

Not long ago, an elementary class was learning the language for expressing likes and dislikes. The teacher asked, *After 'like', do we use 'to' or 'ing'?* A Japanese learner eagerly responded *'ing'*. *'Give me an example,'* said the teacher. *'I like cooking,'* she replied. A less aware teacher might have congratulated Keiko and continued with the lesson. This teacher, however, stopped, looked at her and asked, *'Is that true? Do you like cooking?'* She

matrix. The learners are encouraged to speak for and from themselves, rather than by proxy through responses initiated by the teacher or the materials. In short, they become the authors of their own language use, rather than vehicles for abstracted repetition.

One such humanistic approach, 'Counselling Learning' or 'Community Language Learning', was created by an American priest and academic, Charles A Curran. From within a framework derived from the pioneering work of

# Community language learning

**Simon Marshall and Judith Baker** circle in on humanistic language teaching.

shook her head and laughed. The other students began to chuckle too. *'Tell me something true,'* said the teacher. *'Something you really like.'* Keiko sat up with a renewed enthusiasm and said, *'I like eat Japanese food.'* *'So you like eating Japanese food?'* the teacher repeated. *'Oh yes ... eating,'* said Keiko hastily. There was full-blown laughter from everyone now, the genuineness of which rendered the question as to whether 'like' is followed by a gerund or the infinitive utterly secondary. Keiko had expressed something meaningful, while her peers were listening to her with authentic interest.

Behind this account lies a fundamental question. Why did Keiko give an ostensibly 'correct answer' to the original question in terms of grammatical accuracy, yet remain quite content to reiterate a snippet of language which conveyed nothing in terms of the truth? We (the authors) feel strongly that the answer lies in the fact that many approaches to language teaching still prioritise form over content. Learners are seen and treated as operatives who recite language, rather than employing it as a medium to communicate real-life meanings and messages. They regurgitate input, rather than express personal output.

## Humanistic approaches

Humanistic approaches to language teaching have tried to redress this imbalance by recognising the learner as the pivotal agent in the learning/teaching

Carl Rogers, founder of person-centred therapy, Curran emphasised both the role of the learner as an individual and as a member of the group. Learners are referred to as 'clients', and Curran also used the term 'group' instead of 'class' to emphasise the importance of genuine human interaction in language learning.

He was sensitive to the fear many learners have of appearing foolish when learning a new language, and aware of

## Stages of learning

**Charles Curran identified five stages of development:**

- 1 Students don't know the target language and are completely dependent on the teacher.
- 2 With the aid of the teacher, students begin to use the new language.
- 3 Students use language independently and confidently, understand better, and may even begin to resist intervention by the teacher.
- 4 Students are able to express themselves more elaborately, although they may feel aware of gaps in their knowledge.
- 5 Students are able to continue their learning without assistance.

# Community language learning

▶▶▶ the anxieties many adults bring to group learning situations. In 'CLL', the teacher, rather than being a hierarchical figure, adopts the role of, and is called, the 'counsellor' or the 'knower'. The aim of the counsellor is to give the learners (clients) space, ensuring that all members of the group can contribute when they feel ready, and to create a relaxed, accepting and non-threatening environment.

## A typical lesson

In the first session, the clients sit in a circle, with a cassette player in the middle. The counsellor stands outside the circle and explains that he/she will translate anything that any of the clients wants to say to anyone else or to the group. The counsellor then waits for someone to speak. Whenever someone says something in the mother tongue, the counsellor translates what has been said and coaches the client to make the utterance in the target language. The client then records it onto the tape. This process is repeated with contributions from as many group members as care to speak. (No pressure is put on anyone to speak unless they want to.) The end result is a recorded version of the conversation in the target language (English) on the tape.

The counsellor then transcribes the conversation, either onto the board, or onto paper. This body of language, the 'reformulation', created entirely by the group, becomes the text from which they work. The counsellor will answer questions about the linguistic aspects of the text, or encourage other group members to do so.

