

## Demystifying and vindicating communicative language teaching

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Over the years many future teachers, have been captivated with the idea that Communicative language teaching (CLT) is the most suitable method for teaching a new language. However, there has been little information on how to adapt this panacea to real classrooms. Theory and practice have not moulded in a smooth way due, in part, to the superficial information that teachers share about the nature of CLT. The goal of this paper is to explore the characteristics of CLT, the misconceptions that have led to inconsistent applications of this approach and to describe briefly the aspects to be taken into consideration when incorporating CLT to an EFL setting.

Let us begin by putting together a definition of CLT.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics (1998) provides this definition:

“Method of teaching a foreign language which aims to develop communicative competence, as opposed to simple knowledge of grammatical and similar structures.”

Ann Galloway (1993) states that: “Communicative language teaching makes use of real life-situations that need communication. The teacher sets up a situation that students are likely to encounter in real life.”

The common point found across different texts and authors is the idea of free expression as opposed to the mechanism of audiolingualism and Grammar translation method. Another commonplace when talking about CLT is the concept of real communication, and here raises a question. How can a teacher know the expressions or functions of language that are real? Here the conditions of the environment where learning takes place play an important role.

But first, let us state the features of different CLT authors (e.g., Richards & Rodgers 1998, Savignon 1987) mention:

- a. It was intended as a reaction against structural methods.
- b. The birth of CLT was encouraged by authors like Chomsky, Hymes, Austin and Searle among others, and their ideas about meaning and communication in the 60s and 70s.
- c. The theory of language underlying CLT is the functional view, that is, meaning prevails over grammatical characteristics.
- d. The theory of learning is not well defined, but the principles that can be implied are:
  - Learning is achieved by means of activities involving communication.

- Motivation for learning is found in the use of language that relates to the learner in a meaningful way. If we consider these principles, the activities that best suit the category of communicative tasks include debates, conversations, role plays, and dialogues about specific functions of language such as calling a friend, booking a flight, apologizing, and so on.

So far, CLT seems to be a good way to provide learners with enough elements to interact with L2 speakers and succeed, then, teachers would not need other teaching methods. However, this is not true, teachers usually intend to use CLT and end up doing something completely different; and CLT should not be blamed for that. Rather, teachers should reflect on their conceptions and practice when adopting CLT.

Richards and Rodgers (1998) argue that the lack of uniformity when defining CLT is due to the fact that teachers with diverse educational views embrace this approach and interpret it differently.

Geoff Thompson (1996) illustrates some of these misconceptions:

- a. CLT means not teaching grammar.
- b. CLT means teaching only speaking.
- c. CLT means pair-work, which means role-play.
- d. CLT means expecting too much from the teacher.

From these misconceptions, perhaps the most widespread is the divorce between CLT and grammar.

This situation is explainable since CLT is considered a reaction against structural methods, which featured grammar and neglected spontaneous communication. In addition, grammar is not easy to teach, and sometimes all the time invested in having students understand and repeat rules does not result in an equivalent outcome.

Lately, some authors (McCarthy (1998), Conrad (2000), Byrd (1997)) have focused on concepts like spoken grammar and corpus analysis. This has revitalized the importance of grammar in the language classroom, and evidence taken from different corpora (e.g., CANCODE, COBUILD) show that even the most casual, natural spoken exchange follows a grammatical organization.

This trend implies that to be able to understand grammar it is necessary to “discover” it rather than memorize it, consciousness raising tasks are one way to achieve this goal. Students no longer spend most of the class trying to elucidate what the teacher is saying, but now they have the chance to reflect on some examples and elaborate their own rules and discuss them with the class. This way we find meaningful communication and at the same time students are able to relate to more formal knowledge of the L2.

The second misconception is also, unfortunately, very common among teachers. When we are told that students should have plenty of practice in the classroom, we tend to visualize dialogues and all types of oral exchanges instead of writing letters or filling out forms. As Thompson expresses it, practice is often understood as STT (student talking time), a belief that is even more accentuated with the current learner centered classes. Although in some instances the goal of

learning can be communicating orally it is important to remember that communication involves more than dialogues. As Losee (1999) notes, "communication is characterized by information transfer, both the sender and the receiver are actively involved in a communication system, and the quality of communications varies."

If we reflect on these characteristics of communication, we would realize that students can benefit from reading and writing as much as they do from speaking. The main task for teachers should be to provide learners with opportunities to communicate in all the possible contexts, not to overwhelm them with dialogues that are not found in the context of students (e.g., finding a summer job or finding a roommate are situations that are not very likely to occur in some South American countries).

