Learner-centred syllabus design and CLT

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Why question CLT?

- Surveys of AMEP students over a number of decades have shown that many are not comfortable with CLT approaches and many feel confused by what they perceive as randomised activities and unsystematic syllabus design.

- The overall take-up of AMEP hours is low and there is concern about how much is achieved in the available hours, especially for lower-level and special needs students.
Progressive methodologies are being critiqued in other educational sectors, especially in terms of their effectiveness with lower-level and special needs students.

Critiques of CLT eg: Widdowson (1990) have not been debated systematically in the AMEP.

Although students with similar characteristics have accessed the AMEP over the decades, reinvention of the wheel is still the norm.
What we wanted to do

- We wanted to investigate the role of the teacher in framing the language learning experiences of their students and the way students responded to different teaching approaches.

- We wanted to use theoretical frameworks to investigate effective teaching in AMEP classrooms, which are being used to analyse classrooms in broader educational contexts.
What is effective teaching?

Effective teaching is teaching which responds systematically to student characteristics and needs, develops student language, builds confidence to use English outside the classroom and which students see as a positive experience.
What is teaching?

Vygotsky (1978) believed, that learning is essentially a social activity and teaching is essential to the learning process. All learning can be seen as an apprenticeship and no matter how that learning occurs, whether in the classroom, through a book, through observation, through demonstration, over the Internet, in the workplace or via a CD ROM there has to be a teacher thinking about instruction or attempting to intervene and short-circuit the learning process (Widdowson 1990).
Why refocus on teaching?

Walkerdine (1984) outlines how, within what are termed *progressive approaches*, the focus shifted from teaching to learning. The teacher is expected to provide an environment in which learning occurs and teaching has become invisible. Sharing Walkerdine’s concern with the invisibility of the teaching process, we believe that it is time to reflect on the nature of teaching and what it means to be an effective teacher, in this case specifically a language teacher.
Traditional approaches

In traditional approaches to education and language learning:

- the teaching-learning relationship [is] one of transmission and reception (Gibbons 2002: 6)
- content is decided at a system level and is usually supported by textbooks, designed as apprenticing texts

Traditional methods of language teaching have been criticized for working against what is generally accepted as one of the central principles of language learning: namely that using the language in interaction with others is an essential process by which it is learned (Gibbons 2002: 7).
Interestingly Lisa Delpit (1988) believes traditional education systems were more successful in educating black children in the USA than later progressive approaches because the curriculum was less hidden, textbooks supported learning and teachers concentrated on teaching and took responsibility for ensuring that students had a sense of themselves as able to learn.
Progressive approaches

Natural learning approaches:

- came to dominate education in Australia in the 1970s and 1980s, with communicative language teaching (CLT), as a progressive methodology, introduced into language teaching

- place the learner at the centre of the pedagogic process and see education not as a matter of receiving information but of intelligent inquiry and thought (Gibbons 2002: 6)
Progressive approaches require teachers to:

- provide an environment in which learning occurs
- identify student needs
- design courses
- create materials
- design assessment tasks

*Teachers* become *facilitators* in setting up a learning environment through tasks designed to enable students to produce language.
Various aspects of traditional language teaching, such as the explicit teaching of grammar and vocabulary, became the focus of confused debate, leading to fractured classroom practice.

Interestingly, the surveyed AMEP students (eg: Burton 1991) were not confused about the need to learn the systems of language, asking for more grammar in all surveys.
The fracturing of classroom practice means that elements of traditional and progressive approaches coexist in most classrooms. But as Gibbons (2002:7) states: *This is not to be critical of teachers. Rather it points to the inadequacy of the most common models of learning within which teachers are expected to work. In fact, though very different in the way they view learning and the role of the teacher, both ideologies have what is essentially an individualistic notion of learning.*

**Question:**
Is the coexistence of traditional and progressive methodologies in adult second language classrooms the result of teachers believing language is learnt through interaction but learners still seeking instruction in the language systems?
Widdowson (1990: 164) sees the study of language as system as an essential aspect of language learning:

Let me summarize the points I have made against a too-ready acceptance of the primacy of doing. To try to replicate the conditions of natural communicative use for language in the classroom is mistaken for two basic reasons. First, to do so is to deny the whole purpose of pedagogy, which is to contrive economical and more effective means of language learning than is provided by natural exposure and experience. Second, natural language use typically deflects attention from language itself and presupposes a knowledge of the language system as a basic resource which learners have, by definition, not yet acquired.
Critiques of progressive pedagogy