In this way, learners are always given the means to say what they want in the target language, even if they are at a very low language level. Curran maintained that this protects the learners from the feeling that they can only communicate in a diminished way in the target language, which he saw as a major disincentive to learning. He also believed that hearing themselves expressing their own ideas and feelings in the language really helps learners to feel a part of the target language, and that the target language becomes a real

part of the learner. Learners also feel good about learning.

As the sessions evolve, learners become more and more independent in expressing themselves in the target language. At low levels, the counsellor only intervenes when errors interfere seriously with communication. As the sessions progress, the counsellor becomes more rigorous and systematic about 'correctness'. However, this rigour is confined to the linguistic aspect of the communication and is never judgemental or reproachful. An atmosphere of trust and respect is created in the group. The focus is on co-operation, not competition.

Freed from the time needed to find or create texts for the group, the counsellor is able to concentrate on the

Learners may well feel unwilling to see themselves as the sole providers of the language content, and believe that it is the teacher's responsibility and job to provide language texts and exert more traditional controls in the language classroom. Some learners may be unwilling to accept that group process or personal development has anything to do with learning a language.

However, there is a lot to be learned and borrowed from CLL, and these ideas can be used in many different learning environments and contexts.

Certainly, in a monolingual class, there is a strong argument for recognising the mother tongue of students as a legitimate and natural entry point into the target language. If everybody in the classroom, including the teacher, speaks the same language, then why not profit from it? It is also respectful to assume that learners have messages to convey, even when they don't yet have the language to articulate them. It is perfectly valid for the teacher to be the source of the language forms, rather than the ideas behind them.

*Learners have messages to convey, even when they don't yet have the language to articulate them*

feelings and thoughts of the group members, and to focus on the content, not just the form, of what they say. It may well be that the learners choose to use their text as the starting point of the next session, or they may begin a new conversation. What is important here is that all text used in the session is created by the learners. This has been a major inspiration for many teachers, and ideas on how to adapt and use it appear in *Lessons from the Learner* by Sheelagh Deller (Longman), and in Hanna Kryszewska and Colin Campbell's *Learner Based Teaching* (OUP). Readers of French can find an excellent description of CLL in Bernard Dufeu's book, *Les approches non conventionnelles* (Hachette 1996).

## Borrowing from CLL

It is clear that this approach in its pure form is not suitable for every learning situation. Not everybody has a monolingual class of 12 adults who are prepared to engage in this process of creating their own learning texts.

It is also reasonable to argue that language originating from the learners will be more memorable to them. Ultimately, Curran's work places great emphasis on the essentially human nature of the language-learning process and recognises its affective as well as its cognitive aspect. The people we work with, rather than being mere recipients of lessons, can become the well-spring for their own learning development. This helps remind us that, despite the ever-increasing battery of materials available, it is people that we are working with. We are teachers of people as well as being teachers of English.

Groups sitting in a circle function very differently from groups sitting in rows. A teacher standing outside the circle takes on a different identity from one standing at the front. Every aspect of the interaction alters radically. The circle formation encourages participants to focus on one another, rather than maintain the 'eyes front' position when the teacher is to the fore. In the latter configuration, the teacher's attention tends to move from one

student to another, whereas from a more neutral, observatory position it is easier to gain a deeper perspective into how the group is working as a whole. Even if you are teaching in a classroom with rows of desks, standing at the back of the class from time to time will give you a similar, useful perspective.

## Working with teachers

The method can refocus the group's attention, too. In one quite large group of teachers on an intensive teacher-training course, there were some powerful personalities, who held very diverse views on teaching. The group

## *Curran's work places great emphasis on the essentially human nature of the language-learning process*

was not a naturally harmonious one and a storm was brewing. With the permission of the group, a particularly heated discussion was recorded and transcribed. This took a long time, but it was worth it. In the next lesson, everyone sat silently reading through the transcript. This gave the members of the group an opportunity, not only to reconsider their ideas and opinions, but also to reflect on their own degree of participation, the way in which they communicate their ideas to other people, and the pattern of their interaction. The group seemed to come together again and to move forward in their learning together, with a new respect for each other's individuality, values and points of view.

