



# A Discussion on Using CLT in Teaching Vocabulary for Vietnamese EFL College Students

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**Abstract:** *The use of CLT (communicative language teaching approach) in EFL programs, particularly in college-level English courses, appears to be growing. Besides, vocabulary is crucial for improving students' English language proficiency. Therefore, this paper aims to discuss various aspects of using CLT to teach vocabulary for college students. Those issues include how CLT meets the need of EFL college students in their English learning process and some challenges that the lecturers and students probably encounter. The paper then also provides some suggestions for lecturers when using CLT in their English classrooms.*

**Key words:** *EFL classrooms, CLT, vocabulary teaching, challenges, suggestions*

## I. Introduction

In recent years, English has been using more and more widely, which leads to the increasing demand of studying English. Understanding that demand, English teaching is being developed much better in both public schools and private schools. In order to catch up with this trend, several approaches and methodologies have been developed to meet the needs of different teaching and learning contexts. Among them, *communicative language teaching*, or CLT, seems to be used more and more popular in EFL classes, especially in English classes for college students. The first reason is that college students are believed to have qualified language competence that satisfies the features of CLT. Secondly, college students are those who need to equip themselves with an ability to communicate in English to prepare for their further career after graduation. With the hope that college students will be able to increase their communication skills in the target language, CLT is now being used widely in colleges in Vietnam.

Besides, vocabulary also plays an extremely important role in learners' communicative ability. Vocabulary is considered as a mean to express ideas and thoughts. Without vocabulary, it is impossible for learners to communicate effectively in the target language. In other words, vocabulary appears to be one of the most essential elements contributing to the success of communication.

Due to the certain roles of CLT and vocabulary in learners' ability to communicate in English, it is highly interesting if the two concepts are put together in a context. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to learn and discuss different aspects related to the using of CLT in teaching vocabulary for college students. In the situation that CLT is being widely used all over the world including in Vietnam, this project is expected to bring useful and informative knowledge for teachers or educators who are interested in the application of CLT in teaching vocabulary.

## II. Literature Review

### Definition of CLT

Before CLT, there was a wide range of approaches and methodologies developed. They included grammar-translation, direct method, audio-lingual, and so on. However, most of them focused significantly on language accuracy and depended quite much on learners' first language (L1). Moreover, in those approaches, teachers were considered as the center of the class and learners were just the observers who followed teachers in most activities. These features of traditional approaches have been said to lead to the learners' passiveness and the lack of learners' opportunities to interact and communicate.

Due to the weaknesses of traditional teaching approaches, CLT was emerged in the early 1970s as a result of the work of the Council of Europe experts (Al-Mutawa & Kailani, 1989). However, it was until the late 1970s that the scope of CLT was expanded. CLT is considered as an approach than a method (Richards & Rogers, 1986). According to Ur (2012), CLT is an approach "based on the assumption that language is for communication and that we learn it best through naturalistic acquisition processes" (p.8). On the other hand, the goal of language teaching is communicative competence. It emphasizes on the way learners being able to communicate with others in the target language. For this goal, there are some differences between this approach and traditional approaches. Learners now are considered as the center of classrooms and the way learners convey meaning is important than the way they can use language accurately.

### Characteristics of CLT

According to Nunan (1991) and Li (1998), CLT includes six basic characteristics which are listed as following: (1) classroom goals are focused on all of the components of communicative competence, including grammar, discourse, function, sociolinguistics, and strategy; (2) fluency and accuracy are considered as complementary principles. However, fluency plays a more important role than accuracy; (3) language techniques are designed to engage learners in the pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaningful purpose; (4) students in a communicative class ultimately have to use the language productively, receptively, in unrehearsed outside the classroom; (5) students are given opportunities to focus on their own learning process through understanding of their own styles of learning and through the development of appropriate strategies for autonomous learning; (6) the role of teacher is that of facilitator and guide. Students are therefore encouraged to construct meaning through genuine linguistic interaction with others.

