Tikrit University

Collage of Education for Humanities

English Department

Techniques & principles in language teaching

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Community Language Learning

Asst. Lect. Noor Arkan Ghaleb

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Community Language Learning (CLL)

Introduction

Community Language Learning (CLL) is a language teaching approach developed in the 1970s by **Charles A. Curran**, a psychologist and educator. Unlike traditional language teaching methods that focus primarily on grammar and rote memorization, CLL is grounded in **humanistic psychology** and draws on the principles of **counseling** and **group dynamics**. It views the language learning process as deeply **personal, social, and emotional**, where the relationship between teacher and learner plays a central role.

At the heart of CLL is the idea that **language learning is most effective when learners feel safe, supported, and empowered**, similar to how clients feel in a counseling session. The method encourages **cooperation, emotional support, and community building**, creating a low-anxiety environment that promotes meaningful communication.

Theoretical Background

CLL is rooted in **humanistic psychology**, particularly the work of **Carl Rogers**, who emphasized empathy, authenticity, and non-directiveness in human relationships. Curran, influenced by these ideas, believed that successful language acquisition depends on meeting learners' emotional needs, not just cognitive goals.

Curran referred to the teacher as a **"language counselor"** and learners as **"clients."** This metaphor reflects the teacher's supportive role in helping learners overcome anxiety, frustration, and fear of making mistakes. Learning is seen as a **growth process** that happens best in a safe and collaborative environment, rather than through rigid instruction.

The method also takes into account **affective factors** (such as motivation, confidence, and anxiety), **group interaction**, and **individual learner development**, making it one of the most **learner-centered** approaches in language education.

Key Features of Community Language Learning

1. Learner-Centeredness

The focus of CLL is entirely on the **learner's needs, pace, and experiences**. The teacher does not impose a rigid curriculum but instead adapts based on what students want to say or learn. Students choose what they want to express, and the learning material is generated from their own communication needs.

2. Teacher as Counselor

In CLL, the teacher does not act as a traditional authority figure but rather as a **counselor** who listens, supports, and guides students. The teacher helps learners by translating or modeling correct usage when needed, but always in response to the learner's requests.

3. Group Work and Community Building

Group dynamics are central to the method. Learners work closely together and **support one another**, often sitting in a circle to encourage openness and equality. The classroom is seen as a **community** where trust is essential, and where each member's contribution is valued.

4. Translation and Recording

A unique aspect of CLL is the use of **tape recording** (in its original form) and **translation**. In a typical lesson, a learner says something they want to express in their native language. The teacher then helps translate it into the target language, and the learner repeats it. This sentence may be recorded so students can listen later and review.

5. Focus on Meaning First

Grammar and structure are not taught in isolation. Instead, they emerge naturally from meaningful communication. The emphasis is on **understanding and expressing real ideas**, with grammar explained only when necessary and always within a meaningful context.

Stages of a CLL Lesson

Curran outlined five progressive stages of learning in CLL, based on the learner's **emotional and linguistic development**. These stages reflect the growing independence of the learner over time.

1. Stage 1 – Dependence

Students are highly dependent on the teacher. They speak in their native language, and the teacher provides translations and models the target language. Emotional support is crucial at this stage.

2. Stage 2 – Partial Dependence

Learners begin to form simple sentences on their own. They still need help, but they are beginning to internalize the language and feel more confident.

3. Stage 3 – Independence

Students can speak with more fluency and need less help. They start engaging in conversations with peers and express themselves more spontaneously.

4. Stage 4 – Interdependence

Learners take more responsibility for their learning and help others in the group. The teacher becomes more of an observer or facilitator.

5. Stage 5 – Independence and Autonomy

The learner becomes confident, fluent, and capable of continuing language learning outside of the classroom. The teacher's role is minimal.

These stages are not fixed in time and may vary among learners. Some may progress quickly, while others may need more time and support.

Advantages of Community Language Learning

- **Emotional Support**: Learners feel safe and valued, which lowers anxiety and increases motivation.

- **Learner Autonomy**: Students control the content and direction of learning, increasing their sense of ownership.

- **Collaborative Learning**: The group setting promotes cooperation, communication, and peer support.

- **Contextual Language Use**: Language is learned in meaningful contexts, leading to better retention and understanding.

- **Adaptability**: CLL can be adapted to various levels, from beginners to more advanced students.

Limitations and Criticisms

While CLL has many strengths, it also presents some challenges:

- **Time-Consuming**: Lessons often progress slowly since learners choose content and the teacher must support each request.

- **Not Structured**: Some learners, especially those used to traditional methods, may feel lost without clear grammar instruction or objectives.

- **Teacher Skill**: Requires a highly skilled and sensitive teacher who can act as a counselor and language expert.

- **Group Dependence**: Success depends on a cooperative group dynamic. If trust is missing, the method may not work effectively.

- **Limited Use in Large Classes**: The method is difficult to implement with large groups where individual attention is limited.

Practical Example of a CLL Session

Here is an outline of a possible CLL lesson:

1. Students sit in a circle.

2. One student says a sentence in their native language, e.g., "I want to go to the market."

3. The teacher translates: "I want to go to the market."

4. The student repeats it in English. The teacher may correct pronunciation or grammar gently.

5. The sentence is recorded.

6. The process continues with other students.

7. After the conversation, the teacher plays the recording.

8. Students listen, repeat, and discuss grammar or vocabulary if needed.

This approach allows learning to emerge organically, based on real communication.

Conclusion

Community Language Learning offers a powerful alternative to traditional, grammar-focused language teaching. By emphasizing **emotional safety**, **group cohesion**, and **learner control**, CLL aligns closely with humanistic educational values. While it may not suit all learners or teaching contexts, it provides valuable insights into the **importance of emotional and social factors** in language learning.

Ultimately, CLL encourages us to see language learners not just as students, but as **whole persons**—with thoughts, feelings, and social needs that deserve attention in the classroom.