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Sociolinguistic Competence: The Often Neglected Link in CLT

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Although Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is the most adopted and perhaps even the most adapted teaching approach by ESL and EFL teachers, its fullest potential in producing communicatively competent learners is seldom realised. Many ESL and EFL teachers alike have rather blurred and incomplete comprehension of the approach. One such misconception includes the marginalising and even total neglecting of grammar teaching, either deductively or inductively leading to the undesirable outcome of fluent learners without accuracy. In the other extreme, is the absolute emphasis of language forms over language functions resulting in accurate learners but without fluency. This balancing act between language forms (accuracy/usage) and language functions (fluency/use) in the CLT classrooms is further compounded by another CLT component which is equally important but more complex and elusive to address – culture. The neglect of this vital and basic component in CLT classes has inevitably resulted in many ‘fluent fools’ a term aptly used by Bennett (1993), referring to learners who are fluent, accurate but inappropriate. Many ESL and EFL teachers are guilty of teaching the target language oblivious of this ‘fifth skill’ -

Culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them.

(Kramsch, 1993:1)

The paper seeks to raise ESL and EFL teachers’ awareness of this ‘fifth skill’ in CLT, in particular its complementary role in the communicative competence equation:

Communicative Competence = Linguistic Competence + Sociolinguistic Competence + Discourse Competence + Strategic Competence

The contributing and complementary roles of the four components in the communicative equation will be examined, in particular sociolinguistic competence vis-à-vis the multicultural Asian landscape. Strategies and challenges in incorporating the cultural dimension of language into the daily teaching of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills will be also explored. It is hoped that with such cultural integration, the full potential of CLT in producing communicatively competent learners, holistically balanced in all aspects of fluency, accuracy and appropriacy will become a reality enjoyed by both ESL and EFL learners and teachers alike.

References

Bennett, M.J. 1993. How not to be a fluent fool: understanding the Cultural Dimensions of Language. *The Language Teacher* 27 (9)

Kramsch, C. 1993. *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*. Oxford: OUP