

Community Language Learning - the real self access method

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What is CLL?

Perhaps the best way of answering this question is to describe what happens in a typical beginners' class. The students sit in a circle. In the centre of the circle there is a tape-recorder with, hopefully, a microphone with a pause button on a long flex. The teacher stands outside the circle, behind the students.

Step I - Conversations

When a student wants to speak to another person in the learning group, s/he calls the teacher over and says what s/he wants to say in the group's mother tongue (or mutually understood working language). The teacher then whispers the translation into the speaker's ear. The speaker then says the sentence in the target language to the addressee in the group and into the microphone of the tape-recorder, switching on before speaking and off after speaking.

Should the sentence the student wants translating be a long one, or one requiring a lengthy translation into the target language, the teacher may break the translation into smaller bits, asking the student to

speak out aloud and record one bit at a time.

After a while students realise for themselves that producing over-long sentences for translation into the target language is bad learning policy.

The addressee may decide to answer, in which case s/he will call the teacher over and the process described above will be repeated.

The addressee may not want to answer, may feel there is nothing to reply or may be pre-empted in answering by another group member wanting to say something else to another person.

Negotiation of speaking turns is left entirely to the learners, the teacher abdicating any attempt or desire to control what happens. In practical terms this means that the teacher must avoid eye contact with an addressee following the target language utterance directed to him or her, because otherwise the teacher is effectively cueing the addressee to reply.

The teacher is no longer group leader in the ordinary sense - s/he is more like a 'waiter', standing in the background until called over, serving acceptantly, neither proposing nor dictating.

Curran, who originated the method, describes the teacher as a 'knower' or a 'counsellor'. 'Knower' in the sense of being an expert target language

informant. The teacher in CLL is effectively engaged in consecutive translation of as many idiolects as there are students. It is vital the translations offered to individual learners are perceived by them as fitting the mood and 'feel' of their original sentence. Once the group warms up all this has to be achieved by the teacher at considerable speed. His/her command of both the learners' L1 and the target language is well stretched even by beginners. Curran's second description of the teacher as 'counsellor' refers to the teacher's role in accepting and cushioning the students' understandable anxiety in the face of the new language. A practical example of how counselling works is when a CLL teacher, sensing the tension in a student who wants something translating, gives the translation into the person's ear while laying a hand on their shoulder to show solidarity and to help them dare to unwind a bit. The conversation stage will normally go on for about 15-25 minutes. If it goes on much longer the resultant tapescript will be too long and the corpus of language to be worked on will be too daunting and cumbersome.

Step 2 - Translation back to L1

Providing students switched the recorder on before speaking and off after each utterance the tape will contain everything said in the target language.

A student rewinds the tape and plays it utterance by utterance, so that the 'owner' of each sentence can translate it back from the target language to the group's language. Sometimes the person who spoke a sentence does not recognise it or can't remember its meaning - someone else in the group nearly always does. Should none of the learners remember, they can turn to the teacher/knower for help.

While this is going on the knower is picking out and maybe jotting down sentences s/he will want to use in the next step.

Step 3 - Grammar Analysis

The knower writes up on the board sentences from the tape that have a common pattern that the student may notice and ask about. Three or four sentences may well be enough with beginners.

This is the moment when the knower is most likely to be tempted to relapse into the directive teacher role and give an expositional 'lesson'. Having written the sentences on the board the knower simply tells the learners s/he will answer any questions the students feel like putting. It is vital that the knower should answer the questions asked and no more; there is a temptation to accept a question as a trigger mechanism for lengthy explanations. The questions are asked and answered in the L1.

These three steps usually take up one lesson.

Step 4 - Study of Transcript

Before the next session the knower transcribes the tape. The transcript should be as close to what was actually said by the students as possible. If the transcript is of a first or second lesson and one student has made a complete Russian salad of a sentence the transcriber may omit the sentence or transcribe it as it was intended. Generally, from lesson 2 on, some of the speakers will try to form sentences or parts of sentences without asking the knower to translate and these will abound with structural, word order etc. errors. The errors go into the transcript.

At the beginning of the next session the knower gives out photocopies of the transcript and lets the learners read through what they said the previous time. At this reading stage learners ask a lot of questions about meaning and quite frequently questions about the grammar too. They ask each other and they ask the 'knower' who is available as a resource to be called over by those who want his/her help.

The reading phase leads very naturally back into recording a new conversation, but with students trying out bits of language they have understood, which they want to test out or which they want to show off.

