

# The Communicative Language Teaching Approach: Theory and Practice

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*Abstract. This paper is an exposition of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Approach. After establishing the need for a more effective teaching strategy by presenting the limitations of earlier methods, the emergence of language learning theories is discussed and how they, in turn, paved the way for the development of CLT. CLT is tackled as a more comprehensive approach because it takes into account learner's communicative needs. There is less emphasis on grammar precision but more on fluency. The learner is the focus, while the teacher is a facilitator. From this, some pedagogical implications are given, although not exhausted, as a way of bringing the approach into the classroom setting.*

## **Introduction**

The worldwide demand for English has created a demand for quality language teaching. It has become an international language and has acquired such importance that the need to learn and master it has increased enormously. Learners set themselves high goals in learning it, and in turn, they expect teachers to provide excellent teaching (Richards, 2006).

Over the years, efforts have been made to explore new ways of teaching second languages with the objective of finding a coherent and comprehensive approach, responding to the needs of language learners. Methods have been drawn up based on the way of presenting the language, the sequencing and amount of focus on the various language skills, and the specification of learning activities. Normally, methods have also included a syllabus or teaching plan based on grammatical complexity and communicative usefulness (Horwitz, 2008).

The earliest methods (Grammar Translation, Audio-Lingual Method and the Direct Method) tend to emphasize more on the structure of the language with the practice of drilling the students and rehearsing speech acts. These methods, although still in use, have already been deemed insufficient because they do not develop fluency and spontaneity in natural conversations. Their premise is that language can be learned by habit formation which is why they gave priority to grammatical competence as the basis of language proficiency (ibid).

Then came the input methods (Natural Approach and Total Physical Response) whose objectives were to develop the listening skills of the students with the premise that this influences language proficiency (ibid.). These approaches allow for a silent period, a time when the learner assimilates the language so that he can produce it later on. Both

are based on the theory that speaking emerges when the student is ready. It is unlike the earlier methods in that it does not focus on grammar. However, it uses the target language as a medium of instruction for which it requires gestures, pictures, props and dramatic flair and thus, a teacher personality and skill that match such requirements. This may indeed be quite demanding on the teacher.

The ever-growing need to fill in the insufficiencies of these earlier methods gave rise to the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Method. This paper will look into the theoretical framework within which it was developed, and will elaborate the methodology. It will also give implications in the language teaching profession.

## **Communicative Language Teaching**

### **Historical Background**

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) originated in Europe in the 1970's with the aim of making language instruction responsive to the communicative, functional demands of learners. It has its roots in the changes to the British language teaching tradition which adopted the Situational Language Method. This method aimed to teach basic grammar within meaningful situations. However, it was seen that this method did not allow for the creativity of interactions. A need to study the language itself was seen. This was partly a response to Chomsky's demonstration that the current structures of language could not account for the uniqueness and creativity of uttered sentences. Likewise, the British Applied linguists saw the need to focus more on the communicative proficiency rather than structures (Richards & Rogers, 2001).

Another cause that triggered the search for different approaches to teaching was the changing educational realities in Europe. The increasing interdependence of European countries required a working knowledge of the major languages in the continent. Thus, the effort to look for and develop alternative ways of teaching languages was in the list of top priorities (ibid).

Thus, in 1971, a group of scholars looked into the development of language courses where learning tasks were broken down into smaller units that corresponded to the needs of the learners and are related to the rest of the syllabus. After considering the needs of European language learners, the British linguist, Wilkins, sought to propose a functional or communicative function of language based on which a syllabus can be developed. He analyzed the communicative meanings that a learner needs to express and understand. Thus, instead of the traditional system of teaching grammar, he focused on meaning. He categorized meaning into two: (1) notional (time, sequence, quantity, location, frequency; and (2) categories of communicative function (request, denials, offers, complaints) (Richards & Rogers, 2001). This, together with the work of other applied linguists and teaching specialists in Great Britain, came to

be called the Communicative Approach or simply Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).

