

# Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

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## Framing the Issue

Languages and language learning have always been elements of change and adjustment. Their relationship with the world and societies has been multifaceted and interrelated. From a historical point of view, significant events and shifts in balance were always depicted in the way languages evolved, changed, and served different purposes. Along with language evolution and re-shifting of purpose, language learning and teaching followed suit, by establishing themselves as agents and mirrors of these changes, in order to reflect and serve the new purposes of languages more effectively. Similarly, developments in second language acquisition theories and other disciplines, such as linguistics, social science and educational research in general, have also had a great impact on the development of various second language learning theories. These theories have had, from their part, played a great role in the development of new teaching approaches.

Communicative language teaching is an approach to second language teaching that emphasizes the importance of communicative competence and developed as a result of changes both in societies and the world (commerce, traveling and the European Union), as well as the inability of previous methods to accommodate these new-world, modern needs. Approaches such as situational language teaching and the grammar-translation method have been treating languages as skills that can be taught with repetition, by practicing chunks of structures, completely isolated from the context in which they occur. This resulted in producing speakers who would treat the language almost clinically, with extreme focus on accuracy and would, however, find it difficult to communicate with others using the language. Inspired by the work of Chomsky in the late 1950s and early 1960s, several British applied linguists such as Brumfit and Wilkins discussed a more functional approach to language. Aided by educational administrators and curriculum developers, they introduced the idea of more communicative syllabi based on notions and functions instead of structures (Richards & Rodgers, 2014, pp. 84–5).

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Similarly, with regard to second language acquisition, research at the time supported the importance of the social context, the negotiation of meaning, and the opportunities to interact with others in the second language, all prime concepts in communicative language teaching.

CLT has also taken a stance on the debate of forms versus functions and accuracy versus fluency. The terms forms, accuracy, and structures usually refer to the grammatical aspect of the language, whereas functions and fluency refer to the way language is used to produce meaning in a communicative context. Previous teaching methods put a lot of emphasis on the structural and linguistic aspect of languages, adopting a more grammatical approach to learning that focused on accuracy and condemned errors. Nevertheless, this is not sufficient on its own to explain how a language can be used to communicate. Language is not only words put in the correct form and the correct order. It is also the social and cultural context in which it is used, as well as the efforts that people make by paraphrasing, clarifying, explaining, and using gestures and mimicry that all constitute aspects of communicative competence. A common claim made by critics of CLT is that it promotes fluency at the expense of accuracy. However, as Littlewood (1981, p. 1) asserts, one of its most fundamental characteristics is that “it pays systematic attention to functional as well as structural aspects of language, combining these into a more fully communicative view.”

## Making the Case

One of the most pivotal works in the field of CLT came with the Bangalore project, led by Dr. Prabhu. The basic premise behind the project was that structures are learned more effectively when the learner focuses on meaning (Brumfit, 1984). It was based also on the belief that language and grammar acquisition is a more holistic process: learners do not acquire languages simply by memorizing and repeating chunks one after the other, but by internalizing them in a more “organic” way, by developing, at the same time various other communicative competences.

It is exactly the development of communicative competence that has become the purpose of CLT. Somebody who effectively develops communicative competence is able to both know and use the target language with regard to appropriate socio-cultural norms. This theory of language is one of the many supporting CLT. Later on, Canale and Swain (1980) defined communicative competence more clearly, by referring to its four aspects: *grammatical*, *sociolinguistic*, *discourse*, and *strategic*. Grammatical refers to the linguistic aspect of language, sociolinguistic applies to the understanding of the social context, discourse examines the elements of cohesion and coherence, and finally, strategic analyses refer to the strategies that people use when communicating in order to keep communication going, with whatever language they have at their disposal. All current research at the time also emphasized the importance of changing teaching practices in the classroom in order to promote meaningful exchange. A lot of stress was put in the shift of social forms, from individual to pair and group work and new types of activities were

suggested that would require interaction such as role play, group discussions, information-gap activities, and so forth (see next section).

By having a look at the relevant literature we can summarize the focal points of CLT in the following list:

- Importance of meaning
- Authenticity
- Communication from the very beginning
- Contextualization
- Error is part of the natural process of learning
- Grammar is contextualized
- Unpredictable language use
- Autonomous learning
- Functional syllabi
- Teacher as the facilitator
- Fluency then accuracy
- Drilling in moderation
- Interaction is important: group work, pair work

Given the radical changes that CLT proposes compared with previous teaching methods, it was only natural for these changes to greatly affect the student and teaching roles as well. The most difficult adjustment for students would have to be the nature of classroom work in its social forms and the materials being used. On the one hand, students would have to learn how to work within pairs and groups, share their opinions, and contribute to a greater extent to the process, by speaking more and taking on more responsibilities and initiative. Since the kind of activities and material used has also changed (less drilling, more communicative tasks), students would have to be more active and creative and have more control. On the other hand, teachers would have to be the ones to relinquish this control over to their students. They would have to act more as the facilitators of the communication between their students and also as the organizers of the material and the activities used.

Finally, the different versions that CLT could appear in are worth mentioning. When the approach first emerged, it took the form of a compromise between traditional and modern elements. Taking elements from the presentation-practice-production approach (PPP) and merging them with more communicative activities, we first had the weaker version of CLT, which is currently used to a large extent. This model could be seen in Littlewoods's (1981) work and the suggestion of pre-communicative and communicative activities. The former are more structural in nature and the language is more controlled, so they are used at the beginning of the lesson. The latter are more functional in nature, aiming more at developing the sociocultural aspect of communicative competence. The language production is more free and unpredictable (see next section). On the opposite side, with the development of task-based teaching, we have the stronger version of CLT. In this approach, a meaningful task is put in the center of the lesson (see next section). A task is

defined as a non-linguistic activity that has a communicative purpose which requires students to meaningfully interact to accomplish it (Edwards & Willis, 2005, p. 3).

