

7 Community Language Learning

Background

Community Language Learning (CLL) is the name of a method developed by Charles A. Curran and his associates. Curran was a specialist in counseling and a professor of psychology at Loyola University, Chicago. His application of psychological counseling techniques to learning is known as Counseling-Learning. Community Language Learning represents the use of Counseling-Learning theory to teach languages. As the name indicates, CLL derives its primary insights, and indeed its organizing rationale, from Rogerian counseling (Rogers 1951). In lay terms, counseling is one person giving advice, assistance, and support to another who has a problem or is in some way in need. Community Language Learning draws on the counseling metaphor to redefine the roles of the teacher (the *counselor*) and learners (the *clients*) in the language classroom. The basic procedures of CLL can thus be seen as derived from the counselor–client relationship.

CLL techniques also belong to a larger set of foreign language teaching practices sometimes described as *humanistic techniques* (Moskowitz 1978). Moskowitz defines humanistic techniques as those that

blend what the student feels, thinks and knows with what he is learning in the target language. Rather than self-denial being the acceptable way of life, self-actualization and self-esteem are the ideals the exercises pursue. [The techniques] help build rapport, cohesiveness, and caring that far transcend what is already there . . . help students to be themselves, to accept themselves, and be proud of themselves . . . help foster a climate of caring and sharing in the foreign language class. (Moskowitz 1978: 2)

In sum, humanistic techniques engage the whole person, including the emotions and feelings (the affective realm) as well as linguistic knowledge and behavioral skills.

Another language teaching tradition with which Community Language Learning is linked is a set of practices used in certain kinds of bilingual education programs and referred to by Mackey (1972) as “language alternation.” In language alternation, a message/lesson/class is presented first in the native language and then again in the second language. Students know the meaning and flow of an L2 message from their recall

of the parallel meaning and flow of an L1 message. They begin to holistically piece together a view of the language out of these message sets. In CLL, a learner presents a message in L1 to the knower. The message is translated into L2 by the knower. The learner then repeats the message in L2, addressing it to another learner with whom he or she wishes to communicate. CLL learners are encouraged to attend to the “overhears” they experience between other learners and their knowers. The result of the “overhear” is that every member of the group can understand what any given learner is trying to communicate (La Forge 1983: 45).

Approach: Theory of language and learning

Curran himself wrote little about his theory of language. His student La Forge (1983) has attempted to be more explicit about this dimension of Community Language Learning theory. La Forge accepts that language theory must start, though not end, with criteria for sound features, the sentence, and abstract models of language (La Forge 1983:4). The foreign language learners’ tasks are “to apprehend the sound system, assign fundamental meanings, and to construct a basic grammar of the foreign language.” La Forge goes beyond this structuralist view of language, however, and elaborates an alternative theory of language, which is referred to as *Language as Social Process*:

communication is more than just a message being transmitted from a speaker to a listener. The speaker is at the same time both subject and object of his own message. . . . communication involves not just the unidirectional transfer of information to the other, but the very constitution of the speaking subject in relation to its other. . . . Communication is an exchange which is incomplete without a feedback reaction from the destinee of the message. (La Forge 1983: 3)

This social-process view of language is then elaborated in terms of six qualities or subprocesses. La Forge also elaborates on the interactional view of language underlying Community Language Learning (see Chapter 2): “Language is people; language is persons in contact; language is persons in response” (1983: 9). CLL interactions are of two distinct and fundamental kinds: interactions between learners and interactions between learners and knowers. Interactions between learners are unpredictable in content but typically are said to involve exchanges of affect. Learner exchanges deepen in intimacy as the class becomes a community of learners. The desire to be part of this growing intimacy pushes learners to keep pace with the learning of their peers.

Interaction between learners and knowers is initially dependent. The learner tells the knower what he or she wishes to say in the target language, and the knower tells the learner how to say it. In later stages,

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interactions between learner and knower are characterized as self-assertive (stage 2), resentful and indignant (stage 3), tolerant (stage 4), and independent (stage 5). These changes of interactive relationship are paralleled by five stages of language learning and five stages of affective conflicts (La Forge 1983: 50).

