

Communicative Language Teaching in 21st Century ESL Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Communicative language teaching (CLT) refers to both processes and goals in classroom learning. The central theoretical concept in communicative language teaching is ‘communicative competence’ a term introduced into discussions of language use and second or foreign language learning in the early 1970s. This paper looks at the phenomenon of communicative language teaching (CLT) in the current scenario. The goal of the paper is to show how CLT has been interpreted and implemented in various contexts. Also, the paper discusses ways for teachers to shape a more communicative approach to ELT in the context of their own situation keeping in mind the needs and goals of learners and the traditions of classroom teaching, which is the first step in the development of a teaching program that involves learners as active participants in the interpretation, expression, and negotiation of meaning.

Teachers have found many ways or methods for teaching languages. All have been admired models in some time or place, often to be ridiculed, perhaps, or dismissed as inappropriate in yet another. Times change, fashions change. What may once appear new and promising can subsequently seem strange and outdated. Within the last quarter century, communicative language teaching (CLT) has been put forth around the world as the “new,” or “innovative,” way to teach English as a second or foreign language. Teaching materials, course descriptions, and curriculum guidelines proclaim a goal of communicative competence.

Not long ago, when American structural linguistics and behaviorist psychology were the prevailing influences in language teaching methods and materials, second/foreign language teachers talked about communication in terms of four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. These skill categories were widely accepted and provided a ready-made framework for methods manuals, learner course materials, and teacher education programs. Speaking and writing were collectively described as active skills, reading and listening as passive skills.

Today, listeners and readers no longer are regarded as passive. They are seen as active participants in the negotiation of meaning. Schemata, expectancies, and top-down/bottom-up processing are among the terms now used to capture the necessarily complex, interactive nature of this negotiation. Yet full and widespread understanding of communication as negotiation has been hindered by the terms that came to replace the earlier active/passive dichotomy. The skills needed to engage in speaking and writing activities were described subsequently as productive, whereas listening and reading skills were said to be receptive.

While certainly an improvement over the earlier active/passive representation, the terms “productive” and “receptive” fall short of capturing the interactive nature of communication. Lost in this productive/receptive, message sending/message receiving representation is the *collaborative* nature of making meaning. Meaning appears fixed; to be sent and received, not unlike a football in the hands of a team quarterback. The interest of a football game lies of course not in the football, but in the moves and strategies of the players as they punt, pass, and fake their way along the field. The interest of communication lies similarly in the moves and strategies of the participants. The terms that best represent the collaborative nature of what goes on are *interpretation*, *expression*, and *negotiation* of meaning. The communicative competence needed for participation includes not only grammatical competence, but pragmatic competence.

Interpretations of CLT

Adapted from the familiar “inverted pyramid” classroom model proposed by Savignon (1983) (Figure 1), it shows how, through practice and experience in an increasingly wide range of communicative contexts and events, learners gradually expand their communicative competence, consisting of grammatical competence, discourse competence, socio-cultural competence, and strategic competence. Although the relative importance of the various components depends on the overall level of communicative competence, each one is essential. Moreover, all components are interrelated. They cannot be developed or measured in isolation and one cannot go from one component to the other as one strings beads to make a necklace. Rather, an increase in one component interacts with other components to produce a corresponding increase in overall communicative competence.

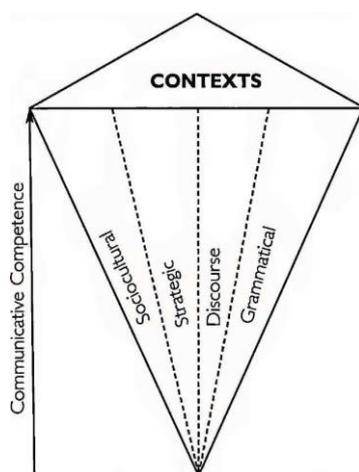


Figure 1

Grammatical competence refers to sentence-level grammatical forms, the ability to recognize the lexical, morphological, syntactic, and phonological feature of a language and to make use of these features to interpret and form words and sentences. Grammatical competence is not linked to any single theory of grammar and does not include the ability to state rules of usage. One demonstrates grammatical competence not by stating a rule but by using a rule in the interpretation, expression, or negotiation of meaning.

Discourse competence is concerned not with isolated words or phrases but with the interconnectedness of a series of utterances, written words, and/or phrases to form a text, a meaningful whole. The text might be a poem, an e-mail message, a sportscast, a telephone conversation, or a novel. Identification of isolated sounds or words contribute to interpretation of the overall meaning of the text. This is known as bottom-up processing. On the other hand, understanding of the theme or purpose of the text helps in the interpretation of isolated sounds or words. This is known as top-down processing. Both are important in communicative competence.

Socio-cultural competence extends well beyond linguistic forms and is an interdisciplinary field of inquiry having to do with the social rules of language use. Socio-cultural competence requires an understanding of the social context in which language is used: the roles of the participants, the information they share, and the function of the interaction. Although we have yet to provide a satisfactory description of grammar, we are even further from an adequate description of socio-cultural rules of appropriateness. And yet we use them to communicate successfully in many different contexts of situation.