### Teacher's role and student's role in a classroom using CLT

CLT has been popular and widespread in EFL learning. Contrary to the teacher-centered approach, in which teachers are regarded as knowledge givers and learners as receivers, CLT reflects a more social relationship between teachers and learners. This learner-centered approach gives students a sense of "ownership" of their learning and enhances their motivation (Brown, 1994).

CLT emphasizes the process of communication and lead learners to the roles which are different from the traditional approach. Learners are actively engaged in negotiating meaning by trying to make themselves understood within the classroom procedures and activities (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). Teachers also take particular roles in CLT approach. Firstly, the teacher facilitates the communication process between all the students in the classroom. The teacher is also considered as a co-communicator who engages in communicative activities with the students (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). In addition, the teacher acts as an analyst, a counselor and a group process manager (Richards & Rodgers, 1986).

### Strategies and techniques in teaching vocabulary by CLT

Two popular strategies that are usually employed when teaching vocabulary using CLT approach are choosing suitable topics according to the unit theme and explaining word meaning in a situation.

For the first strategy, instead of explaining every new word together with its pronunciation, spelling, word structure, word collocation, or part of speech. Teachers can choose several topics for students to discuss as long as those topics are related to the theme of the lesson. After that, teachers instruct and assign students to prepare for the presentation of their discussion. In this way, the related words are practiced.

Another strategy of CLT that is recommended to teach vocabulary effectively is arousing students' communicative consciousness as well as their communicative motivation. Littlewood (1981) suggested some techniques that can be used to activate students' communicative desire. Those are role play, reading authentic materials and reading extensively.

**Role-play:**

Role-play activities give students an opportunity to practice communicatively in different social contexts and in different social roles. The language used in this activity is varied depending on characters' status, attitudes, mood and different situations. That is the reason why role-play is considered as a presence of a real-life situation in the classroom.

**Reading authentic materials:**

Although authentic materials such as newspapers articles, brochures, train tickets, letters, advertisements, airport announcements, etc. were originally used in real situations and were not designed for use in language teaching, they are now used in the classroom to expose students to the language in real use. Such materials are considered desirable to give students an opportunity to develop strategies for understanding language as it is actually used by native speakers. When students pay attention to the really useful materials and the real language situations, the words seem easier to master.

**Reading extensively**

Students should be available to English newspaper and magazines in the original, especially those freshly published. In such ways, they have the chances to learn authentic English, to add authentic English to their vocabulary and to grasp the up-to-dateness of English expressions.

### **Advantages and disadvantages of CLT in teaching vocabulary**

#### **Advantages**

As Xia (2010) pointed out, the application of CLT in teaching vocabulary has numbers of advantages. CLT helps students acquire vocabulary naturally and get better understanding of vocabulary knowledge thanks to the modified target language input gotten from conversational interaction between teacher and learners. Moreover, because the activities used in CLT classrooms are close and relevant to students' daily life, they contribute to promoting learners' communicative competence and stimulates their inner motivation. In addition, by encouraging students to discover the forms and structures of the target language by themselves, CLT makes learners adopt the responsibility to their own learning. Finally, when engaging in the group-work activities in which students are allowed to freely express their different views and ideas towards certain issues, students' team spirit and individuality can be developed.

#### **Disadvantages**

Besides the advantages, the application of CLT in teaching vocabulary also includes some disadvantages. Firstly, in a class of communicative activities, teacher has to equip themselves with sheer professional skill in knowing when and how to intervene productively. Therefore, CLT requires more energies and adaptability from the teacher. Secondly, to teach vocabulary in a class with one hundred percent of the language used is L2, teacher needs to have a fluent language competence. Thirdly, the use of CLT may cause confusion for the students who are taught by other approaches, at least at the initial stages. Finally, CLT makes it more difficult to evaluate the performance of students.