Curran's counseling experience led him to conclude that the techniques of counseling could be applied to learning in general (this became Counseling-Learning) and to language teaching in particular (Community Language Learning). The CLL view of learning is a holistic one, since "true" human learning is both cognitive and affective. This is termed *whole-person learning*. Such learning takes place in a communicative situation where teachers and learners are involved in "an interaction . . . in which both experience a sense of their own wholeness" (Curran 1972: 90). Within this, the development of the learner's relationship with the teacher is central. The process is divided into five stages and compared to the ontogenetic development of the child.

In the first, "birth" stage, feelings of security and belonging are established. In the second, as the learner's abilities improve, the learner, as child, begins to achieve a measure of independence from the parent. By the third, the learner "speaks independently" and may need to assert his or her own identity, often rejecting unasked-for advice. The fourth stage sees the learner as secure enough to take criticism, and by the last stage, the learner merely works on improving style and knowledge of linguistic appropriateness. By the end of the process, the child has become adult. The learner knows everything the teacher does and can become knower for a new learner. The process of learning a new language, then, is like being reborn and developing a new persona, with all the trials and challenges that are associated with birth and maturation.

Curran in many places discusses what he calls "consensual validation," or "convalidation," in which mutual warmth, understanding, and a positive evaluation of the other person's worth develop between the teacher and the learner. A relationship characterized by convalidation is considered essential to the learning process and is a key element of CLL classroom procedures. A group of ideas concerning the psychological requirements for successful learning are collected under the acronym SARD (Curran 1976: 6), which can be explained as follows:

S stands for security. Unless learners feel secure, they will find it difficult to enter into a successful learning experience.

A stands for attention and aggression. CLL recognizes that a loss of attention should be taken as an indication of the learner's lack of involvement in learning, the implication being that variety in the choice of learner tasks will increase attention and therefore promote learning. Aggression applies to the way in which a child, having learned something, seeks an opportunity to

show his or her strength by taking over and demonstrating what has been learned, using the new knowledge as a tool for self-assertion.

R stands for retention and reflection. If the whole person is involved in the learning process, what is retained is internalized and becomes a part of the learner's new persona in the foreign language. Reflection is a consciously identified period of silence within the framework of the lesson for the student "to focus on the learning forces of the last hour, to assess his present stage of development, and to re-evaluate future goals" (La Forge 1983: 68).

D denotes discrimination. When learners "have retained a body of material, they are ready to sort it out and see how one thing relates to another" (La Forge 1983: 69). This discrimination process becomes more refined and ultimately "enables the students to use the language for purposes of communication outside the classroom" (La Forge 1983: 69).

These central aspects of Curran's learning philosophy address not the psycholinguistic and cognitive processes involved in second language acquisition, but rather the personal commitments that learners need to make before language acquisition processes can operate.

Design: Objectives, syllabus, learning activities, roles of learners, teachers, and materials

Since linguistic or communicative competence is specified only in social terms, explicit linguistic or communicative objectives are not defined in CLL. Most of what has been written about it describes its use in introductory conversation courses in a foreign language. CLL does not use a conventional language syllabus, which sets out in advance the grammar, vocabulary, and other language items to be taught and the order in which they will be covered. The progression is topic-based, with learners nominating things they wish to talk about and messages they wish to communicate to other learners. The teacher's responsibility is to provide a conveyance for these meanings in a way appropriate to the learners' proficiency level. In this sense, then, a CLL syllabus emerges from the interaction between the learner's expressed communicative intentions and the teacher's reformulations of these into suitable target-language utterances. Specific grammatical points, lexical patterns, and generalizations will sometimes be isolated by the teacher for more detailed study and analysis, and subsequent specification of these as a retrospective account of what the course covered could be a way of deriving a CLL language syllabus.

