran's (1976) Community Language Learning (CLL), has to date been less successful.

The question of where CLL may fit into the context of modern language teaching is at the core of this discussion. As theoretical

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data continue to accumulate on foreign language acquisition and new task types are developed accordingly, it is worth asking whether language teaching methods with relatively well-defined procedures couldn't be translated into components of a task-based approach. In the case of CLL, this will entail an examination of its main 'task type' at least partially severed from its original underlying theories of language acquisition, given that while Curran was devising the method in the 1950s, linguistic theory was far less sophisticated than today, and Curran's almost exclusive focus on affective factors governing learning and teaching without adequate recourse to sound psycholinguistic underpinnings have obscured many of the potential benefits of his method.

It is not the intention of this paper to provide an exhaustive account of SLA theory and task-based approaches, nor indeed is a detailed analysis of the original theories underpinning CLL at its inception necessary. The purpose here is instead to draw upon certain key aspects of SLA theory to illustrate the substantial benefits possible from integrating CLL into the task-based classroom.

Curran's Community Language Learning

Community Language Learning is Curran's attempt to translate principles of Rogerian counselling into a practical methodology for the language classroom. The procedure of CLL is superficially quite simple: a group of learners sits in a circle facing each other and attempts to have a conversation. The teacher stands outside this circle. When a learner has difficulty expressing a particular notion, he or she asks the teacher to supply the information needed to continue communicating with the group. This may entail the teacher translating almost all of the messages the learner wishes to communicate. Once the learner has retained the language forms which have been supplied by the teacher, he or she then turns to the group to repeat them. Most accounts of this procedure (e.g. Richards and Rodgers 1986: 113) include the use of a tape recorder into which the learners record their contribution to the conversation which is then played back to them to be used as a 'text' from which specific grammatical or lexical items are isolated for the learners to focus on later as part of a transcript.

These 'texts' serve as the main source of linguistic input, and thus if the learners wish to learn, they must cooperate to produce a conversation containing language meaningful to the individuals and sufficiently linguistically substantial for use as learning material. Learners themselves decide on the content of these conversations, with each individual's contribution serving as a basis to which other learners react.

Learners may choose, particularly at later phases of the acquisition process, how they will proceed with the task of CLL. If they choose to remain largely independent of the teacher, be it for psychological reasons or because they wish to communicate in a less cumbersome fashion than constantly asking for 'feedback' for each linguistic contribution they wish to make, they can contribute directly into the recorder. As Curran intended the role of the teacher at later stages to be largely that of supplying more complex language and idiom, the tape-recorded nature of CLL would allow a learner to use the language he has at his disposal and subsequently have it discussed, analysed, and possibly reformulated by the teacher into a more complex, native speaker-like utterance while transcription takes place.

As an exclusive method, many criticisms can be made of CLL. Many critics (e.g. Richards and Rodgers 1986: 126) seek evidence that the learning process does indeed parallel that of psychological counselling. Learner hostility, institutional concerns, and Curran's essentially structuralist view of the language system were also instrumental in the downfall of CLL as a method. As the Communicative Approach gained momentum, use of the learners' L1 was also viewed with suspicion by methodologists who sought parallels with first language acquisition theory and strove to match these with more sophisticated views of second language acquisition researchers. With the rush for modernization and a belief in the infallibility of Communicative teaching, methods and procedures that did not fit neatly into the paradigms set by the approach became relics of a bygone era.

It would, however, be unwise to dismiss the procedure of CLL simply because of the gaps we have noted in the theory supporting it initially. As Communicative methodology segues into lexical and task-based learning, the wisdom of exploring a framework whereby we may utilize the fundamental CLL procedure as one particularly valid task type in conjunction with others becomes compelling.