## **III. Discussion**

### **How CLT meets the needs of Vietnamese college students in learning vocabulary**

There is a fact that after many years of learning English, most Vietnamese college students are not able to speak an even simple sentence when facing with native speakers. A number of Vietnamese, including college students, have soon realized that fact. Therefore, those students have recently changed their minds. They discover that learning by heart the spelling and the meanings of a list of new words is not an effective way to improve their vocabulary. What they really need is that vocabulary has to be a useful tool to help them in communication.

In this circumstance, CLT seems to be the most appropriate approach. CLT has its characteristics as an approach that is not only focus on mastering language elements but also on the use of target language communicatively. In other words, the priority of this approach is students' ability to use the target language rather than knowledge about language, with a balance between the four skills. This means that instead of emphasizing vocabulary, grammar rules going with rote memorization like traditional approaches, CLT gives priority to the semantic content of language learning. For that reason, "learning activities are selected according to how well they engage the learner in meaningful and authentic language use (rather than merely mechanical practice of language patterns)" (Richards & Rogers, 1986, p.72). Those activities can be collaborative problem solving, writing for a purpose, discussion of topics of genuine interest or reading, viewing and responding to authentic materials. Such activities allow students to improve their own ideas about what they are going to talk and what vocabularies they should use to express those ideas. By purposely using the language in different specific contexts, students' vocabulary is assumed to be naturalistically improved. As consequence, students may know that learning vocabulary is not useless because they now can make use of the words in their real-life communication, rather than to do well in the exams.

College students are the generation seeing the rapid changes in Vietnam's society in recent years. A Vietnamese more-opened culture somehow has an influence on students' characteristics. College students today seem to be more easy-going, open-minded and willing to learn. A majority of them do not want to be put in passive status like they used to be in high schools. Especially, when learning vocabulary, they really want to discover the new words by themselves, rather than being given a list of words by the teacher and being asked to learn it by heart. They realize that being passive in learning English may prevent them from performing their abilities and personalities.

For this aspect, CLT obviously meet their need. In CLT, there is a large change in the role of teachers and students. Teacher-centered classrooms are replaced by learner-centered classrooms. Learners in CLT are the participants actively contributing to the construction of new words. Specifically, when engaging in the activities students work by themselves and communicate with others to complete the tasks. By this, students are able to access to the new vocabularies on their own but anyone else. Meanwhile, teachers share different roles such as communication facilitator, independent participant, needs analyst, counselor, and group process manager (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). On the other hand, in CLT, teacher-student relationship is an interactive, harmonious relationship, rather than a master-servant one.

### **Difficulties and challenges of using CLT in teaching vocabulary for Vietnamese college students**

#### ***To the students***

The first problem of Vietnamese college students is the imbalance between their inputs and outputs. In order to perform well in the CLT activities, students should have some background knowledge about the activities. Nevertheless, learning English in traditional methods for a long time makes students feel strange towards communicative activities of CLT. For each new task, they usually do not know what and how to do to complete the task. This causes confusion among students in the beginning stages. Moreover, with narrow source of vocabulary, structures and limited communicative skills, most students have difficulties in communicating with the others because they do not know how to express their ideas as well as quickly response to their friends' questions or ideas.

Another important problem existing among students is the lack of motivation. The reasons for this problem not only come from the students' limited language proficiency but also originate from the exam-oriented educational system. The fact that there are so many tests and exams throughout the school year and most of those tests only focus on grammar, reading and writing skills, students have little interest in communicative activities. As a result, they are not willing to engage themselves in any communicative activity that is organized by the teachers, which makes the lesson unsuccessful.

#### ***To the lecturers in colleges***

When using CLT to teach vocabulary for college students, lecturers are facing with a challenge coming from their own problems. Lecturers are not equipped with sufficient experience in applying CLT, especially in teaching vocabulary because using CLT to teach vocabulary is still an unfamiliar definition in Vietnam. Even

when the lecturers have all the information about the features of CLT, it is not easy for them to apply those theories effectively in their real classes because of different unexpected problems probably occur during the lessons. Without teaching skills of how to teach vocabulary in CLT framework, the lecturers may find it really difficult to teach vocabulary using communicative activities.