However, CLT has not come without its criticism by voices objecting mainly to the promotion of fluency that came, as it was suggested, to the expense of accuracy, producing, thus, learners that might have been more comfortable communicating but, at the same time, made more mistakes. It was also claimed that being primarily a European movement, developing from Europe and for Europe, it was not applicable to other contexts (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Finally, it was suggested that the approach could not really cater for all types of learners, especially more analytic ones, who needed rules and a more bottom-up approach to language learning.

### Pedagogical Implications

As mentioned in the previous section, CLT proposed the creation of syllabi based more on functions, rather than forms. Practically that meant that teachers now teach students from a list of *how* to do different things with the language (e.g., ask questions, give information, make suggestions, introduce themselves, etc.), instead of a list of *what* language to use (e.g., simple present, gerunds and infinitives, modal verbs, etc.). In the frame of this new approach to syllabi and classroom procedures, both materials and activities changed. In terms of activities, the new approach dictated tasks that would promote interaction, real communication, equal focus on fluency and accuracy, and integration of the four skills. When it came to the teaching of grammar, teachers were supposed to use a more inductive approach by also providing the structural elements in a contextualized way. Learners are also supposed to try and communicate with whatever language they have at their disposal by experimenting and being challenged into stretching their output to include the new structure.

As also previously mentioned, the weaker approach to CLT or *classic communicative language teaching* proposed also the use of more controlled activities. Littlewood (1981) differentiated between “functional communication activities” and “social interaction activities.” The former included working with pictures or maps and noticing differences, giving instructions, and sharing information that would close any information gap that each learner might have. The latter included more free activities, such as dialogues, discussions, role plays, and simulations. Another distinction for activities made by researchers and educators was that of *mechanical*, *meaningful*, and *communicative* practices (Richards, 2006). Mechanical practice refers to the learners repeating or *drilling* language chunks that they do not necessarily understand. Meaningful refers to meaningful but controlled choices that learners make. For instance, they are given a map with different destinations and buildings and a list of prepositions of place and they are asked to describe the way to a certain building. Or a pair of learners are given two pictures both depicting the same scene but with different details and they are supposed to exchange information in order to

create one complete picture. Finally, communicative practice refers to activities which are more real-world and free interaction is expected in order to complete them. For instance, learners might be expected to draw a picture of their ideal home and be prepared to answer questions about it. This sequence of practice is usually also the one followed by many contemporary textbooks and lesson plans, starting from the most and progressing to the least controlled activity.

As can be deduced from the previous distinction, the focal point of most activities in CLT is the information gap, in which students have to interact and exchange information in order to complement each other's information and accomplish a goal. A typical information-gap activity used by teachers is the picture activity described above, usually done in pairs, or similar map activities, where students are required to create one complete map with the pieces they have, by exchanging information. In all activities the teacher can decide to shift or equally share the focus on either accuracy or fluency, judging by the group's needs and skills. Apart from the information-gap activities other common communicative tasks include opinion-sharing tasks, information-transfer, simulations, and reasoning-gap activities. Reasoning-gap activities require the processing of given information in order to arrive to new information or inferences. For instance, students are given a list of people's names and their attributes and a list of hobbies and they are supposed to match them to the people based on the information they have about their characters.

On the other side of CLT, the more communicative one, the development of TBLT has put more emphasis on the use of real-world tasks and communication. Different types of tasks can be used in the classroom, in different degrees of control and organization by the teacher. A classroom task is an activity that is goal- and content-oriented with a real outcome that reflects real-world language use (Shehadeh, 2005). In more traditional views tasks can be used to support the lesson, or, in the other extreme, be the lesson. According to Nunan (1989) tasks can be either *pedagogical* or *real-world*. Pedagogical tasks are used mainly with less advanced learners and include activities done in the classroom that are usually not done in the real world. Such tasks include, for instance, most information-gap activities such as finding the differences between two pictures. Real-world tasks are activities that could also be performed in the real world. An example would be planning a birthday party and deciding within your group on the different party aspects: food, invitations, decorations, party-games, music, and so forth. Willis (1996) proposes a different categorization of tasks, from the simpler one to the most complicated, namely *listing, ordering and sorting, comparing, problem solving, sharing personal experiences*, and *creative* tasks. Most tasks are done in pairs or groups and require some kind of public performance either orally, where groups can present their results in posters or using visual media, or in written reports, emails, letters, and so forth.

According to the stress put in the importance of forms, many teachers also use *focused tasks*, which lead the learners toward producing and using the grammar structure in a meaningful context. Such a task could be, for example, creating a personality quiz to practice second-type conditionals. After showing the students actual magazine quizzes, the teacher asks the students to come up with quiz questions of their own, using phrases such as "What would you do if aliens

landed in your garden?" and answers such as "I would run screaming in fear" (Loumpourdi, 2005).

Because CLT is a real-world approach most of the inspiration and the material should come from the real world. Personal stories and experiences, news, articles, and the Internet and its infinite well of information are ideal sources of material when planning communicative activities. Teachers should also rely on their own experience and beliefs when making decisions with regards to the emphasis put respectively on accuracy and fluency by weighing in their students' needs, interests, skills, and level. Finally, it should also be mentioned that assessment needs to follow the instruction paradigm: communicative language testing has also developed from the CLT premise and should be applied when teaching communicatively.

**SEE ALSO:** Authentic Language Use; Debates and Discussions; Functional-Notional Approach; Role Play; Teaching Aids and Materials

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