By the mid-1970s, CLT expanded to American context. At that time, both British and American proponents saw it more as an approach that aims to teach communicative competence and to seek ways to teach the four literacy skills that recognize the interdependence of language and communication. Ever since then, CLT has given rise to many derivations and versions. There is no single model that is universally considered as authoritative. But the important thing is that this approach focuses on function, meaning and fluency rather than on grammar. From this, classroom practice has taken on various designs that assume this perspective (ibid.).

### **Theoretical Development**

The first theorist behind CLT is Noam Chomsky (1957, 1965) who attacked behaviorist and structuralist views about language learning. According to him, new language is produced in each utterance correcting the belief that language is limited to structures. Rather, there were fixed sets of principles and parameters from which an infinite number of linguistic forms arise (Grenfell & Harris, 1999). This means that there was an underlying syntactic structure which allows people to share a universal grammar. This deep structure is not affected by the variability of the surface structure consisting of the different languages spoken in the world.

Chomsky developed the notion of *competence* which he asserted was the goal of language learning. Competence here is defined as the formation of all possible generating structures in the mind, from which any one structural element (utterance) comes out as a product. The common name for the latter is “performance” (ibid.).

Thus, competence came to be the most commonly shared concept in linguistics and language learning. This means that the knowledge of a language depends not so much on the performance of the speaker which may be affected by variables such as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention, hesitation phenomena, etc. but on how much it has been assimilated and internalized by the learner as part of his psychological mindset. This position therefore leads to the idea that the aim in teaching and learning a second language must be to develop competence in that language. More than monitoring performance, one has to set up generating structures at a deeper mental level (ibid.).

However, this Chomskyan idea of competence was rather ideal. It did not take into account actual linguistic performance but rather concerned itself more on the perfect language *knowledge*. The question now was how to measure this unobservable, underlying level (Brown, 2000).

It was then that Dell Hymes coined the term “communicative competence.” Hymes referred to it as the aspect of competence that

enables one to convey, interpret and negotiate meaning interpersonally within specific contexts (Brown, 2000). He balanced grammar with appropriateness and use. This notion then opens the way to social and interactional values and conventions. “Hymes celebrated statement was ‘there are rules of use without which rules of grammar would be useless’” (Grenfell & Harris, 1999, p. 16). Hymes therefore introduced *language acceptability* through this concept of communicative competence. This has been considered a more comprehensive view of language learning and has since then been an established concept and goal in this field.

Communicative competence is defined in terms of *expression, interpretation, and negotiation* of meaning. It includes knowing how to use a language for a wide range of purposes, knowing how to vary the language according to the context, knowing how to produce and understand different types of texts, and knowing how to communicate despite lack of proficiency using effective communication strategies (Richards, 2006). These respectively correspond to the four components of communicative competence: grammatical competence, discourse competence, socio-cultural competence, and strategic competence (Savignon, 2002). Psycholinguistic and sociocultural perspectives in second language acquisition (SLA) research account for its development (ibid.).

Thus, there was clearly a move from the grammatical expression of language to its social expression. At the same time that this linguistic theory was being developed, other fields contributed to the advancement of CLT with their social paradigms: *anthropology* became focused on social contexts and speech events; *sociolinguistic* observations pointed out that individuals adjust their language depending on the situation, and that grammar is more a probability rather than an absolute rule; *social psychology* mapped feelings of persons within and outside a group, the way individuals combine different linguistic forms, and their motivations for doing so; *philosophy* also turned to speech acts, intentions and interpretations, and the notion of cooperative principle in interactions; finally *ethnomethodology* looked into the conventions followed in social activity. These fields, as can be seen, developed a social perspective that made language context-dependent, negotiable and related with the person’s self-concept and identity (ibid., p. 18).

