〈論文〉

A critique of Melinda Wong's 'A linguistic perspective on communicative language teaching' in *The Language Learning Journal*, 2013, 41:1, 115-128.

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1. Introduction

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is an approach to language teaching that stresses meaning and function over form. Since the 1970s, the CLT approach has gained acceptance as the dominant approach for many teaching environments. Melinda Whong argues in her journal article, *A linguistic perspective on communicative language teaching,* that "...linguistics is not only important to language teaching, but is and should be an integral part of it" and that "...an understanding of linguistics is needed for language teaching expertise." (Whong 2013, 116-117) Whong shows in her paper that CLT is a valid approach to teaching any language, but that it would be a mistake to discount the contributions of linguists in that doing so may "...move too far away from the fundamental basis of language teaching -- the basic properties of language itself." (Whong 2013, 116) This paper will first briefly review the development of language teaching approaches and methods that have led from a strict focus on the form of the language to a focus on the meaning and function of language. Next I will review the 10 fundamental concepts that Whong says characterize CLT and which she analyses from a linguistic point of view to show how linguistics can reinforce CLT. Finally, I will finish with a discussion on my own views of the importance of linguistic knowledge in a CLT classroom.

2. Review of the development of language teaching approaches and methods leading up to Communicative Language Teaching

The study of classical Latin from a linguistic point of view, ie. the study of a language's grammar, syntax, and phonetics was the primary goal of formal language study in Europe and North America (Richards & Rodgers 2001, 3). The language "...was taught through rote learning of grammar rules, study of declensions and conjugations, translation, and practice writing sample sentences…"(Howatt 1984, cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2001, 4) If there was any speaking practice, it seems to have been "...limited to reading aloud the sentences they had translated". (Richards & Rodgers 2001, 4) This became known as the Grammar Translation Method, and seems to have been the main method of instruction of language from the 19th century to the mid 20th century. In some countries, it still exists as a primary way of language study in public education. (Richards & Rodgers 2001, 6)

In the middle of the 19th century educators began to see a need for being able to become proficient at communicating orally rather than just a linguistic knowledge of a language. An interest in how children "naturally" acquired language became popular. Speaking, correct pronunciation, and functional language were the focus. Meaning was deduced through the use of words that the students were already familiar with and through "mime, demonstration and pictures."(Richards and Rodgers 2001, 11) These principles eventually became known as the Direct Method. In America, linguists who wanted language study to have more structure as a starting point for language learning combined structural linguistic theory, contrastive analysis of languages, aural practice followed by oral practice (Aural-Oral Approach) and behavioral psychology to create the AudioLingual Method. (Richards and Rodgers 2001, 53) After the learning paradigm of behaviourism was called into question as a foundation for learning languages by Chomsky (Chomsky, 1957, cited in Richards and Rodgers, 2001, 153), linguists focussed on more functional and communicative aspects of language. The work of the British linguist David A. Wilkins (1976, cited in Richards and Rodgers, 2001, 154) "...proposed a functional or communicative definition of language that could serve as a basis for developing communicative syllabuses for language teaching (Richards and Rodgers 2001, 154). Wilkins' book, *Notional Syllabuses*, had a strong impact on the development of Communicative Language Teaching as it heavily influenced the design of textbooks and language teaching programs. (Richards and Rodgers, 2001, 154) Within CLT there is debate over how much emphasis should be put on form, function or meaning. Long (1991) describes three aspects of this debate as *Focus on Forms* (FonFs), where teachers focus on the structure of a language separated

from context; *Focus on Form* (FonF), which is a more general form of language structure, but put into some contextual situations; and *Focus on Meaning* (FonM). In addition to what Whong sees as a lot of emphasis on teaching with a Focus on Meaning, Whong also feels that there has been a "shift in the theoretical paradigm underpinning language pedagogy" to what is called "critical pedagogy"(Whong 2013, 116). Norton and Toohey (2004,) describe critical pedagogy as "...not simply a means of expression or communication; rather it is a practice that constructs, and is constructed by the ways language learners understand themselves, their social surroundings, their histories and their possibilities for the future."(Norton and Toohey 2004, 1) Judging from the types of articles in Norton and Tooey's book, the focus on language teaching within critical pedagogy seems to be more on words and their cultural meanings rather than the actual structure of language.

