

The Role of Affect in a Sensible Model of L2 Acquisition: A critical review of Community Language Learning

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Community Language Learning (CLL) is a popular language teaching method today, and one of the few which still is taught as an exclusive method in teacher training centers. Because of its popularity, most ESL teachers are at least familiar with it, though most probably have not tried it themselves since it requires special equipment and training. (Some readers may recall a workshop on CLL by Dr. Robert Oprandy of Teachers College at Columbia University and Dr. Patricia Tirone of the Counselling-Learning Institute, given at the 20th National MEXTESOL Convention on October 15, 1993.) However, some of its claims, particularly the vital importance of positive affect for language learning, are well known and therefore influential. The purpose of this paper is to (1) examine some of these claims, thereby exposing discrepancies between Charles Curran's (CLL's founder) theories and current, widely accepted linguistic theories; (2) to expose contradictions among Curran's stated theories and methods; and (3) to discuss possible explanations for CLL's apparent success and clarify the proper position of affect in L2 learning / acquisition.

In his articles about CLL, Curran makes a number of questionable assertions and says some things that are clearly false. Despite these theoretical errors, I think there may be some merit in CLL, though not quite for the same reasons as Curran claims, a point to which I shall return at the end of this paper.

Curran's underlying assumption about all learning is that it happens best "in an atmosphere suffused with mutually reflected fineness, worth, consideration, and deeply shared regard." (Curran 1982: 145). This atmosphere is allegedly achieved when the learner and teacher feel secure with each other and the learner is no longer "threatened" by his "inadequacy." With such statements, Curran is making the argu-

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ment that learning is primarily determined by affect: where affect is positive, learning is rapid; where affect is negative, learning is greatly retarded. This is an old theory in education and psychology which appeals to common sense, and which many parents and teachers support with anecdotal evidence. It is also recognized by current theorists in second language acquisition, such as Bley-Vroman, who asserts that "the central role of affect in [adult] foreign language learning is absolutely indisputable" (1989: 49), so it would seem that Curran is on firm ground. However, central though it may be, the role of affect is nonetheless adjunctive rather than primary. That is to say, affect by itself does nothing--it merely facilitates or hinders other activities. Therefore, even if CLL does promote L2 acquisition we must still account for it in psycholinguistic terms; i. e., we must explain (or at least hypothesize) by what means and in what manner the mind has organized the L2 input and why the particular input and/or production exercises of the method are beneficial.

Unfortunately, there is almost no discussion of this type in Curran's writing. He mentions that learners display more interest in genuine conversation than "artificial topics," and he says that sometimes the conversation focuses on a particular tense, but he never analyzes these activities in linguistic or cognitive terms. We can of course infer a language acquisition theory (presumably Curran's) from the few statements he does make and from his choice of class activities; but, as I will try to show, this leads to confusion because there are implicit contradictions among these statements and activities. Consider the following claim regarding students and teachers who work together in CLL:

Once this kind of security [between teacher and student] has been established the learner seems increasingly motivated to work on his own vocabulary lists and grammar structures and able to sort out what he knows and what he still needs to know. (1982: 142)

Two important points are implied in this statement: (1) that L2 organization is a **conscious** process, and (2) that the student's ability and willingness to learn is dependent on his affective state. Now, from (1) we can infer that Curran believes that L2 learning is accomplished much like other cognitive tasks; i. e., by the general Problem Solving Cognitive System (PSC), which psychologists agree emerges gradually in childhood and matures sometime around puberty (Bley-Vroman 1989: 53-54 citing Inhelder and Piaget 1958; Newell and Simon 1972; Sacerdote 1977; McDermot and Doyle 1980; and Anderson 1983). This is a perfectly respectable theory held by numerous experts in L2 acquisition (see Bley-Vroman 1989; White 1990). Coupled with point (2) above (importance of affect), we could construct a reasonable model of L2 acquisition. But

such a model would entail certain pedagogical obligations, such as presentation of linguistic information in a logical order, explicit explanations of grammar, careful inclusion of all grammar structures and essential vocabulary, etc. Certainly no teacher of other complex paradigms such as calculus or classical physics would expect his/her students to "sort out what they know" without lots of explicit instruction, and language is every bit as abstract and complex as these constructs. However, since Curran's student-centered curriculum offers almost no explicit instruction, it would seem that he believes L2 learning to be quite different from other cognitive problems. But in what way(s)?