One central criticism is the failure of progressive approaches to meet the needs of disadvantaged students, who are not part of the dominant culture, as Delpit (1988: 285) explains in relation to children in school:

Some children come to school with more accoutrements of the culture of power already in place – ‘cultural capital’ as some critical theorists refer to it – some with less. Many liberal educators hold that the primary goal of education is for children to become autonomous, to develop fully while they are in the classroom setting without having arbitrary, outside standards forced upon them. This is a very reasonable goal for people whose children are already participants in the culture of power and who have internalized its codes. But parents who don’t function within that culture often want something else. It’s not that they disagree with the former aim, it’s just that they want something more. They want to ensure that the school provides their children with discourse patterns, interactional styles and spoken and written language codes that will allow them success in the larger society.
Another criticism of progressive education, which many feel *reinforces the inequalities of access* (Feez 1985:9), is the fact that the curriculum framework, within which students work, remains hidden to students, as Feez (9) goes on to explain:

*It is simply that in progressive pedagogies, the way these inequalities are perpetuated becomes invisible. Learners’ individuality and freedom may be more highly valued in progressive classrooms, but during and at the end of their course of study learners are still assessed against the standards of the dominant culture ... although classrooms are more pleasant, what is actually expected of learners in order for them to be successful is not made explicit ... progressive classrooms tend to reinforce existing social inequalities of opportunity because it seems that it is the learner, rather than the educational institution, who is to be blamed for failure in such benevolent and rich learning environments.*
Progressive pedagogies have also been criticized for their lack of explicit language teaching, which, it has been argued, places a disadvantage on those who are less familiar with the language and assumptions of a [Western] middle-class curriculum (Gibbons 2002: 7).
What are critics proposing?

Post-progressive methodologies are proposing a collaborative orientation. Here the teacher is central to the teaching-learning process, through processes of scaffolding, whereby the teacher focuses the learners’ attention, keeps them motivated to learn, divides the learning task into manageable components and demonstrates and models successful performance.

[Scaffolding] is not just any assistance which helps a learner to accomplish a task. It is help which will enable a learner to accomplish a task which they would not have been quite able to manage on their own, and it is help which is intended to bring the learner closer to a state of competence which will enable them eventually to complete such a task on their own.

Questions about CLT

- Do many AMEP students find the load of learning in the classroom too heavy because of methodologies that emphasize the task and activity?
- With such methodologies are students continuously learning new ways of operating in the classroom as well as new content areas in which the language to be learnt is contextualized?
- Are classrooms offering high challenge but low support where, according to Mariana (1997 in Hammond 2001), students experience frustration, insecurity and anxiety?
- Can communicative activities and their placement in lessons demand performance a long way ahead of student capabilities?
- When communicative tasks continually demand that students learn new ways of operating in the classroom, or are given without the necessary scaffolding, do they place an extra cognitive load on learners, making it harder to learn?
Bernstein’s concept of *individual enhancement*

Bernstein saw enhancement as a condition for experiencing boundaries, be they social, intellectual or personal, not as prisons, or stereotypes, but as tension points condensing the past and opening possible futures ... it is the right to the means of critical understanding and to new possibilities (Bernstein 1996: 7).

*English language for AMEP students is the means to possible futures.* It provides *access to community membership* and such membership can be *high stakes indeed for individual learners* ... *and high stakes for the community itself in terms of being an inclusive community where capacity for ‘participatory association’* (Somers 1993:587) *is available to all* (de Silva Joyce and Hood forthcoming).

In all surveys, AMEP students have identified language learning as of central importance to settlement and have placed the language classroom at the centre of their language learning process.
Bernstein’s concept of *pedagogic device*

Bernstein was interested in the question: *Are there general principles underlying the transformation of knowledge into pedagogic communication, whether the knowledge is intellectual, practical, expressive or official knowledge or local knowledge?* (Bernstein 1996: 39)

In exploring this question he developed the concept of the *pedagogic device*, which *mediates between the field of potential pedagogic meanings and what emerges as pedagogic communication* (Davis in Muller, Davies and Morais 2004: 45).
The AMEP was originally established as part of the settlement program of the Commonwealth Government and the focus was on language learning, which would enable newly-arrived migrants and refugees to participate in Australian society. More recent directives from the Australian Government are towards preparing these same students more directly for participation in the workforce.