The above is a fairly full description of the extraordinarily simple mechanism of CLL. The joy of this method is that within the frame described above students feel free to explore language the way they want to. Some groups turn the conversation phase into a role-play time; this happened with a group of English adults learning French in Norwich in 1979 who decided to restrict themselves to situational dialogues for holiday purposes: their shared objective. Alan Pulverness of Bell School, Norwich, reports (private communication) that successive groups of French and German speaking learners of EFL over the past three years have decided to formalise group conduct in the conversation phase by implicitly or explicitly appointing a chair person or animateur/provocateur. They have also frequently decided to define and restrict the topics to be dealt with in a given conversation. Groups have been known to decide to tell a group story, some groups I have worked with have demanded that I read the last session's transcript so they can read it aloud round the group after me. The method leaves control of what happens in the hands of the students and thus they build up their unique, group textbook.

Where has it been used and what for?

Because the CLL frame is so simple and open many different teachers have found that it easily moulds itself round the needs of their particular groups.

Professor David Pollard, teaching first year students of Chinese at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, used a few hours of CLL work to give the students who found oral Chinese hard to break into a chance to do so. They were already some way into their study of characters and could read and write a lot more than they could say. CLL proved a fecund frame for getting them talking to each other in Chinese.

Jane Lockwood of the University of New South Wales, Australia, found herself faced with intensive 8-week courses for immigrants who wanted to bring their English up to a standard that would allow them to undertake professional work in Australia. They were mainly people from South East Asia or from Southern Europe who had been in Australia for quite a while. They knew a lot of English but had a great many fossilised mistakes.

She has used CLL to make them take group and then individual responsibility for coping with these mistakes and to let them measure for themselves their progress in eradicating the mistakes over the 8 weeks. Her procedure was this:

On the first morning she put them in two groups of ten round two tape-recorders in different rooms and simply asked them to record about 300 counter units of conversation with each other and then to re-wind and found out what mistakes they thought they had made. She told them she would be back in half an

hour. In this way, from the very beginning, she put the onus of coping with the endemic mistakes on their shoulders - the peer teaching involved worked well as a Greek soon becomes aware of what a Vietnamese gets wrong in English and viceversa.

The next day she gave them the transcripts of their tapes and asked them to work on winking out the mistakes - she had transcribed as closely as possible what she had heard.

She repeated the procedure described above 16 times during the course and the CLL sessions became a gauge for the students' success in eradicating their own.

Lockwood's case is an example of CLL used with a multi-lingual level specifically for making the students assume responsibility for their own mistakes and their rectification.

In Stevick's recent book, A Way and Ways, Dieter Stroinigg, of Miami University, Ohio, reports on his use of CLL with North American undergraduates on an intensive six-week beginners' German summer course in Luxemburg. He writes:

"The results in the Luxemburg program soon became apparent. Some of the students clearly advanced more quickly than others. The group relationship provided that the faster students could advance on a nearly individualised basis, yet without making the slower students ill-at-ease or resentful of their slower progress. Members of the group helped

each other when there was a need for encouragement, clarification or information, leaving the teacher free to observe the learning process without having to direct or even seek out reinforcement activities."

Stroinigg goes on to suggest that at the end of the six weeks using CLL as a learning frame, his students had the same technical command of German as students completing a US first-year university programme in the language.

In my own work-place, Pilgrims in Canterbury, UK, we run intensive six-hour-a-day language programmes. In summer 1980 all the French speakers in four lower intermediate classes were syphoned off for one and a half hours per day and allowed to work in the CLL mode. Their knower, Marjorie Baudins who initiated the experiment, reported that they were delighted to escape from the multi-national pressure of their normal classes. They were relieved to have the chance to fall back on L1 when they felt the need to and they were thrilled to be almost "magically", via the knower, given the sudden power to say just what they wanted in English, including things well beyond their own still then autonomous powers of expression in the target language. Marjorie Baudins was here using CLL as a pressure and tension reliever in the after lunch period on a very very intensive but in the target language day. The week after, she offered the same

relief to the Italians and the week after that to the Spanish speakers.

In 1978 I used CLL on a one hour per day course over six weeks with Chilean working class refugees in Cambridge. Many of the people in this group had found the classes they had attended in language schools in Cambridge frustrating and hard to follow; some of them had resented the contents of the textbooks used and found the wellheeledness of some of their classmates hard to cope with.

They seemed to be an ideal group to use CLL with, forming, as they did, part of an ideological, national and linguistic community, that of the Chilean exiles in Cambridge. I had the advantage, as their knower, of having spent two years in Chile when it was still under democratic rule, and they knew this.

Here is an example of the kind of CLL conversation they produced:

Doris: What did you do yesterday?

Filomena: We spoke about anything.

Manuel: Did you miss us?

Filomena: Ema (Manuel's wife) said she was sick of seeing you!

(Laughter)

Consuelo: She had a rest from her husband.

Marriage is hard, isn't it?