It is of course not feasible for learners to anticipate the socio-cultural aspects for every context. Moreover, English often serves as a language of communication between speakers of different primary languages. Participants in multicultural communication are sensitive not only to the cultural meanings attached to the language itself, but also to social conventions concerning language use, such as turn-taking, appropriacy of content, nonverbal language, and tone of voice. These conventions influence how messages are interpreted. Cultural *awareness* rather than cultural knowledge thus becomes increasingly important.

The “ideal native speaker,” someone who knows a language perfectly and uses it appropriately in all social interactions, exists in theory only. None of us knows all there is to know of English in its many manifestations, both around the world and in our own backyards. Communicative competence is always *relative*. The coping strategies that we use in unfamiliar contexts, with constraints due to imperfect knowledge of rules or limiting factors in their application such as fatigue or distraction, are represented as *strategic competence*. With practice and experience, we gain in grammatical, discourse, and socio-cultural competence. The relative importance of strategic competence thus decreases. However, the effective use of coping strategies is important for communicative competence in all contexts and distinguishes highly competent communicators from those who are less so.

Language teaching has seen many changes in ideas about syllabus design and methodology in the last 50 years. We may conveniently group trends in language teaching in the last 50 years into three phases:

Phase 1: **traditional approaches** (up to the late 1960s)

Phase 2: **classic communicative language teaching** (1970s to 1990s)

Phase 3: **current communicative language teaching** (late 1990s to the present)

Current communicative language teaching

Since the 1990s the communicative approach has been widely implemented. Because it describes a set of very general principles grounded in the notion of communicative competence as the goal of second and foreign language teaching, and a communicative

syllabus and methodology as the way of achieving this goal, communicative language teaching has continued to evolve as our understanding of the processes of second language learning has developed. Current communicative language teaching theory and practice thus draws on a number of different educational paradigms and traditions. These include second language acquisition research, collaborative learning, competency based learning, and content based instruction. And since it draws on a number of diverse sources, there is no single or agreed upon set of practices that characterize current communicative language teaching. Rather, communicative language teaching today refers to a set of generally agreed upon principles that can be applied in different ways, depending on the teaching context, the age of the learners, their level, and their learning goals and so on. The following core assumptions or variants of them underlie current practices in communicative language teaching.

Core assumptions of current communicative language teaching

- ◆ Second language learning is facilitated when learners are engaged in interaction and meaningful communication
- ◆ Effective classroom learning tasks and exercises provide opportunities for students to negotiate meaning, expand their language resources, notice how language is used, and take part in meaningful intrapersonal exchange
- ◆ Meaningful communication results from students processing content that is relevant, purposeful, interesting and engaging
- ◆ Communication is a holistic process that often calls upon the use of several language skills or modalities
- ◆ Language learning is facilitated both by activities that involve inductive or discovery learning of underlying rules of language use and organization, as well as by those involving language analysis and reflection
- ◆ Language learning is a gradual process that involves creative use of language and trial and error. Although errors are a normal produce of learning the ultimate goal of learning is to be able to use the new language both accurately and fluently
- ◆ Learners develop their own routes to language learning, progress at different rates, and have different needs and motivations for language learning
- ◆ Successful language learning involves the use of effective learning and communication strategies
- ◆ The role of the teacher in the language classroom is that of a facilitator, who creates a classroom climate conducive to language learning and provides opportunities for students to use and practice the language and to reflect on language use and language learning
- ◆ The classroom is a community where learners learn through collaboration and sharing

Shaping a Communicative Curriculum

Syllabi for language courses today seek to capture the rich view of language and language learning assumed by a communicative view of language. While there is no single syllabus model that has been universally accepted, a language syllabus today needs to include

systematic coverage of the many different components of communicative competence, including language skills, content, grammar, vocabulary, and functions. Different syllabus types within a communicative orientation to language teaching employ different routes to developing communicative competence.

In planning for CLT, teachers should remember that not everyone is comfortable in the same role. Within classroom communities, as within society at large, there are leaders and there are those who prefer to be followers. Both are essential to the success of group activities. In group discussions, there are always some who seem to do the most talking. Those who often remain silent in larger groups typically participate more easily in pair work. Or they may prefer to work on an individual project. The wider the variety of communicative, or meaning-based, activities; the greater the chance for involving all learners. *My Language Is Me* implies, above all, respect for learners as they use English for self-expression. Although Language Arts activities provide an appropriate context for attention to formal accuracy, Personal English Language Use does not. Most teachers know this and intuitively focus on meaning rather than on form as learners express their personal feelings or experiences.

Respect for learners as they use English for self-expression requires more than simply restraint in attention to formal “errors” that do not interfere with meaning. It includes recognition that so-called “native-like” performance may not, in fact, even be a goal for learners. Moreover, as the English language is increasingly used as a language of global communication, so called “non-native” users of its many varieties overwhelmingly outnumber so-called “native speakers.” The decision of what is or is not one’s “native” language is arbitrary and irrelevant for ELT and is perhaps best left to the individual concerned.