3. Whong's 10 fundamental concepts of CLT

Whong feels that these 2 trends have diminished the importance of linguistics research in teaching and learning in favor of focussing on meaning. In her paper, Whong wants teachers and academics to keep in mind the importance of linguistics in teaching of the language -- particularly in Communicative Language Teaching. She focuses on 10 key concepts of CLT and shows how linguistic knowledge can make a teacher or learner better at acquiring a new language. They are *integrated skills, process, meaning, authenticity, fluency, interaction, active, learner autonomy, selective error correction,* and *humanistic*. (Whong 2011, 29-34, cited in Whong 2013, 117)

Due to the functional use of language in CLT, *integrated skills* are a key component. This means that all four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking may be incorporated into one lesson. Whong suggests that a knowledge of linguistics in terms of explicit versus implicit knowledge, and descriptive versus prescriptive grammars can be useful in helping language teachers fine tune their teaching to optimize each of these skills. One example that stands out is that implicit knowledge of language is useful for spontaneous language use, while explicit knowledge is useful for improving or making more sophisticated language. (Whong 2013, 118)

Next Whong delves into modern research on how the brain works in processing language information. In CLT, the focus, as mentioned previously, is more weighted toward functional use of a language rather than on models and rules of language. Whong states that psycholinguists also allow that language acquisition is not "...merely a set of constraints, patterns or rules." (Whong 2013, 118) Indeed, Whong cites many psycholinguistic research studies (Truscutt and Sharwood Smith 2004a, 2004b; Caroll 2001; Pienemann 1998; Van Patten 1996, 2002, cited in Whong 2013,

119) that show a language learner improves "...not when learners memorise rules about language, but as a by-product of processing and producing language." (Whong 2013, 119) According to Whong, this research has also shown that there are differences between subconscious, linguistic knowledge and conscious metalinguistic knowledge. Learners, particularly adult learners, can leverage this conscious metalinguistic knowledge to improve their language ability by noticing and practicing production errors until their subconscious language learning process makes the changes necessary to overcome those errors. (White 2003; Lardiere 1998a, 1998b)

In her section on *meaning*, Whong shows again the importance of function over form in CTL, and that CTL classrooms "...should revolve around meaningful activities which require the use of language in communication". (Whong 2013, 119) She states that psycholinguistic research has shown that both meaning and structure are important for comprehension, but with a tilting toward meaning. This would suggest that grammar (structure) has a place in CLT but within the context of meaningful discourse examples.

Authenticity is another key component of CLT, as real language in spoken and written texts from newspapers, magazines, video, and audio can provide language learners with a lot of input. This real input allows learners to acquire language without it explicitly being taught (Van Patten and Williams 2007). *Authenticity* has also played a driving force in the development of research in corpus linguistics, where databases of existing, real language from television, radio, recorded conversations and other media have resulted in a better understanding of how language is really used. Whong suggests that *language learners* should be trained in linguistic techniques in order to not only understand the meaning groups of words but also to identify "...grammar patterns, lexical co-occurrence and other types of pattern use."(Whong 2013,121)

Fluency is another key aspect of CLT. Fluency, it is thought, results in more production which in turn may lead to more input from listening, which finally results in more language development. However, Whong argues that some explicit knowledge of certain aspects of language need to be learned in order to become proficient. (Whong 2013, 121) She cites studies by Rohde (2009) and Moyer (2009) that support this. Sometimes accuracy is important and knowledge of linguistics is useful for identifying those situations.