Attempting to answer this question, we could perhaps overlook the apparent implications of point (1) and construct an L2 acquisition model based on intuition, or, more promisingly, on innate linguistic tools such as Universal Grammar (UG) and/or a Language Acquisition Device (LAD) (See Flynn 1987, White 1990; for a thorough exposition of this view). But this approach quickly founders also. To begin with, Curran never mentions anything like UG, which of course we might forgive on the grounds that he is not a linguist; however, once again, his methods also do not reflect our proposal. CLL is very short on L2 input, especially at first, and long on production. This is completely opposite of what we would expect from a method which relied on UG, for everyone agrees that UG, if it exists at all, is activated by language input. This is the basis of arguments for delayed oral practice in L2 acquisition (Krashen 1979; Postovsky 1982), and Chomsky's explanation for the problem of L1 acquisition (1975). Moreover, Curran's garbled writing suggests that he doesn't understand UG theory even in relation to L1:

The concept of threat could also give additional clues [to] why the small child learns one or more languages so readily.... He is... generally surrounded by an atmosphere of warmth and understanding...which would be conducive to the diminishing of his threatened state (Curran 1982: 120)

Once again, Curran invokes affect as the solution to the problem of language acquisition. But this time he is certainly wrong. Many children do not grow up in "warm" atmospheres, as Curran must know from his counseling practice, yet virtually all of them master their native languages (and other languages if exposed to them before puberty). Linguists generally agree that this phenomenon has nothing to do with affect. Most of them accept the theory of UG or some other innate mechanism as the only reasonable explanation for L1 acquisition (Hall 1993). Also, if adults learn L2 in the same manner as children learn L2, then we can hardly propose general problem solving ability as the mechanism whereby language is learned for, as has been noted,

this ability does not mature before puberty. Thus, point (1) seems hopelessly contradicted.

So, what's left? Innate knowledge is out, and so is general problem solving. How about special problem solving then? This is, in fact, what Curran claims overtly:

...the problems a person faces and overcomes in the process of learning a foreign language were conceived as similar to the problems one faces and overcomes in a personal counseling process. (1982: 119)

But this won't do either. Curran is forcing an analogy here by using the same word--"problem"--in relation to two very different processes: psychotherapy and L2 learning. (Interestingly, Curran engages in this fallacy even though he devoted the better part of an article (1982) to explaining why the "problem solving model" is inadequate to describe learning.) The "problems" of clients in therapy are not usually cognitive. Rather, they concern such things as difficulty accepting reality, unreasonable beliefs, and debilitating emotions; i. e., pathological ways of thinking and being. The therapist's job is to talk the client out of his/her pathological perspective and restore him/her to his/her normal, healthy state--one which he/she presumably enjoyed before, or would have, had it not been for his/her mental illness. The L2 learner's situation is not like this at all. He/She is not being restored to a former state of mind, but rather being taught something entirely new which he/she could never learn through introspection (read psychotherapy).

Curran's comparison of psychotherapy and language learning depends entirely on the observation that both involve anxiety, but even in this aspect the two processes are essentially different. In psychotherapy relief of anxiety may properly be considered the main focus of the work, but in L2 learning it is only an aid to achieving the main goal. Thus, even if it's true that positive affect is crucial for L2 learning, counseling should not become the main focus of a language class. We can use it to relieve anxiety, which may make our students more receptive to L2 input and more relaxed when speaking, but they will still need specific **cognitive** skills, information, and/or "tools" (UG, LAD) to acquire L2.

