

## **Communicative Language Teaching**

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Language of interaction is beyond sets of phonological, grammatical and lexical rules. The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach focuses on communicative proficiency in language teaching, concentrating on the role of message in language practice, rather than on mere mastery of structures. This essay presents the notion of CLT, and it examines its priorities and major techniques. Moreover, it supplies a critical evaluation regarding language learners' experience.

The essence of CLT is to develop the ability to communicate effectively in the target language. It is inappropriate to consider CLT as a teaching method, rather as an approach that understands language to be inseparable from individual identity and social behaviour. In other words, language is studied in the broader sociocultural context of its use. A further feature of this approach is its learner-centred and experience-based view of second language teaching. Therefore, the active involvement of the learner is central to this approach, and a procedure that captures the active and experiential nature of the process: learning by doing (Hinkel, 2005). Primarily, students are seen as communicators.

The communicative language teaching approach emphasises the process of communication, therefore it significantly aims to make communicative competence the goal of language teaching. This term, communicative competence, as Canale and Swain (1980) state, involves the following four aspects of language knowledge. Linguistic competence is recognised as the domain of grammatical and lexical

capacity. Sociolinguistic competence refers to an understanding of the social context in which communication takes place, including role relationships, the shared information of the participants, and the communicative purpose for their interaction. Discourse competence which is the knowledge of how discourse analysis works in terms of the common cohesive devices used in the target language, and of how meaning is represented in relationship to the entire discourse and text. Strategic competence, as the last aspect of communicative competence, refers to the coping strategies that communicators employ to initiate, terminate, maintain, repair, and redirect communication (cited in Richards and Rodgers, 2001). A further priority is to aim for fluency in speech. This implies to be able to respond with reasonable speed in real time and to respond appropriately with a degree of ease. Moreover, CLT also aims to develop techniques for the teaching of these language skills that acknowledge the interdependence of language and communication.

CLT's methodology is carried out with a communicative intent. Activities that are truly communicative have three features in common: information gap, choice and feedback (Morrow, 1981, cited in Larsen-Freeman, p. 129). Information gap, this feature involves a transfer of given information from one student to another, generally calling for the decoding or encoding of information from or into language. Moreover, students have a choice of form and content as occur in real communication. Finally, feedback, a student can evaluate whether or not his or her purpose has been achieved relying on the information that the student receives from his or her listener. On the other hand, in order to expose students to natural language, CLT uses language materials authentic to native speakers of the target language such as real newspaper articles, timetables, a live radio or television broadcast. These materials give students

the opportunity to develop strategies for understanding language as it is actually used (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). There are two major activity types in CLT that must be distinguished, 'functional communication activities and social interaction activities' (Littlewood 1981, cited in Richards and Rodgers, 2001, p.166). These two types of activities aim to prepare students for their first contact with authentic spoken English.

Firstly, functional communication activities primarily require students to use their knowledge of language to solve problems through information-gap and reasoning-gap activities. Simultaneously, these activities provide knowledge and practice of the language. Communicative interaction that encourages cooperative relationships among students is achieved by a series of tasks: learners comparing sets of pictures and noting similarities and differences; picture strip stories predicting a likely sequence of events; discovering missing features in a map or on pictures; one learner communicating from behind a screen to another learner and giving instructions on how to draw a picture or shape, or how to complete a map; following directions; and solving problems from shared clues. These activities provide the learner with immediate feedback from the listeners on whether or not he or she has successfully communicated. In this way students can negotiate meaning. Further activities focus on cohesion and coherence, those properties of language which connect the sentences together through formal linguistic devices. An example is scrambled sentence activity, where students are given a passage in which the sentences are in a scrambled order. Then, students must unscramble the sentences so that they are restored to their original order. Additionally, students might also be asked to unscramble the lines of a mixed-up dialog, or to put the pictures of a picture strip story in order and write lines to accompany the pictures (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

Secondly, social interaction activities require the learner to focus on the context and the roles of the people involved. Role play and simulation are vital examples of this type of activities. Role play gives students an opportunity to practise communication while playing different roles. Examples of role play are socio-drama, sketches, story dramatisation, mock interviews, business meetings and even debates. Simulation activities require learners to enact an imaginary situation keeping their own identities. These two types of activities, role play and simulation provide students with the opportunity to practice communicating in different social roles and in different social contexts. Therefore, students learn how to use language forms appropriately and realise how context is essential in giving meaning to the utterances. Moreover, they learn grammar and vocabulary through function, situational context and the roles of interlocutors. Further activities are opinion-gap activities such as conversations, discussion sessions and debates (Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

Functional communication activities and social interaction activities encourage students to use and practice functions and forms. However, as Littlewood (1981) states, new teaching points are introduced in dialog form, followed by controlled practice of the main grammatical patterns. In other words, 'teaching material is achieved by pre-communicative activities that actually teach the language, followed by realistic communicative ones to facilitate the transition from classroom to real world' (cited in Allwright and Hanks, 2009, p.47). It is crucial to consider that some structural points present difficulties of form as well as meaning, such as interrogative and negative structures or word order in phrasal verbs. Therefore, it could be best to explicate such problems of form before students do communicative work. However,

other grammar points are less problematic, and can be taught simultaneously with communicative activities. As examined above, CLT's methodology focuses on communicative activities which enable learners to practice real communication, where students interact primarily with each other rather than with the teacher.

There are matters of concern to be addressed when examining this approach.

According to Swan (1985), CLT generally over-simplifies the importance of vocabulary and the question of authenticity in materials and methodology. Moreover, it fails to recognize the crucial role of the mother tongue in foreign language learning. Students not only have to learn how information is conveyed, they also have to learn the vocabulary which is used to refer to the things in the world that they want to talk about, ask or request. Furthermore, the classroom is not the outside world, and learning language is not the same as using language. A certain amount of artificiality is inseparable from the process of isolating and focusing on language items for study. If students are exposed only to authentic material, they will unlikely meet all the high-frequency items they need to learn. Therefore, it is appropriate to create special texts for specific purposes. Finally, students' mother tongue plays an important part in learning a foreign language. Learners need a mother tongue equivalent that categorises the world, an element that makes it possible to learn a new language (Swan, 1985). From my own experience, if I did not make correspondences between English, my second language, and Spanish, my mother tongue, I believe that it would have been extremely complicated for me to learn English. Therefore, the process of learning a language contains a mother tongue element. Overall, CLT has positively directed the attention of educators to the importance of different aspects of language and it contributes enormously to analyze and teach the language of interaction.

As a student of English as a foreign language, I view CLT as an effective approach. I studied English mostly focusing on the linguistic competence, where grammar and vocabulary were the core elements, while most of the teaching was taught in my mother tongue. When I first arrived to an English speaking country, I found myself incapable of communicating. I did have all the main rules of how the structure of the language worked but conversely I did not have the fluency and confidence to express myself. Communication is also the learner's goal.

To conclude, the communicative language teaching approach sets as its goal the teaching of communicative competence. Therefore, it focuses on the kinds of classroom activities that can be used as the basis of a communicative methodology, in which two types of activities are distinguished: functional communication activities and social interaction activities. Moreover, it is important to consider that CLT's principles can be applied in different ways, depending on the teaching context, the students' ages, levels, learning goals, and educational and cultural backgrounds. However, the crucial question is not which curriculum is the most effective, but how best to integrate the different syllabuses into a judicious teaching programme, for learners to become fluent in whatever aspects of speaking, understanding, reading, and writing that relate to their purpose.

## References

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