The 'task' of task-based approaches to language teaching

Many teachers and educators are now advocating that the language classroom revolve around the 'task', so if a methodology is to be 'task-based', a definition of task as a valid unit of classroom instruction needs to be found. One definition (Skehan 1996: 38) is that

> a task is taken to be an activity in which: meaning is primary; there is some sort of relationship to the real world; task completion has some priority; and the assessment of task performance is in terms of task outcome. ... [A] task which requires personal information to be exchanged, or a problem to be solved, or a collective judgment to be made bears a resemblance to things that happen outside the classroom in a way that separates these activities from doing, for example, a transformation exercise.

There are strong theoretical grounds for the belief that the primacy of meaning is an essential prerequisite to SLA, providing that 'adequate attentional capacity' remains to focus on *form* as well as meaning (Skehan 1996: 45).

Nunan (1989: 10) considers a task to be 'a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focussed on meaning rather than form'.

Both of these definitions stress the focus on language as interaction between learners using the L2 system as the means through which such interaction occurs. However, while Skehan advocates the 'real-world' nature of tasks, many others may not mirror exactly the types of tasks native speakers engage in, but may be believed nevertheless to be valid as 'pedagogic' tasks or tasks which activate the processes that lead to language acquisition.

Returning to Skehan's definition of 'task', it is important to note that both the priority given to task completion and the assessment of task performance in terms of task outcome are relative. While the teacher may view the conveyance of meaning as the task goal and assess the learners accordingly, learners themselves have very specific goals regarding the meanings they wish to convey and how they desire to do so. These wishes are often linked to the learners' typical L1 responses in similar situations.

Learners may consequently 'successfully' complete a task in terms of fluent communication of ideas while still feeling frustrated at their own linguistic inability to truly express themselves without relying on communicative strategies which limit their true meanings. Teachers may see that learners are communicating ideas in the L2 and be unaware of the anxiety caused by the constraints of the simultaneous processing and production demands placed on learners.

Many existing tasks emphasize the need to provide the learners with meanings to convey (Tarone and Yule 1989) but if the aim of oral fluency is the ability to communicate one's thoughts and opinions, CLL's use of a learner's true communicative intent may prove a more valid vehicle for creating a classroom which avoids the complaint that 'we have failed to consider the communication potential of the L2 classroom *itself* and the authentic resources for interaction it has to offer' (Van Lier 1988: 29-30).

It is now time to examine CLL procedure as a possible piece in the puzzle of task-based learning and its role as task, complementing other task types currently employed in task-based learning.

CLL as 'task'

The CLL procedure outlined clearly lends itself, in several regards, to the definitions of 'task' as described above. CLL involves learners in an activity where meaning is primary. As a task, CLL is not structured around specific linguistic items chosen by the teacher for acquisition purposes, but rather around topics chosen by the learners, emphasizing the meanings the learners themselves choose to convey and project into their exploration of these topics in the learning process. Due to the use of the learner's L1 to establish meaning, this information is not limited by an individual's current interlanguage stage. Learners involved in CLL are required to manipulate the L2 system while engaging in true interaction rather than a 'rehearsal' for real-world communication. Thus the task holds the means for a large range of possible outcomes as valid as the opinions and emotions of the learners themselves.

Both task completion and task outcome are of priority and this manifests itself in two ways. The desired outcome of CLL is the approximation of 'real-world' communication; it mirrors the main

objective of language learning — the use of language in a social setting for the communication of ideas. Learners may have as a secondary goal the production of the tape-recorded 'text' which can serve as a vehicle for focused language study after the meaning of this language is established. Consequently the learners are largely autonomous in their decisions concerning content, yet they are dependent on one another to produce language which is meaningful to them as a group as well as complex enough to provide new material from which the group expects to derive linguistic input to further interlanguage growth.

These apparent links between CLL procedure and the current notion of 'task' are easily established. The categorization of CLL as clearly fitting into established task categories such as 'skill-getting' and 'skill-using' (Rivers and Temperley 1978: 4) or communicative and 'precommunicative' (Littlewood 1981: 85-86) is more problematic, as the conveyance and comprehension of personal meaning places it in the latter category, while individual language focus places it in the former. It is possible to separate the creation of the conversation and the subsequent language study into two discrete tasks, yet this alone does not solve entirely the problem of categorization. The mixture of skill-getting and skill-using elements of CLL may indicate a potential economization of class time spent engaging in the former to the detriment of involving learners in meaningful interaction.