Assessment of students' difficulties is another area where CLL contradicts current L2 acquisition theories. Insisting that all learning problems are caused by affect, as Curran does, may work in psychotherapy (although I'm even skeptical about this), but it's bound to lead to misdiagnoses when applied to L2 acquisition problems. I will cite just one example here, but it is reasonable to assume that it is representative of the kind of misdiagnosis Curran's obsession with affect leads to:

The inability to pronounce new sounds accurately..could follow from the distortion which the person's threatened state could produce. Many people may hold on to a false sound because it is similar to a familiar sound in their native language. They perhaps get security form this sound. (1982: 120)

This is possible, but extremely unlikely (Fiedelholz 1993). A better explanation for pronunciation difficulties is that the new sounds do not conform to the learner's L1 phonological rules. The ESL learner may be feeling just fine, and yet if he's a native Spanish speaker he will probably say *estatisitcs*, *eSpanish*, and *estop* for quite a while because Spanish phonology does not allow two consonants in a row at the beginning of a word. What is insidious about Curran's diagnosis is that it accurately identifies the cause of mispronunciation as L1 interference, but (probably) misidentifies the reason for the interference as insecurity. Hence, laboring under a delusion, the CLL counselor may try to reassure the learner, to "convey his/her deep empathy" for him/her, and so on, and may try to get the learner to practice the sound. Ironically, this may well serve to induce a "threatened state"--such untoward attention would certainly make me nervous--when what the learner really needs is a clear explanation of the contrasting phonotactics of English and Spanish and lots of listening practice. (For research and discussion on the relation between oral production and listening practice see Krashen 1979; Postovsky 1982).

Despite the above contradictions, the fact remains that numerous teachers and students claim good results from CLL, and this must be accounted for somehow. There are three main possibilities: (1) that the current L2 acquisition theories are mostly wrong, and that positive affect by itself, as Curran claims, really is the key top L2 learning, (2) that CLL unwittingly incorporates techniques which Curran himself was unaware of, or (3) that CLL practitioners, consciously or not, provide language instruction which is not specific to CLL and which, combined with positive affect, is really responsible for the students' growth. The first possibility, as explained above, merely begs the question how students learn, since positive affect is not in itself a cognitive process, but at best only a means to one. Thus, it seems to me that the answer must lie somewhere between (2) and (3). Examining typical CLL lessons and methods we can see that they do have several characteristics recommended by many researchers in education and language teaching which are not exclusive to CLL. The first of these is an extremely low student/teacher ratio. Not suprisingly, teachers of all disciplines generally agree that students learn more when class size is small. In CLL the student/teacher ratio is often as low as five or six to one, so this condition alone may account for much of CLL's success. Another interesting feature of CLL which corresponds nicely to some recent recommendations in ESL teaching is its emphasis on genuine communciation initiated by the students rather than by the teacher.

At this point, it should be noted that neither small class size nor genuine communication (not, indeed, any such condition) can be a primary cause for learning any more than positive affect can; even if we find that such conditions seem to promote learning, we still must posit some linguistic and/or cognitive theory to explain how new linguistic knowledge is mastered by the student. If we fail to do so, then even if our classes are successful, we are still no more than purblind practitioners of a mysterious art and hence liable to make serious mistakes of the kind mentioned above. This doesn't mean that we should ignore conditions, such as positive affect, which seem to aid learning/acquisition; what it means is that we need to incorporate whatever conditions seem to aid learning/acquisition into a comprehensive linguistic model. So far as this goes, the crucial theoretical issue every language teacher must resolve is whether adults consciously learn L2 whether they unconsciously acquire it (hence the use of learning/acquisition above), or whether mastery is gained by some mixture of learning and acquisition (see Krashen 1982 for a discussion of the difference between learning and acquisition). Clearly, concerns such as positive affect must be subordinate to theoretical decision, since the wrong theoretical decision can have disastrous effects on conditions (the opposite, i.e., good theory and bad conditions would probably not be as bad for students unless the conditions were truly egregious). In fact, this may be why language learning has developed a reputation in the last twenty years or so as a "threatening" experience, and may also account for Curran's obsession with affect. When most classes were dominated by an audiolingual approach, students were forced to speak before they were ready to, and hence these students felt embarrassed, or "threatened," to use Curran's term. Counseling may alleviate such threats, but it does not remove them. If, on the other hand, better theoretical decisions are made in the classroom, i.e., ones that are linguistically and pedagogically aligned with students' natural abilities and inclinations, there may be no threat, and hence no need for counseling or other artificial ways of maintaining positive affect. Of course, the difficulty here is that as yet there is still little general agreement about natural abilities and inclinations in language learning/acquisition. Our job, then, is to continue working toward a better understanding of these issues, always striving to build an L2 learning/acquisition model that integrates what we believe from experience and intuition with linguistic theory that makes sense.

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