What do you think, Filomena?

Filomena: It depends how it goes.

Manuel: If you carry your cross alone, it is heavier. It is better for two people to carry it.

Ema: What do you think, Consuelo?

Consuelo: For me it was heavy; thirty eight years.

Ema: Was it difficult to bring up your children?

Consuelo: Yes!

Manuel: Ema, how long have you been married?

Ema: Nine years.

Manuel: No, ten years.

Ema: It seems a hundred to me.

Consuelo: What do you think about marriage?

Doris: I am still learning what it is.

Consuelo: (to Manuel) Don't tell me you're the victim!

I would not claim that the people in this group made startling linguistic progress. The majority of them felt heavily blocked by the need to learn English to survive in an alien environment.

They saw it as, in many ways, the language of Pinochet and his North American backers.

Into the bargain some of them were not gifted language learners. What the CLL experience did give them was the sensation that English could be spoken, listened to and read to communicate personal,

important things, as the transcript above shows.

The implication of CLL as a real self-access method

The teacher completely changes role. S/he becomes a language informant, an empathetic shock-absorber, a person both central and marginal to the learner group. It is possible that CLL posits a rather different kind of professional from the normal kind of language teacher.

Perhaps a training in anthropology, therapy or one of the other listening, observing disciplines might be a good background for an efficient knower. One is looking for a person who is happy standing behind/ with individuals rather than for a 'leader' standing in front of a group. "Hilflosen Helfer" are not the ideal knowers.

CLL serves redundancy notice on coursebooks and curricula and the people who busy themselves preparing such things. The lesson by lesson transcripts piling up in the students' folders gradually grow into the group's tailor-self-made course book. On this Dieter Stroinigg writes:

"In practical terms, it is the student who, in his desire to learn what is meaningful or necessary for himself, determines his own needs and thereby the pace and presentation of subject matter. For instance, in the Luxemburg group, it would not be

unusual for questions about the tenses in German to arise even in the first class session. But such questions might not occur until the end of the first, second or even third week. The subjunctive mood, traditionally taught at the end of the first year, was discussed in this group at the end of the first week, because the students felt they should know about it. When some of the students would not accept 'Was Wüchten Sie Zum Frühlück' as a mere idiom, it was time to discuss the use of the subjunctive."

It would clearly have been ridiculous for Stroinigg to try and plan a notional/functional or a structural progression in advance. It would have been equally useless for a curriculum developer/administrator to have done this for him and for the group even more in advance.

Looked at from a Curran standpoint, why is so much time spent planning E.S.P. curricular - if a group of engineers learning a language get together in the CLL mode, they will have every opportunity to talk technically or not, as they wish to from session to session. Quite often technical people want to focus on each other and not on their shared 'official' technical interest.

Community Language Learning is the purest self-access language learning frame I have yet come across,

because it does not rely at all on pre-prepared materials. What is learnt is the choice of the individual from moment to moment. The knower is a resource. CLL also has a warmth and mutual help aspect that is aridly lacking in self-access systems where the individual finds himself all alone with the language to be learnt, an odd situation if one reflects that language is a way of being with other people.

Problems the Community Language learning frame generates

Most of this article has been devoted to describing what happens in the CLL classroom and to ways various people have used it in different teaching situations. The part of the article you have just finished reading deals with my own reasons for finding the approach useful. But all methods have their disadvantages and I would like to end on these. The asterisked paragraphs below are problems I have faced in my own teaching while the ones in quotation marks are taken from the Drawbacks and Caveats section of Rod Bolitho's article CLL: a way forward? that appeared in the British Council's ELT Documents 113, 1982. Bolitho is one of the most experienced CLL practitioners in UK.

"Early sessions may be uncomfortable, as teachers and learners alike struggle to adapt to new roles. Learners may be particularly vocal in their demand

for teacher-counsellors to provide a theme for conversation....."

CLL, because of the immense freedom it gives the students, is a scary frame to work in if there happens to be a dominant and psychiatrically unbalanced person in the group. In such circumstances I have decided not to use CLL with a particular group.

"Discussions often continue at an irritatingly trivial level for a long time"

Groups are sometimes loathe to take the self-directing responsibility involved in CLL work. One group found that in a parallel class I was using highly charged Moskowitz type exercises; they said they wished to abandon CLL and learn through exciting manipulations stage-managed by me. After 24 hours agonising I obeyed them, feeling I had no choice. Asking people to take responsibility after 15,000 hours in primary and secondary school is no small thing.

"I have occasionally known groups with 'warring' factions or individuals, and on one occasion, (the only time it happened) I had to intervene and suspend

a session when two students with a hearty contempt for each other used the freedom of the CLL situation to vent their aggression on each other."

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