CLL and the cognitive processes of SLA

Part of the language acquisition process involves the construction of hypotheses by the learner about the L2 grammatical system. This demands that learners focus their attention on form as well as on content when producing language (Tarone 1985). The dilemma this poses in the context of task-based learning has already been examined as most tasks have as their ultimate aim the primacy of meaning over form. Consequently many such tasks may leave learners with insufficient attentional capacity to concern themselves with accuracy while under pressure to communicate. This capacity is essential if the learners require time to construct and, more crucially, apply hypotheses with which they are currently working.

CLL offers one solution to the problem caused by the dichotomy of form and meaning during communicative tasks. As one of the goals of task completion is the creation of a piece of coherent discourse in the form of a recorded conversation, learners are made aware that the accuracy of language produced does have some value in the execution of the task. The time given between the formation of the utterance and its repetition into the microphone with the intention of referring to it at a later time in the lesson heightens awareness of the value of linguistic accuracy. Learners are expected to transcribe the conversations afterwards and thus they will most likely desire accurate linguistic data from which to learn outside of the classroom. At earlier stages of the learning process, learners are largely formulating L2 responses with the aid of the teacher's reformulations of the L1 meanings they wish to express. This use of L1 lightens the processing load for the learners, leaving enough attentional capacity to be focused on the forms being used to translate a message familiar to the learners into L2, whereby teachers may use these forms to highlight particular linguistic elements in either inductive or deductive activities.

Here CLL can play an important role in terms of the input learners receive, as CLL input is:

1. *Cyclical*, i.e., there is no external pressure to use any specific linguistic items and thus the conversations will tend to comprise a wide range of structures and lexical items which will be used and reused as often as the learners require such structures for natural communication. Skehan (1996: 51) indicates that 'task-based learning should work toward a constant cycle of analysis and synthesis'.

2. *Relatively ungraded*, as learners can rely on the teacher to give a precise translation of the messages they wish to convey, yet the teacher or the learners themselves can choose to adapt L2 messages to a form less complex than that of the original L1 message. These features suggest another possible benefit of CLL. The nature of input generated by the learners themselves allows each individual learner to concentrate on whatever element of the L2 system he or she is currently at the stage of acquiring (Pienemann et al. 1988), adding a new dimension to the concept of 'learner-centred' teaching.

3. *Authentic*, in terms of showing language as used by native speakers rather than language specifically designed for the

classroom, and thus not displaying some of the characteristics of specially prepared input such as an unnaturally high frequency of one particular structure. From McCarthy (1991) we see some features of natural conversation; authentic dialogue revolves around the manipulation of topics. Most authentic discourse is dynamic, i.e., flowing in a process of trial and error from one topic to another as long as interest is displayed by participants in the conversation and provided that they have something relevant to add to the discussion.

4. *Communicative*, in that learners engage in social interaction prescribed only by the authentic communicative intent of the learners, thus increasing interest from other group members as the interaction is real and more natural than with other task types which often 'generate output which is boring, uninspired and non-committal' (Legutke and Thomas 1991: 8). Hatch (1983: 180) suggests that social interaction gives the learner the best type of data from which to learn.

The ability to rely on L1 as a source for data to be transmitted into L2, as well as the interactive and spontaneous nature of the data generated by CLL, heightens the likelihood that learners will develop greater complexity in their L2 utterances, stimulating interlanguage growth and lessening the possibility of fossilization.