The curriculum reflects all these goals in general outcome statements but it is the AMEP teacher who contextualises these outcomes into pedagogic discourse. In the case of second language learning the classroom mediates real world discourse into a mediated, virtual or imaginary (Bernstein 1996: 47) discourse.
Bernstein’s concept of classification

Classification is about boundaries between one category and another: where we have strong classification, the rule is: things must be kept apart. Where we have weak classification, the rule is: things must be brought together (Bernstein 1996: 26).

For Bernstein, classifications, strong or weak, always carry power relations (21) and it is important to analyse what is happening in ESL classrooms to ensure that the inescapable authority of the teacher (Bourne 2004: 65) is not masked and is used to develop collaborative practice.

In the second language classroom, one of the main categorical divisions is the four macroskills: reading, writing, speaking and listening. There is a tendency in communicative language teaching to integrate these skills within activities.
Questions

- Can the integration of skills lead students to lose the intended focus of an activity, through weak classification?
- Can the integration of skills also lead to failure of CLT activities? For example, students may be able to complete an activity using their speaking skills but the reading load of the activity may be beyond their reading capabilities.
- Can CLT methodology confuse the expectations of students about the role of the teacher and the learner and blur the division of labour within the classroom (Bernstein 1996: 29)?
- Can CLT blur the specialisation of spaces (Bernstein 1996:29) within the classroom and the multi-modal signals, such as changes of place, pace and deportment (Bourne: 2004: 67) which establish changing relationships between teacher and students within lessons?
Bernstein’s concept of framing

[Framing is related to the transmission of knowledge through pedagogic practices (Sadovnik 1995: 8). It is about the relationship between the transmitter (teacher) and acquirers (students).

Where framing is strong, the transmitter has explicit control over the selection, sequence, pacing, criteria and social base. Where the framing is weak, the acquirer has apparent control (Bernstein 1996: 27).

For Bernstein strong framing develops a visible pedagogy where rules of instructional and regulative discourse are explicit and weak framing develops invisible pedagogic practice where the rules of regulative and instructional discourse are implicit and largely unknown to the acquirer (28).
Bernstein distinguished between *regulative discourse* and *instructional discourse* in the classroom. Regulative discourse orders the relationship between teacher and students and includes *expectations about conduct, character and manner* (Arnot and Reay 2004: 135), through rules of how people will engage with one another. Instructional discourse refers to *the selection, sequence, pacing and criteria of knowledge*.

In classrooms where the decisions of the teacher are explicit, the student will always know what is expected of him or her, since the rules of legitimate expectations are made clearly available to the acquirer [student] by the transmitter [teacher] (Sadovnik 1995: 13). On the other hand where the teacher’s decisions are implicit, the students must create their own criteria for what is happening in the classroom and the teacher’s role is as a facilitator not a transmitter (13).
Questions

- In classrooms strongly oriented to communicative language teaching, have the educational experiences of the students prepared them for implicit pedagogic practices?

- Do students have the time available to only learn language by participating in communicative activities, with no explicit teaching?

- In the learner-centred curriculum, who has apparent and who has ultimate control over what will be taught and how the classroom operates?
In many surveys of AMEP students and in our research project, the students indicated a level of confusion about classrooms. However they were not adverse to learning in *new ways* as long as they understood *why* the teacher wanted them to undertake particular tasks in the classroom and they could understand *how* this would help them to learn language.
Visible collaborative pedagogy

Many educators around the world are exploring new methodological approaches to ensure that education will provide *new possibilities* (Bernstein 1996: 7) for students from all backgrounds.

Rather than blaming students or their backgrounds for lack of success in educational programs, these educators have worked with the analytical frameworks of Bernstein and Vygotsky to understand what constitutes pedagogic practices and how collaborative pedagogic practices can be developed which will improve levels of student success.
Authority

The concept of a visible pedagogy comes from Bernstein (1996). It is a pedagogy that operates with strong classification and framing and is explicit in acknowledging responsibility for taking up a position of authority (Bourne 2004: 65).