## Working with students


We have had some very successful one-off CLL lessons with intermediate level groups. Reorganising the chairs into a circle and putting a cassette recorder in the middle of the room sets up a level of expectation. It is not necessary to explain what is going to happen, but if a student speaks, what they say is recorded onto the tape in English. Another student is then asked to write it on the board (this solves the problem of spending a long time transcribing the tape later). Initially students may say some silly things, or only the more extrovert students might speak, but after a few utterances, when they realise that whatever they say is going to be accepted without judgement (and that

it's going to be written up for all to see), the lesson tends to warm up. Students might continue talking about what is happening, or someone starts a topic of conversation, or individuals start 'trying out' language that they're not sure of. The class develops in whichever way the group wants it to develop. Students who are familiar with the procedure have used it to create short roleplay scenes or stories.

The last third of the lesson is spent listening to the tape (and accepting the squeals of embarrassment as students hear themselves on tape) and then going through the text on the board, highlighting language points. We make

sure to leave time for a final play-through of the cassette, which students always want to hear again.

In very large classes, subsequent lessons can be run with an outer and inner ring of chairs and only those on the inside speak on to the tape, although the outside ring can whisper help, and make suggestions, to the person in front of them. Alternatively, students can run the activity themselves in two different groups, with the teacher being called in to provide language as required.

So why not try it? All you need is a cassette recorder, a blank tape and a willingness to experiment and trust the students. You – and they – might find it a very liberating experience. 



**Judith Baker works part time for Pilgrims in Canterbury, UK, and has wide experience of teaching immigrants, language students and teachers. She has a passion for NLP, and thinks that learning about different methodologies adds perspective to one's teaching.**



**Simon Marshall is a teacher/trainer at Solihull College, UK. He is particularly interested in the application of humanistic approaches within the classroom, etymology, and lexical relationships. He is writing a resource book for advanced learners with Mario Rinvolucri.**

## TALKBACK!

**T**hank you for Mark Warburton's article 'When in Japan' (ETp Issue 14). I had a similar experience while teaching Koreans in Israel.

I read up as much as I could on Korean etiquette, but I was not prepared for the way in which they received handouts. They took them from me in very much the manner of Mark Warburton's description of how business cards are accepted in Japan. The pages were treated with a reverence that I found charming – especially as I had just retired from teaching English in high school, where handouts were not quite so popular.

As we got to know each other better, we discussed some of the problems that had been worrying me. They assured me that when they were with me in Israel, they were perfectly comfortable conforming to what was acceptable behaviour to me. They put me at my ease with their warmth and humour. They were serious students, but lessons were fun as well as fruitful. They could dance the Hokey Cokey as well as any Englishman – or woman – and their rendition of 'Doe a deer' was inspiring.

A map of South Korea, with information about interesting places to visit in Seoul, inspired them far beyond what was in my lesson plan.

I learnt a lot from them and about them, and I consider it an honour to have been their teacher.

**Edna Collins  
Upper Galilee, Israel**



**I**f Robinson Crusoe is the epitome of a good one-to-one teacher (*Lessons for Friday*, John Hughes, ETp Issue 15), then I'd like to nominate another 'giant' of literature for the 'Best Autonomous Learner' prize. By hanging round the back of an Alpine hut listening to its inhabitants for a few months, Frankenstein's monster was able to acquire perfect French, as well as a good grasp of world history, philosophy and anthropology. Later he back-packed through 'the heaths of England, and among the deserts of Scotland', picking up faultless English along the way.

In the interests of future teaching employment, don't let your students read Mary Shelley!

**Joan Workman  
Croydon, England**