CLL procedure can also help activate the dual mode processing of language for production by facilitating understanding of the rule system of L2, with learner utterances that can also be used as exemplars, i.e., learnt as chunks of accurate language which the learner may access in later communication as a single unit. CLL allows exemplars to be introduced singly in clear contexts to facilitate their acquisition by learners. As Lewis (1993: 75) states: 'It is possible to use effectively unanalysed, pragmatically useful wholes which are only subsequently analysed'. Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) believe that fluent speech consists of much exemplaric language, used as a basis to decrease linguistic encoding. Thus CLL provides learners with potentially exemplaric language which can be deployed later in other task types while also allowing enough attentional capacity to focus on form if desired.

As learners establish the means for dual mode processing, i.e. a sufficient number of exemplars and a burgeoning knowledge of the rule-based system of L2, it is likely that they will consequently wish to become more independent of teacher intervention if sufficient interest is generated by the output they produce.

In summary, there are strong arguments to support the implementation of CLL as a valid part of a task-based classroom procedure in which the focus of instruction is on the exchange of meaning through realistic interaction between learners. From a psycholinguistic perspective it seems plausible that CLL can be used to activate the cognitive processes which enable language to be acquired. The ability to shift a learner's attention from meaning to form aids in the development of the rule-based system of language, and the cyclical nature of the input allows the learner's 'internal syllabus' to operate more naturally than with many other task types.

The interactive, learner-centred nature of CLL can play a role in establishing a classroom environment which fosters true communication, thus increasing learner interest and motivation. The possible use the learners themselves can make of their L1 to manage their interaction can be viewed as a component of the learning process when the interactional skills which they already possess are taken into account. Likewise, the opinions and ideas the learners use can be seen as a personally meaningful basis for communicating in the L2.

CLL in the classroom context

The empirical research referred to in this section was conducted in 1996 in Waterford Institute of Technology, with two groups of learners of German, the first a mixed-ability intermediate group of five learners, the second consisting of 11 beginners. Both groups studied the language as an elective subject.

Each group used the CLL procedure for one of the three weekly one-hour sessions. The first four conversations created by each group were intended to be free and spontaneous. The learners themselves chose specific topics to be discussed for the final three sessions. A list of possible discussion topics was supplied lest they be unable to think of some themselves. The purpose of the experiment was to assess the degree to which CLL functioned as a task in the classroom. The dialogues themselves have not been included here for the sake of brevity (see Sosa 1996 for a detailed conversational analysis of the nature of the CLL output). Here I will limit the discussion to some aspects of the conversations and the learners' views of the task itself.

The first two attempts to use CLL to build a conversation showed the learners hostile both to the task itself and towards each other for the lack of response to dialogue initiation. Long silences ensued between utterances. This, they explained later, was largely due to a lack of familiarity with the task type and an inability to decide the degree to which they could truly say what they wished. All members seemed reluctant to ask the teacher for reformulations and chose to remain as independent as possible. As some learners began to express their frustration at the lack of interaction, a more serious attempt was made to engage in discussion, although all 'free' conversations remained superficial small talk. When learners pre-selected subjects for their conversations, they tended towards the topical, discussing Northern Ireland, divorce, drug use, and student life. On the basis of questionnaires distributed to the learners after the conclusion of the experiment, the learners in both groups were equally split as to whether they preferred the pre-decided topics 'because we could focus more on the subject' or free discussions which were 'natural and relevant containing vocabulary we might actually use'.

Combining the two groups, over 87% of the learners considered the input they received from CLL to be 'more relevant' than the material they received from their coursebooks. Some 81% shared the belief expressed by one learner that the conversations 'reflected natural dialogue', while another stated that they were 'more applicable' to the types of conversations in which they felt they would later engage. Another believed that 'they were certainly more natural and relevant (as books seem to deal with holiday conversations, i.e. booking a hotel room, asking for directions, etc.)'. Yet another expressed the belief that traditional classroom practice 'is not reflective of what people want to learn about. The language is useless, boring and tedious'. Although this view is certainly extreme and not intended to be representative of how most learners feel in the foreign language classroom, it does indicate that teachers must be aware that learners desire relevant input and practice opportunities.