This was the academic climate within which communicative language teaching was born. At this time, another important figure came into the picture - the psycholinguist, Stephen Krashen. He claimed that language competence is something innate. He believed that every individual has a language acquisition device (LAD) which is activated when learning takes place. This activation takes place when there is a lot of exposure to the language or what Krashen terms as *comprehensible input*. Language is acquired and not learned, and it takes place in a natural order. Grammar only serves to monitor accuracy. Although Krashen was not one of the proponents of CLT (who were mainly British), his theory

definitely had things in common with the CLT theories that were then taking shape. Some of these commonalities were that learning a first and a second language is similar; that “learning takes place through meaning-focused language; third is that interactions with other people rather than the language itself are central in the learning process.... The fourth is that the identity of the learner is central in the learning process” (ibid., p.19).

### **Communicative Language Teaching Approach**

The Communicative Approach puts the focus on the learner. It is the communicative needs of learners that provide the framework for the program in aiming for functional competence. Moreover, the sociocultural differences in styles of learning are also a determinant for the program (Savignon, 2002).

Savignon (2002) cites Berns’ summary of the eight principles of CLT:

1. Language teaching is based on a view of language as communication. Through it, speakers make meaning and communicate for a specific purpose, whether orally or in writing.
2. Diversity is part of language development and use.
3. Competence is relative, not absolute.
4. Varieties of language can be used as models for learning and teaching.
5. Culture is a means for shaping speaker’s communicative competence, both in the first and in subsequent languages.
6. Various techniques and methodologies are allowed.
7. Language use serves to express ideas, interact with others and understand and produce texts, and is related to the progress of competence in each.
8. Learners should use the language in performing tasks, for a variety of purposes throughout the learning process.

Grammatical curricula which were considered the traditional lesson formats of language teaching focused more on the mastery of different items of grammar and practice through controlled activities such as memorization of dialogues and drills, and toward the use of pair work activities, role plays, group work, and project work.

CLT, which departed from such traditional format, included language functions in its curricula instead of grammar development. Its aim is to develop fluency and the ability to communicate in different settings, embedding grammar use in a context. Authentic materials are used. The students are encouraged to maximize classroom participation. Within this, interactive small-group work became an important strategy to develop fluency. They had to listen to peers rather than only on the teacher and were to take a more responsible role for their own learning. The teacher simply plays the role of guide and facilitator (Parrish, 2006).

Another of the techniques that CLT employs is scaffolding which is the “role of teachers and others in supporting the learner’s development and providing support structures to get to that next stage or level”

(Raymond, as cited in Van der Stuyf, 2002). This is based on Lev Vygostky's sociocultural theory and his concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Vygostky theorized that learning occurs through participation in social or culturally embedded experiences (ibid.). Learning is not done in isolation but rather takes place in meaningful communication with more capable "others" until he internalizes that knowledge. CLT works on the basis of this theory employing authentic conversation in classroom settings rather than focusing on the rules. Here, learner-centeredness is again made manifest because it engages him. He is not only a passive listener but rather builds on prior knowledge through the hints given by the teacher (ibid).

### **Pedagogical Implications**

A CLT-based syllabus looks at the following aspects of language as summarized by Richards (2006):

1. As detailed a consideration as possible of the **purposes** for which the learner wishes to acquire the target language; for example, using English for business purposes, in the hotel industry, or for travel;
2. Some idea of the **setting** in which they will want to use the target language; for example, in an office, on an airplane, or in a store;
3. The socially defined **role** the learners will assume in the target language, as well as the role of their interlocutors; for example, as a traveler, as a salesperson talking to clients, or as a student in a school;
4. The **communicative events** in which the learners will participate: everyday situations, vocational or professional situations, academic situations, and so on; for example, making telephone calls, engaging in casual conversation, or taking part in a meeting;
5. The **language functions** involved in those events, or what the learner will be able to do with or through the language; for example, making introductions, giving explanations, or describing plans;
6. The **notions** or concepts involved, or what the learner will need to be able to talk about; for example, leisure, finance, history, religion;
7. The skills involved in the "knitting together" of discourse: **discourse** and **rhetorical skills**; for example, storytelling, giving an effective business presentation;
8. The **variety** or varieties of the target language that will be needed, such as American, Australian, or British English, and the levels in the spoken and written language which the learners will need to reach;
9. The **grammatical content** that will be needed;
10. The **lexical content**, or vocabulary, that will be needed (pp. 9-10)

Lessons therefore should be designed in a way that helps students develop communication skills. The teacher therefore has the task of providing a safe learning environment in which the students feel comfortable speaking in English. The students should be given ample opportunities to speak in class. Ideally, students should be speaking more than the teacher.