In addition, the application of CLT in teaching vocabulary in Vietnam seems to be not as effective as it is expected owing to the crowded number of students in Vietnamese college classrooms. In Western countries, student number of each class is adequate, which is a good condition to apply CLT in language teaching. Nevertheless, in Vietnam, the number of students in most classes ranks from 35 to 45 or even more than that, which is as twice as that in Western countries. With such crowded number of students, it is hard for lecturers to control the class and administer the activities. Specifically, lecturers can not know exactly whether students talk about the assigned topic or not during group discussion. Moreover, lecturers may not have a deep view of every student's ability when there are so many students to take care of.

Finally, insufficient teaching resources also bring challenges to the lecturers when using CLT in teaching vocabulary. As one of the strategies of CLT in teaching vocabulary, the students need to get access to authentic materials outside the textbooks such as newspaper articles, brochure, advertisements, etc. Nevertheless, due to the lack of material resources in most of Vietnamese colleges, lecturers are not provided with enough materials. This causes definite difficulties to them when they want to teach something outside the textbook.

### **Suggestions for lecturers when using CLT in English classrooms**

#### ***The roles of lecturers***

The traditional role of a lecturer as the transmitter of knowledge should be changed. Lecturers should not be the single speakers anymore. Instead, their main role should be a facilitator. Facilitation in an English class includes many aspects. Lecturers should act as physical facilitators and provide things that vocabulary teaching and learning classes need.

#### ***Lecturers should integrate all of the four English skills***

Teaching and learning vocabulary does not exist alone. A student with rich knowledge of vocabulary is usually able to read, write and speak more efficiently, while students with poor knowledge of vocabulary usually do not have good ability of listening, speaking, reading and writing either. Therefore, teaching vocabulary should be integrated with reading, listening, speaking and writing skills. Typically, in the process of vocabulary teaching and learning, the vocabulary is often introduced before learning into the real time of the lessons relating to these four skills. And they should be associated with the topic of those lessons. Reading is also closely related to vocabulary knowledge. The learnt words and the ability to infer from the context when students are reading can help them very much in understanding the content of the reading task. Associating teaching vocabulary and listening can be useful too, especially at the beginning stage of familiarizing students with the correct and native-like pronunciation. Speaking is also one essential part of vocabulary teaching and learning class since classrooms of CLT should never be silent. In topic choosing, peer conferring, group sharing, presentation, speaking skills have to be trained. However, when carrying out speaking activities in the classroom, lecturers have to make it clear to the students that they should try to speak English as much as possible even they may make many mistakes.

#### ***Lecturers should train the students to be autonomous learners***

Since the lectures may not have enough time to teach everything about a word, students have to become independent word learners. As Gu (2003) summarizes his own and others studies: "Good learners seem to be those who initiate their own learning, selectively attend to words of their own choice, studiously try to remember these words, and seek opportunities to use them."

#### ***Lecturers should integrate different methods in teaching vocabulary***

No method is best and appropriate in all contexts, so the teachers should make use of the advantages of other methods in order to apply for teaching effectively. Communicative activities are really important especially in teaching vocabulary. However, other traditional approaches should not be ignored. Lecturers should wisely combine or integrate various methods depending on different learning situations and purposes.

#### IV. Conclusion

Because of its innovation and modern teaching principles and techniques, CLT has been found to improve Vietnamese EFL college students' learning strategies and build up the communicative consciousness to help those students enlarge their vocabulary and enhance their vocabulary knowledge. As a result, students' abilities of listening, reading, speaking, writing will be developed as well as their communicative capacity will be improved.

However, because of both objective and subjective reasons, lecturers and learners are facing with several challenges when applying CLT in vocabulary teaching and learning. Students are worried due to their limited vocabulary and structures as well as confused about the procedures and requirements of CLT's activities. Meanwhile, lecturers are challenged by the problems from the large number of students, the shortage of authentic materials and their limitation of class management skills. Thus, in order to make this approach to be applied effectively and bring significant benefits to the students, there must be a great effort from both lecturers and learners.

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