It is not surprising that the learner questionnaires revealed that over 87% of the learners commended the vocabulary produced during the CLL sessions as being, as one learner put it, 'useful in conversation as opposed to textbook'. Another student, alluding to the learner-centred nature of CLL and its relation to motivation, stated that 'if the topics are decided on by the students, it offers

more incentive to learn the vocabulary from the tape. The vocabulary is relevant to them and what they have to say'. CLL may be a possible and relevant means of producing vocabulary for the various interests within any given group of learners, as the lexis used will reflect the learners rather than frequency counts or spurious, pre-selected topic-based lexical selection.

Although 56% of the learners claimed to focus wholly or mainly on content rather than form, grammar-specific questions were asked during the dialogues, illustrating that learners have sufficient time and attentional capacity to concentrate on form and that some actually do so and actively work towards the internalization of linguistic systems. Some learners indicated that accuracy is a priority and that CLL allows for a shift of focus from accuracy to fluency without interrupting the flow of communication during task performance. Sixty-two per cent claimed to have contributed an utterance 'with the sole intention of finding out a particular structure or expression'. This illustrates the opportunity learners have to formulate linguistic hypotheses and to use teacher reformulations to test them out. It certainly shows that form is of concern to many learners, yet their interest in form is dictated by the interaction and suitability of an utterance within the constraints of true communication. However, while the majority of learners indicated that they were able to use CLL in the process of understanding grammar, one learner felt that CLL 'doesn't help to learn the language because we are only repeating everything the teacher tells us in German'. It could be argued that this particular learner had failed to develop a sufficient number of strategies to apply to the linguistic data he was receiving, yet the danger remains that a number of learners may not consciously attempt to construct hypotheses about the linguistic system and may also feel so hostile to the task that they are not motivated to learn anything at all.

With both groups, many questions were posed concerning the language generated by the conversations during the transcription stage of the lesson, indicating that the learners were motivated to understand the 'rules' of the language when enough attentional capacity remained for them to focus on form. Interestingly, many of the questions asked concerned points of grammar which would generally be regarded as 'too advanced' for the learners' level. As Curran (1976: 45) states, 'no one is more lost and confused than learners who intensely desire to know something, but who can find no one capable of teaching them'. CLL can perhaps provide a

means to allow learners access to the linguistic knowledge they desire when it is suitable for them, either due to interest or, compellingly, after having reached a point in the acquisition process when they are able to acquire that knowledge in their own time.

The scope of the empirical research was insufficient to gauge the exact extent to which exemplaric acquisition occurred, yet over half of the students polled believed that they were in a position to recall 'a large number' of whole utterances from the CLL conversations, indicating that utterances were being stored in the brain as single units by a large number of learners. Interestingly, these exemplars contained many aspects of German grammar which learners could not explain or translate individually (e.g. modal particles), but which could be called upon later for more detailed analysis.

Classroom research on CLL — a critical appraisal

The above research indicates that the task of CLL is viewed by many learners as genuinely relevant to their perceived needs, yet there are some problems which must be addressed in order to provide a more balanced picture of CLL's usefulness in the classroom. While nearly 70% of the learners in both groups believed CLL had improved their linguistic ability, we must also remember the 30% who did not. Despite the increase in interaction and learner autonomy, only 43% of the learners enjoyed the sessions 'greatly', the remainder finding them 'average'. If further research indicates such figures as general, we do not have a great breakthrough in language teaching.

Only 37% felt they had contributed 'a great deal' to the conversations, 31% 'a bit' and the remainder 'very little'. Reasons cited for lack of participation ranged from 'nothing to say' to 'fear of being laughed at'. Another student felt that CLL 'discriminates against shy people', by which it is unclear whether the learner was stating that more introverted group members felt uncomfortable contributing to the conversations (a condition not necessarily detrimental, considering the value of receptive periods of silence as a valuable part of the learning process for some cognitive styles), or whether he was referring to the 'on-the-spot' feeling when questions were directly posed to them or when they found themselves the topic of conversations. One learner recommends CLL because

it offers learners 'a chance to speak aloud their thoughts and a chance to be corrected. You don't have to think much doing textbook work but in conversation you have to put in the effort'. Perhaps this 'effort', if it causes learners to feel uncomfortable about the task, may in fact hinder the acquisition of the potential benefits which exist in theory.