Authority does not mean the authoritarian teacher of traditional pedagogy but teachers exercising expertise through authoritative practices in the classroom, as Widdowson (1990:188) explains:

But the teacher ... exercises authority in transaction by virtue of the achieved role of expert. His or her authority is based on professional qualification.

Progressive approaches are seen as simply mask[ing] the inescapable authority of the teacher (65).
Observed examples of visible pedagogy

Publication in the classroom of program planning

- Whole course programs, eg: topics to be covered, are displayed on notice-boards.
- The teacher gives the course outline for students to put in their folders and refers to it at the beginning of each week/lesson.
- Curriculum outcomes are displayed, with outcomes to be covered in the course highlighted.
- Translations of curriculum outcomes are displayed in student languages.
Teacher’s philosophy and expectations of student roles are made clear

- The teacher trains students in ways to participate in the classroom eg: the teacher expects students to ask one another for clarification in discussion and will not assist with clarification.

- The teacher expects students to take responsibility for classroom materials eg: to pack away materials and return them to the front of classroom.

- The teacher clearly finishes the lesson before students leave.
Daily lesson planning published

- The teacher writes the lesson plan on the board at the beginning of the lesson and goes through it.
- The teacher reviews the plan at the end of the lesson and indicates what will happen with tasks not completed eg: *We will do this task tomorrow / We have not had time to do this task in class so you must finish it tonight and I’ll check it first thing tomorrow.*
Movement from one phase of lesson to another signalled clearly

- The teacher moves to another part of the classroom eg: to front when demonstrating and states change of focus eg: Now all look to the front and I will read this text.
- The teacher returns to the lesson plan on the board and ticks off completed activities.
- The teacher instructs students in what to do with completed material eg: Now write the date on the page and put the page in your folder.
- Students are asked to prepare equipment eg: Open exercise books.
- The teacher does not commence a phase of the lesson until all students are paying attention or understand what they need to do.
- The teacher clearly outlines the classroom processes eg: I am going to play this tape twice. Put your pens down and listen carefully.
Purpose and focus of activities made clear

- The teacher names the focus of the activity eg: *We are now going to read a text about ... / This activity will help your reading.*
- The teacher explains the purpose of an activity eg: *This activity will help you develop more vocabulary for your writing.*
- The teacher gives clear instructions about how to undertake an activity or task and checks all students understand.
- If some students do not understand, the teacher suspends the start of the activity until more competent students explain in L1.
- The teacher displays an activity sheet on the OHP and gives instructions before handing out student copies.
Materials displayed in classroom

Materials are displayed in the classroom:

- acknowledging the products of the student language learning e.g.: texts written by students
- providing reference points for ongoing learning e.g.: phonetic alphabet or posters outlining structure and language features of genres.
Reframing CLT in a visible pedagogy

In proposing a reframing of communicative language teaching (CLT) we are not proposing to throw the baby out with the bathwater, as has been the tendency in language teaching over the decades, as one method followed another. However, an over-emphasis on the communicative activity as an end in itself often results in constant movement from one unrelated activity to another, with some students still reporting what they did in Burton (1991: 63):

- *It’s too chaotic at the moment. A manual is what we need.*
- *Lessons should be sequential, day by day ... classes should be sequenced like a proper school.*
Classrooms where the curricular and pedagogic frameworks are visible are not places where novelty for its own sake is a feature of teaching. Some of the teachers we observed spent considerable amounts of time on one text or one activity and were not afraid of silence in the classroom as they gave students time to formulate responses to questions etc. Teachers worked within repeated identifiable frameworks, which provided students with a sense of familiarity and security. Presenting new language through familiar activities and tasks, and in repeated phases of lessons, enables students to focus on the language. It is important to understand the features of the classroom that increase the learning load for students. Many teachers introduced new ways of operating in the classroom eg: a new activity or task type, only when students were reviewing or practising learnt material, thus reducing the overall learning load.
We want to take this opportunity to thank all the AMEP teachers who have bravely opened their classrooms to our scrutiny over the years. In this project we particularly want to thank the teachers for taking the time to speak to us about their teaching. We also want to thank those students who were willing to talk to us about their experiences and expectations of learning English in the AMEP. We also acknowledge the funding from the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, which made the research possible.