As with most methods, CLL combines innovative learning tasks and activities with conventional ones. They include:

1. *Translation.* Learners form a small circle. A learner whispers a message or meaning he or she wants to express, the teacher translates it

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- into (and may interpret it in) the target language, and the learner repeats the teacher's translation.
2. *Group work.* Learners may engage in various group tasks, such as small-group discussion of a topic, preparing a conversation, preparing a summary of a topic for presentation to another group, preparing a story that will be presented to the teacher and the rest of the class.
 3. *Recording.* Students record conversations in the target language.
 4. *Transcription.* Students transcribe utterances and conversations they have recorded for practice and analysis of linguistic forms.
 5. *Analysis.* Students analyze and study transcriptions of target-language sentences in order to focus on particular lexical usage or on the application of particular grammar rules.
 6. *Reflection and observation.* Learners reflect and report on their experience of the class, as a class or in groups. This usually consists of expressions of feelings – sense of one another, reactions to silence, concern for something to say, and so on.
 7. *Listening.* Students listen to a monologue by the teacher involving elements they might have elicited or overheard in class interactions.
 8. *Free conversation.* Students engage in free conversation with the teacher or with other learners. This might include discussion of what they learned as well as feelings they had about how they learned.

Learner roles in CLL are well defined. Learners become members of a community – their fellow learners and the teacher – and learn through interacting with the community. Learning is not viewed as an individual accomplishment but as something that is achieved collaboratively. Learners are expected to listen attentively to the knower, to freely provide meanings they wish to express, to repeat target utterances without hesitation, to support fellow members of the community, to report deep inner feelings and frustrations as well as joy and pleasure, and to become counselors of other learners. CLL learners are typically grouped in a circle of six to twelve learners, with the number of knowers varying from one per group to one per student.

Learner roles are keyed to the five stages of language learning outlined earlier. The view of the learner is an organic one, with each new role growing developmentally out of the one preceding. These role changes are not easily or automatically achieved. They are in fact seen as outcomes of affective crises:

When faced with a new cognitive task, the learner must solve an affective crisis. With the solution of the five affective crises, one for each CLL stage, the student progresses from a lower to a higher stage of development. (La Forge 1983: 44)

The teacher's role derives from the functions of the counselor in Rogerian psychological counseling. The counselor's role is to respond calmly and nonjudgmentally, in a supportive manner, and help the client try to understand his or her problems better by applying order and analysis to them. "One of the functions of the counseling response is to relate affect . . . to cognition. Understanding the language of 'feeling', the counselor replies in the language of cognition" (Curran 1976: 26). It was the model of teacher as counselor that Curran attempted to bring to language learning.

There is also room for actual counseling in Community Language Learning: "Personal learning conflicts . . . anger, anxiety and similar psychological disturbance – understood and responded to by the teacher's counseling sensitivity – are indicators of deep personal investment" (J. Rardin, in Curran 1976: 103).

More specific teacher roles are, like those of the students, keyed to the five developmental stages. In the early stages of learning, the teacher operates in a supportive role, providing target-language translations and a model for imitation on request of the clients. Later, interaction may be initiated by the students, and the teacher monitors learner utterances, providing assistance when requested. As learning progresses, students become increasingly capable of accepting criticism, and the teacher may intervene directly to correct deviant utterances, supply idioms, and advise on usage and fine points of grammar. The teacher's role is initially likened to that of a nurturing parent. The student gradually "grows" in ability, and the nature of the relationship changes so that the teacher's position becomes somewhat dependent on the learner. The knower derives a sense of self-worth through requests for the knower's assistance.

Since a CLL course evolves out of the interactions of the community, a textbook is not considered a necessary component. A textbook would impose a particular body of language content on the learners, thereby impeding their growth and interaction. Materials may be developed by the teacher as the course develops, although these generally consist of little more than summaries on the blackboard or overhead projector of some of the linguistic features of conversations generated by students. Conversations may also be transcribed and distributed for study and analysis, and learners may work in groups to produce their own materials, such as scripts for dialogues and mini-dramas.

Procedure

Because each Community Language Learning course is in a sense a unique experience, description of typical CLL procedures in a class

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period is problematic. Stevick (1980) distinguishes between “classical” CLL (based directly on the model proposed by Curran) and personal interpretations of it, such as those discussed by different advocates of CLL (e.g., La Forge 1983). The following description attempts to capture some typical activities in CLL classes.