Regardless of the variety of communicative activities in the ESL/EFL classroom, their purpose remains to prepare learners to use English in the world beyond. This is the world upon which learners will depend for the maintenance and development of their communicative competence once classes are over. The classroom is but a rehearsal. Development of the Beyond the Classroom component in a communicative curriculum begins with discovery of learner interests and needs and of opportunities to not only respond to but, more importantly, to develop those interests and needs through English language use beyond the classroom itself.

In an ESL setting, opportunities to use English outside the classroom abound. Systematic “field experiences” may successfully become the core of the course, which then could become a workshop in which learners can compare notes, seek clarification, and expand the range of domains in which they learn to function in English. Classroom visits to a courtroom trial, a public auction, or a church bazaar provide introductions to aspects of the local culture that learners might not experience on their own.

Implications for methodology

Current approaches to methodology draw on earlier traditions in communicative language teaching and continue to make reference to some extent to traditional approaches. Thus classroom activities typically have some of the following characteristics:

- They seek to develop students' communicative competence through linking grammatical development to the ability to communicate. Hence grammar is not taught in isolation but often arises out of a communicative task, thus creating a need for specific items of grammar. Students might carry out a task and then reflect on some of the linguistic characteristics of their performance.
- They create the need for communication, interaction, and negotiation of meaning through the use of activities such as problem solving, information sharing, and role play.
- They provide opportunities for both inductive as well as deductive learning of grammar.
- They make use of content that connects to students' lives and interests
- They allow students to personalize learning by applying what they have learned to their own lives.

Classroom materials typically make use of authentic texts to create interest and to provide valid models of language

Conclusion

Depending upon their own preparation and experience, teachers themselves differ in their reactions to CLT. Some feel understandable frustration at the seeming ambiguity in discussions of communicative ability. Negotiation of meaning may be a lofty goal, but this view of language behavior lacks precision and does not provide a universal scale for assessment of individual learners. Ability is viewed as variable and highly dependent upon context and purpose as well as on the roles and attitudes of all involved. Other teachers who welcome the opportunity to select and/or develop their own materials, providing learners with a range of communicative tasks, are comfortable relying on more global, integrative judgments of learner progress.

Communicative competence obviously does not mean the wholesale rejection of familiar materials. There is nothing to prevent communicatively-based materials from being subjected to grammar-translation treatment, just as there may be nothing to prevent a teacher with only an old grammar-translation book at his or her disposal from teaching communicatively. What matters is the teacher's conception of what learning a language is and how it happens. The basic principle involved is an orientation towards collective participation in a process of use and discovery achieved by cooperation between individual learners as well as between learners and teachers.

Since its inception in the 1970s, communicative language teaching has passed through a number of different phases. In its first phase, a primary concern was the need to develop a syllabus and teaching approach that was compatible with early conceptions of communicative competence. This led to proposal for the organization of syllabuses in terms of functions and notions rather than grammatical structures. Later the focus shifted to procedures for identifying learners' communicative needs and this resulted in proposals to make needs analysis an essential component of communicative methodology. At the same time methodologists focused on the kinds of classroom activities that could be used to implement a communicative approach, such as group work, task work, and information-gap activities.

Today CLT can be seen as describing a set of core principles about language learning and teaching, as summarized above, assumptions which can be applied in different ways and which address different aspects of the processes of teaching and learning. Some focus centrally on the *input* to the learning process. Thus content-based teaching stresses that the content or subject matter of teaching drives the whole language learning process. Some teaching proposals focus more directly on *instructional processes*. Task-based instruction for example, advocates the use of specially designed instructional tasks as the basis of learning. Others such as competency-based instruction and text-based teaching focus on the *outcomes* of learning and use outcomes or products as the starting point in planning teaching. Today CLT continues in its classic form as seen in the huge range of course books and other teaching resources that cite CLT as the source of their methodology. In addition, it has influenced many other language teaching approaches that subscribe to a similar philosophy of language teaching.

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A Brief Bio-Note about the Author:

Mr. B. Bala Nagendra Prasad has wide teaching experience of 11 years at engineering level. A Post graduate from Sri Venkateswara University, Tirupati, he completed Master of Philosophy from Madurai Kamraj University. His passion to enhance his pedagogic skills drove him to complete PGCTE and PGDTE from English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad. Currently, he is working as an Associate Professor of English at Annamacharya Institute of Technology and Sciences (Autonomous) Rajampet. He is the Chairman of the Board of Studies, English, and is instrumental in setting up English Language Communication Skills Laboratory on the campus. Also, he is the Editor of PORTRAITS, the newsletter of the college besides being the Editor of the Bulletin, the newsletter of the Educational Trust. An avid researcher and a regular contributor of articles, he presented several papers on language teaching, literature in various national and international conferences.