Whong strongly supports the efficacy of *interaction*, where language learners need to put equal attention to input and output. Michael Long's interaction hypothesis (Long 1981) suggests that language development depends on interaction -- getting input and producing output as well as negotiation of meaning. Learning is enhanced when language learners work to make themselves

understood in the target language by using feedback from their listeners. To quote Whong (2013, 122), "...it is not only the challenge of making sense *of* language, but also making sense *in* a language that facilitates language development." The strength of interaction as a learning strategy is reinforced by both cognitive and generative linguists. (Keck et al. 2006, cited in Whong 2013, 122)

For *interaction* to be effective, being an *active* learner is very important. Communicative tasks require thinking on the part of the learner to succeed. This "higher level of engagement" (Whong 2013, 122) leads to more processing, which in turn leads to more language development. Van Patten's input processing model (Van Patten 1996, 2002) suggests that there is a limit to a language learner's processing power of the input. Tasks which challenge the learner to focus directly on the language can help the learner "...overcome processing limitations."(Whong 2013,123) It would seem then that linguistic knowledge and analysis could help teachers design effective activities and tasks appropriate to the students' levels.

Most of Whong's discussion so far has focussed on the classroom. What happens outside of the classroom is also important and this leads to Whong's thoughts on *learner autonomy*. Language learners need to take responsibility for their learning. Progress will be severely limited if the learning is limited to just the classroom. Reading has many positive attributes for comprehension (Krashen 2004, cited in Whong 2013, 124), but doesn't result in a lot of production, which in a CLT approach, is very important. Practice makes perfect for not only improving a learner's ability, but also for noticing areas where a learner is deficient. Whong suggests more and more linguistic research is investigating the benefits of practice and teachers would be well advised to encourage their students to study and practice outside of the classroom.

One area of CLT that is a topic of debate is the issue of *selective error correction*. The debate is not whether error correction should occur or not -- all seem to agree that limited, selective error correction (mainly when there is a breakdown in communication) is better as too much may lead to discouragement and less interaction.The debates seem to be around the type of error correction (Russell and Spada 2006, cited in Whong 2013, 124) and over what and when to correct a learner. For example, a traditional linguistic approach would focus on mistakes in syntax or meaning with explicit practice. A psycholinguistic approach may take into account the level of the learner's development or processing limitations (Van Patten 1996, cited in Whong 2013, 124) as these factors seem to determine whether error correction would have any noticeable effect.

Finally, Whong discusses the *humanistic* aspect of CLT, where learners are seen as individuals and can vary significantly in their second language development (Van Patten and

Williams 2007) . Whong suggests that humanistic ideas tend to focus more on non-traditional linguistic study, such as dialects and forms of a language, or even new forms of linguistic study. However, traditional, mainstream, linguistic knowledge is still important for developing "pedagogical expertise" (Whong 2013, 125).

4. Discussion

Whong's article was very useful for understanding the main foundations of Communicative Language Teaching and the generative and psycholinguistic research that supports them. Whong shows how these different linguistic viewpoints contrast and sometimes complement each other. My teaching experience doesn't contradict anything that Whong presented in her paper, especially when it comes to using authentic materials, integrating the four skills and providing a lot of interaction. In fact, her providing the linguistic underpinnings to what I do in class makes me feel more confident in how I am teaching. I want to learn more about how the brain may be processing information and how different language learners can be at different stages within the process of language learning. I would like to learn more about best practices for each of those stages. Whong's paper has made me rethink how I do error correction and and also the types of activities I do in class to support learner autonomy and encourage more active engagement in the class from the students.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, I feel that Whong has written not only a clear summary of the current state of CLT and its linguistic foundations, but also has shown that linguistic knowledge is very important for being aware of what might be happening inside the brains of our students which may lead to better teaching practices. Whong's references for her work have shown me the way to different sources to learn more about how the learning process works and how that in turn may lead to my making more efficient activities for my students' learning.

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