Classroom practice using CLT then includes activities that allow learners to take on very active roles as they engage in role-plays, discussions or debates since CLT employs a considerable amount of group work (Horwitz, 2008, p. 57). They are given exposure to authentic language by reading, listening to or watching news reports, articles, or taped interviews. Students are called on to engage in communication that corresponds to real-life situations. Focus is given to appropriate communication behavior given certain contexts rather than grammar. Teachers do a lot of scaffolding in order to help students produce output where they may still have difficulties because the students are demanded to speak in the target language.

The teacher supplies interesting and comprehensible input such as stories and jokes. They try to use culturally appropriate language use. They negotiate meaning and correct errors only when they interfere with the communication. This means that although grammar teaching is not completely eliminated, it is done when the teacher notes that the students need reinforcement in certain structures in order to communicate their needs more effectively. Listening is also given primary importance.

There is no one model for a lesson plan but a widespread practice is that the class starts with the simultaneous reading and hearing of a dialogue based on a real-life everyday situation. At first, there is no translation and no explanation of the structures involved, although the method does not exclude native language aids. Since this stresses communication, this kind of teaching allows for flexibility. It has room for anything in the classroom as long as it improves the student's communicative ability. Thus it can include translations later on, grammatical explanations, drilling if need be. The point is that the students read and write in the target language immediately as long as it serves the cause of communication (Steinberg, Nagata, & Aline, 2001).

Although CLT has had different interpretations and versions, Savignon (2002) identifies five components that a curriculum must have to qualify as a CLT curriculum. The first is *language arts*. This refers to the typical elements of language teaching namely syntax, morphology and phonology. Activities include spelling tests, translation, dictation and memorization; vocabulary is expanded by reading; the students are coached in pronunciation. The second component is *language experience* which is the use of the language for real and immediate communicative goals. It is employing the language for a purpose.

The third component is *personal second language use*. This designs classroom activities that relate to the learner's emerging identity.

The teacher is aware that people may have differences in role preferences and also in learning styles, thus he or she does not treat students in the same way. Based on the awareness of the learner's personality, the teacher focuses on how students use their new language for self-expression. This is why near-native performance may not be a goal for learners in this approach because this lacks sensitivity to learner psychology, and their social and cultural background. Instead, they are encouraged to have a personality in the second language.

*Theater arts* is the fourth component listed by Savignon. As the name implies, it gives importance to role playing as an occasion for self-discovery and growth. Finally, *language use beyond the classroom* aims to expose the students to the target language in real-life and not simulated contexts. The teacher can organize visits to the market, the repair shop, the restaurant, etc. in order to use the language in realistic contexts. The teachers may also ask them to listen to certain radio or TV programs.

How these components can be integrated into a syllabus or a curriculum will depend on the teacher. Having considered the factors that may affect learning, as well as the needs of the students, the teacher can creatively come up with an effective program, and always with the help of colleagues and the institution where he or she works.

## Conclusion

It has been seen in this paper how CLT has developed, first as a theory and then as an approach. It has been a response to the insufficiencies of earlier methods which focus on structure and not on meaning, thus emptying language learning of its essence. CLT as an approach views language as a tool for communication and should therefore be taught as one. Grammar is therefore auxiliary and should not be the main focus of language teaching because it does not encourage fluency and hinders spontaneity. Errors are a part of learning and should only be corrected when they interfere in effective communication. Moreover, language learning is done in a social context such that the aim of learning is communicative competence. With this, the student learns to express and negotiate meaning.

A CLT curriculum therefore engages the learner. The role of the teacher is facilitator and guide. He provides opportunities for the student to engage in authentic communication both inside and outside the classroom.

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