The third misconception is similar to the preceding one in that role-play is seen as the only way to bring CLT into practice. Role-play is a technique that offers many advantages. The problem is, many of us have not discovered them yet. Textbooks that have been used as communicative by many teachers (e.g., American Streamline, Spectrum, Headway) devote several pages to present dialogues emphasizing speech acts. Usually, urgent things do not leave time for the important things and these dialogues are approached as: "work with your partner", "read the dialogues", "let's repeat the dialogues". What can be done to change this? First, present dialogues as the basis for students to play with language, not to memorize them. Then, offer alternatives, encourage them to make variations in the vocabulary, (e.g., replace sweatshirt with CDs) answers given (e.g., replace sure with sorry, I can't), and in the

objective of the exchange (e.g., can you lend me some money? instead of how much money do you have?). If students feel that at some level they are controlling their responses, they may feel motivated to be creative and meaningful, which would be the most desirable aim for this type of tasks.

The fourth misconception needs a little more explanation because CLT is indeed an approach that requires an active work on the part of the teacher. The misconception is in the belief that has led some teachers to see CLT as impossible to implement without having a native speaker in the classroom, this has been the reason why many teachers prefer to safely stick to traditional methods regardless of the audience, the resources and the goal of teaching. Although a good background (i.e., techniques, fluency in the L2) is needed to embrace this approach, there are many options that can help ease the transition. The resources that we find in any country, in most schools are waiting for us to use them. Cable TV, Internet, e-mail, free educational software, videos, newspapers and magazines can be adapted in many circumstances to provide students with authentic meaningful, stimulating materials. For sure teachers today not only need to work on their fluency and teaching skills, but also on their attitudes toward technology. Children and teenagers all over the world are holding on to all these elements. If we want to communicate with our students we have to begin by talking the same language, which nowadays is technology. In addition, textbooks' authors and publishers are aware of the importance of supplementary tools (CD ROMs, a web page for the textbook), to support the work of the teachers and there are many good options available now. It is easier said than done, but with the contributions made by

spoken grammar, corpus linguistics, and technology, it is possible to approach CLT optimistically in the years to come.

A difficulty teachers fail to notice in their attempt to create a communicative classroom is the fact of balancing speaking and thinking. In a 1991 article, Tarvin and Al-Arishi discuss the danger of praising fast answers regardless of their accuracy and expect students to communicate without reflecting on what they are saying. This is very true, especially when we want to engage students in games or activities that require listening and answering quickly. What can we do to find the balance? Again, real expectations are the first step. The first time we say “good morning” to a new class, very few will answer back. After a while the answer without problems because they have been given the time to understand the structure. Let us not push students to give a five-minute-long answer when they are not ready for that. Speed must not be our main concern when dealing with fluency. Giving learners some time to organize their ideas and find the vocabulary to express them is also important, above all, if we want our students to achieve long lasting learning.

The last aspect that I think is essential to take into account when dealing with CLT is culture. The roles of teachers and students, the values, the taboo topics vary according to culture. For teachers it is important to know the audience before engaging in any lesson, but this is especially relevant for CLT classrooms. Imagine a teacher that wants to encourage students to discuss and debate. What will happen if the topic chosen to debate is not culturally correct? I have seen the case of a foreign teacher asking students about them moving out their parents’ house. This topic is very appropriate for Europe and The United

States, and some good anecdotes can be drawn. However, for South American students this topic may lack importance or have a negative connotation since in South America you are not encouraged to leave your parents’ house even if you have a job. Then, some of the students in their late 20s or 30s felt like they should find a place (real quick!).

Ellis (1996) analyses this issue from the perspective of students and teachers in China where western and eastern values collided. The best way to solve the problem was not to change the minds of Chinese teachers, but to keep their values and adapt the tasks to them. Although one might think that only values and aspects like religion and politics are likely to cause trouble, this is not true. In the same article Ellis notes that some western teachers give more importance to the outcome of a task, while for eastern cultures, the process is as important as the result.

When facing a mixed audience it is important to be aware of aspects like these and remember that gestures, body language, tone of voice and posture also make part of communication and they all convey a message for our students.

According to the characteristics of the environment language teachers should decide what real language should be taught to students, which situations are most likely to occur (at home or in another country) considering the background of the learners. For instance, we have to reflect on the usefulness of teaching learners with a Moslem background about how to throw a party with beer and loud music when they are never going to take part in a situation like this.

In conclusion, CLT detractors and

followers still have a lot of issues to deal with. Our concern as teachers must be to inform ourselves about the approach or method we want to use in our professional practice. Then, we have to consider how feasible it is to bring that approach into practice. Finally, think about the goal of learning, for our students and the way they are going to be using English when they leave our classroom.

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