Communication strategies, clearly important to learners with underdeveloped interlanguage, need to be employed in real time with real communicative constraints without possible teacher intervention. The task of creating a conversation utterance by utterance, into a microphone and onto tape with the teacher providing many of the utterances directly, is clearly not authentic. Thus the task has linguistic but not necessarily psychological authenticity.

The ability to rely on L1 during task execution is another concern. More research is needed into bilingual education and the possible benefits to interlanguage development (e.g. complexity) as well as the detriments (e.g., the possibility that learners may not achieve complete Ll independence). In the case of the above experiments with CLL, the reliance on teacher reformulations actually increased with time. While this may be viewed as positive for interlanguage growth, such a task must be counterbalanced by other task types in which learners must rely solely on their linguistic ability.

Another issue concerns the need to implement tasks in which learners are able to practise long and short turns (Brown and Yule 1983: 16ff.). CLL does offer learners the ability to practise taking long turns, yet certainly in this experiment this was scarcely the case. By far the longest turn taken with either group consisted of seven utterances, although few consisted of more than one. There may be several compelling reasons for this, yet it would seem that CLL does not greatly lengthen the turns taken by individual learners. Thus learners do not provide themselves with practice at organizing longer turns.

Nevertheless, the benefits of the CLL task are remarkable in terms of learner autonomy and lexical selection and organization. Many learners found it a 'more relaxed' way of language teaching as 'you can speak your mind while at the same time learning'. Learners were able to retain large amounts of linguistic data, and perhaps this may be attributable to the self-investment which learners made in determining the content of the sessions and in

managing their interaction wholly autonomously. The ability of CLL to allow learners to do so should not be underestimated.

Conclusion

At the heart of this discussion was the question of whether Community Language Learning could be reappraised in a modern context as a potentially valuable classroom task in ways which its founders could hardly have imagined. After considering many aspects of SLA research and theory we have seen that this is indeed the case.

CLL is not the answer to all of the dilemmas facing language teachers and methodologists. The problems outlined above show this, yet Richards and Rodgers (1986: 126), in an overview of eight teaching methods including the Communicative Approach, state that CLL is 'the most responsive of the methods in terms of its sensitivity to learner communicative intent'. In light of current discussions concerning the true function and nature of language as communication and interaction between individuals, we could find some place in the modern classroom for CLL. The primacy of meaning, the authentic interactive possibilities, and the ability to employ CLL procedure within a self-contained lesson allow the method to be viewed as a task according to most definitions of task. The nature of the input largely corresponds to that which many methodologists consider beneficial to the acquisition process, creating strong theoretical grounds in favour of its implementation in the classroom. As one learner involved in the research noted, CLL is 'a good way to learn language but to be used in conjunction with other traditional methods'.

Inconclusive research concerning the SLA process, learner variables, the role of the Ll in the acquisition process, and a host of other relevant questions is a frustrating barrier to any methodologist attempting to provide a full evaluation of CLL, yet the theoretical claims indicate that such research is needed.

Van Lier (1996: 5) states his belief that the foreign language syllabus should 'allow language education to unfold in a regulated yet creative manner, within a framework of individual and social *constraints* and *resources*'. The very essence of CLL rests exactly on these principles, allowing learners to use language under their own constraints, relying on their own resources from which they

must supply personally relevant meanings and invest themselves in a learning process which provides for interactive opportunities, naturalistic input, and the time to develop communicative, lexical, strategic, and linguistic competence. This being the case, we can no longer realistically view CLL as incongruous with the modern language teaching context.

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