Generally, the observer will see a circle of learners all facing one another. The learners are linked in some way to knowers or a single knower as teacher. The first class (and subsequent classes) may begin with a period of silence, in which learners try to determine what is supposed to happen in their language class. In later classes, learners may sit in silence while they decide what to talk about (La Forge 1983: 72). The observer may note that the awkwardness of silence becomes sufficiently agonizing for someone to volunteer to break the silence. The knower may use the volunteered comment as a way of introducing discussion of classroom contacts or as a stimulus for language interaction regarding how learners felt about the period of silence. The knower may encourage learners to address questions to one another or to the knower. These may be questions on any subject a learner is curious enough to inquire about. The questions and answers may be tape-recorded for later use, as a reminder and review of topics discussed and language used.

The teacher might then form the class into facing lines for 3-minute pair conversations. These are seen as equivalent to the brief wrestling sessions by which judo students practice. Following this the class might be re-formed into small groups in which a single topic, chosen by the class or the group, is discussed. The summary of the group discussion may be presented to another group, who in turn try to repeat or paraphrase the summary back to the original group.

In an intermediate or advanced class, a teacher may encourage groups to prepare a paper drama for presentation to the rest of the class. A paper drama group prepares a story that is told or shown to the counselor. The counselor provides or corrects target-language statements and suggests improvements to the story sequence. Students are then given materials with which they prepare large picture cards to accompany their story. After practicing the story dialogue and preparing the accompanying pictures, each group presents its paper drama to the rest of the class. The students accompany their story with music, puppets, and drums as well as with their pictures (La Forge 1983: 81–82).

Finally, the teacher asks learners to reflect on the language class, as a class or in groups. Reflection provides the basis for discussion of contracts (written or oral contracts that learners and teachers have agreed upon and that specify what they agree to accomplish within the course), personal interaction, feelings toward the knower and learner, and the sense of progress and frustration.

Dieter Stoinigg (in Stevick 1980: 185–186) presents a protocol of what a first day's CLL class covered, which is outlined here:

1. Informal greetings and self-introductions were made.
2. The teacher made a statement of the goals and guidelines for the course.
3. A conversation in the foreign language took place.
 - a) A circle was formed so that everyone had visual contact with each other.
 - b) One student initiated conversation with another student by giving a message in the L1 (English).
 - c) The instructor, standing behind the student, whispered a close equivalent of the message in the L2 (German).
 - d) The student then repeated the L2 message to its addressee and into the tape recorder as well.
 - e) Each student had a chance to compose and record a few messages.
 - f) The tape recorder was rewound and replayed at intervals.
 - g) Each student repeated the meaning in English of what he or she had said in the L2 and helped to refresh the memory of others.
4. Students then participated in a reflection period, in which they were asked to express their feelings about the previous experience with total frankness.
5. From the materials just recorded the instructor chose sentences to write on the blackboard that highlighted elements of grammar, spelling, and peculiarities of capitalization in the L2.
6. Students were encouraged to ask questions about any of the items above.
7. Students were encouraged to copy sentences from the board with notes on meaning and usage. This became their "textbook" for home study.

Conclusion

Community Language Learning places unusual demands on language teachers. They must be highly proficient and sensitive to nuance in both L1 and L2. They must be familiar with and sympathetic to the role of counselors in psychological counseling. They must resist the pressure "to teach" in the traditional senses. The teacher must also be relatively non-directive and must be prepared to accept and even encourage the "adolescent" aggression of the learner as he or she strives for independence. The teacher must operate without conventional materials, depending on student topics to shape and motivate the class. Special training in Community Language Learning techniques is usually required.

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Critics of Community Language Learning question the appropriateness of the counseling metaphor on which it is predicated. Questions also arise about whether teachers should attempt counseling without special training. Other concerns have been expressed regarding the lack of a syllabus, which makes objectives unclear and evaluation difficult to accomplish, and the focus on fluency rather than accuracy, which may lead to inadequate control of the grammatical system of the target language. Supporters of CLL, on the other hand, emphasize the positive benefits of a method that centers on the learner and stresses the humanistic side of language learning, and not merely its linguistic dimensions.

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